



GIVE
WHERE
YOU LIVE
FOUNDATION



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

RESEARCH REPORT 2026

Food Security in the Geelong Region: A People-Centred Data Snapshot

Prepared for the Give Where You Live Foundation
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Deakin University

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Give Where You Live Foundation acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia. We recognise the loss of lands, culture and connection experienced by First Nations peoples and acknowledge the ongoing impacts of colonisation on communities and nations. We pay our respects to First Nations Elders past and present, and acknowledge that sovereignty over these lands and waters has never been ceded.

We give thanks to the Wadawurrung People of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Owners of the land, waterways and skies of Wadawurrung Country, where this work has been centred in. We are grateful for their ongoing custodianship of Country and acknowledge the deep knowledge, practices and traditions that have sustained communities and food systems for thousands of years.

Food security is fundamentally connected to place, culture, community and wellbeing. We recognise the significant food-related challenges experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities and support efforts to strengthen equitable access to healthy, culturally appropriate food and community-led solutions.

Food for Thought is an initiative of Give Where You Live Foundation, made possible through its valued education and research partnership with Deakin University. This partnership has strengthened the evidence base for understanding food security and informing community action across the Barwon region.

We sincerely thank the researchers who led this work, Fiona McKay and Bolanle Olajide, for their expertise, dedication and commitment to generating insights that support a more equitable, resilient and food-secure community.

We also gratefully acknowledge the many local organisations across the Barwon region that contributed data, reports, expertise, local knowledge and insights to this research. Their contributions have enriched our understanding of food security across the region and will support collective efforts towards a more equitable, resilient and healthy food system.

A full list of participating organisations is provided at the end of this report in Appendix 1.



CONTENTS

WELCOME FROM THE CEO	4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	6
DATA SNAPSHOT SUMMARY	9
PURPOSE & SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH REPORT	11
CONCEPTUAL FRAMING: WHAT WE MEAN BY FOOD SECURITY	12
CONTEXT: WHY FOOD INSECURITY IS ACCELERATING	13
PREVALENCE OF FOOD INSECURITY	15
PLACE-BASED ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD	18
FOOD SYSTEM PRESSURES, RESPONSE & INSIGHTS	20
KEY DRIVERS AND ENABLERS OF FOOD SECURITY	27
CONCLUSION	31
IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	32
REFERENCES	33
APPENDIX 1	34
APPENDIX 2	35



WELCOME FROM THE CEO

Food insecurity is rising sharply across the Geelong region, driven primarily by At the Give Where You Live Foundation, we are working towards a Geelong region where every community thrives through equity, inclusion and shared opportunity. This guides our commitment to creating a fairer, more equitable community where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

For more than 70 years, the Foundation has worked alongside communities across our region. In recent years, Geelong has experienced strong population and economic growth, yet increasing cost of living and housing pressures mean the benefits of this growth are not experienced equally. For many households, rising costs are making it increasingly difficult to afford everyday essentials, including healthy and nutritious food.

That is why food security continues to be one of the Foundation’s key areas of impact, alongside housing justice and inclusive employment. Our work in this area is focused on helping ensure everyone across our region has access to healthy and nutritious food.

At the Foundation, our approach is to respond to immediate needs while also investing in longer-term systemic change.

Through our Feed Geelong initiative, community grant funding and our Community Choice voucher program, we support local organisations and provide people experiencing financial pressure with greater choice and dignity in accessing food and other essentials. In 2024/25, the Foundation provided more than \$1.1 million to 45 community partner organisations across food security and homelessness assistance.

We also know that emergency food relief alone cannot address the underlying causes of food insecurity.

Through initiatives such as The Paddock, our seven-acre community farm in Leopold, and our new partnership with Feed Me, we are helping to strengthen food security across the region by supporting community-led food production and contributing to a more sustainable local food system.

Research and evidence are another important part of how we are working to create long term change. We are proud to release this latest Food for Thought report, which provides an important snapshot of the growing pressures facing our community and the organisations responding to growing food insecurity.

Developed in collaboration with our education and research partner, Deakin University, Food for Thought provides an important evidence base to deepen our understanding of food insecurity, inform where we invest our resources and identify opportunities for collective action. This research helps strengthen our collective understanding of food security across our region and informs how we can work together to create meaningful change.

I would particularly like to acknowledge researchers Fiona McKay and Bolanle Olajide, along with the more than 30 local community organisations who generously contributed their knowledge and experiences to this research.

Together, through research, investment, collaboration and action, we can continue to strengthen food security across our region. Together we can work towards a future where everyone has access to healthy and nutritious food and every community has the opportunity to thrive.

Zac Lewis
Chief Executive Officer
Give Where You Live Foundation





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Food insecurity is rising sharply across the Geelong region, driven primarily by structural economic pressures rather than food availability alone. Local data shows a significant increase in households running out of food or worrying about affording food, with the Barwon area rising from 4% in 2020 to 14% in 2022¹⁷ and almost one in ten Greater Geelong residents unable to afford more food in 2024¹³.

Food insecurity is concentrated among groups and communities already experiencing disadvantage including younger people, low income households, renters, unemployed people, single parent families, healthcare card holders and people with disability, and is geographically clustered in suburbs such as Corio, Norlane, North Shore, Breakwater, Moolap, Newcomb, St Albans Park, Thomson, and Whittington¹³.

However, 58% of organisations surveyed as part of Food for Thought reported increasing numbers of new cohorts, including working families, middle-income households and first time service seekers. Concerns were also raised about increasing levels of food insecurity among children, during school holidays.

Physical access to healthy food is also uneven. Rurality, transport limitations and the distribution of food retailers create inequitable access, with some neighbourhoods located far from fresh food outlets, yet closer to fast food retailers.

In Colac Otway and Golden Plains, limited public transport and long travel distances increase residents need to travel outside their municipality for affordable groceries, with some reducing meal sizes or skipping meals due to cost pressures.

Housing affordability, cost of living pressures, rising food costs and transport barriers are the dominant drivers shaping food insecurity in our region. Households across the region face increasing financial stress, declining emergency savings capacity, and escalating housing costs. Nationally, 14.2%¹¹ of Australians lived below the

poverty line after housing costs in 2022-23, while food prices rose by 3.1% and housing costs 7.2% (in the year to February 2026), further eroding household budgets¹. These pressures have intensified demand for food relief.

