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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

RESEARCH REPORT **2023**

**Exploring the demand and
challenges facing the food relief
sector in the G21 region.**

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PRELUDE

Give Where You Live Foundation and Sustain teams would like to thank the members of the Research Advisory Working Group and all participating organisations for their participation and support of the project, in generously sharing their insights and experiences in the G21 food relief sector:

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Colac Food Share
Drysdale Family Support Inc.
Empower Australia
Feed Me Inc
Forrest Neighbourhood Centre
Geelong Food Relief Centre
Lorne Community House
Manifold Heights Baptist Church
Marrar Woon Neighbourhood House
Northern Futures
OneHope Community Care
Salvation Army
Salvation Army Colac
St Andrews Food Relief
St Mary's Parish Pantry
St Vincent De Paul
St Vinnies Colac
Stronger Communities: Community Pantry
Torquay Food Aid
Wesley Asylum Seeker Welcome Place

Also thanks to Volunteers from the Give Where You Live Foundation who supported the collection of survey data for this project, Jenna Wade, Chris Maddock, Forrest Sklar, Robyn Hemley, Janine Koch (Rotary - Geelong East) and Annette Devereaux (Rotary - Geelong East).



This research was undertaken in collaboration with the Geelong Food Assistance Network.

GIVE WHERE YOU LIVE FOUNDATION

Located in Geelong, the Give Where You Live Foundation aims to be recognised as one of the most progressive Foundations in the country. We want to build a better, fairer society and use all our energy and resources, in partnership with our community, to help all people and all places thrive. Whether that be financially helping frontline community support agencies, bringing people and organisations together to tackle a challenge, advocating on behalf of those that need assistance or rallying the community to support our cause, we have always put community at the centre of our work.

The Give Where You Live Foundation has been actively engaged in the issue of food insecurity and supporting the food assistance system since it established an emergency relief voucher program, now known as Community Choice, in the early 1990's. A 'no cost' emergency relief program for people experiencing immediate financial crisis in the Geelong/G21 region, the program provides food, pharmacy and material aid vouchers to those in need. To complement this program, in 2011 the Foundation established Feed Geelong to support awareness raising and fundraising to support organisations responding to the issue of food insecurity within the G21 region.

As part of our commitment to support the food assistance system, the Give Where You Live Foundation also conducts regular research to provide an evidence base of the needs and challenges impacting the sector. Earlier Food for Thought reports in 2014 and 2018 provided key information to understand food insecurity and the food assistance system in the region. The most recent report, undertaken in late 2020 - early

2021, provided a unique picture of the sector during a time of global crisis, COVID-19. The global pandemic impacted everyone globally and locally, however the effects were felt more keenly by members of our community who were already struggling.

Across the G21 region we continue to see growing disparity and inequity with increasing cost of living impacting many in our region. With the current challenges being felt even more broadly across our community, this research again is timely and provides a point in time picture of the current levels of demand and challenges being experienced by the many food relief agencies in our region. We are fortunate to have such diversity of support available in our region, and hope this research provides some of the context in which they operate, the challenges they experience and the opportunities that exist for us to collectively ensure all people and places thrive.



Jane Fitzgerald Photography



SUSTAIN: THE AUSTRALIAN FOOD NETWORK

Sustain is a think-and-do network with a mission to create food systems that nourish people and nurture the planet. We know that transitioning to a healthier, more sustainable and equitable food system requires good policy and practice, underpinned by a strong evidence base and inspiring examples that empower communities and governments to work collectively towards a better food future for all.

We base our work in the scientific understanding of the interconnectedness and mutual interdependence of all elements of food and agricultural systems, and their interrelationship with other systems, including education, health, economy, culture and politics. We ground our work in a principled commitment to the human right to adequate, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

As connectors, we facilitate events, networks and communities of practice for sharing knowledge and fostering collaboration amongst diverse food system actors.

As researchers, we translate and share our food systems knowledge to build an evidence base for effective food policy and action.

As policy experts, we understand the critical issues facing local government and their communities. Our holistic approach aims to cut across the institutional and departmental silos that hinder cohesive and integrated food policy implementation.

As practitioners, we design and deliver community food projects (including our two urban farms) that experiment with new approaches to food system transformation and model the change we want to see. Our projects aim to demonstrate in the here and now that, yes, a better future is within our grasp.



ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS



Dr Kylie Fisk is a social scientist researcher specialising in human rights and governance. As Sustain’s Research and Projects Manager, she oversees a portfolio of research and consultancy projects related to food security, food systems, and food relief across urban and regional Australia. Prior to her recent work as Acting Director at the Tasmanian Integrity Commission, she was a Senior Research Fellow at the International Women’s Development Agency, and an independent consultant delivering research projects related to anti-corruption reform, international LGBTQI+ rights, and international women’s rights. She holds a PhD in social and political psychology (University of Queensland) and a Bachelor of Psychological Science (University of Queensland).



Molly Fairweather is the Projects and Research Coordinator at Sustain, and also works as a Public Health Nutrition Research Officer at Monash University. With Sustain, she has worked across a range of research and policy projects, and co-facilitates Sustain’s Local Government Food Systems Network. She has research experience across a range of food systems topics, including food politics, food security and urban agriculture. She is motivated by a passion for healthy, sustainable and equitable food systems across multiple scales which consider the social, environmental, political and commercial drivers of current food system challenges. She has completed a Master of Environment specialising in Public Health and Food Systems (University of Melbourne) and Bachelor of Health Sciences/ Master of Dietetic Practice (La Trobe University).



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores the interconnected dimensions of food security within the G21 region, aiming to provide an understanding of the factors, dynamics, and initiatives that currently shape the food security service sector. We situate the report’s findings in the context of broader societal challenges including the dual housing and cost of living crises, and environmental threats posed by climate change. This research outlines the challenges that individuals and organisations face in ensuring that every resident has reliable access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food, and the strengths in the region contributing to enhanced food security for the community.

Background Research

Food insecurity is largely driven by an inability to afford food, indicated by incomes failing to keep pace with the cost of living. Analysis of available data on socio-economic drivers of food insecurity paints a picture of increasing vulnerability in the G21 region. The regions of Corio-Lovely Banks, Norlane, and Newcomb-Moolap face amongst the highest levels of socio-economic disadvantage in Victoria. The proportion of residents in the region struggling financially has quadrupled between March 2020-March 2023 from 4.8% to 18.2%. The housing crisis, characterised by drastic increases in rental and mortgage costs, is placing further strain on household budgets and increasing vulnerability to food insecurity.

Survey and Qualitative Research Findings

At the time of writing, demand for food relief services in the G21 region has surged and is expected to continue rising. Organisations distributing food to other agencies face increased requests for more food and additional products, while those providing direct food relief experience higher numbers of clients, new client cohorts, and increased client complexity. Survey data quantifies the extent of the increase in demand, with 90% of agencies experiencing service demand growth over the past year, and 63% of agencies report that clients’ needs have become more complex.

Key drivers of food insecurity include cost of living pressures, low income, unemployment, reliance on government benefits, and families dependent on a single income. Economic pressures force individuals to make financial tradeoffs, leading them to prioritise other essential expenses over food. Food relief agencies also note a demographic shift in the communities they serve. This includes an increase in working families, residents affected by the cost of living crisis, and more individuals experiencing homelessness or rough sleeping. This shift in client demographics is a notable theme emerging from the research. Staff and volunteers from food relief agencies themselves reported personal challenges with rising costs of living and housing affecting work availability, fatigue, and stress. This interconnection of issues faced by agencies and the broader community highlights the ripple effect of food insecurity on a community.

From the agencies participating within the research, we find a sector supporting a large number of individuals and families, estimating weekly statistics of 8,751, with food relief agencies providing over 34,293 meals, 2372 food parcels and distributing almost 22,930kg of food delivered to clients. The G21 region is served by a diverse range of organisations addressing food security, including local community groups, faith-based welfare organisations, neighborhood and community houses, regenerative agricultural programs, and larger scale food distributors. Almost half of the organisations surveyed for this project primarily focus on food relief, while an equal number incorporate food relief into broader social support services.

Food relief in the region is delivered through a variety of means, with non-perishable pantry items, fresh produce, frozen meals, and food parcels being the most common. Some agencies offer culturally appropriate food options and vouchers. Food relief services in the G21 region often extend to include wraparound meal services, programs targeting social housing residents, diversified voucher systems, material aid, emergency food pantries, and support

for primary schools. Social connection and community engagement are integral components of many organisations’ efforts.

Shortfalls in the supply of certain food relief products were reported, including meat, eggs, food vouchers, fresh dairy, and fresh fruits and vegetables. Commonly cited barriers for clients seeking to access food relief services include limited operating hours, and the perception of stigma producing feelings of guilt or shame in clients for accessing services. Geographic restrictions and transport challenges were noted by one in five agencies as barriers to residents seeking support , highlighting the importance of accessibility in the wider region.

The most common food sources for food relief agencies in the region include Geelong Food Relief, donations, independent food retailers, and FoodBank. To supplement donations, 80% of organisations also purchase food.

Due to increased demand, statewide food distributors are placing limitations on the volume and type of food agencies can access, with participants noting higher caps for urban than regional areas. Supermarkets tightening excess supply has reduced the availability of food for food relief in the region. This has not only affected the availability of food but also its quality and nutritional value, as supermarkets look for ways to reduce costs. Educating supermarkets on freezing and storage practices can increase the availability of donated food but requires extra time and resources from distributors. This has implications for the stability of food provision. To address instability, some agencies are cultivating alternative sources of food, both locally and from Melbourne.

Some agencies expressed a need for additional equipment, with eight agencies wanting a vehicle for transporting food and one-quarter requesting cold storage. Interruptions to deliveries on public holidays and food unsuitable for clients’ needs were also noted.

Volunteers play a pivotal role in the sector, outnumbering paid employees by a ratio of 22 to



Jane Fitzgerald Photography



1, with 6.7 volunteer hours for every hour of paid work. While some agencies have paid staff for food relief activities, others are entirely volunteer-run. The cost of volunteer labor in the region is estimated at over \$10 million annually. Challenges arising from limited paid staff include difficulties in establishing new programs, increased burnout, and loss of institutional and sectoral knowledge.

Funding for surveyed organisations primarily comes from individual donations, philanthropic grants, and corporate contributions, with government funding less common but preferred for its provisions to support core costs. Despite some agencies experiencing reduced grant funding, many have seen an increase in individual and philanthropic donations. To overcome funding uncertainties, agencies have explored diversifying revenue streams, such as charging for services and engaging in social enterprise activities, to sustain their operations and address the rising demand for food relief services.

Organisations primarily monitor their services by recording the number of clients served, and many also track the quantity of meals or parcels distributed. However, there is a growing recognition that traditional metrics may not capture the full impact of these services, with a desire to measure outcomes beyond outputs, including trust, connection, and social cohesion.

The figures presented in this report itself include duplications of clients accessing multiple services or the same service multiple times, highlighting the importance of triangulating measurement approaches to provide a more accurate representation of the sector's impact.

Efforts to enhance service delivery in the G21 food relief sector will involve increased collaboration within the sector, and the integration of food relief with broader social support services. Around half of the surveyed organisations do not offer additional social services, but among those that do, a diverse range of services such as education and financial counseling are provided. Notably, health services, domestic violence support, and financial literacy were identified as crucial adjacent services in focus groups and interviews.

Food relief agencies reported limited confidence that clients' support needs were being adequately met if they had referred them to other support services. Overstretched services, long delays, and administrative hurdles were identified as significant barriers to effective referrals. Referrals into food relief services came from various sources, including community organisations and health services.

Collaboration was identified as a key strategy for

improving service efficiency and coordination, with more than half of agencies already engaged in collaborations. These collaborations involve shared resources, support for non-English-speaking clients, and access to commercial kitchens, demonstrating a supportive network within the community. However, barriers to collaboration, such as time and resource constraints, were also acknowledged.

The Geelong Food Assistance Network was seen as a promising initiative for regional coordination, and there was strong support (76% of surveyed agencies) for a platform to coordinate food access between agencies, provided it addressed practical concerns like vehicle access and cold storage. While there was mixed support for a combined reporting platform, the idea of creating a comprehensive booklet or map of services received favorable responses as a means of increasing collaboration and accessibility for clients.

Reflecting on the findings in the G21 food relief sector, participants in focus groups and interviews identified both broad contextual and sector-specific risks. The most significant broader risk was rising housing prices and the increasing cost of living, which is putting pressure on both clients and agencies. Agencies operating on limited budgets struggle to find affordable

spaces for operations in a rapidly inflating real estate market, risking displacement and reduced capacity to store food. Climate change, while discussed less frequently, was recognised as an existential threat to food security within the region's context. Sector-specific risks included a lack of collaboration, donated food leaving the region, loss of physical space for operations, and sole dependencies on larger distribution hubs.

Despite these challenges, participants highlighted several enabling factors supporting the food relief sector in the G21 region. The strong dedication and passion of the community, coupled with the diversity of existing services, were noted as significant strengths. The community's positive and respectful response to food relief efforts, was also acknowledged.

To address community needs and strengthen the food relief system, agencies called for increased funding from government and philanthropic sources, partnerships with local food businesses and logistics, and delivery of donations to agencies. Focus groups and interviews generated ideas for promoting long-term food security, such as prioritising land for food production, educating government on food security's importance, a preventative approach to food security, raising public awareness, and fostering community engagement.



Recommendations

Service Coordination and Capacity Building

- Explore solutions to streamline referral processes and build capacity amongst food relief agencies to link clients with social services, in particular housing, mental health, and family violence services.
- Prioritise financial literacy and resourcing financial counselling services for food insecure individuals
- Support emergency relief funding for food insecure individuals, including petrol and rental assistance.
- Allocate increased resourcing to facilitate effective collaboration among food relief agencies.
- Leverage existing coordination mechanisms, such as the Geelong Food Assistance Network, to establish the feasibility of a tool to coordinate food access between food relief agencies, or explore use of existing online coordination platforms
- Engage with a wider network of stakeholders to promote and support the food relief sector in the G21 region, including schools, hospitals and other health and specialist support services.

Knowledge Sharing and Best Practices

- Within the G21 food relief network, highlight examples of best-practice and knowledge sharing opportunities in addressing barriers to food relief access, and increasing coordinated access to fresh produce that meets cultural and dietary needs.
- Investigate innovative solutions to food relief supply issues, such as direct links between food relief agencies and food producers, partnerships with local businesses, and harnessing technology to redistribute surplus food locally.

Staff and Volunteer Support

- Address staffing challenges by allocating wages and operational costs in grants and funding to support program delivery, project management, and volunteer coordination.
- Work with agencies to facilitate volunteer training and support opportunities, acknowledging that volunteers are experiencing increasing client complexity in the context of cost-of-living pressures.

Public Engagement and Communications

- Advance public communications aimed at decreasing stigma associated with accessing food relief, and normalising help-seeking behaviour to reduce experiences of shame or guilt in accessing services.
- Raise public awareness of food security and foster community engagement with food security initiatives through residents and community leaders.
- Develop a comprehensive map of food relief and social support services, to ease service navigation in food insecure individuals.

Data and Impact Assessment

- Work with agencies to gather data and narratives that capture service impact beyond quantitative output metrics, highlighting the value of services in terms of social/community connectedness, cohesion, and trust.
- Work with Sustain to make any amendments to the survey instrument based on the utility of findings to ensure future iterations of the Food For Thought capture the most practical and impactful data.

Systems and Policy

- Local council and community stakeholders prioritise allocation of land specifically for agricultural purposes to enhance local food production.
- Provide educational initiatives aimed at enhancing awareness of food security and interconnected issues in local and state government.
- Adopt a proactive, preventative approach to framing food security, encompassing elements of health promotion and the strengthening of food system resilience.



INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity is an entrenched and worsening social problem, understood according to the internationally-accepted definition from the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO):

“Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”²

Within this definition, food security is underpinned by six dimensions^{3 4}:

- 1. Availability:** Having a sufficient quantity and quality of food to meet dietary needs
- 2. Access (economic, social and physical):** Having the personal or financial resources to purchase or access food to meet dietary needs
- 3. Utilisation:** The ability to prepare safe, nutritionally adequate and culturally acceptable meals to meet dietary needs
- 4. Stability:** The ability to maintain food security in the event of shocks and stresses (e.g. bushfires, COVID-19 pandemic)
- 5. Agency:** Having independence and choice about what foods to eat, and how that food is produced, and having a voice in food systems discussions and policy processes.
- 6. Sustainability:** Ensuring that food systems contribute to long-term regeneration of natural, social and economic systems to ensure food security for future generations.

These complex and interrelated domains can only be addressed on a structural level to ensure

‘dignified food security’ and guarantee the human right to good food for all.