Over the past 12 months, 72% of surveyed organisations (Food for Thought Survey, 2026) reported increased demand for food support. 82% of organisations reported challenges responding to demand; over 50% had to turn people away due to limited capacity, food supplies, staffing & funding.

Many organisations supported between 20 and 1,500 people each week and described increasing complexity of need, with organisations observing a broader range of households experiencing food insecurity. Agencies identified stigma and shame, limited awareness of available services, transport difficulties and distance as key barriers to accessing support.

Despite these challenges, the region has strong foundations for coordinated action. Local governments have established food policies and strategies, community organisations deliver diverse food programs, whilst regional partnerships such as food relief networks, community gardens, local food production initiatives and neighbourhood houses provide important assets for strengthening food security.

Collaboration across organisations is widely recognised as a regional strength, although workforce, funding and food supply constraints limit capacity to meet rising demand.

Looking forward

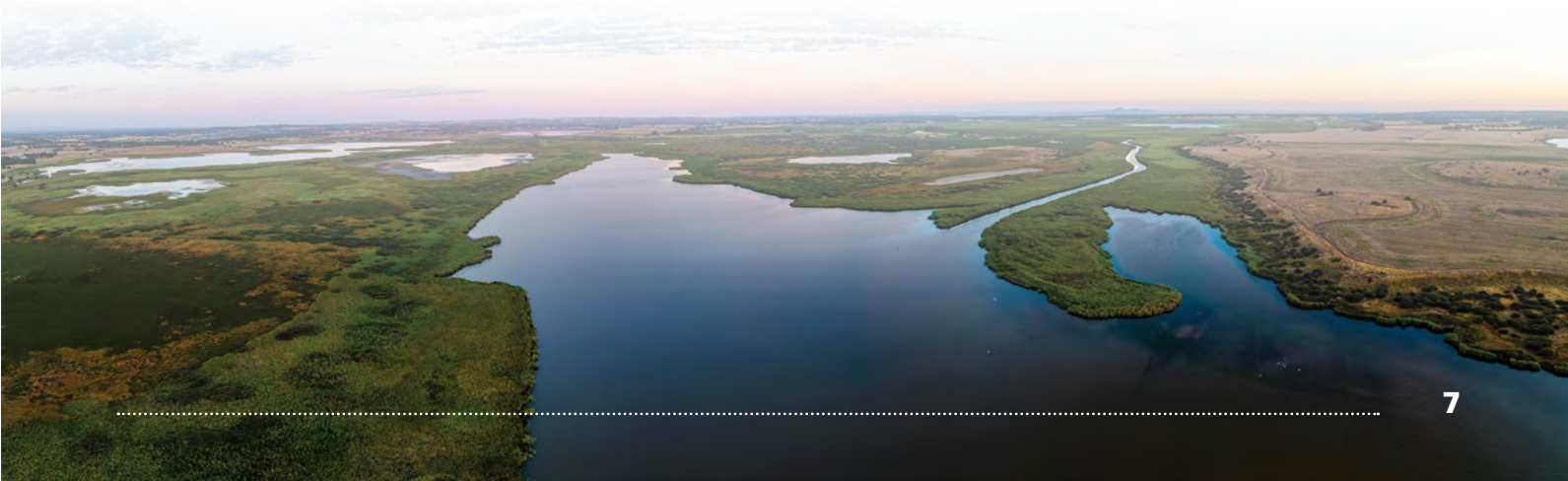
Food insecurity is shaped by broader economic and social factors, including housing, transport and cost of living pressures. Addressing it requires both immediate support for people in need, addressing barriers to support, and long term action to address its underlying causes.

“We need to be careful with the narrative. The cost-of-living crisis drives food insecurity, so advocacy for long-term solutions is needed alongside support for immediate needs. Our community deserves solutions, not just a band-aid.”

- Food For Thought surveyed organisation

Key priorities identified by organisations

- Sustainable funding for food security initiatives and staffing
- Stronger collaboration and coordinated service delivery
- Greater investment in food literacy and community education
- Expansion of school and food holiday programs
- Improved access to information and support services
- Action on the underlying drivers of food insecurity, including cost-of-living pressures.





1. DATA SNAPSHOT SUMMARY

Key finding 1. Food insecurity is increasing across the Geelong region

Food insecurity is increasing across the Geelong region and is closely linked to rising financial stress, housing costs and cost-of-living pressures. In the Barwon area, food insecurity increased from 4% in 2020 to 14% in 2022, exceeding the Victorian average of 8% (Victorian Population Health Survey, 2023).

More recent data indicate that in Greater Geelong, almost one in ten residents ran out of food and could not afford more in 2024, while around one in five worried about running out of money to buy food (Geelong Preventative Health Survey, 2024).

Key finding 2. Food insecurity is concentrated among communities already experiencing social and economic disadvantage

Food insecurity is disproportionately experienced by younger people, low-income households, unemployed people, renters, healthcare card holders, single-parent households and people with a long-term disability (Geelong Preventative Health Survey, 2024).

Figure 1 illustrates the variation in food insecurity across priority population groups in Greater Geelong. Geographic variation is also evident, with suburbs including Corio, Norlane, North Shore, Breakwater, Moolap, Newcomb, St Albans Park, Thomson, and Whittington reporting higher levels of food insecurity.