However, to date, governments in Australia at all levels have conceptualised and described food security responses in terms of ‘food relief’ and ‘emergency food relief’. It is widely acknowledged that food relief does not address food insecurity in the long term. Research has consistently shown that food insecurity is associated with poverty or financial stress, disadvantage, social and economic exclusion and/or insufficient social and economic support systems.^{5 6}

Food insecurity is not a problem caused by the pandemic. In 2019, only 37% of charities said they were “currently meeting the full needs of the people they assist”.⁷ The pandemic, and subsequent cost of living crisis, has deepened inequality and its impacts, while climate change-induced weather events compound food security risks via impacts on primary production and supply chains. In the absence of supportive social policy and adequate resourcing, these social and environmental pressures place undue pressure on the emergency food relief sector to respond in times of both acute and ongoing crises.

PROJECT AIM

The aim of the project was to capture the current levels of demand and challenges being experienced across the local food relief sector in the G21 region, as well as identify models of service delivery, with a focus on emerging and innovative practice.

Under this aim, project objectives were to:

- **Provide recommendations** for improved, simplified data and evaluation questions based on review of previous Food for Thought research reports and insights from Give Where You Live Foundation staff
- **Develop and administer a survey** containing standard and repeatable questions to allow ongoing consistent data collection to monitor trends over time
- **Complement the survey with desktop research and focus groups** to provide a deeper understanding of the current state of the food relief sector in the G21 region
- **Identify case studies of emerging and innovative responses** to food security in the region

This report and its accompanying appendices, outlines the project methodology, findings from the desktop research, survey, focus groups and case studies, as well as future directions and recommendations for the sector.



BACKGROUND RESEARCH

In the absence of updated data on household food insecurity, with the most recent estimates at a local government level being from 2020, we have instead drawn on available data for socio-economic drivers of food insecurity. The findings paint a picture of increasing vulnerability to food insecurity in the G21 region. An expanded desktop analysis is available from Give Where You Live Foundation.

Socio-economic disadvantage (SEIFA)

Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) is a series of measures that rank geographic areas by relative socio-economic advantage or disadvantage.⁸ The Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD) is a composite index of factors such as low income, low educational attainment and unemployment, that together paint a picture of an area's disadvantage relative to others.

The G21 region experiences great disparity in socio-economic position. The regions of Corio-Lovely Banks, Norlane, and Newcomb-Moolap face amongst the highest socio-economic disadvantage in Victoria, while areas including Torquay and Point Lonsdale-Queenscliffe have very low socio-economic disadvantage.

Low income

Food security is largely driven by an inability to afford food, indicated by incomes failing to keep pace with the cost of living. Similar to the SEIFA results, Norlane, Corio-Lovely Banks and Newcomb-Moolap have the highest proportion of low-income households, at 64.8%, 58.6% and 58% respectively.

This is compounded by social welfare payments that are failing to guarantee sufficient funds to cover basic living costs, with payments for many household types below the poverty line.⁹

Considering current median rental costs (as of March 2023), a single man renting a one-bedroom flat in Greater Geelong would be spending 71% of their income on rent, while a single mother of two children would be spending 60% of income on a 3-bedroom house in Greater Geelong, and 79% in Surf Coast Shire.¹⁰

Cost of Living Pressures

Financial precarity:

Findings point to increasing economic vulnerability in the G21 region, with compounding impacts of COVID-19 and cost-of-living pressures, evidenced by the proportion of G21 residents 'struggling' having quadrupled between March 2020-March 2023 from 4.8% to 18.2% (Figure 2).^{11 12}

Housing stress

Housing stress, defined as spending >30% of income on housing costs (either rent or mortgage costs), places strain on household budgets, which can increase vulnerability to food insecurity.¹³

Based on 2021 Census data, mortgage stress among very low-income households and low income households in the G21 region was 61.3% and 24.9% respectively, higher than in Regional Victoria (53.9% and 19.0% respectively). Findings indicate extremely high levels of rental stress among very low income households (85.4%), considerably higher than the regional Victoria benchmark of 79.2%. Large proportions of low and moderate income households are also experiencing rental stress in the G21 region. These figures are likely to be a gross

underestimate given the 10+ interest rate rises introduced since 2022.

Additional demographic variables that can increase vulnerability to food insecurity, as well as present difficulties in accessing and navigating services, include single-parent households, low English proficiency, residents with assistance needs and households without car access. There was a notable overlap in the distribution of these factors and the regions identified to have high levels of socio-economic disadvantage in Figure 1 above.

Figure 1: SEIFA index of relative socio-economic disadvantage in the G21 region

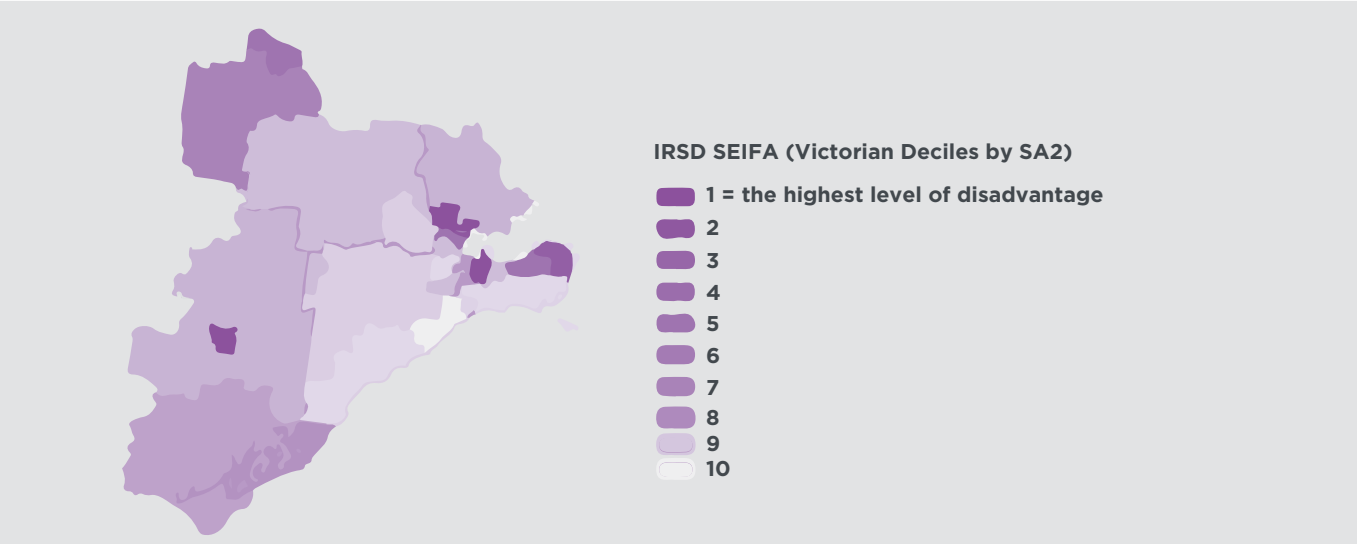
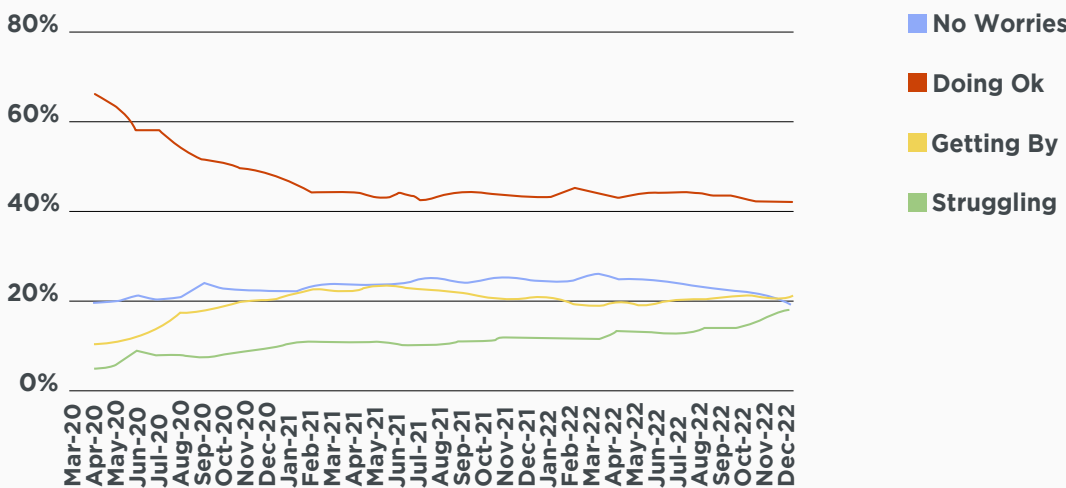


Figure 2: Change in financial wellbeing across the G21 region





RESEARCH FINDINGS: DEMAND

Survey results show significant variation in the scale of service delivery across food relief organisations across the different metrics i.e. kg of produce distributed ranges from 80kg-20,000kg per week. Table 1 below highlights the number of agencies providing data against each measure, and the results across the sector.

The total number of clients accessing food relief services each week is 8,751, with food relief agencies providing over 34,293 meals, 2372 food parcels and distributing almost 22,930kg of produce.

Findings highlight that individual organisations are responsible for much of the scale of food relief provision. For example, one organisation services an average of 7000 clients a week, with the remaining 28 agencies servicing a combined 1,751 clients.

Table 1: Scale and monitoring of food relief services (weekly average) across the G21 region

METRIC	# OF ORGANISATIONS WITH DATA, N	RANGE	AVERAGE	MEDIAN*	TOTAL
Number of clients per week	29	4-7000	398	60	8,751 clients**
Number of meals distributed per week	11	20-25,000	3118	100	34,293 meals
Number of parcels distributed per week	18	5-1800	132	29	2372 parcels
Kilos of produce distributed per week	6	80-20,000	3822	800	22930kg

*We present both an average and a median figure, as outlier agencies distributing large amounts of food will skew averages volumes. A median is a statistical measure used to find the middle value in a set of numbers with large outliers. A median is the number that divides the data into two equal halves when they are arranged in ascending order. This helps identify a central or typical value within the dataset. **The survey design could not identify whether individuals were accessing multiple services, so it's possible this figure is slightly overestimated.

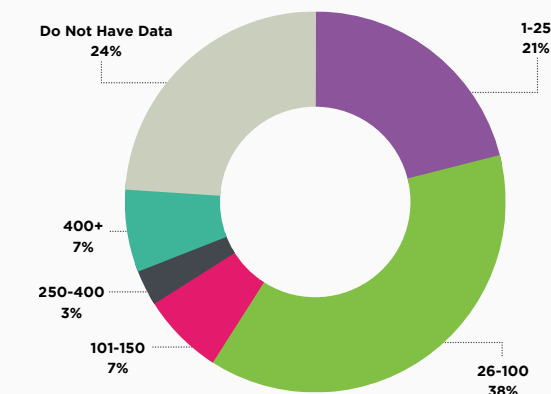
Focus groups and interviews suggest that some clients, especially those experiencing homelessness, are able to access multiple services with complementary opening hours within a small geographical region. Although this is positive from the perspective of users, it means that raw figures such as those collected above will include

the same individual being captured by multiple services, or individuals who frequent a service every day will be counted 7 times in a week. Short of methods that identify clients and track them through the system, all aggregate quantitative figures will represent some duplication and overlap.

“They actually encourage us by saying, we’re pretty well served the food in the city, because they actually have breakfast with us, then they toddle along to Lazarus House, and then they toddle down to the outpost... they’re feeling as secure as they can.”
- focus group participant

“I like that story of people being able to go in the community from different service to service throughout the day”
- focus group participant

Figure 3: Percentage of agencies with average client range per week

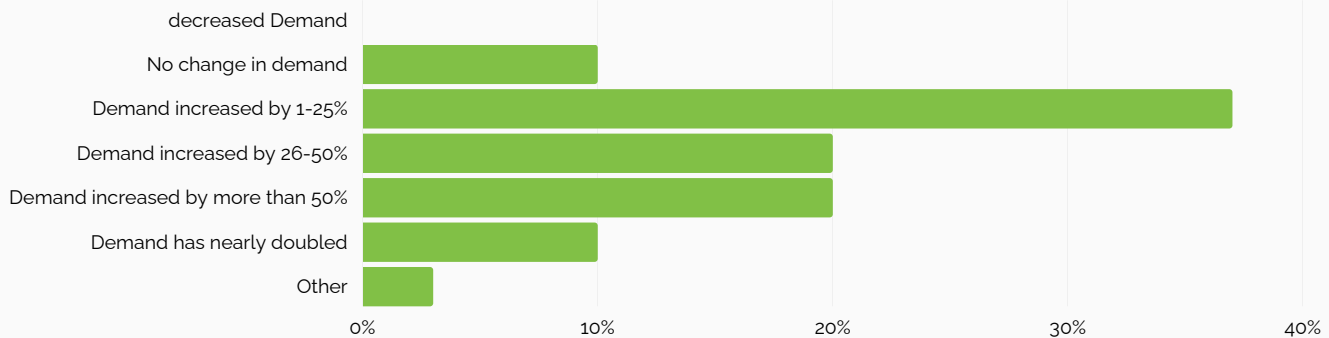


“The core of it is that it’s absolutely not slowing down. It’s just almost a fine line for some between whether it’s exponential increases or just significant increases.”
- Interview participant

Survey data quantified the extent of the increase, with ninety percent of agencies experiencing

increased service demand over the past year, and 30% experiencing increases of 50% or more (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Change in service demand in previous 12 months





CASE STUDY: THE OUTPOST

“People don’t go hungry into the night.”

The Outpost has provided food relief services in Geelong for 33 years and serves over 1,200 people per month. It operates on a small annual budget and over 70 volunteers. The Outpost provides cooked meals for lunch Monday, Wednesday and Friday and dinner 365 days a year, with no barriers to access.

Its central location and reliability have enabled it to become an important support service, especially when other services are unavailable over holidays. The Outpost’s model of services contributes to the availability, access, and stability dimensions of food security in the region.

“Consistency is key to the longevity of our organisation, but also accessibility.”

“Barriers to access support through some services are limiting for people...we never refuse food service and do not require personal identifiers”

“The plus of the Outpost is it is a central community hub that people can rely on.”

Demand for the Outpost’s services has increased significantly in recent years, with a 50% increase in people accessing its services. There has also been an increase in the complexity of needs,

including mental health issues and homelessness due to the housing crisis. More families, young people and professionals have been accessing the Outpost’s services.

The Outpost currently relies on a month-to-month lease and faces an uncertain future in its current location. More space would allow the Outpost to provide additional services and improved its variety of food offerings. Lack of access to medical and mental health services is an ongoing issue, with several Outpost clients passing away in the past 18 months due to lack of treatment. Trusted, accessible healthcare remains an unmet need. Space and facilities continue to be a challenge for the Outpost whose attendance is swelling.

The Outpost receives generous donations and has a large, dedicated volunteer base which has grown over the past two years. However,

more could be done to encourage donations of food and other essential items from local businesses and organisations to support the food relief sector. Culturally appropriate and nutritional food options could be improved across the sector. The costs and expertise required to provide specialised menus are challenging, especially for smaller organisations, but remain an important need particularly for those with dietary requirements.

Collaboration between organisations and levels of government remains limited. Competition for funding and ‘patch protection’ have prevented greater cooperation. The Outpost’s ‘no questions

asked’ and non-judgmental approach has enabled it to build trust and cooperation with its clients, some of whom the Outpost will be their only daily touchpoint. The generosity and volunteerism of the Geelong community is an enabling factor.

The Outpost primarily addresses the food security dimensions of availability, access, and stability. Identified future directions include nutritional content packaging, incorporation of Indigenous and dietary foods into services, providing related outreach services if space and resources were available, and fundraising events to harness community awareness and support.





RESEARCH FINDINGS: WHO IS SEEKING SUPPORT

“We’re hearing things like, ‘we never thought it would be us.’”
- Focus group participant

Surveys, focus groups, and interviews were in consensus that demand for food relief has increased, and is expected to continue rising. Agencies also experience changes in demand with regard to changing client cohorts and complexity.

A significant portion of the new clients affected by the cost of living crisis are individuals and families with jobs and homes, and existing clients present with increasingly complex needs. Survey results found that 63% of agencies report client’s needs becoming more complex.