Priority Populations

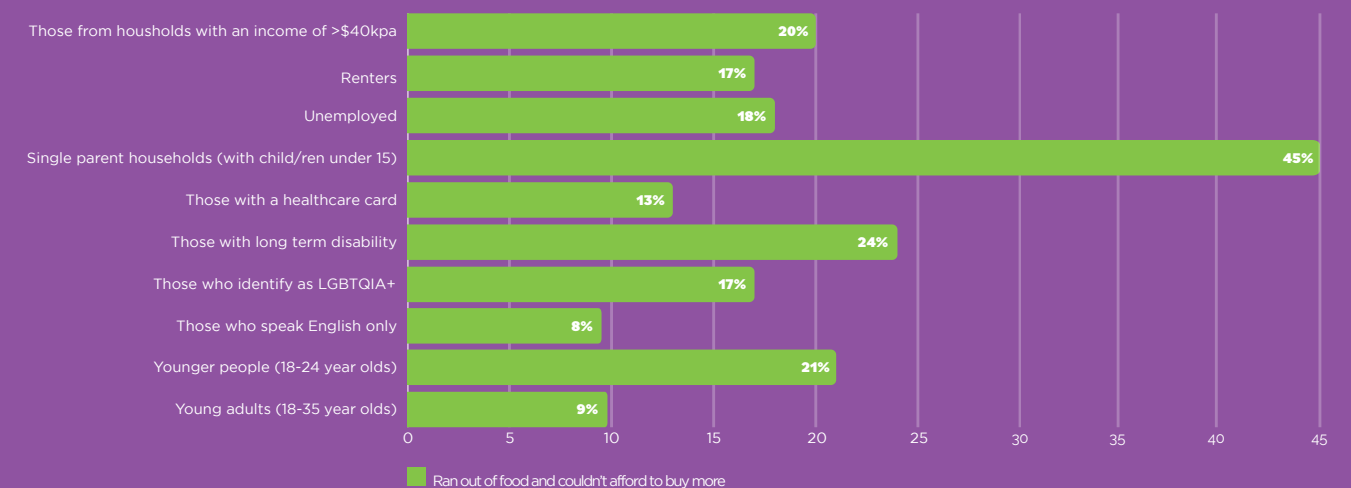


Figure 1. Prevalence of food insecurity among priority population groups in Greater Geelong (2024)



Key finding 3. Rising living costs continue to drive food insecurity

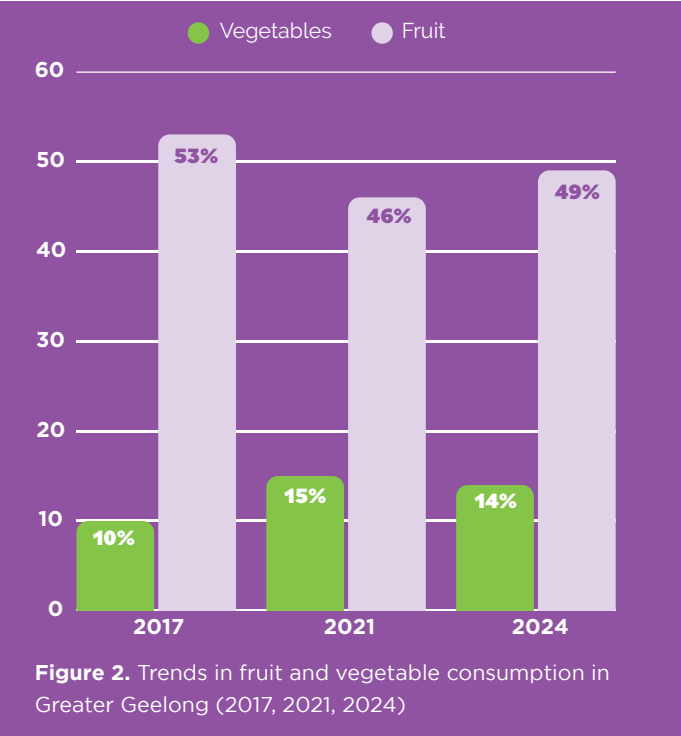
Income insecurity, housing costs, food price inflation and transport barriers continue to reduce households' ability to afford adequate food. Nationally, 14.2% of Australians lived below the poverty line after housing costs in 2022–2023 (Davidson & Bradbury, 2025). Over the 12 months to February 2026, food prices increased by 3.1%, while housing costs increased by 7.2%, placing further pressure on household budgets (ABS, 2026a, 2026b).

Key finding 4. Food access and support remains uneven across the region

Food insecurity is shaped not only by affordability but also by access to healthy food. In Greater Geelong, only a small proportion of residents meet the recommended intake of fruit and vegetables, with cost, time and availability identified as key barriers (Geelong Preventative Health Survey, 2024). **Figure 2** shows that fruit and vegetable consumption has remained consistently low over time, particularly for vegetable intake.

Demand for food support continues to increase across the Geelong region. Over the past 12 months, 72% of organisations that responded to the Food for Thought organisational survey reported increased demand for food support. 58% of organisations reported increasing numbers of new cohorts, including **working families, middle-income households and first time service seekers**. Concerns were also raised about increasing levels of food insecurity among children, during school holidays. Barriers for people in accessing food support extend beyond affordability and include

stigma and shame (70%), lack of awareness of services (67%), transport and distance (52%).



Key finding 5. The region has strong foundations for coordinated action

Despite increasing pressures, the Geelong region has important food system assets, including local food strategies, community food initiatives, food relief networks, local food production and strong community partnerships. The Food for Thought organisational survey also highlighted collaboration between community organisations, local government and regional food networks as an important strength supporting food access across the region. These findings suggest that the region has a strong foundation on which to build more coordinated, equitable and sustainable responses to food insecurity.

2. PURPOSE & SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH REPORT

This report brings together the available evidence for the Food for Thought 2026 research to describe the nature and distribution of food insecurity across the Geelong region. This research covers the G21 region which covers the broader Barwon region, including Greater Geelong, Golden Plains, Colac Otway, Surf Coast and the Borough of Queenscliffe local council areas.

It examines the prevalence of food insecurity, the structural factors influencing food access, and the strengths within the regional food system that can inform future action.

The report brings together the findings from multiple data sources, including population health surveys, local government strategies and policy documents, economic and demographic indicators, local food system assessments, food environment mapping, and from the results of the Food for Thought organisational survey.

Where possible, findings are presented across the Geelong region, with more detailed analysis provided where richer local evidence is available, including the Geelong Preventative Health Survey, the Australian Urban Observatory, and local food system assessments.

The Food for Thought organisational survey was conducted in July 2026 to gather insights from a broad range of food system stakeholders across the Geelong region. The survey was conducted with organisations involved in food access, food

security and the broader food system. It received 35 responses representing 33 organisations operating across all Geelong local government areas. Respondents represented a diverse range of stakeholders, including community service and not-for-profit organisations, community health organisations, neighbourhood or community houses, local governments, targeted support organisations, and other organisations involved in the regional food system.

The survey captured perspectives beyond food relief alone and was used to complement population-level data by providing system-level insights into food insecurity, service demand and organisational experiences. Further details on the survey respondents are provided in the Appendix.



Why this matters?

The evidence indicates that food insecurity in the Geelong region is driven primarily by structural economic pressures rather than food availability alone. While demand for food support continues to increase, the region also has strong food system assets, community partnerships and local initiatives that provide opportunities for more coordinated and equitable responses. The following sections explore these findings in greater detail.



3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMING: WHAT WE MEAN BY FOOD SECURITY

Food security refers to consistent access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets people’s dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (Yii et al., 2020). In this report, food security is understood as more than the availability of food alone. It reflects whether people are able to consistently afford, access and obtain appropriate food in ways that support their health, wellbeing and everyday lives.

This report considers four interrelated dimensions of food security. The first is **affordability**, including whether households have sufficient income after meeting essential living costs such as housing, utilities and transport.

The second is **physical access**, including the availability of transport and proximity to healthy food outlets. The third is **food quality** and suitability, recognising the importance of accessing food that meets nutritional, cultural and household needs. The fourth is **stability**,

acknowledging that food insecurity may be temporary, recurring or ongoing depending on changing financial circumstances, housing pressures and service availability.

This framework underpins the interpretation of evidence throughout the report, recognising that food security is influenced by the affordability, accessibility, suitability and stability of food over time.



4. CONTEXT: WHY FOOD INSECURITY IS ACCELERATING

Key messages

- Housing unaffordability, cost of living pressures, rising food prices and transport barriers are reducing households’ ability to consistently access and afford sufficient food, intensifying food insecurity across our region.
- Demand for food support continues to increase, placing growing pressure on organisations across the regional food system.
- Food insecurity is increasingly driven by structural economic pressures rather than food availability alone.

Context

The increasing prevalence of food insecurity across the Geelong region reflects broader economic and social pressures affecting households and communities.

The proportion of Greater Geelong residents experiencing financial hardship increased from 5% in March 2020 to 18% in March 2024, while the proportion of residents able to raise \$2000 in an emergency declined from 88% in 2019 to 82% in 2022 (Give Where You Live Foundation, 2023).

Similar patterns were observed in Greater Geelong, where the proportion of residents able to raise \$2000 within two days in an emergency decreased from 85% in 2021 to 80% in 2024 (Geelong Preventative Health Survey, 2024).

These findings indicate that household financial resilience has weakened across the region, leaving many households less able to absorb unexpected expenses and increasing their vulnerability to food insecurity.

Demand for food support has increased alongside these broader economic pressures. Findings from the Food for Thought organisational survey demonstrate the scale of community support being provided across the region.

Among organisations able to provide an estimate, weekly support ranged from approximately 20 people to around 1500 people, although some organisations reported a much broader regional reach or delivered seasonal food support programs.

These findings highlight both the diversity and scale of organisations responding to food insecurity across the Barwon region. At the same time, growing demand is placing increasing pressure on the capacity of these organisations to respond sustainably.

These local trends reflect broader national economic conditions. National poverty data indicate that 14.2% of Australians lived below the



poverty line after housing costs in 2022–2023, including 15.6% of children (Davidson & Bradbury, 2025).

Over the 12 months to February 2026, food prices increased by 3.1%, while annual housing inflation reached 7.2%, with housing remaining the largest contributor to inflation (ABS, 2026a, 2026b).

Rising costs reduce the income available for essential needs such as food, particularly for households already experiencing financial

disadvantage. Food insecurity is increasingly driven by structural economic conditions rather than food availability alone.

This reinforces the need for responses that address the underlying economic conditions affecting food security while strengthening the capacity of local organisations and food systems to respond to increasing demand.



5. PREVALENCE OF FOOD INSECURITY: HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE AFFECTED & WHERE

Key messages

- Food insecurity is evident across the Geelong region and varies considerably between local government areas, with Colac Otway and Greater Geelong reporting levels above the Victorian average.
- Food insecurity is concentrated among low-income households, renters, unemployed people, single-parent households, younger people and people with disability, particularly in neighbourhoods including Corio, Norlane, North Shore, Newcomb and Whittington.
- Local evidence demonstrates that important variation also exists within local government areas, reinforcing the need for place-based responses.
- Patterns of food insecurity closely reflect broader social and economic disadvantage across the region.

5.1 Across the Geelong Region

Victorian Population Health Survey data (2023) show that food insecurity varies across local government areas (LGAs) in the Barwon South-West region. In 2023, the Victorian average for adults who ran out of food and could not afford more was 8.2%. Several Geelong local government areas (LGAs) exceeded this level, including Colac-Otway (9.6%) and Greater Geelong (9.0%) (Victorian Population Health Survey, 2023).

Marginal food insecurity also varied across local government areas. The Victorian average for adults who were worried about running out of money to buy food was 9.9%, compared with 12.1% in Colac-Otway, 10.3% in Greater Geelong,

and 10% in Golden Plains (Victorian Population Health Survey, 2023). These findings demonstrate that food insecurity is present across the Geelong region but is not experienced uniformly. These differences suggest that local economic, social and environmental conditions influence food security across the region, reinforcing the importance of place-based responses.



Figure 3. Proportion (%) of adults who ran out of food and could not afford to buy more, by Local Government Areas in Barwon (2023), with comparison to Victoria (2023) Greater Geelong (2017, 2021, 2024)