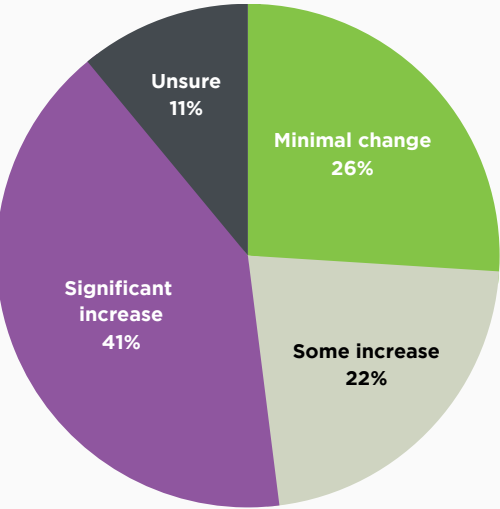


Figure 4: Change in complexity and social support needs among clients (N=27) (N=27)

the survey findings highlight the interrelated socio-economic drivers of food insecurity. Key reasons for seeking food relief services were identified as cost of living pressures, followed

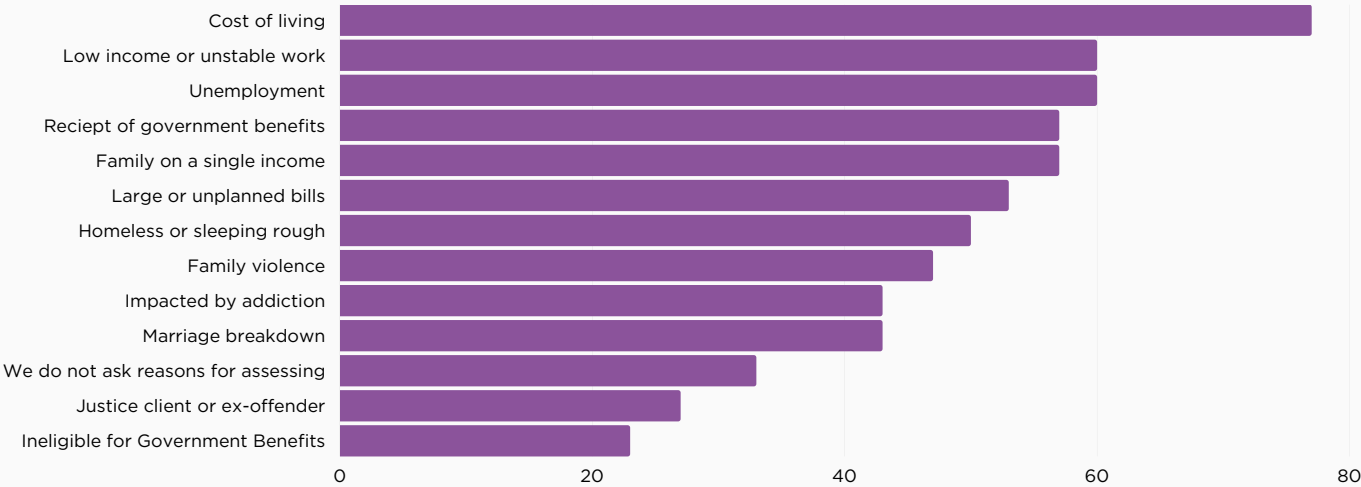
Figure 4 below highlights the extent of changes in client complexity and social support needs, with 63% of agencies reporting ‘some increase’ or ‘significant increase’, while no agencies reported a decrease in client complexity.

The multidimensional pressures faced by members of the community, leading to increasingly complex client needs at the frontline of food relief delivery, was a common theme in focus groups and interviews. How these complex needs are addressed through social service referral pathways is addressed later in this report.

“We see more and more people where their situations are so complex. So what they’re finding is it’s far too complex, all the issues that they have, and they don’t know where to start.”
- Interview participant

by low income, unemployment, receipt of government benefits and families reliant on a single income (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Reasons for accessing food relief support (N=27)



The survey results were validated and expanded through focus groups and interviews. These discussions delved deeper into observations and circumstances of individuals seeking food relief directly from the frontlines. They revealed how people under economic pressure are compelled to make financial tradeoffs, ultimately leading to reliance on food relief services.

“People are putting food last, I think often it’s the thing that they are having to go without more than anything else.”
- Focus group participant

Agencies were more likely to identify women as their primary cohort than men. Only one agency explicitly reported servicing non-binary / LGBTQIA+ communities. Other cohorts commonly seeking support include single parents (93%), retirees or pensioners (70%), single/two person households and residents with disabilities (Figure 6).

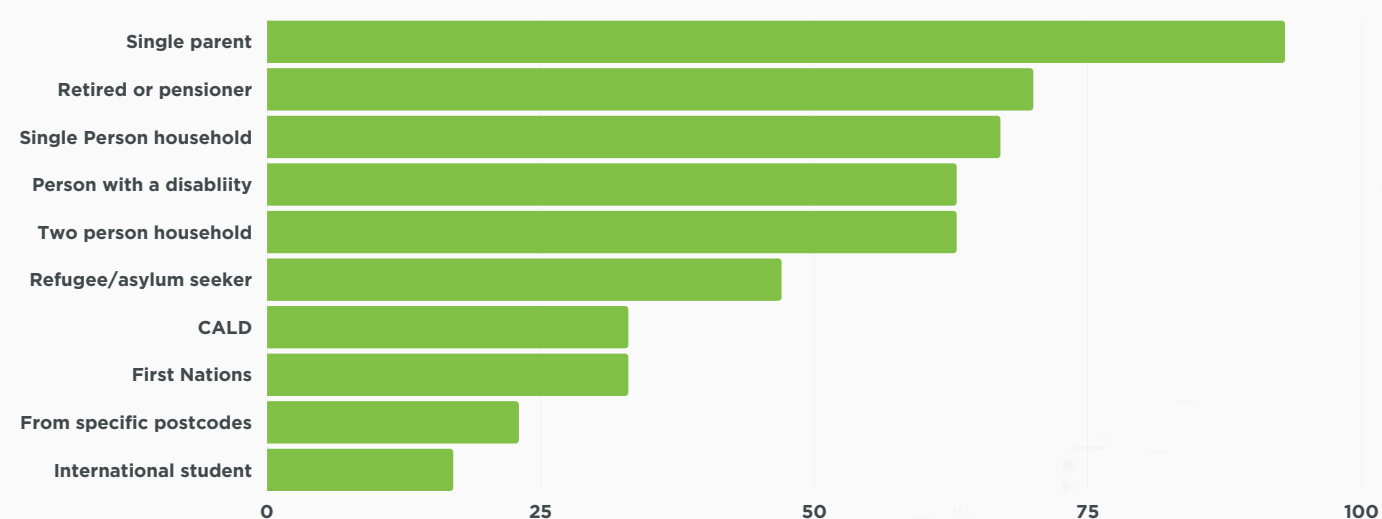
“People are facing a lot of financial strain, which is obviously affecting their ability to get food, let alone get the right kind of healthy, nutritious food. But it’s also extending to being able to have the ability to put petrol in the car to go and get the food or pay for public transport to get the food.”
- Interview participant

“We’ve found a number of people where they often put their pets ahead themselves”
- Focus group participant

A demographic change in the cohorts accessing services was noted by 69% of food relief agencies. Changes observed across multiple agencies include an increase in working families with residents feeling profound impacts of the cost of living crisis, and an increase in rough sleepers. These new cohorts presenting for food relief were a major theme emerging from qualitative analysis.



Figure 6: Community cohorts seeking support



“Most of the people we started off seeing were people that were living in public housing and on some sort of Centrelink payment. Now we’re finding more and more people that ... work full time.”

- Interview participant

“In the last six months that we’ve seen a real young professional cohort emerge.”

- focus group participant

“There’s definitely been an increase in families, young professionals, escalation in mental health.”

- focus group participant

Focus groups and interviews also locate wider community distress within organisations themselves. Organisations are comprised of community members (often volunteers) also facing pressure from rising cost of living and housing stress, affecting work availability, mood, and daily life. An important theme from focus groups and interviews was the interconnection of issues faced by agencies and the broader community. One participant highlighted

that availability of food on their shelves had a noticeable impact on the experience of individuals visiting the service, highlighting the personal implications of disruptions to agency’s food supplies (see Food Supply section).

“One thing I’ve found is when our shelves are full, our clients feel more secure and a lot more peaceful. [When they’re less full], our clients going in there will look around and get very edgy. And then sort of ... ‘I need to get in there first’ mentality takes over.”

- focus group participant

CASE STUDY: FEEDME INC

“Being a beacon of kindness at the forefront of the... shift in perspective.”

FeedMe Bellarine and Surf Coast (‘FeedMe’) started in 2019 as an extension of its founders catering business, to provide excess food to those in need. The demand for services skyrocketed due to COVID-19 and produced an alternative sourcing and distribution model.

FeedMe now provide food relief to over 2,000 families per week across multiple locations, addressing the availability and stability dimensions of food security.

The model operates with a ‘no questions asked’ policy and does not require identification or criteria to access their services, lowering barriers to the utilisation of their services. Staffed by a large volunteer base of over 500 people, volunteer attraction and retention is premised on prioritising wellbeing and mental health. Funding comes from a variety of sources including local philanthropists, community donations, grants, and their own catering arm.

“Knowing the stories that were coming from the community of people needing help, but finding limitations and barriers to other agencies that

already existed because they didn’t qualify. Or they couldn’t access them, or they were at the wrong times, or they didn’t want to sit in an interview.”

Challenges identified include increasing demand, lack of government funding and support, limited availability of donated food, and a lack of affordable housing in the region putting pressure on social services. FeedMe plays a leadership role in the community, modelling empathy, kindness, and sustainable practices. New ventures include collaborating with fine dining establishments to promote food sustainability and security. Through their services, the dimensions of food security addressed by FeedMe include availability, stability, and utilisation.





Participants in focus groups and interviews identified the unique approach and community profile of FeedMe.

"We have to admire Feed Me's approach as well. During COVID they really just mustered up the community through the power of social media, and what they were able to achieve is amazing. And every single person you talk to knows who Feed Me Bellarine is and what they do."

"For [FeedMe] to really run such a fundamentally different model to more sort of traditional service delivery models is fantastic. I think, too, through their social media and how they operate, they made it easy for people to give."

"A lot of people, given the opportunity, would really take up delivery systems. So the charities like Feed Me who are able to provide that sort of service are overrun at the moment because that's been really valuable to people."

"What Feed Me Bellarine, for example, in our region's doing is really inspiring."



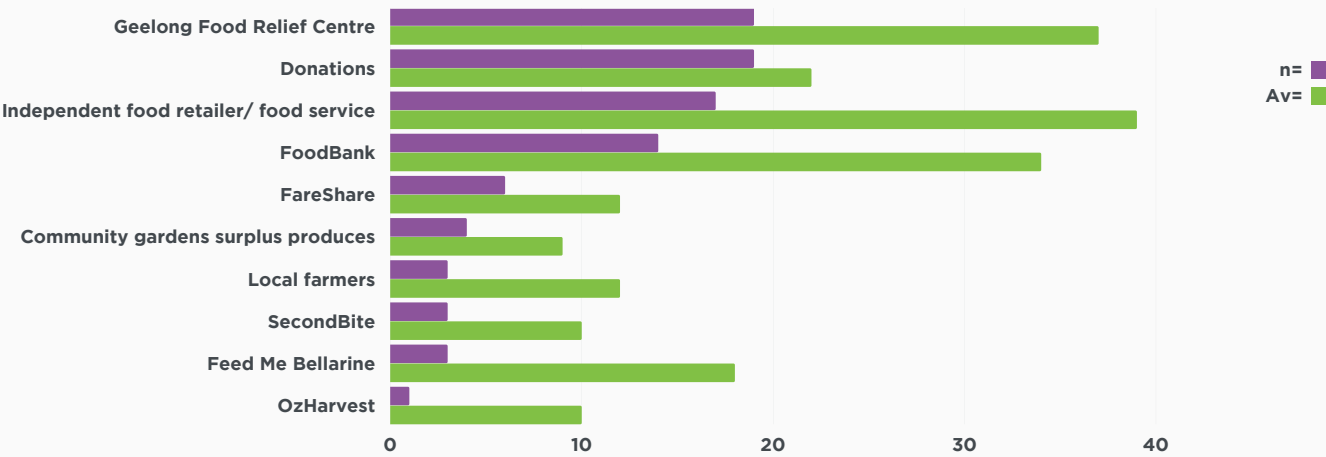
RESEARCH FINDINGS: FOOD SUPPLY

The most common food sources amongst the region's food relief agencies were Geelong Food Relief Centre, donations, independent food retailers and FoodBank, all accessed by 14 or more organisations.

Figure 7 shows the number of organisations sourcing food from different suppliers and the average % contribution of each supplier to the food supply volume of agencies responding to

the survey. 'Other' food sources noted in the survey by multiple agencies (not shown on the Figure below) included Colac Food Share and major supermarkets.

Figure 7: Food sourcing across food relief agencies*



*The count (n=) denotes the number of organisations sourcing food from that supplier.

Focus groups and interviews revealed statewide food distributors are placing limits on availability of food for donation due increased demand. Focus group and interview participants working in organisations that service both Greater Melbourne and G21 note different caps for food between the urban and regional areas.

"We're noticing that we can't get as much food as we usually would from FoodBank. Limits are applying, obviously, because more people are needing help, they're needing to spread their resources as well as fill their own buses across the region" - interview participant

"The [Melbourne] limit [of food available to source from FoodBank] is definitely much higher compared to the Geelong one, which is a discussion that we've been trying to have with them." - focus group participant

Supermarket efforts to limit excess stock in their supply chains has reduced the volume of donations for food relief in the region, as noted by multiple interviewees. This impacts the availability dimension of food security, with flow on effects for food access among clients accessing food relief services.

"I know a lot of the other regional groups are having a significant drop in the supermarket rescues because, for example, if they just hold on to that food for 12 hours more or 24 hours more, there's a significant reduction." - interview participant

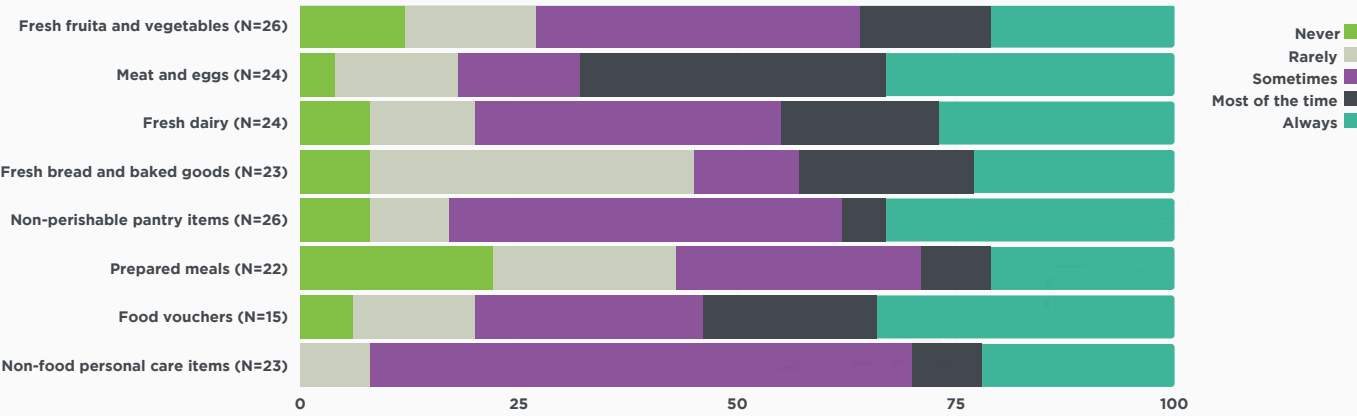
"as costs increase, [supermarkets are] looking for more ways to support their customers by reducing prices before they give it off to us." - focus group participant



Importantly, significant shortfalls in supply of food relief products were reported across all product categories, with >20% of agencies running out of each product either always or most of the time.

Agencies most commonly ran out of fresh food categories including meat and eggs, fresh dairy and fresh fruit and vegetables as well as shortfalls in available food vouchers.

Figure 8: Frequency of supply shortfalls for different products



Focus groups and interviews indicated an increasing focus from food distributors on providers' needs, their client base, and outcomes of distributed food. Understanding the overlaps and gaps in service delivery, and anticipated future directions of the services, would enable distributors to scale accordingly and support a broader food security strategic agenda. The efforts of distributors to engage with providers were recognised and appreciated in focus group discussions with providers.

"We need to understand a lot more about what the agencies do, who they're supporting and how many people they're supporting"
- Interview with distributor

"What [FeedMe] do in that space is quite extraordinary. The volume that they manage to rescue and then redistribute; their model, also, of no questions." - Focus group participant

"[Geelong Food Relief] have been out to [our sites] and met with the coordinators and they're asking the nitty-gritty questions."

"Okay, how much are you getting? How can we do better? So I think that's a really good initiative that's happening, but... If they weren't giving us that [support], that is a big risk."
- Focus group participant

Quality and nutritional value is also affected by decisions to reduce costs at supermarkets. Variable quality was another identified issue from focus groups and interviews in procuring food directly from statewide distributors.

"[re: food quality] the supermarkets are ... they're not wanting a lot of leftovers. They're reducing the amount they're getting in the first place. And by the time it gets to [smaller community organisations], then, you know, it's getting very much to the end of its life."
- focus group participant

"we'll get a crate of strawberries in punnets. And each of the punnets will have a mouldy strawberry. And with our packers, we can't have our workers open them up and separate them."
- focus group participant

In addressing these challenges, the investment of Geelong Food Relief Centre in upstream sorting was noticeable among providers.

"now, our delivery comes from from Geelong Food Relief and I have to say that somebody's done something about the quality of the stuff getting to us." - focus group participant

Educating supermarkets on freezing and storage practices can increase the availability of donated food, but involves extra time and resources from distributors. Agencies describe changing interactions with supermarket employees, brushing up against policies on retail vs wholesale provision of food, with practice differing on a case-by-case basis. This interrupts the stability of food provision for agencies buying food for food relief.

"we'll educate [major food retailer] in terms of how we get meat from them because we won't collect it if it's not frozen, because we can't trust it" - interview participant

"One of the upper echelon of one of the big supermarkets did tell me that they were a

retailer, not a wholesaler. You know, it takes a lot of energy to actually ... argue your case with people. And sometimes you win and sometimes you don't." - focus group participant

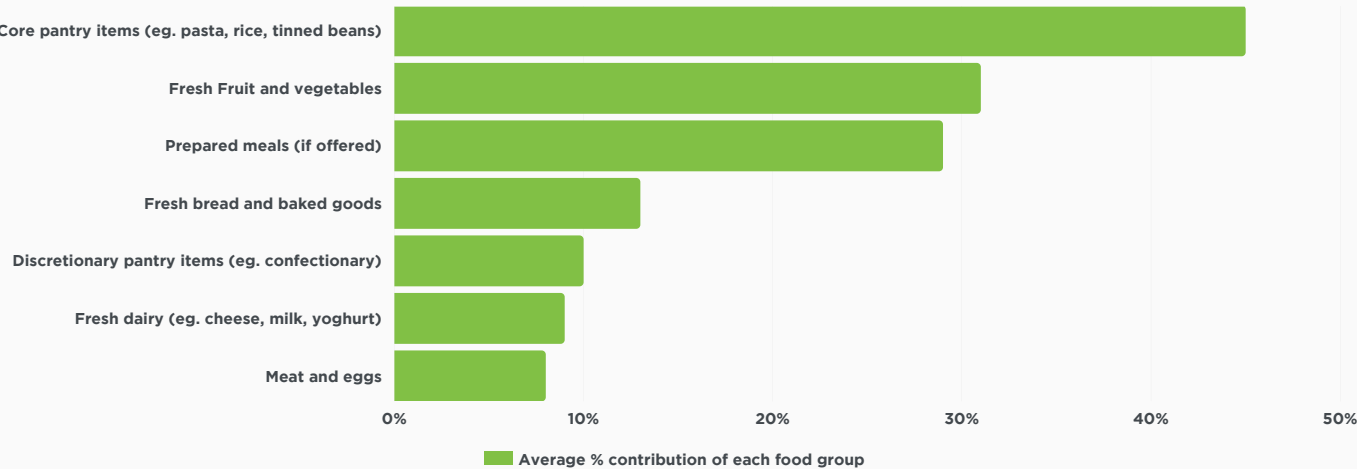
"The guy at [major food retailer] told us he was just bound by company policy and he couldn't let us have any more. We actually do our eggs through a wholesaler now...They're not as cheap as Aldi. And, you know, it hurts me, but... it means we get them." - focus group participant

Only two agencies reported having good choice over the food donations they receive, with 46% having 'some choice' and 'no choice' respectively.

To supplement donations, 80% of organisations also purchase food. Among the agencies purchasing food, the proportion of food purchased ranges from 5-95%, with an average of 44% purchased food. A mix of products are purchased across agencies, including fresh produce, meat, eggs, tinned/ pantry staples and ingredients for meals programs.

Figure 9 below highlights the average contribution of different food groups across services, with the number of agencies providing that item shown in brackets. The primary food items typically provided consist of essential pantry items, fresh fruits and vegetables, bread and baked goods, dairy, meat and eggs, all provided by 16 or more agencies.

Figure 9: Average contribution of different food groups to service delivery





Most organisations source their food via a combination of collection and delivery (59%), while 21% rely solely on collection, and 10% via delivery only. Remaining responses included agencies purchasing food directly from stores, sourcing food on demand or offering vouchers only.

In interviews participants discussed cultivating alternative sources of food to address the dimensions of availability, utilisation, and agency in their food relief supplies, both local to the region and from Melbourne.

“People just pulling up with, during fruit season, their trees are too, are overlaid and they can’t eat all the fruit”
- focus group participant

“Over the last three years, I’ve created relationships at 01:00 in the morning with fruit and veg guys in the Melbourne market.”
- interview participant

“Some of the kind of constraints in procurement is an interesting one for the meals that we make with the women, because they are culturally appropriate meals, and we’re buying [specific ingredients] from the wholesale market, which is coming from Melbourne.”
- focus group participant

In terms of equipment, all agencies reported having pantry storage , while 82% had cold storage access. Commercial kitchens were available for 42% of agencies, while only one third had a provided vehicle for food transport.¹⁴ Over half organisations report that volunteers either ‘always’ or ‘often’ use their own vehicles to collect or deliver food.

When asked what additional equipment would assist service delivery, one third responded they had all the required infrastructure. Eight agencies would benefit from a vehicle for transporting food, with one quarter of agencies wanting cold storage (Figure 10). ‘Other’ responses included additional physical space on premises for storage, program delivery, a better-equipped kitchen and additional volunteer support.

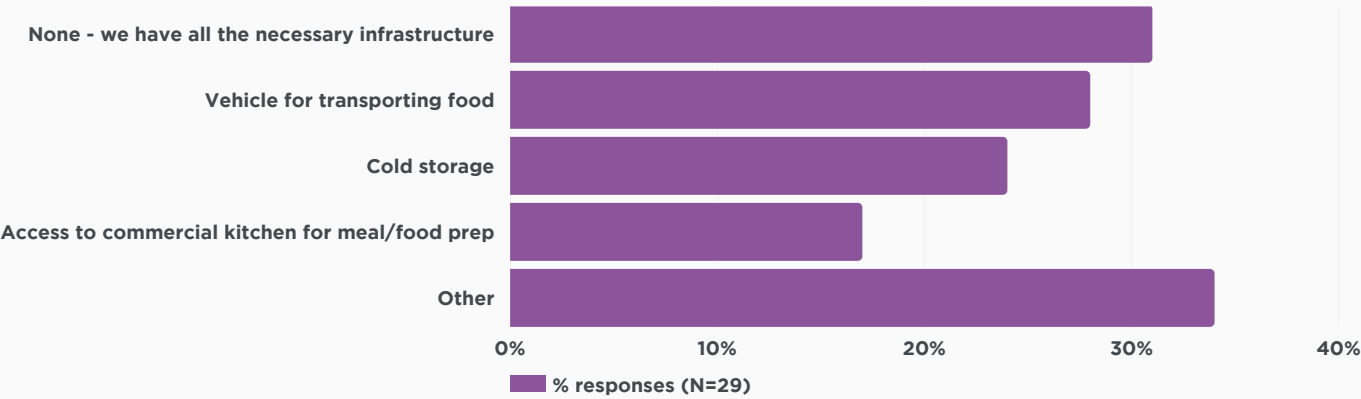
Non-food sourcing issues raised in focus groups and interviews included kitchens and takeaway containers for organisations that serve takeaway food (since the government ban on plastics). Remaining gaps in procurement include interruptions to deliveries on public holidays, and food unsuitable for clients’ needs.

“Because we get our order on a Monday for Tuesday distribution, every time there’s a public holiday, we don’t get anything from second bite. The first half of the year, we have a lot of days where we’re down on produce.”
- focus group participant

“We spend an awful lot of money on Up&Go because one of the breakfast foods that they really liked before was their cereal and milk and they seriously missed that when it became takeaway.”
- focus group participant

“People give us lots of bread, but we don’t need seedy bread because, you know, there’s such a lot of trouble with their teeth...we’re in the market for white sliced bread and so is everybody else.”
- focus group participant

Figure 10: Additional equipment requested by food relief agencies





CASE STUDY: GEELONG FOOD RELIEF CENTRE

“If it wasn’t for North Geelong Food Relief Center, our clients would get very little choice.”

The Geelong Food Relief Centre coordinates the collection and redistribution of donated and surplus food to over 50 community support agencies, and operates two mini-marts where people with vouchers can shop for groceries, via referral from agencies.

“We have two mini -mart locations, which service individuals who come via agency referral. The agencies provide the social support across all areas of people’s lives. A 20 point voucher will provide \$120 - \$140 worth of groceries.”

The Geelong Food Relief Centre operates at an immense scale, with 38,589 individuals supporting through minimarts in 2022-2023 and 850,000kgs of food distributed in the same year. The size and outputs of Geelong Food Relief contribute to the availability and stability dimensions of food security in the region, and minimarts and vouchers encourage agency by providing choice for clients.

The organisation is funded through grants from state and local government, which provide 40% of revenue, with the remaining funding from other sources. The Centre has a team of over 125 volunteers who sort and redistribute over 80

tonnes of food each month. A strong volunteer base enables cost-efficient services and reduces reliance on purchased food.

“We’ve increased our donated supply by 122% last year and reduced our purchasing by 78%. And I think a lot of that’s got to do with the work we’ve done in terms of having the volunteers that are capable of sorting the food.”

Geelong Food Relief has more recently focused on improving relationships, safety standards, and professionalism, positioning itself as a leader in food relief and building its profile to attract additional donors and funding. Geelong Food Relief sees its role as supporting community groups and wants to provide a hub for groups to come together. Stakeholder engagement is a priority, focusing on understanding and responding to the needs of agencies and building a skilled and supported volunteer base. The

Centre is working to build trust and encourage collaboration between the agencies it serves to increase efficiency, though agencies also need to maintain independence in the event that the Centre’s supply chain is disrupted.

Participants in focus groups and interviews praised the role Geelong Food Relief plays in the food relief sector in G21.

“The direction of the Geelong Food Relief Centre is amazing. The way they’re really kind of stepping into their role as a food distribution hub for other agencies... the potential pressure that that can take off the system as well as the funders is actually really amazing”

“I think that their role has changed a little bit in that they’re providing support, broad spectrum. And they’re trying to actually target more individually to our needs... Which is really good.”

“I think that Geelong Food are doing amazing work and they’re an amazing organisation and they’re heavily funded and they’re good.”

Through their services, the dimensions of food security addressed by Geelong Food Relief include availability, stability, and agency.

“We deliver free bulk food to agencies for them to distribute to their communities. We’re also continually aiming to adapt to the social need by increasing our minimart hours to be open until 7pm on Tuesday and Thursday, and 9-12.30 on a Saturday.”

“We are continually working on increasing our supply chains with the aim to provide stability of supply for our agencies”

“Our Mini-mart service allows individuals to shop with the dignity of choice and have a normal shopping experience, rather than receiving goods they didn’t choose and may not use. We attempt to do the same with agency distribution – we try and match their requests as best we can.”



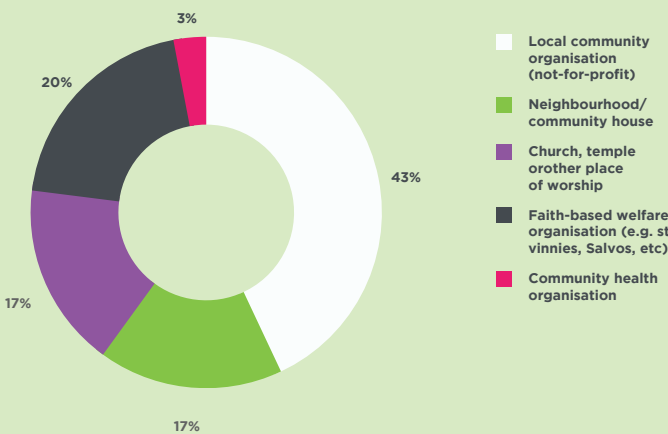


RESEARCH FINDINGS: SERVICE DELIVERY

“Our first priority is actually [to] get healthy nutritious food into the community”
- Interview participant

There is a wide diversity of food relief organisations in the G21 region. As noted in Figure 11, the largest number of organisations identified themselves as local community organisations, followed by faith-based welfare organisations, neighbourhood/ community houses and religious groups.

Figure 11: Type of agency/organisation providing food relief (N=30)



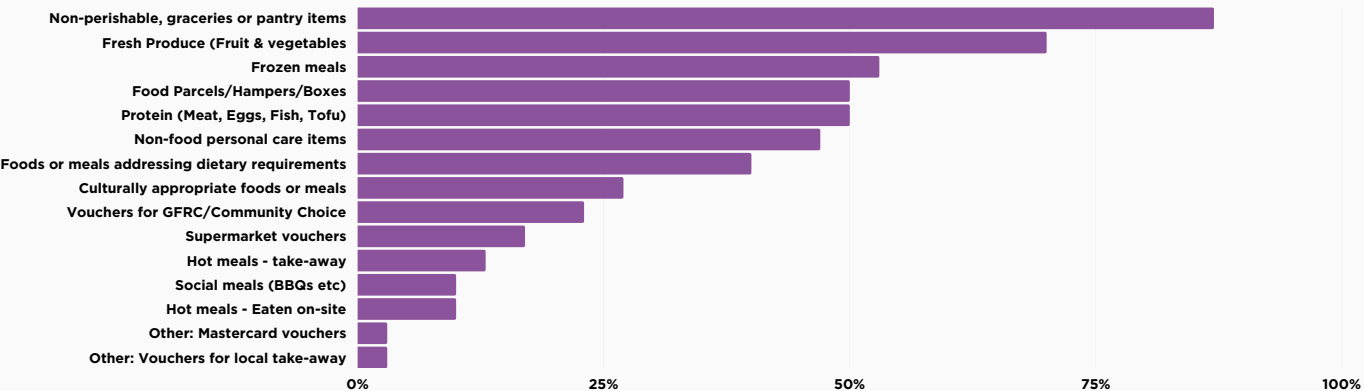
Food relief is the primary purpose of almost half of organisations (47%), while the same number of organisations incorporate food relief into broader services (47%).

In exploring the origin of organisations and programs in the region, focus groups and interviews found programs ranging from long-term core food relief service provision, relatively unchanged over decades, to organisations and programs borne of the unique challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. The flexible government funding available during and after the pandemic also provided an opportunity for innovative program design, tailored in response to both the needs of the community, and pilot phase outcomes.

Food relief is delivered in a variety of ways across the region, the most common being non-perishable pantry items, followed by fresh produce, frozen meals, and food parcels.

One in four agencies offer culturally appropriate food or meal options. Vouchers for Geelong Food Relief, Community Choice or supermarkets were offered by 23% and 17% of agencies (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Type of food relief provided (N=30)



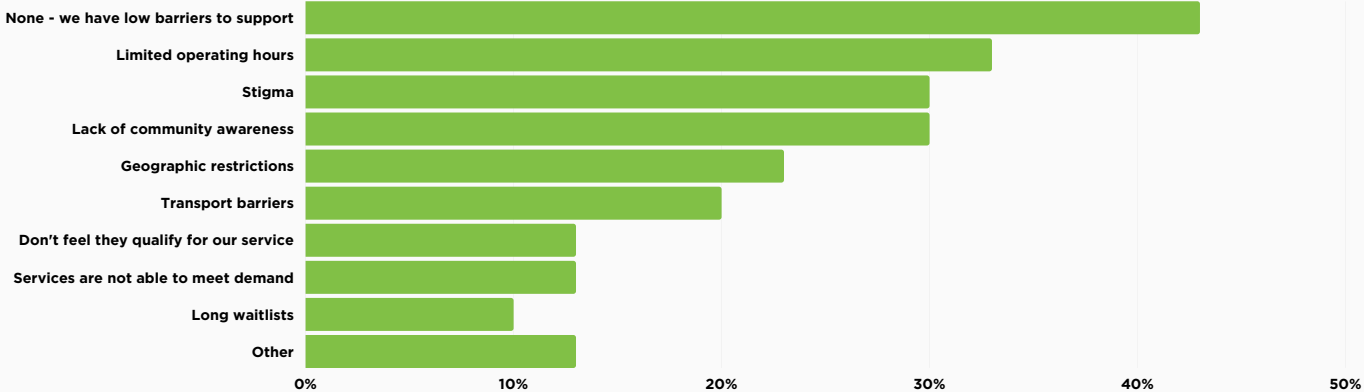
Focus groups and interviews further revealed the breadth of services: 365 days/year wraparound lunch and dinner services; meal programmes targeted at connecting with people in social housing; diversified voucher systems; material aid; emergency food pantries; boxed fresh food to primary schools; and farming and agricultural programs.

Food relief delivery in the G21 region is offered by organisations that also provide programs related to training and employment, education, and farming/agriculture. This is evident in most organisations considering their organisation’s purpose beyond delivery of food relief.

Three agencies surveyed offer meals in a social environment. Community engagement operating through food relief was also a significant theme in focus group and interview data. For some organisations, social events like barbecues provide on-site meals alongside food boxes to take home, though the social connection provided through the event is considered the primary purpose. For others, social connection emerged organically through providing space for clients themselves to create community.

“Our community barbecue is really to combat isolation, so we host monthly barbecue[s], just at our social housing estates...through [the bbqs], we will let them know that is this food relief service that they can do.”
- Focus group participant

Figure 13: Perceived barriers to service access





In focus groups and interviews participants made reference to the stigma of charity informing their approach to branding their services, and feelings of guilt experienced by users of services. Stigma is the negative judgement of a community for needing assistance to get food, and can produce feelings of shame or guilt in people accessing services, or rejecting services altogether.