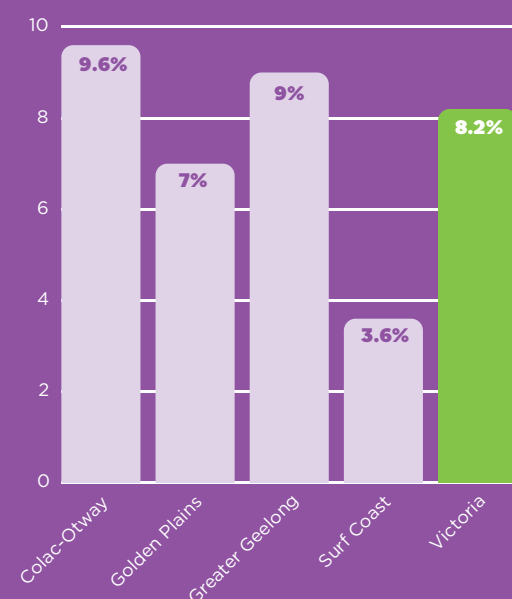
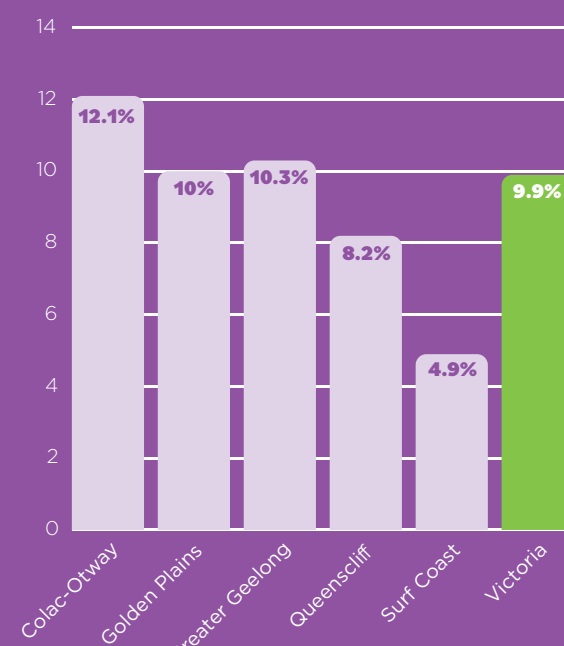


Figure 4. Proportion (%) of adults who were worried about running out of money to buy food, by LGA in Barwon (2023), with comparison to Victoria (2023)



Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the variation in severe and marginal food insecurity across local government areas within the Barwon South-West region.

Local evidence further indicates that variation also exists within local government areas. In Golden Plains Shire, communities including Dereel, Meredith, Mount Mercer, Linton and Pittong experience comparatively greater socio-economic disadvantage and may therefore be more vulnerable to food insecurity (Ciesielski & Simpson, 2024).

These findings demonstrate that food insecurity can vary considerably within local government areas, indicating that local responses should be tailored to neighbourhood-level need rather than assuming uniform experiences across an entire municipality.

5.2 Greater Geelong: Population and neighbourhood differences

The Greater Geelong Preventative Health Survey provides more detailed local evidence, demonstrating that food insecurity is unevenly distributed across both population groups and neighbourhoods.

Greater Geelong data demonstrate that food insecurity is concentrated among particular population groups and neighbourhoods rather than being experienced equally across the municipality (Geelong Preventative Health Survey, 2024).

The highest prevalence of food insecurity was reported among younger people, people with long-term disability, healthcare card holders, single-parent households, unemployed people, low-income households and renters (Geelong Preventative Health Survey, 2024).

These findings indicate that food insecurity is concentrated among people already experiencing financial or social disadvantage, suggesting that broader social and economic disadvantage continue to shape access to food.

58% of organisations surveyed as part of Food for Thought also reported increasing numbers of new cohorts, including working families, middle-income households and first time service seekers. Concerns were also raised about increasing levels of food insecurity among children, during school holidays.

“Through other data from Foodbank, we know generally that families with young children are increasingly struggling to put food on the table. During the school term, the severity of this food insecurity is lessened to an extent because of food support provided at school (breakfast club and lunches). However, the school holidays potentially create an additional period of food insecurity for families, who may experience challenges accessing food elsewhere during the holidays (transport barriers, caring commitments etc)”

- Food For Thought research team

Geographic variation was also evident across Greater Geelong. Higher levels of food insecurity were reported in the Eastern Suburbs of Geelong, which includes Breakwater, Moolap, Newcomb, St Albans Park, Thomson and Whittington, and Geelong’s Northern Suburbs including Corio, Norlane and North Shore. 42% of residents in Geelong’s Northern Suburbs were reported to be worried about running out of money to buy food (Geelong Preventative Health Survey, 2024).

These findings demonstrate that where people live, influences the likelihood of experiencing food insecurity, highlighting the importance of neighbourhood-level approaches alongside region-wide strategies.





6. PLACE-BASED ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD

Key messages

- Access to healthy food varies considerably across the Geelong region, with some communities experiencing much poorer access than others.
- Rurality, transport availability and the location of food retailers influence residents' ability to obtain affordable and nutritious food.
- In some communities, unhealthy food outlets are more accessible than healthy food retailers.
- These place-based differences create inequitable opportunities for healthy eating and contribute to food insecurity.

6.1 Greater Geelong

Access to healthy food varies across neighbourhoods in Greater Geelong. While suburbs such as Manifold Heights (418.5 m), Geelong West (558.4 m) and Bell Park (646.9 m) are located relatively close to healthy food outlets, residents of Fyansford (3,020 m), North Shore (2983.6 m), Charlemont (2699.5 m) and Clifton Springs (2186.3 m) must travel substantially further to reach similar services (Australian Urban Observatory, 2021).

These findings demonstrate that opportunities to access healthy food are not evenly distributed across Greater Geelong, with some neighbourhoods experiencing substantially poorer physical access than others.

Access to fast food outlets also differs from access to healthy food retailers. On average, residents live closer to fast food outlets (1153 m) than to healthy food outlets (1294 m) (Australian Urban Observatory, 2021). This suggests that local food environments may make healthier food choices less accessible than less nutritious options for some communities.

6.2 Colac Otway

Place-based barriers are also evident in the Colac Otway region. Although the municipality contains 211 registered food premises, only 11.85% are food stores where fresh produce can be purchased regularly, while restaurants, cafés and takeaway outlets account for a much larger proportion of food businesses (Colac Area Health et al., 2013). Residents of Beeac and Cressy also have no local supermarket or fresh produce outlet despite having access to prepared meals through cafés, restaurants and hotels (Colac Area Health et al., 2013).

Transport further influences food access. Many parts of Colac Otway have been identified as food deserts, with public transport services described as limited, infrequent and particularly restricted outside larger townships (Colac Area Health et al., 2013).

These findings indicate that food availability alone does not ensure food access. The distribution of food retailers and transport infrastructure strongly influences whether residents can obtain affordable and nutritious food.

6.3 Golden Plains

Similar place-based challenges are evident in Golden Plains Shire. Local food system mapping indicates that healthy food retailers are concentrated around Bannockburn and areas bordering Ballarat, leaving many rural communities with more limited access to supermarkets and fresh food retailers (Ciesielski & Simpson, 2024).