“The public image of us needs to be very open to a lot of people so that it’s not just constantly thrown in their face... unfortunately, charity has a bit of a stigma attached to it, so we don’t want to be known as charity.”
- interview participant

“There’s a lot of guilt. We had the conversation around guilt about accessing services last night. Some of our more capable guys that have homes and are able to cook and can afford the basics, they feel like there’s people that need it more than they do.”
- interview participant

Geographic restrictions and transport barriers were noted by one in 5 agencies, an important consideration given the size of the region relative to service locations.

CASE STUDY: GIVE WHERE YOU LIVE FOUNDATION - COMMUNITY CHOICE VOUCHERS

“Ability for a mum to take a kid out for pizza... those simple things, those simple acts that... if they’re the bits of the puzzle that we can help fix with this system, then that just seems like a really good outcome.”

The Give Where You Live Foundation Community Choice Voucher Programme provides emergency relief vouchers for individuals experiencing financial difficulties.

The programme started in the 1990s to help with the financial stress from the recession and has expanded to cover more essentials like food and chemist essentials.

In response to COVID-19, the foundation started conversations on leveraging local cafes to help with increased demand for food relief and eventually launched the current voucher programme, allowing people to access food relief from different locations. The choice provided by the program contributes to the agency dimension of food security, while the range of vendors available through the program address access and stability.

“Some of the ideas and thinking around our programme was actually coming from emergency cash distribution programmes,

where if you just fly in food, you actually collapse an entire local market.”

“That bit around accessibility and it being more distributive is really important and I think we still need to think around the needs of different cohorts and what sort of food types people are seeking.”

The programme is now funded through state government and philanthropic funding. Over time, the vouchers have expanded beyond food relief to pharmaceutical products and material aid, such as purchasing essential furniture for those relocating or trying to establish a home. Since January 2021, Give Where You Live has dispensed over 15,000 vouchers (\$280,000). Partnering with local businesses has provided dignified access to food for recipients of vouchers,





including enabling social outings that provide reprieve and normality for those experiencing hardship. The program has also expanded to merchants open 24 hours a day, enabling around the clock food relief for recipients.

“The sense of normality people have with just the ability to go to a cafe and do something that most of us just completely take for granted... the level of dignity and normality that that is giving to someone who clearly is experiencing ... constant levels of stress you can’t underestimate.”

“Food is a draw card for some people. Food is equally what brings some people together.” Certain demographics are heavily overrepresented as service users including women (68%), single person households (58%), single parents (22%), persons with disability (19%), CALD community members (9%), refugees/ asylum seekers (7%), and First Nations (5%). Almost half of all residents accessing vouchers lived in Corio, Norlane or North Shore, indicating extremely high levels of food insecurity in this area. Community Choice data indicate

that receiving government benefits was the most cited barrier to affording food (57%), followed by unemployment (15%), large or unplanned bills (11%), and low income or unstable work (10%).

Participants from focus groups and interviews expressed gratitude for the voucher program.

“If we didn’t have Give Where You Live giving us support for vouchers, we wouldn’t be able to give vouchers to every consumer that presented into both the sites because we just don’t have that extra. They’re just absolutely fantastic.”

Challenges include funding and resourcing sufficient to meet the demand for the program. Future directions for the voucher system involve establishing a single regional emergency relief voucher system funded through multiple agencies that is easily scalable in a crisis while supporting local businesses, and increasing collaboration and partnerships with local businesses and the private sector.



RESEARCH FINDINGS: SERVICE COORDINATION

“Giving food to people is feeding them. It’s not helping them. Connecting them with an agency is helping them. It’s getting them into a system” - interview participant

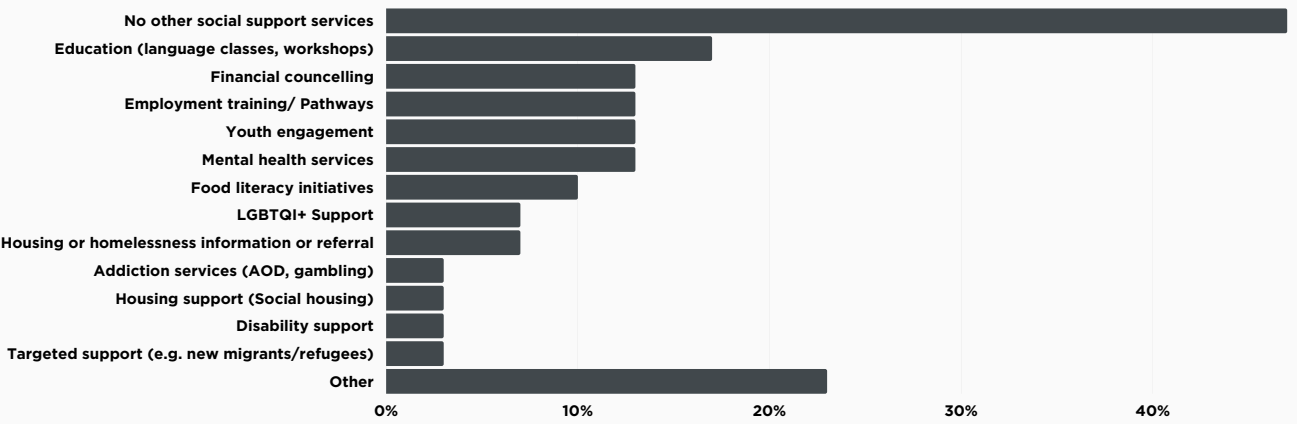
Improving service delivery in the context of heightened demand and reduced resources will require strengthened collaboration within the food relief sector. Addressing the increasingly complex needs of clients involves integration of food relief with other social support services.

Integration with social services

Approximately half (47%) of the organisations surveyed do not provide any additional social services. Among those offering additional social services, there is a wide variety noted across the sector, including education, financial counselling and employment services (Figure 14). Responses in the ‘other’ category included assistance with sourcing items from op-shops, religious support, case management and other neighbourhood house programs.

In focus groups and interviews, participants identified the most important services adjacent to food relief as health services (mental and physical), domestic violence services (noting increase in clients presenting throughout COVID-19), and financial literacy.

Figure 14: Social services offered by food relief agencies

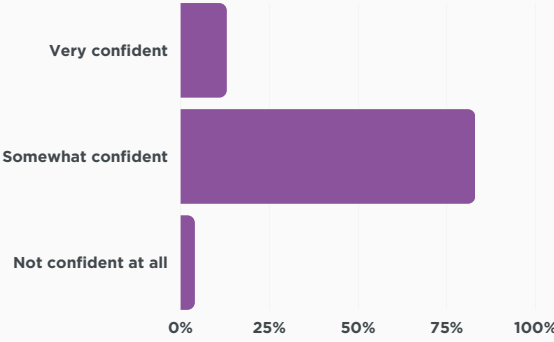




Referrals from food relief to other services

Only 13% of respondents were ‘very confident’ when referring clients to other social support services, with most being ‘somewhat confident’ (83%) shown in Figure x. Reasons for this lack of confidence include being unsure of the clients’ outcomes, agencies being overstretched already, clients receiving incorrect information, and the capability of organisations to cater for clients with complex needs.

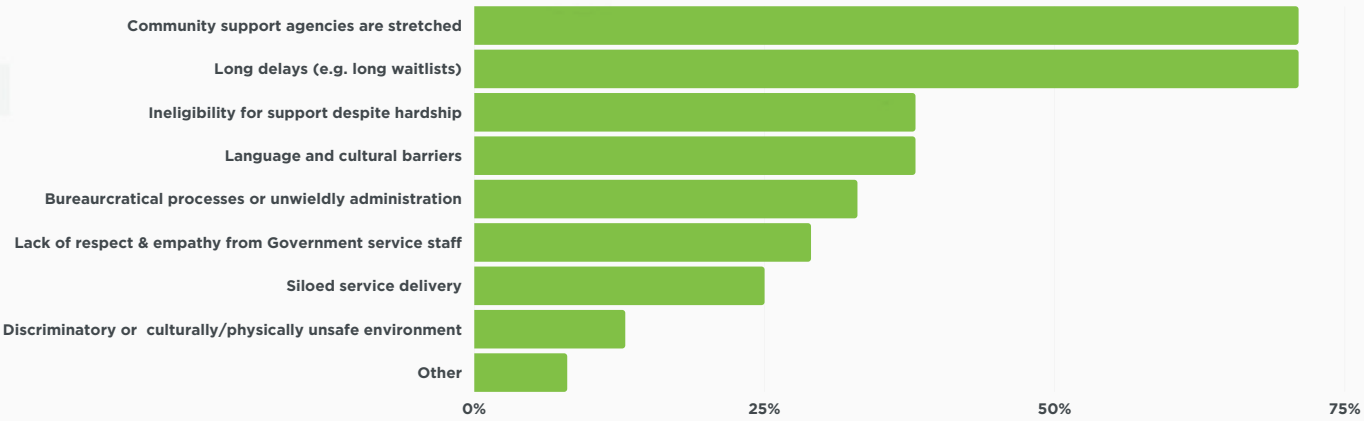
Figure 14: Confidence in referrals meeting clients’ needs



Food relief agencies highlighted complex and compounding barriers that their clients face in accessing other support services, the most consistent across responses being overstretched services and long delays (Figure 16). Ineligibility

for support, language/ cultural barriers and administrative burden were also highlighted by at least one third of agencies. ‘Other responses included distance from services, and a lack of volunteer training in referral systems.

Figure 16:



Referrals into food relief services

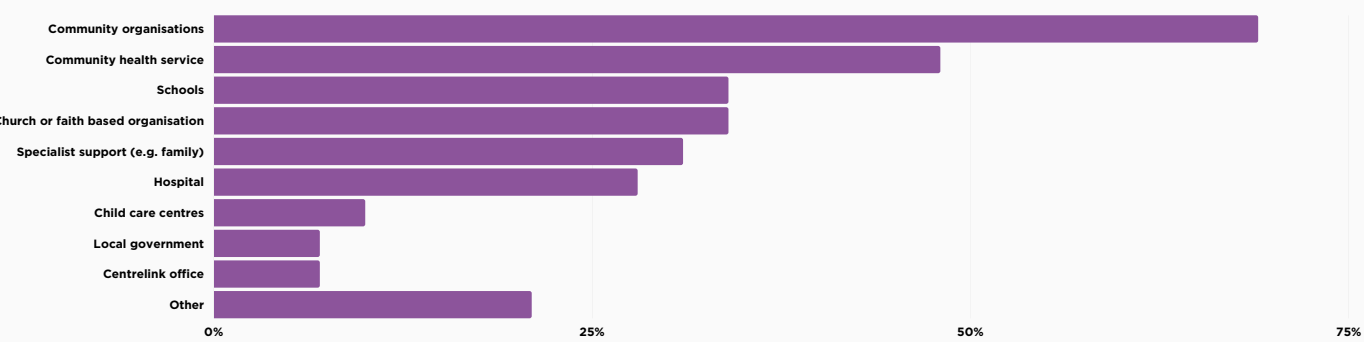
Food relief agencies receive referrals from a wide range of sources, indicative of strong awareness of programs across different service sectors. The most common referral sources are community organisations and health services, followed by

schools, faith-based organisations, specialist support services and hospitals (Figure 17). ‘Other’ responses include word of mouth, self-referrals, brochures at Geelong Food Relief and employment agencies.

In focus groups and interviews, participants outlined informal referrals, connections to appropriate services, and on-the-spot help provided by staff members or volunteers with relevant skills.

This included basic financial literacy, delivery drivers stopping for conversation with people who have been on the service for an extended period of time, letting clients know about the Utilities Assistance Grant, and informing clients of parents’ support groups.

Figure 17: Referral sources to food relief agencies in the G21 region



Existing collaborations

“I’ve really noticed a big change there and that is, and I think maybe just even just having network meetings like the Geelong Food Assistant Network Meeting where people can talk about what’s going on”
- focus group participant

Over half of agencies (62%) have existing collaborations with other food relief agencies or services.¹⁵ Larger distributors collaborate at the inter-regional level. Collaboration between other agencies involve shared resources, support for non-English speaking individuals, and access to commercial kitchens, demonstrating a network of support in the community. By collaborating with organisations with specialised resources and expertise, organisations can broaden their reach and provide more holistic assistance to those in need. Cultura was cited by multiple organisations as providing support for individuals with non-English speaking backgrounds.

“We also have a partnership with a staff member from Cultura. They are with two days a week to support people from non English speaking backgrounds.”
- interview participant

“The women were connected up with Cultura, the service agency, so they kind of help us recruit the women and they come here for a cooking programme.” - focus group participant

“We have a partnership with OneHope Community Care, the church, where we go in and cook from their commercial kitchen.”
- focus group participant

“We have access to Geelong Mums as well, which is connected through to Give Where You Live.” - focus group participant

“OneHope Community Care in Geelong, Bellarine Living and Learning Centre, Norlane community initiative. We go to their food programme, evening meals programme, once a month.” - interview participant



Benefits and constraints of collaboration

One quarter of agencies (23%) don't collaborate due to time of resource constraints. Four agencies (13%) stated they wanted to collaborate but didn't know where to start, while 20% have tried to collaborate but found it challenging.

When asked how and why organisations would like the collaborate with other agencies/ services, the following benefits and challenges were discussed:

Benefits:

- Improving coordination and communication among agencies
- Avoiding duplication of services and sharing resources
- Building openness and trust among agencies
- Opportunity to create a platform outlining what each service offers
- Allocating surplus food appropriately.

Challenges

- Lack of time and resources to put towards collaboration and engaging with other services
- Past negative experiences when attempting to engage other services
- Regional areas can find it harder to collaborate, given distances from other services

We called around multiple organisations and said you use your venue during the day, can we use it during the night? And they're like, oh, no, we're a disability services provider or we don't have your cohort here"
- interview participant

"There really should be a better system for entry points, for access to all these places, because I get the nurses at the hospital going, oh, someone told me about you. It's kind of like, well, shouldn't you know?"
- interview participant

"There is a serious disconnect in Geelong with the service providers. People within the food services community and all other communities compete with one another rather than collaborate with one another."
- interview participant

Focus groups and interviews identify that services could be more efficient, and that broadly there was an appetite for increased collaboration. But agencies noted that clients had routines, and preferences that would be disrupted if services were merged.

"Inefficiency across agencies. even some of the inefficiency in the funding. I think at times there's funding across groups that actually, if you pulled groups together, it would work so much better."
- interview participant

"People have spoken about mergers and things like that whereas we have clients that refuse to go to other services and other services have clients that refuse to come to us"
- interview participant

The Geelong Food Assistance Network was singled out in interviews and focus groups as providing 'hope' for improved regional coordination.

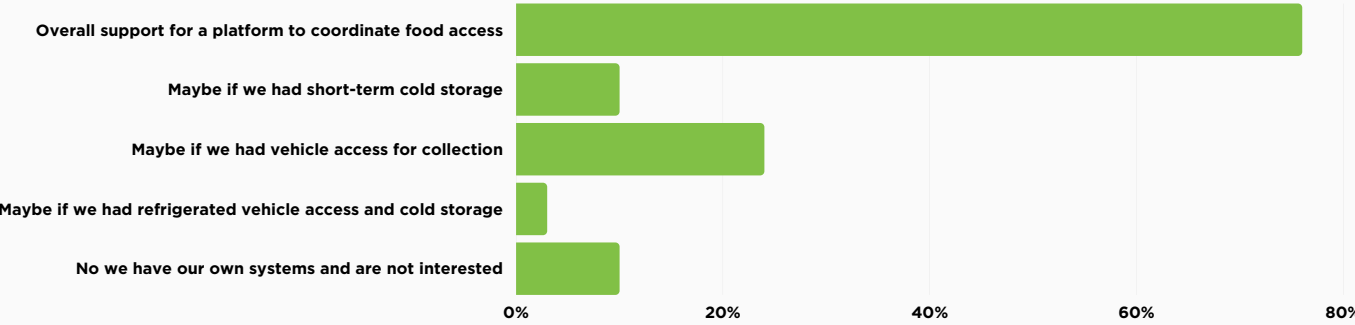
"The thing that I'd probably say that's encouraging me at the moment is the development of a Geelong Food Assistance Network. Just as a way of coordinating the agencies and trying to spread what's available as equitably, not even equitably, but just making sure there's no waste."
- focus group participant

Tools to support collaboration

The survey identified strong support (76%) for an online platform to coordinate and redistribute food access between agencies (Figure 18), with responses highlighting vehicle access and cold storage as necessary to be able to benefit from

the initiative. Other considerations were the need for proper training for users, having sufficient volunteer capacity to arrange collections, ensuring it is a simple process, and needing to have a sufficient product quantity to make it worthwhile for agencies.

Figure 18: Support for a platform coordinating access to food across agencies



A platform to coordinate food access was the most important theme identified in focus groups and interviews as a mechanism for increasing collaboration, alongside an expanded resource for food relief and other social support services in the region, including relevant government departments and services. Ideally such a platform would be co-designed by interested agencies, and include training and education on its use, though an example of an existing platform is BrightSparqe, which connects business with available food to charities, and allows charities to share excess food with each other¹⁶.

"Is there any kind of partnership that could be open in terms of getting those food that we don't have to put it to waste and be able to give it to people who may need?"
- focus group participant

"I would like almost to see a bank of people that like to do stuff that is then shared across the community."- focus group participant

"A community communication profile that actually supports and encourages local businesses to give what they don't need."
- focus group participant

"Could we not create an entire booklet of housing, drug and alcohol, mental, food, every single kind of thing?"- interview participant

"Mapping out services that are already there. Including social support services. Connectivity maps between organisations. Provide physical copies for rough sleepers and people not in stable housing."- interview participant

"[A map of] connections across government in the region and different parts of councils/ departments" - focus group participant

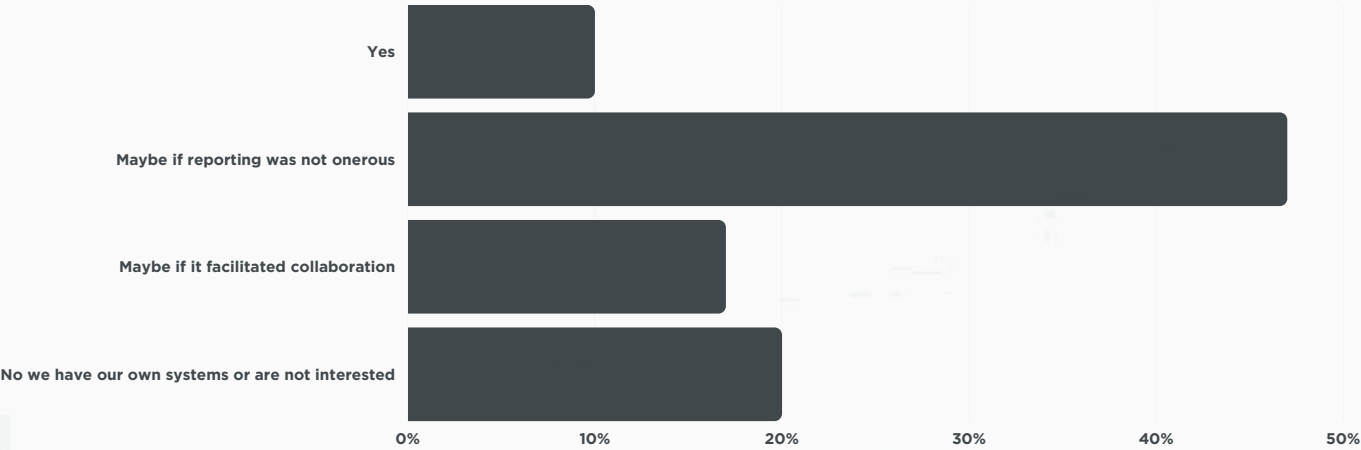
"How many times have I wanted a booklet with all the services or the primary services that they can keep in their wallet?" - interview participant



There was mixed support across food relief agencies for a combined reporting platform, with 20% stating it would be useful, while 20% had their own systems and were not interested (Figure 19). Ensuring that the process did not place extra administrative burden onto agencies

was highlighted by half of agencies, while 17% would be interested if it facilitated collaboration. A combined reporting mechanism was not spontaneously suggested during focus groups and interviews when options for collaboration were raised.

Figure 19: Support for a combined reporting platform across food relief agencies



CASE STUDY: BARWON HEALTH - COMMUNITY CONNECTORS PROGRAM

“Presence, rather than pushing”

The Community Connectors program is a 12-month outreach program funded by the Victorian Government Department of Families, Fairness and Housing that aims to build trust and connection between vulnerable community members and support services in the Geelong region.

The program focuses on linking people experiencing hardship, especially those in social housing, to essential health, housing, and food relief services through an assertive yet unpressured outreach model. Providing food relief in the form of community meals is one component of an integrated service for clients, addressing the utilisation and stability dimensions of food security, while the overall approach of Community Connectors prioritises the agency of clients.

“There were particular primary needs that were identified, being social isolation, lack of health literacy and mental health and wellbeing and health services, and people’s lack of access to all those services.”

“Meals provide an opportunity to connect with potential clients, as well as provide food relief.”

“What we found is, as part of the meals programmes, people come for more than just food. And food may not even be top of the list.”

“Some of the people who come along for a meal [are] also volunteering at the places. The social aspect that happens, the opportunities that develop out of being there.”

The program has reached over 1,700 vulnerable community members since launching in late 2022, well exceeding its initial target, through attending community meals, visiting public housing sites, promoting the program at community events, and receiving referrals from other services.





The program’s strength lies in its ability to spend adequate time with clients to understand their complex needs, build trust, and navigate difficult circumstances.

“The outreach, going out and meeting people where they are, not where you want them to be. As I said, the meals programme has been great... because the people are there, we’re not pushy, we just sit back and let people approach us”

“We’ve had no pressure on us in terms of justifying our time, measuring our time. We can spend as long as we need to to talk to someone, we can follow someone as many times we need to, we don’t need to respond to us by our third phone call. We can keep trying and keep trying and keep trying.”

The program’s funding ends in October 2023, though the work and connections made through the program have been invaluable to both clients and partner organisations. There is interest in continuing the work, though funding and resources remain a barrier.

Key learnings and recommendations from the program include:

- **the need for coordinated**, wrap-around support for vulnerable community members;
- **that people seek community meals** and events for social connection and purpose as much as food;
- **the importance of assertive outreach** and having adequate time to build trust and understand complex circumstances;
- **the value of including lived experience** perspectives to challenge assumptions and co-design solutions;
- **and the need for an up-to-date** community resource directory to help people navigate available supports.

RESEARCH FINDINGS: STAFFING

For every one paid employee in the G21 food relief sector, there are 22 volunteers, and there are 6.7 volunteer hours for every hour of paid work in the sector.

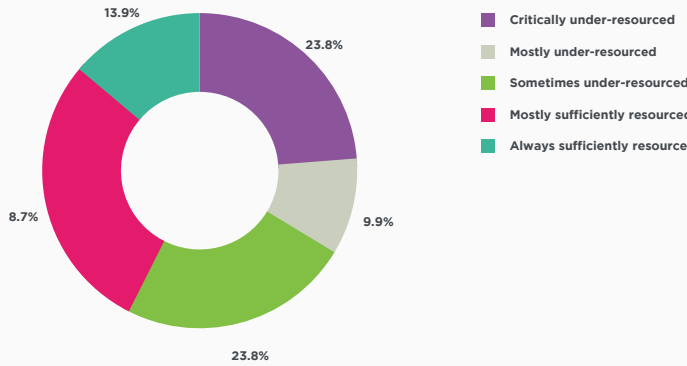
Nineteen agencies have a combined 49 paid staff for food relief activities, ranging from 1-8 employees, while 11 agencies are entirely volunteer-run. Paid staff hours range significantly across organisations, with an average of 38 hours/week per organisation (Table x). Twenty-five agencies have volunteer staff, ranging from a couple of volunteers up to 500 at Feed Me

Bellarine, with an average of 183 volunteer hours/week. The replacement cost of volunteer labour across the food relief sector in the G21 region equates to a staggering \$10,503,640 annually.¹⁷

METRIC	NO. RESPONSES N (%)	RANGE	AVERAGE	MEDIAN*	TOTAL
Paid Staff	19 (63%)	1-8	2.6	2	49
Paid Hours Per Week	18 (60%)	1-177	38	15	684
Volunteer Staff	25 (83%)	2-500	42.5	15	1063
Volunteer Hours Per Week	25 (83%)	5-3000	183.4	25	4584.5



Figure 20: Adequacy of paid staffing for operations





Many newer organisations relied on founders volunteering time to set up and establish the service. Some Directors and CEOs are still not compensated full time. This creates obvious barriers to establishing new programs or organisations, as precedent suggests leadership would remain initially uncompensated. Lack of paid staff can also increase burnout, poor continuity and a loss of institutional and client knowledge.

“Two very underpaid staff, including me. And then we have a manager that’s on a stipend payment and that’s also very minuscule... we also have a truck driver that’s on even less of a stipend payment” - interview participant

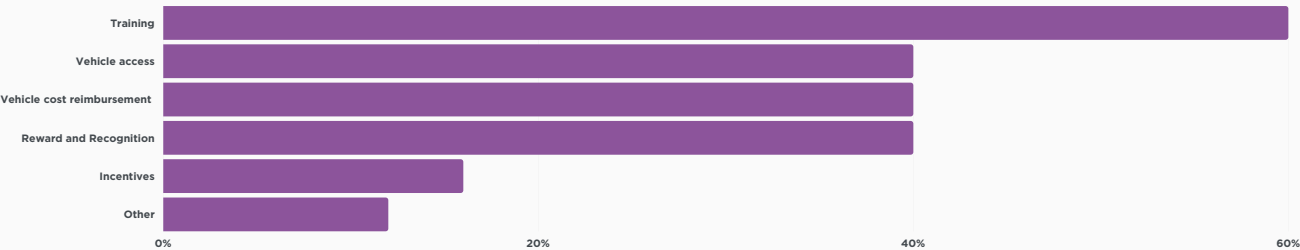
“[my cofounder and I] volunteered the first year.” - interview participant

“I’m the only person essentially working for the charity” - focus group participant

One third of agencies (34%) report their level of paid staffing as critically or mostly under-resourced, while only three agencies (10%) always have enough paid staff for operational aspects of service delivery (Figure 21).

Twelve agencies (40%) do not have enough staff to meet current levels of demand. Reasons for this include challenges with volunteer recruitment, management and retention, insufficient funding for paid staff, and challenges related to the remote location and time involved in collecting and delivering food. One quarter of agencies report an increase in staffing issues in the past 12 months, including volunteers (e.g. retention, attraction, cost).

Figure 21: Opportunities to better support volunteers



Participants in focus groups and interviews acknowledged that the impact of increased demand and client complexity would be worn by volunteers.

“To train [volunteers] or support them in the stories they’re hearing, those stories are getting probably harder and more frequent.”

- interview participant

Agencies identified training as the greatest opportunity to better support volunteers, followed by vehicle access/ reimbursement and increased reward and recognition for their work (Figure 21). ‘Other’ responses included laptops for remote support, training in first aid and referral pathways.

In focus groups and interviews, participants discussed ways they are already supporting volunteers, especially organisations with a large volunteer workforce. Training opportunities and support for mental health and wellbeing were priorities to attract and retain volunteers.

“We are running a first aid course at the end of next week as well, so we’re really trying to upskill our volunteers. We’ve got a few also going through safe food handling courses.”

- interview participant

“We’ve put in hard yards with creating relationships with our volunteers and making this somewhere that they can come and be safe and feel safe and contribute and be part of the family.” - interview participant

“What I put the most effort into is volunteers’ safety, mental well being and health.”

- interview participant

RESEARCH FINDINGS: FUNDING

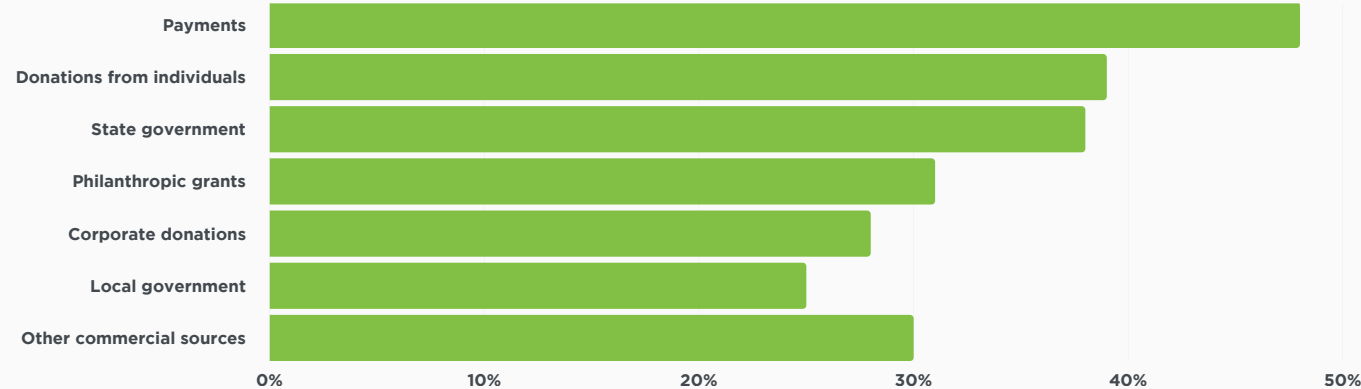
Voucher payments contributed an average of half of the revenue, albeit among three agencies only. The most common revenue source across the region was individual donations, which generated an average of 39% of revenue.

This is followed by philanthropic grants and corporate donations. Funding from local, state or federal governments was less commonly reported. Other notable funding sources included revenue from Op-shops (n=4), church funding (n=2) and revenue from program/ activity fees (n=2).

In interviews, participants acknowledged that COVID-19 had presented a unique opportunity

to secure flexible government funding, and that recent cuts were affecting any state and local government programs, not just in food relief. However, participants expressed a preference for government funding due to the potential to fund core costs, including staffing, operations, and essential services. Barriers to funding core costs were acknowledged across the focus groups and interviews.

Figure 22: Average % contribution of different revenue streams



“A lot of other funders, whether it be the funding collectives, et cetera, they often want to fund something. And so that’s hard. I mean, it’s great, but it’s also really hard is that it’s not sexy to pay for the freezer to stay on.”

- interview participant

“Across philanthropy, a huge number of organisations are not funding into food relief anymore. A lot of them are stepping more into climate resilience and potentially food security, but what that means is that they’re actually sort of stepping away from the crisis funding”

- interview participant

In the context of drastically increased service demand over the past 12 months, 15% of agencies have experienced reduced grant funding, while just over half have noticed minimal change (Figure 22).

“The increase in cost of living means the increasing cost of operations. Funders are equally not increasing allocations”

- interview participant



Over the past year, 40% of agencies have experienced an increase in individual and

Figure 24: Change in grant income from all sources over past 12 months (N=28)

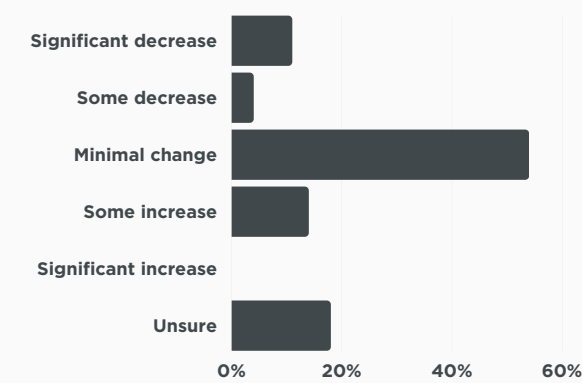
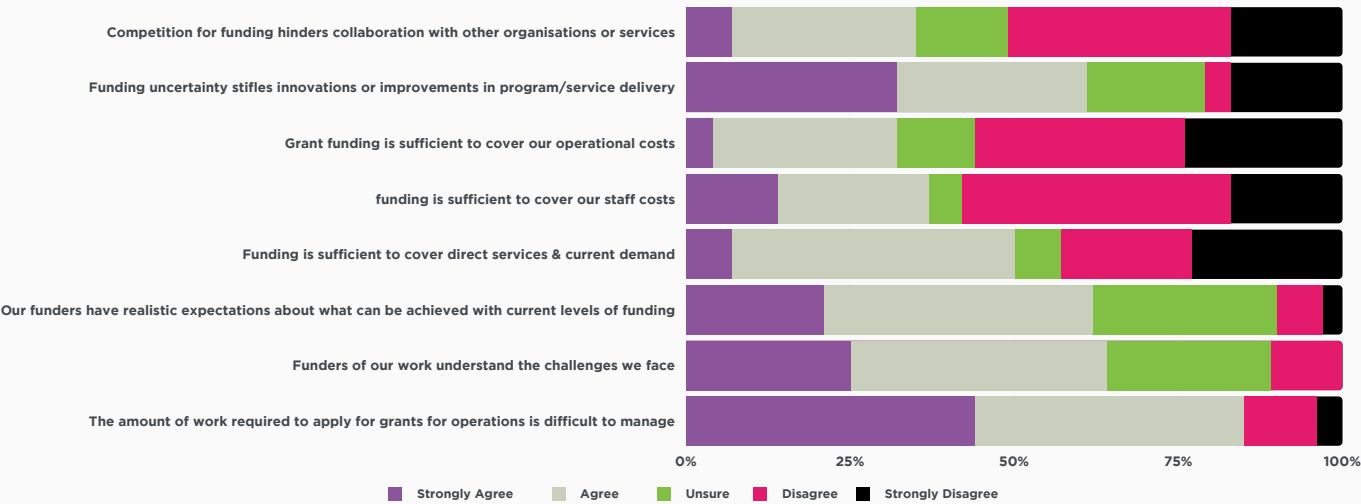


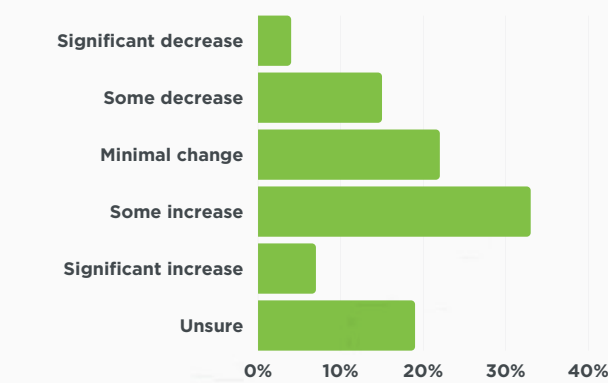
Figure 26 below describes the experiences of the funding landscape experienced by food relief agencies. Approximately half of organisations stated that funding was insufficient to cover operational costs and staffing costs (56% and 59% respectively). Despite these severe funding shortfalls, few agencies reported funders having unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved

Figure 26: Food agency experiences with the current funding landscape



philanthropic donations, while 19% have noticed a reduction in donations (Figure 25).