Approximately 70% of residents reported travelling outside the municipality to purchase affordable food, with long travel distances, limited public transport and increasing fuel costs creating additional barriers to accessing healthy food (Ciesielski & Simpson, 2024).

These findings demonstrate that geographic location can substantially influence food access in rural communities. Improving food security therefore requires consideration of transport, travel costs and the distribution of food retailers, in addition to increasing food availability.





7. FOOD SYSTEM PRESSURES, RESPONSES & INSIGHTS

Key messages

- Organisations across the Geelong region reported sustained increases in demand for food support and increasing complexity of need.
- Rising cost-of-living pressures, income insecurity and housing costs were consistently identified as the primary drivers of increasing demand.
- Stigma and shame, limited awareness of available services, transport difficulties and distance are significant barriers to accessing support, particularly for people who have not previously needed assistance. Organisations are experiencing increasing workforce, funding, and food supply pressures while continuing to respond to growing demand for food support.
- Strong collaboration across the regional food system provides an important foundation for more coordinated and equitable responses to food insecurity.

This section presents findings from the Food for Thought organisational survey of 2026, providing organisational perspectives on how food insecurity is affecting households, services and the broader food system across the Geelong region. The survey complements the population-level evidence presented in earlier sections by describing emerging pressures across the food system, perceived drivers of increasing demand, and opportunities to strengthen coordinated regional responses.

7.1 Pressures experienced across the food system

Organisations across the Geelong region consistently described increasing pressure on their ability to respond to food insecurity, driven by sustained growth in demand and increasing complexity of need.

72% of organisations reported that demand for food support had increased over the previous 12 months, while only 6% reported no change. **Figure 5** summarises changes in demand for food support over the previous 12 months. Similar patterns were observed over the previous three months, suggesting that increasing demand reflects an ongoing trend rather than a short-term fluctuation.

These findings indicate that organisations across the regional food system are responding to sustained increases in community need rather than temporary periods of heightened demand.

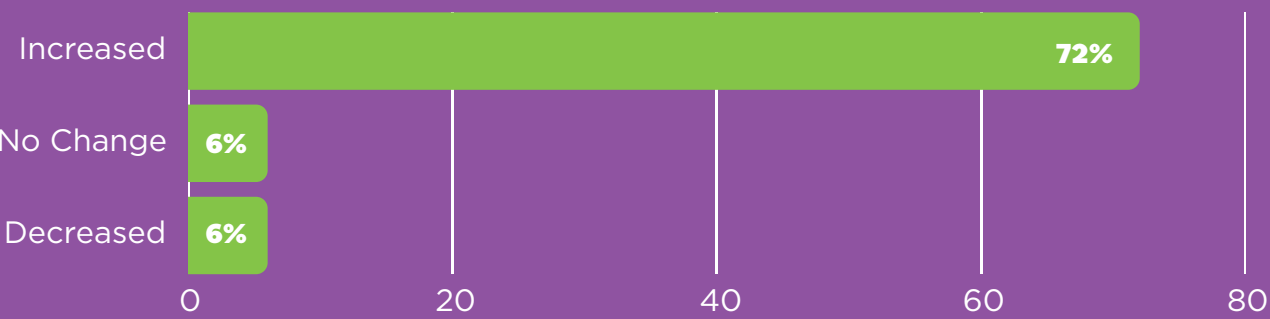


Figure 5. Reported change in demand for food support over the previous 12 months

Growing demand was accompanied by increasing organisational strain, with more than four in five organisations (82%) reporting that the current period posed at least some level of challenge. Two-thirds (67%) described conditions as moderately or slightly challenging, while 15% reported conditions to be very or extremely challenging.

Just under half (48%) reported that they had not needed to turn people away or reduce support during the previous 12 months, whereas 45% reported doing so occasionally or rarely. Where organisations had to limit support, the most commonly reported reasons were demand exceeding service capacity, insufficient food supplies, and limited staff or volunteer capacity.

These findings indicate that organisations are continuing to respond to growing demand but are doing so under increasing operational pressure, with capacity constraints beginning to affect service delivery for some providers.

Beyond increasing demand, organisations reported important changes in the nature of food insecurity within the communities they support. **Figure 6** shows that the most commonly reported change was an increase in the number of people seeking assistance (82%), followed by new groups experiencing food insecurity (58%).

Just over half of organisations (52%) reported increased complexity of need, while 45% described greater pressure on services. Almost one-third (30%) also observed that people were requiring support for longer periods.

Agencies identified stigma and shame (70%), limited awareness of available services (67%), transport difficulties and distance (58%) and health and mobility issues (52%) as key barriers to accessing support, particularly for people who have never previously needed to seek assistance.



These findings suggest that food insecurity is becoming more persistent rather than arising solely from short-term financial crises. This pattern indicates that organisations are responding not only to increasing numbers of people seeking assistance but also to more diverse and complex circumstances influencing food insecurity.

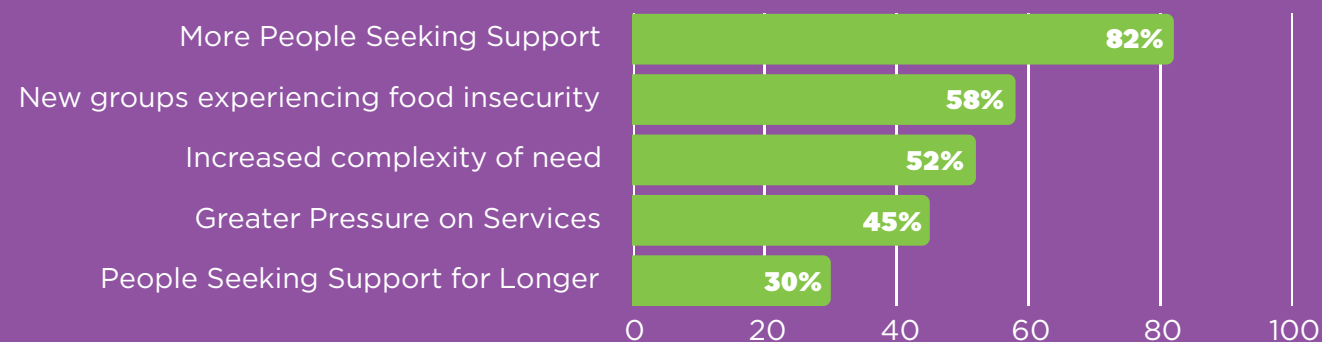


Figure 6. Changes in food insecurity observed by organisations providing food support

Organisations also reported increasing numbers of working households, middle-income families and people seeking assistance for the first time, indicating that food insecurity is affecting a broader cross-section of the community. Concerns were also raised about children’s food insecurity, including growing reliance on school breakfast and lunch programs and limited access to nutritious food at home.