Figure 25: Change in individual and/or philanthropic donations over past 12 months (N=27)



with existing resourcing, and 64% agreed that funders understand the challenges faced by food relief organisations. Three in five agencies agree that funding uncertainty prevents improvement in service delivery, which is compounded by 85% of organisations experiencing difficulty in finding time to apply for grants.

Alternative and mixed revenue streams were discussed by participants in focus groups. Many organisations charge small amounts for services or run social enterprise operations on the side of food relief activities to stabilise income.

“We will charge the agencies \$20. So that’s also a revenue stream for us as well. In many ways, that actually just covers costs because we buy a lot of food to make sure that our minimart is stocked with everything that people need”
- interview participant

“Our catering arm has sustained us with essential funds to keep us going.”
- interview participant

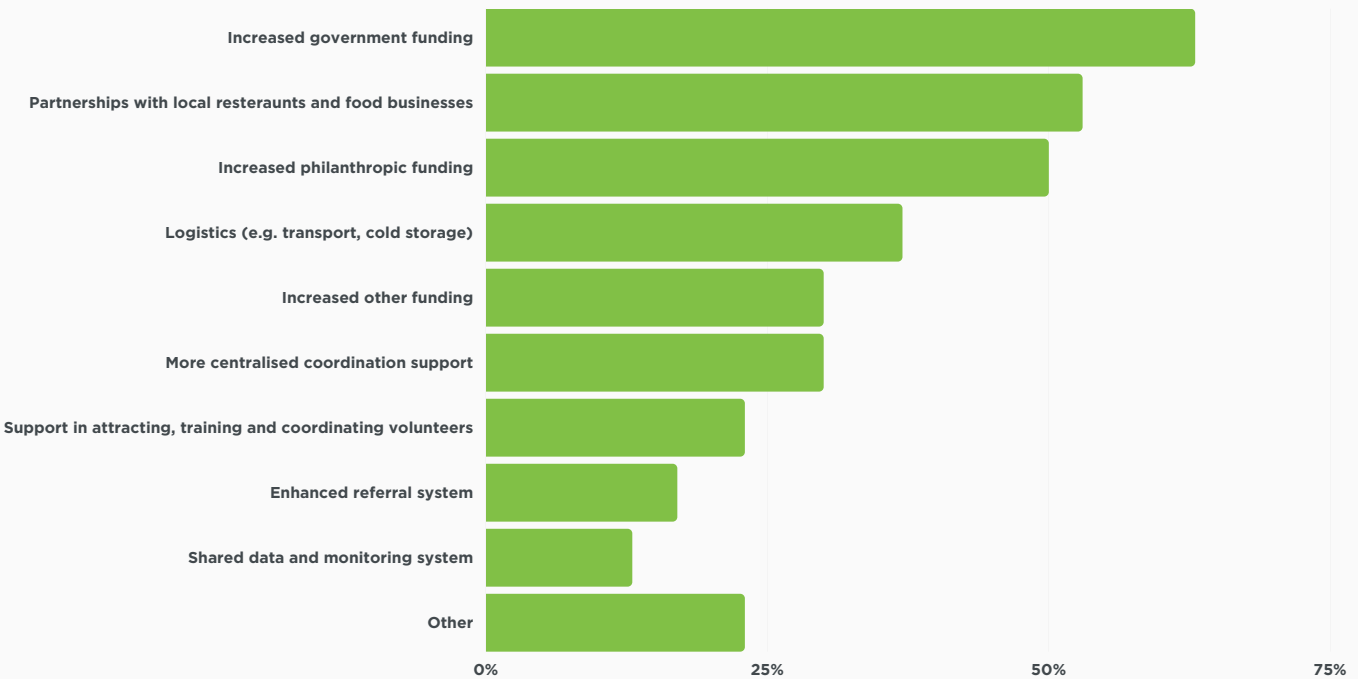
“We wanted to establish a model that’s not going to just rely on grants.”
- interview participant

“We just partnered with the APCO Foundation off the back of a successful Give Where You Live Micro grant” - interview participant

“e are very lucky to be supported by a hospitality group called the Mulberry Group in Melbourne and the founder of that hospitality group kind of set [us] up as the not for profit at the core of that. We actually get 10% of all profits from each of the venues.”
- focus group participant

To meet community needs, agencies most commonly called for increased funding from government (63%) and philanthropic sources (50%), as well as partnerships with local food businesses (53%) and logistics (37%) (Figure 27). ‘Other’ priorities highlighted in the survey by multiple agencies was delivery of donations to agencies (n=4).

Figure 27: Agency priorities to meet current community needs





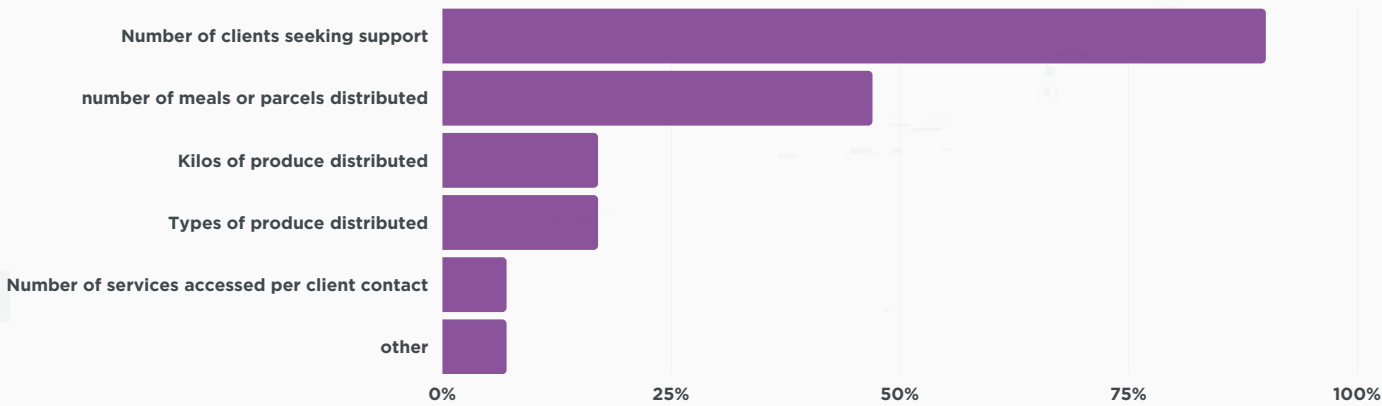
RESEARCH FINDINGS: MEASUREMENT

Most organisations monitor service delivery by recording the number of clients (90%), with almost half capturing the number of meals or parcels distributed (Figure 28). Five agencies gathered data on volume and types of food distributed respectively. ‘Other’ responses included keeping a live database with the DSS, and auditing stock levels.

Measurement that captures not just output, but outcomes of food relief is important for justifying funding from government and donors and communicating value to the community.

Focus group and interview participants identified the kilogram- and client- based metrics typical of the sector as not capturing the full impact of their services.

Figure 28: How do organisations measure service delivery



“We see up to 200 people a day coming on site... and I wish we could capture the right data to show that those 50 people came in and gave us an XYZ donation for their product because they were financially supporting us.”
- interview participant

“The other thing that has been part of the programme, but there’s been a bit harder to set up, is wanting to capture the trust and...sort of the connectedness that people are feeling to services and the change that there has been in that.”
- interview participant

“There’s probably not much measurement of the value of that connection and what that brings to people, how it can maybe elevate their sense of well being”
- interview participant

Less onerous reporting requirements can produce more flexible service delivery and free up staff resources to devote to service delivery, rather than reporting. The Community Connectors program through Barwon Health measures the number of clients contacted, and information on referrals, with little other reporting requirements. But they are able to effectively measure outcomes of the program. Staff collect individual stories on internal spreadsheets - not for reporting, but to remind them that their work is impactful. A Resident Reference Group provides space for discussions on program impact, and changes they would like to see in future service delivery.

Future research could identify measurement that captures the full value of a service and longitudinal impact stories, without creating administrative burden or violating the privacy of clients.

“There’s potential there for a really cool project around that value of a food relief space or what it could be. Just imagine what that could be. A hive of activity, a hive of learning.” - interview participant



CASE STUDY: FARM MY SCHOOL

“This is about preventative health measures. It’s about climate action. It’s about community engagement.... I understand that [food relief] is providing a basic right. Let me make that perfectly clear. But let’s dream a bit bigger and hopefully feed everyone nutritious food”

Farm My School was founded four years ago out of a desire to address lack of access to local, organic food and opportunities for new farmers.

Its founders identified schools as having underutilised land and established a pilot partnership with Bellarine Secondary College. A 1.5-acre market garden has been established on the school grounds, with a farmer employed to grow organic produce for school lunches, veggie boxes for families, and local communities.

The program aims to inspire new farmers, change perceptions of the role of farmers, and seeks to be preventative and address systemic issues, not just provide food relief. The goal is to address food insecurity and lack of nutritious food access for school children and the broader school community, addressing the stability, utilisation, and sustainability dimensions of food security.

“We identified why there weren’t farmers, basically, young farmers or, you know, what I call good farmers, you know, regenerative farmers, organic farmers in our region”

“Instead of sticking the farmer out 30 kilometres away, out when no one sees them, and they toil away and suddenly the food ends up at Coles in your trolley. Disengaged system, I think. And not inspiring at all.”

“If we’ve got a scale, and we’ve got a market garden, which can employ a farmer, that sort of takes care of that and hopefully can make it a more sustainable model”

Farm My School is currently in its third year of a pilot phase, and aims to scale the model to other schools. Scaling the Farm My School model involves creating a financially sustainable and replicable model. Challenges include securing ongoing funding, balancing low-cost nutritious food and fair wages, establishing community support, and navigating bureaucracy to ensure targeted advocacy.

The Farm My School model addresses a range of interconnected issues relating to food security. These include lack of prioritisation of land for food growing, lack of nutrition education, and lack of top-down support for food security. Supermarkets and a focus on food waste have driven the conversation toward food relief rather than systemic solutions. There is a need for political will and mandates across government to drive innovative solutions such as Farm My School.

“For a replicable model, the next school that we would work with, these are all the things that we’re getting in place. Like what does the school have to bring to the table to sign on to be a farmer school?”

Focus group and interview participants praised the Farm My School model

“Farm My School is very cool. Brings me great joy. I have huge belief in the power of a school within a community.”

“I also see schools as a health hub as well, because, again, you’ve got wellbeing staff, you’ve got teachers who have got coverage of children, ultimately usually tracking back stuff in the family.”

Sustainability, stability, and utilisation are the key dimensions of food security addressed by Farm My School. Priorities for the future include developing partnerships and funding sources to support scaling the model, sharing lessons with other organisations and local governments to drive broader change, and considering opportunities to adapt the model for hospitals, councils and urban spaces in addition to schools.





REFLECTIONS FROM QUALITATIVE DATA

Focus groups and interview participants raised topics that were not covered in our structured surveys, including major themes relating to broad contextual and systemic risks and opportunities, and specific sectoral risks and opportunities in the G21 region.

The most prominent theme in broader risks was housing prices and cost of living increases, which were documented earlier in this report. The increased value of real estate in the region is also creating downward pressure on agencies, with land now being too profitable to be donated or provided at low cost to charities; even public land is being sold by local government. This increases risk as agencies operating on shoestring budgets seek to find new spaces in an inflated real estate market.

“The biggest problem we’ve got in the region is housing. I think that’s the hardest thing, and it’s putting so much pressure on any of the agencies that work in housing or emergency services. They just don’t have the ability to go anywhere,... and if they’re displaced in that way, they can’t store food either. So then that’s why they’re calling food relief places.”

While discussions about climate change were less frequent, participants recognised its impacts as an existential threat within the context of food security.

Risks specific to the sector in the region included lack of collaboration, donated food moving outside the region, loss of physical space for operations, and sole dependencies on distributors.

“Obviously future risk is that we don’t work together and don’t communicate our service offerings adequately to those who need it.”

“That’s actually another issue that I have heard around the traps, is that Geelong businesses are feeding all of our food options up to distribution warehouses, yet it’s not coming. So the proportion that we’re donating versus the proportion that’s being allocated

isn’t efficient. And having food leaving the region isn’t a positive.”

Many organisations describe threats in terms of losing physical space (being displaced from existing venues), and opportunities contingent on gaining space (nighttime services, pantry spaces).

“If [we] had a larger venue, that’s the track that we would ultimately focus on, which is about how we involve the community in uplifting themselves and giving back.”

“We are actually thinking of expanding our space just so that we can have more go through because of the waiting time right now, because we open it up as a pantry space”

Larger food distribution hubs, such as Geelong Food Relief Centre, play a crucial role in bridging coordination gaps among agencies, brokering and meeting supply needs and facilitating communication up the food supply chain. They have demonstrated their capacity to efficiently manage substantial volumes of donated or purchased food and distribute amongst smaller agencies.

A potential risk associated with this reliance on larger hubs is the risk of sole dependency. In the event of funding cuts to Geelong Food Relief Centre, the flow of food distribution and crucial system facilitation with smaller agencies would diminish - pressuring smaller agencies time, energy and resources as they would have to seek food independently.

In discussing positive and enabling factors that support the food relief sector in the G21 region, participants identified strong community dedication and passion for the region. Although inadequate council support was raised as a risk

in some interviews, one participant noted that it had produced autonomy and self-reliance in the sector. The breadth and diversity of existing services in the region was also a predominant theme when discussing enabling factors for supporting the community.

“I think that people love their region and want to support people in their region”

“We’re not separate from them. There’s sort of a strong community identity..”

“There’s a real sort of passionate commitment to the town..”

“Our region is really fortunate because of the breadth of agencies providing food relief in such varied and different ways”

Discussions also highlighted a positive and respectful response from the community to the provision of food relief across different models, including gratitude and self-regulation under difficult circumstances.

“They all know each other, so our community tends to self-moderate as well. The ecosystem is so incredibly dynamic, it’s almost like a school really or a community. It’s just a micro community but with escalated mental health and social issues.”

- interview participant

“It’s that unsolicited support from the community that just makes, that had us on a high for days, ‘without youse, love, we’d be stuffed’, that kind of thing.”

- focus group participant

Focus groups and interviews produced ideas for strengthening the food relief system and promoting long-term food security. These included:

- Council and community to prioritise land for growing food
- Education for government on the importance of food security
- A preventative approach to food security, including health promotion and food system resilience
- Raising public awareness and fostering increased community engagement through residents and community leaders
- Prioritising financial literacy and resourcing financial counselling services
- Supporting emergency relief funding for food insecure individuals, including petrol and rental assistance
- A comprehensive map of services, and a platform to enable food redistribution.



CONCLUSIONS

The issue of food security in the G21 region is a complex and pressing concern that necessitates a multifaceted response. Our findings encompass a wide range of factors and dynamics that shape the region’s food relief landscape within the context of broader societal challenges.

The research uncovered a food relief sector in the G21 region that plays a pivotal role in addressing the needs of individuals and families facing food insecurity. The data emphasises the sector’s impact, with an estimated 8,751 weekly client interactions, over 34,293 meals provided, 2,372 food parcels distributed, and 22,930 kilograms of food delivered to those in need. The diversity of food relief organisations, ranging from local community groups to larger distributors, underscores the collective efforts to combat food insecurity in the region.

However, the sector faces numerous challenges. Demand for food relief services has surged, driven by factors such as low incomes, the rising cost of living, and an ongoing housing crisis. The demographics of those seeking assistance have shifted, including working families, individuals deeply affected by the cost of living crisis, and those experiencing homelessness. The interconnection of issues faced by agencies and the broader community highlights the interconnected impacts of food insecurity.

The stability of food provision faces threats from limitations on food availability, quality, and nutritional value. Donations from supermarkets and statewide distributors are under pressure, requiring innovative solutions to maintain a reliable supply of food. Volunteers, who play a critical role in the sector, face challenges due to limited paid staff, funding uncertainties and a lack of training and support in the context of increasing service demand and client complexity.

Efforts to improve service delivery have emphasised the need for increased collaboration within the sector and integration with broader social support services. Referrals between food relief agencies and other social support services face obstacles, including overstretched services, administrative hurdles and uncertainty on how to refer. Collaboration is seen as a key strategy for enhancing efficiency and coordination.

Overarching regional networks and a platform to coordinate food access received strong support as mechanisms for coordination. Findings also support the utility of developing a comprehensive booklet or map of services to increase both collaboration, and accessibility for clients.

In the face of these challenges, the G21 region benefits from a passionate and engaged community, diverse services, and a positive and respectful response to food relief efforts. To address the pressing issue of food security and promote long-term solutions, agencies call for increased funding, partnerships, and innovative approaches. This report emphasises the need for collective action, collaboration, and ongoing efforts to ensure that every resident in the G21 region has reliable access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

APPENDIX: RESEARCH METHODS

The project used several methods to gather information on the food relief sector in the G21 region.

Desktop Research

Available data on the socio-economic drivers of food insecurity was analysed to contextualise the results and provide an overview of the distribution of vulnerability to food insecurity across the G21 region. Where possible, this data is represented visually on maps at the ABS Statistical Area 2 level.

Survey

Authors referred to previous Food for Thought reports, feedback from Give Where You Live Foundation, and standard survey items from comparable project instruments to design a 43-item survey. The survey was shared with the Research Advisory Group for feedback. The final survey included following topics:

- About your organisation
- Sourcing and procurement
- Staffing
- Funding
- Measurement and monitoring
- Integration with social services & Collaboration
- Overall reflections

Survey responses were collected from 30 organisations between 14th-24th August 2023. This represents a response rate of 67% as 45 organisations were asked to participate. For smaller food relief agencies identified by Give Where You Live Foundation, surveys were completed over the phone with the support of local volunteers. Larger agencies were sent the link via email and followed up by phone.

Focus groups

Two focus groups were held online via Zoom with six organisations involved in food relief:

- Christ Church Community Meals
- Uniting Norlane
- Empower Food Relief
- OneBox
- Common Ground
- Drysdale Family Support Inc.

A focus group discussion guide was developed by the Sustain team, with feedback from Give Where You Live Foundation integrated. Questions aimed to go beyond the survey questions to understand the drivers for communities seeking support currently, community engagement, funding models, monitoring and evaluation of services, experiences working with larger state-wide distributors, constraints and challenges within the sector as well as key priorities for the sector.



Case Study Interviews

In order to compare and contrast diverse food relief models within the region, Sustain worked with Give Where You Live Foundation and the Research Advisory Group to select six organisations/programs for group interviews to develop case studies. A desktop review of each organisation was conducted to develop tailored questions, while also drawing on the focus group discussion guide. Qualitative data collected during interviews was also used to inform general analysis.

- Barwon Health- Community Connectors Program
- Farm My School
- Feed Me Inc
- Geelong Food Relief Centre
- Give Where You Live Foundation- Community Choice Vouchers
- The Outpost

Transcripts from focus groups and interviews were qualitatively analysed to identify key themes, also drawing on the six dimensions of food security (see pg x) to situate the results in a broader food security context. Specific dimensions of food security addressed by aspects of the organisations and programs are noted throughout case studies.

Availability	Quantity and quality of food sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individual
Access	Personal or household financial means, and other basic needs aren't compromised
Utilisation	Nutritional wellbeing where all physiological needs are met
Stability	Secure in event of shocks or cyclical variation
Agency	Independent choice about food consumption, production, policy, and governance
Sustainability	Regenerative practices, meeting needs of present generation without compromising future

Case Study 1: Geelong Food Relief Centre	Availability
	Stability
	Agency

Case study 2: FeedMe Inc	Availability
	Stability
	Utilisation

Case study 3: Community Connectors (Barwon Health)	Utilisation
	Agency
	Stability

Case Study 4: Farm My School	Sustainability
	Stability
	Utilisation

Case Study 5: The Outpost	Availability
	Access
	Stability

Case Study 6: Give Where You Live Foundation- Community Choice Vouchers	Access
	Agency
	Stability

APPENDIX 2: SURVEY QUESTIONS

Section One: About your organisation

Question 1. What best describes your type of organisation? (select the best option)

- Local community organisation (not-for-profit)
- Social enterprise
- Neighbourhood/community house
- Church, temple or other place of worship
- Faith-based welfare organisation (e.g. St Vinnies, Salvos, etc)
- Targeted support organisation (e.g. refugee support, family violence, etc)
- Community health organisation
- Aboriginal community controlled organisation
- Other (please specify)

Question 2. What is the role of your organisation?

- Food relief is the primary purpose
- Food relief is incorporated into broader services
- Broader service that refers to food relief providers
- Food production / community gardens
- Other, please specify _____

Question 3. What type of food relief do you provide?

Question 4- How often do you need more of the following products?

Question 5 Do you apply any eligibility requirements to access food relief? (select all that apply)

- No – we assist anyone who comes to us
- Interview to assess eligibility/need
- Healthcare card
- Referral from another agency
- Voucher allocation
- Membership or involvement in a targeted group (e.g. homeless, youth, cultural group, etc)
- Public / social housing estate tenants
- Funding Agreement criteria (please specify)
- Other (please specify)

Question 6 What barriers do you observe people facing in accessing your organisation’s food relief services? (Select all that apply.)

- None – we have low barriers to support
- Stigma
- Limited operating hours
- Lack of community awareness about our services
- Transport (e.g. cost of public transport, too far to walk, etc)
- Long waitlists
- Mobility issues (due to age, disability, etc)
- Don't feel they qualify for our service
- Services are not able to meet demand – lack of resources
- Geographic restrictions e.g. reside outside of agency catchment area
- Other (please specify)



Section Two: Sourcing and procurement

Question 7. What percentage of each source of food donations does your organisation rely on in an average year? Please provide percentage breakdown (numeric and adding up to 100 - an approximate breakdown is fine)

- SecondBite
- FoodBank
- OzHarvest
- FareShare
- Geelong Food Relief Centre
- Feed Me Bellarine (Surf Coast and Geelong)
- Independent supermarkets, grocery stores, or bakeries via own connections
- Donations
- Community gardens surplus produce
- Local farmers
- Farmers external to G21 region
- Other (please specify)

Question 8. How do you usually receive food products? (select one)

- Collection
- Delivery
- A combination of collection and delivery
- Other (please specify)

Question 9. Do you purchase food in addition to donations? (select one)

- No
- Yes
- If yes, approximately what percentage of food do you purchase? _____
- If yes, could you briefly describe what your purchases are and why? _____

Question 10. - How much choice do you have about the food donations you receive (if applicable)?

- No choice – we take what we are offered
- Some choice – we can sometimes specify what we do/don’t wish to receive
- Good choice – our food preferences can usually be accommodated

Question 11. What equipment or resources do you currently have? (select all that apply)

- Access to commercial kitchen for meals/food prep
- Cold storage
- Vehicle for transporting food
- Pantry storage
- Other (please specify)

Question 12. What additional equipment would assist you in improving your services? (select all that apply)

- None – we have all the necessary infrastructure
- Access to commercial kitchen for meals/food prep
- Cold storage
- Vehicle for transporting food
- Other (please specify)

Section Three: Staffing

Question 13 - How many paid staff are currently engaged in food relief support at your organisation? _____

Question 14 – How many staff paid hours per week (on average) are engaged in food relief support? (select one)

- None (volunteers only)
- 1-29
- 30-49
- 50-99
- 100-199
- 200-299
- 300-399
- 400-499
- 500+

Question 15 - To what extent is your current level of paid staffing sufficient to manage the operational aspect of your food relief services (e.g. logistics, finances, HR, volunteer coordination, etc)? Respond on a scale of 1 to 5, where:

- 1 = Operational activities are critically under-resourced
- 2 = Operational activities are mostly under-resourced
- 3 = Operational activities are sometimes under-resourced
- 4 = Operational activities are mostly sufficiently resourced
- 5 = Operational activities are always sufficiently resourced

Question 16 - How many volunteer staff are currently engaged in food relief support at your organisation? _____

Question 17 -How many volunteer hours per week (on average) are engaged in food relief support?

- None (paid staff only)
- 1-29
 - 30-49
 - 50-99
 - 100-199
 - 200-299
 - 300-399
 - 400-499
 - 500+

Question 18 -How often do volunteers use their own vehicles to collect or deliver donated food? This refers to your team of volunteers rather than individual volunteers.

- Never
- Rarely (only in urgent situations)
- Sometimes (1-2 times a month)
- Often (weekly)
- Almost always (most donations are collected in volunteers’ vehicles)

Question 19- How could better support for your volunteer workforce be provided?:

- Training
- Vehicle access
- Vehicle cost reimbursement
- Incentives
- Reward and recognition
- Structures service models
- If better support is needed, who should provide this and please provide any clarification



Question 20 - Do you have enough staff resources - paid or volunteer – to deliver current levels of service?

Yes

No

If no - what is the biggest challenge in ensuring enough staff or volunteers? _____

Section Four: Funding

Question 21 – What percentage of revenue streams does your organisation rely on in an average year? Please provide percentage breakdown (numeric and adding up to 100 – an approximate breakdown is fine if specific percentages aren’t available)

- Donations from individuals
- Corporate donations
- Philanthropic grants
- Voucher payments
- Local government
- State government
- Federal government
- Fee for service delivery (e.g. NDIS or other contracts etc)
- Other commercial sources (e.g. retail trade, consultancy services, etc)
- Other (please specify)

Please provide any examples

Question 22 - About your funding landscape

ADD IN TABLE

Section Five: Measurement and monitoring

Question 23-How do you measure service delivery and demand? (select all that apply)

- Number of clients seeking support
- Number of meals or parcels distributed
- Kilos of produce distributed
- Types of produce distributed
- Number of services accessed per client contact
- Other (please specify)

Question 24 - [If you have this data] What is the average number of clients seeking food relief support from your organisation per week? (This may include repeat clients.)

- 1-25
- 26-100
- 101-150
- 150-249
- 250-299
- 300+
- Do not have data

Question. 25 - [If you have this data] How many meals does your organisation distribute per week?

N/A

Do not have data

Question. 26- [If you have this data] How many parcels of food does your organisation distribute per week?

N/A

Do not have data

Question 27 - [If you have this data] How many kilos of produce does your organisation distribute per week?

N/A

Do not have data

Question. 28 - [If you have this data] What percentage of each type of food does your organisation distribute per week?

- Fresh fruit and vegetables
- Meat and eggs
- Fresh dairy (e.g. cheese, milk, yoghurt)
- Fresh bread and baked goods
- Core pantry items (e.g., pasta, rice, tinned beans)
- Discretionary pantry items (e.g., confectionary)
- Prepared meals (if offered)

Question 29- How has demand for food relief changed in the last 12 months? (select one)

- Decreased demand
- No change in demand
- Demand increased by 1-25%
- Demand increased by 26-50%
- Demand increased by more than 50%
- Demand has nearly doubled
- Other (please specify)



Question 30-What other changes has your organisation experienced in the last 12 months? (please tick below)

CHANGES	SIGNIFICANT DECREASE	SOME DECREASE	MINIMAL CHANGE	SOME INCREASE	SIGNIFICANT INCREASE	UNSURE
Complexity of client type and social support						
Staffing issues, including volunteers (e.g. retention, attraction, cost, etc)						
Donations (individual and philanthropic)						
Grant income						

Other (please specify)

Question. 31 - Which are the most common cohorts of people currently seeking support in your organisation? (select all that apply)

Gender:

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / LGBTIQA+

Demographic:

- CALD
- Refugee / asylum seeker
- First Nations
- Retired or pensioner
- International student
- Person with disability
- Single parent
- Single person household
- Two person household
- From specific postcodes (pls specify)

Reason:

- Receipt of Government Benefits
- Ineligible for Government Benefits
- Low Income or Unstable Work
- Unemployment
- Family on single income
- Justice client or ex-offender
- Impacted by addiction
- Large or unplanned bills
- Family violence
- Marriage breakdown
- Homeless or sleeping rough
- Cost of Living
- Other (please specify)
- We do not ask reasons for accessing

Question. 32 - Have the demographics/ cohorts/ characteristics of community members accessing food relief changed in the last 12-18 months?

- No change
- Yes it has changed

If so, please specify (e.g. middleclass mortgage stress/persons experiencing rough sleeping/ international or domestic students)

Question 33 – What have you observed as the reason for this change?

Section Six: Integration with social services

Question 34. If your organisation / agency provides social support services, please select which services are provided? (Select all that apply)

- No other social support services
- Financial counselling
- Employment training / pathways
- Addiction services (AOD, Gambling)
- Family violence support
- Education (language classes, community workshops, etc)
- Food literacy initiatives
- Youth engagement
- LGBTIQ+ support
- Primary health care (e.g. GPs, community nurses etc)
- Dental health services
- Mental health services (e.g. psychologists, counsellors etc)
- Housing support (social housing)
- Homelessness support (supported social housing)
- Housing or homelessness information or referral
- Disability support

- Legal aid/community justice
- Targeted support (e.g. new migrants/refugees, Aboriginal community health, etc)
- Other (please specify)

Question 35. For food relief agencies, when referring clients to other social support services, how confident are you that their needs will be met? (select one)

- Not confident at all
- Somewhat confident
- Very confident

Provide comment on your response and give reasons/examples e.g. client may need multiple support services / difficult to know outcomes based on the referral process alone

Question 36. What challenges do your clients face in accessing other support services (e.g. income, disability, housing support, etc)? (Select all that apply)

- Siloed service delivery (receiving multiple referrals without assistance, being passed between services, etc)
- Ineligibility for support despite hardship
- Community support agencies are stretched
- Bureaucratic processes or unwieldy administration
- Long delays (e.g. long waitlists, waiting times, etc)
- Lack of respect or empathy from government service staff
- Discriminatory or culturally/physically unsafe environments
- Language and cultural barriers
- Other (please specify)



Question 37. If clients are referred to you for food relief, where do the referrals come from? (select all that apply)

- Local government
- Centrelink office
- Community health service
- Other community organisations
- Hospital
- Specialist support (e.g. family violence, refugee, etc)
- Child Care Centres
- Schools
- Church or faith-based organisation Other (please specify)

Question 38. - Do you currently work with or collaborate with other food relief providers and other services?

If so, please give example

Question 39. - Where would you like to work with or collaborate with other food relief providers or other services more?

Question 40 - What reason best describes why you do or don't collaborate with other organisations to collect and share surplus food when opportunities arise? (select all that apply)

- We collaborate with others because it allows us to support each other
- We collaborate with others because coordination support is resourced by council or elsewhere
- We tried to collaborate with others but found it challenging
- We don't collaborate with others because we don't have time or resources

- We don't collaborate with others because it would not be helpful for us
- We don't collaborate with others because we don't know where to start
- Other (please specify)

Question 41 - Would a platform for coordinating access to food with other agencies be useful to your organisation? For example, an online forum for announcing an excess of a particular type of food, or a need for a particular food?

- Yes
- Maybe if we had short-term cold storage
- Maybe if we had vehicle access for collection
- Maybe if we had refrigerated vehicle access and cold storage
- No we have our own systems or are not interested

If yes/maybe, please elaborate

Please add any additional comments you may have: _____

Question. 42 - Would a platform for combined reporting be useful to your organisation? For example, an online reporting module with standardised questions such as those in this survey?

- Yes
- Maybe if reporting was not onerous
- Maybe if it facilitated collaboration
- No we have our own systems or are not interested

Please add any additional comments you may have: _____

Section 7: Overall reflections

Question 43 - What would help support food relief agencies to meet the needs of the community right now? (select all that apply)

Increased government funding	
Increased philanthropic funding	
Increased other funding (please specify)	
Partnerships with local restaurants and food businesses	
More centralised coordination support	
Support in attracting, training and coordinating volunteers	
Logistics (e.g. transport, cold storage, etc)	
Enhanced referral system	
Shared data and monitoring system	
Other (please specify)	

Question 44: Please add any comments you may have about the demand or servicing of food relief in G21 region that may not have been covered in this survey: _____

Question 45: Please add any comments you may have about this survey (e.g., difficulty, length, topics covered):



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9. Median rent prices are taken from the March 2023 Homes Victoria Rental Report. It assumes a 1-bedroom flat for the single man and a 3-bedroom house for the single mother with two children

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11. Note that the estimated sample size provided by ANZ is between 500-700 residents.

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13. This finding was higher than expected, and could be due to inconsistencies in interpretation of the survey question, as a definition of 'commercial kitchen' was provided within the survey. This is a limitation of the survey instrument, and has been amended so future iterations capture this data accurately.

14. No definition of 'collaboration' was provided within the research question, so it's possible that respondents had different understandings of what constituted collaboration. For example, Geelong Food Relief supply 62% of survey respondents, however these connections may have been perceived as supply chain connections rather than a form of collaboration. The research team have proposed amendments to this question to capture this data more consistently in future iterations of the Food for Thought Research.

15. <https://www.brightsparqe.org/>

16. This has been calculated using the State of Volunteering in Victoria 'Volunteer Replacement Cost Calculator', using the total value of 4584.5 hours/ week with volunteers of all ages.

17.

70

71



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