Some organisations further reported declining availability of rescued food, increased demand associated with new social housing developments, growing demand for prepared meals, and gaps in service accessibility.

Collectively, these findings suggest that food insecurity is becoming more widespread and persistent, placing increasing pressure on organisations across the regional food system and reflecting broader structural economic and social pressures affecting households.

"We are not providing food relief, however the food we can offer children is impacted by what is available (donated) or affordable. We are aware that the vulnerable children in our programs often have limited experience of a broad variety of foods. This might be due to their parents/carers' lack of knowledge or access to affordable, nutritious food."

- Food For Thought surveyed organisation

7.2 Perceived drivers of increasing demand and complexity

Increasing demand for food support was consistently linked to broader economic pressures affecting household financial insecurity.

Cost-of-living pressures were identified as the leading driver of food support need, with 78% of organisations ranking them as the most important contributor. Low or unstable income was the most frequently selected second-ranked factor (36%), while housing costs or mortgage stress was the most frequently selected third-ranked factor (36%).

These findings suggest that many households are experiencing sustained financial pressures that reduce their ability to consistently afford food, reinforcing affordability as one of the principal drivers of food insecurity across the Geelong region.

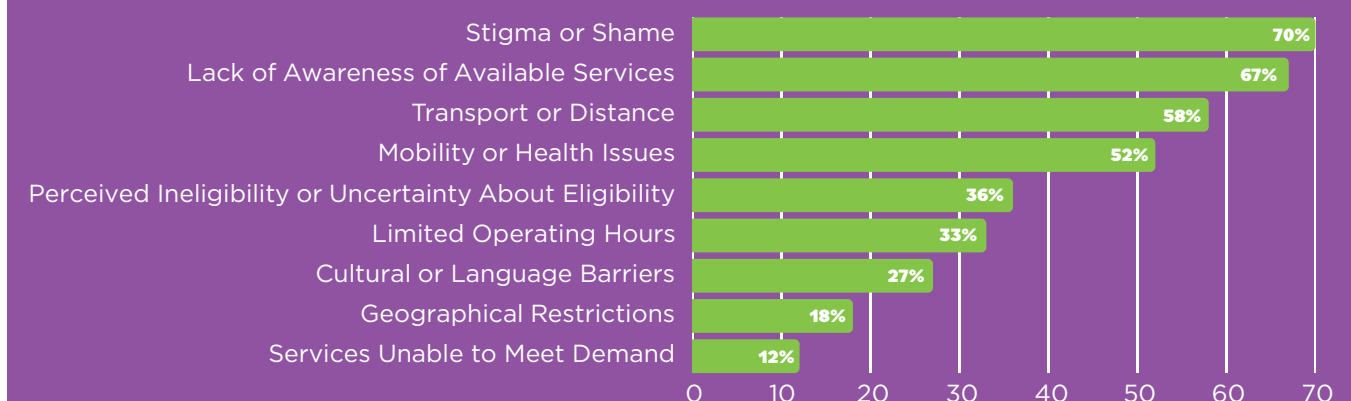
Organisations also described important changes in the profile of people seeking assistance. Two-thirds of organisations (67%) reported increasing

numbers of people on low incomes seeking assistance, followed by families with children (58%) and unemployed people (52%). Almost half also reported increasing demand from people in unstable, casual or gig work (45%), while 42% observed increasing numbers of people experiencing housing stress or homelessness, people from culturally diverse backgrounds, older people, and people experiencing family violence.

One-third (33%) also reported increasing demand among single-person households. These findings indicate that food insecurity is affecting an increasingly diverse range of households while continuing to disproportionately affect groups traditionally considered vulnerable.

Not all people experiencing food insecurity are equally able to access available support. Organisations identified a range of barriers that may prevent people from seeking or accessing available services (Figure 7). The most commonly reported barriers were stigma or shame (70%) and lack of awareness of available services (67%), followed by transport or distance (58%) and mobility or health issues (52%).

Figure 7. Reported barriers to accessing food support services across the Geelong region.





Qualitative responses also identified population groups that may be more likely to experience barriers to accessing food support. Organisations highlighted that older people, people experiencing violence, those requiring culturally appropriate or specialised foods, and people living in areas with limited food support services may face additional challenges accessing available support.

Some organisations also noted that concerns about stigma, pride or privacy may discourage people experiencing financial hardship from seeking assistance, despite struggling to meet basic needs. These findings demonstrate that barriers to food support extend beyond financial hardship and include structural, geographic, informational, cultural and social factors that limit equitable access to services.

7.3 System-level challenges and emerging responses

The capacity of organisations to respond to increasing food insecurity is constrained by workforce, food supply, funding and coordination challenges. 69% of organisations reported having sufficient staff or volunteer capacity to meet current demand. However, 63% provided additional comments describing workforce and capacity challenges. These included increasing reliance on ageing volunteers, fluctuating volunteer availability, funding constraints, and

increasing complexity of client needs requiring additional skills and specialist support. Funding was also identified as an important constraint, with just over half of organisations (54%) reporting that current funding enabled them to meet most demand, while 29% reported that funding limited their ability to meet demand and a further 14% indicated that funding severely limited service delivery.

Although all responding organisations reported collaborating with other organisations to support food access, limited time or organisational capacity (56%), competition for funding (48%), lack of coordination across services (41%), and differing organisational priorities (33%) were commonly identified as challenges to effective collaboration.

“Funding for staffing is challenging and relies on yearly grants. In this way, funding is not secure and therefore staffing to support food security is not secure. Funding to pay for direct food support is challenging, although we’ve been able to secure 3-year funding arrangements with two local community organisations. This has been hugely beneficial and means that we know we can supply direct free food relief for three years to the community”.

- Food For Thought surveyed organisation



These findings indicate that organisations are responding to increasing community need through strong partnerships, but their capacity to sustain and expand services is constrained by workforce, funding and system-level pressures.

Organisations further reported difficulties maintaining a consistent supply of key food items. As shown in **Figure 8**, meat and other protein-rich foods (42%) were the most commonly reported items in short supply, followed by fresh dairy products (27%), staple foods (19%) and fresh fruit and vegetables (15%).

These findings suggest that organisations face ongoing challenges securing a reliable supply of nutritious and essential food items, particularly protein-rich foods and other perishable products. Addressing food insecurity therefore requires not only responding to increasing community demand but also strengthening the capacity of organisations to obtain and distribute these foods consistently.

Organisations also identified a range of opportunities to strengthen food security across the Geelong region in the longer term. As shown in **Figure 9**, reducing the cost of food (65%) was

the most frequently identified priority, followed by addressing broader cost-of-living pressures (45%), improving housing affordability (42%) and increasing income support (39%).

Alongside these priorities, organisations consistently identified collaboration as one of the region’s key strengths. Partnerships between community organisations, local government and food relief providers were widely regarded as supporting coordinated responses to community need, although respondents also acknowledged that limited organisational capacity, competition for funding and inconsistent coordination can reduce the effectiveness of these partnerships.

Looking ahead, organisations view improving food security as requiring coordinated action that extends beyond food relief alone.

Respondents highlighted the importance of addressing the underlying economic drivers of food insecurity, such as cost of living, whilst providing sustainable funding for food security initiatives and staffing, improving access to information and support services, greater investment in food literacy and community education, expansion of school and holiday





food programs and enhancing collaboration and coordination across the regional food system, and building on existing collaboration between organisations.

Initiatives such as community food hubs, school breakfast programs, and mobile or outreach food services would be particularly effective in reaching vulnerable groups, especially in areas with transport barriers.

These findings suggest that the Geelong region has a strong foundation of partnerships and community initiatives that can be further strengthened to support more coordinated, equitable and sustainable responses to food insecurity.



8. KEY DRIVERS & ENABLERS OF FOOD SECURITY

Key messages

- Food insecurity across the Geelong region is driven primarily by structural economic pressures, particularly cost of living pressures, income insecurity and housing affordability.
- Transport, physical access to healthy food and local food environments further influence households' ability to obtain affordable and nutritious food.
- The Food for Thought organisational survey reinforces that increasing demand for food support is being driven by sustained financial pressures rather than short-term crises.
- The region has strong local food system assets, community partnerships and regional initiatives that provide a solid foundation for strengthening equitable and sustainable food security.

8.1 Key drivers of food insecurity

Food insecurity in the Geelong region is shaped by multiple, interconnected structural drivers that influence both household food access and the capacity of the regional food system to respond. Income inadequacy and poverty remain fundamental drivers (Davidson & Bradbury, 2025). National data indicates that poverty increased following the withdrawal of COVID-19 income supports alongside rising living costs (Davidson & Bradbury, 2025).

Locally, Colac Otway has a lower median weekly household income (\$1300) than Greater Geelong (\$1625) and Golden Plains (\$1867), with a smaller proportion of residents earning \$2000 or more per week (id Community Profiles, 2021).

Findings from the Food for Thought organisational survey reinforce these broader patterns. Organisations consistently identified cost of living pressures, low or unstable income, and housing costs or mortgage stress as the leading drivers of increasing demand for food support.

The consistency between organisational perspectives and population-level evidence indicates that financial insecurity remains the dominant structural driver of food insecurity across the Geelong region.

The Barwon Southwest Public Health Catchment Plan also highlights variation in socioeconomic disadvantage across the region, with Greater Geelong experiencing comparatively higher levels of disadvantage than Surf Coast Shire and the Borough of Queenscliff (Barwon Southwest Public Health Unit, 2023). Income constraints



were also evident across several LGAs, indicating that financial vulnerability extends beyond the most disadvantaged communities. These findings demonstrate that food insecurity is primarily driven by broader economic conditions that reduce households’ capacity to consistently afford adequate food.

Housing affordability further contributes to food insecurity by reducing the income available for essential needs. Consumer Price Index data show that housing remained the largest contributor to annual inflation during 2026, while local evidence indicates that housing-related financial stress remains an important challenge across the region (ABS, 2026a, 2026b; .id Community Profiles, 2021).

Food price inflation adds further pressure to household budgets. Food and non-alcoholic beverage prices increased by 3.1% over the 12 months to February 2026, including substantial increases for meals out and takeaway foods (3.7%), meat and seafood (4.5%), beef and lamb (13%), and fruit and vegetables (1.9%) (ABS, 2026a, 2026b).

“We need to be careful with the narrative. The cost of living crisis drives food insecurity, so advocacy for long-term solutions is needed alongside support for immediate needs. Our community deserves solutions, not just a band-aid.”
- Food For Thought surveyed organisation

Together, rising housing costs and food prices reduce households’ financial capacity to obtain adequate and nutritious food, particularly among those already experiencing financial disadvantage.

8.2 Physical access and local food environments

Food security is influenced not only by affordability but also by the physical accessibility of healthy food. Limited transport and travel distance create additional barriers to obtaining affordable and nutritious food across the Geelong region.

In Colac Otway Shire, limited public transport, long travel distances and uneven access to healthy food retailers reduce opportunities to obtain fresh food (Colac Area Health et al., 2013). Similar challenges are evident in Golden Plains Shire, where community consultation found that households commonly responded to rising living costs by purchasing less food, reducing food quality, travelling further to access affordable groceries and changing where they shopped (Ciesielski & Simpson, 2024).

More than one-quarter (27%) of surveyed residents also reported reducing meal sizes or skipping meals because there was insufficient money to purchase food (Ciesielski & Simpson, 2024; Golden Plains Local Food Network, n.d.).

These findings demonstrate that financial pressures and transport constraints interact to influence food access. Even where food is available, long travel distances, limited transport options and the additional costs of accessing food can reduce households’ ability to consistently obtain affordable and nutritious food.

8.3 Existing strengths, assets and protective factors

The evidence reviewed in this section indicates that strengthening food security will require building on existing regional assets rather than creating entirely new systems. Across the Geelong region, local governments, community organisations and regional partnerships have already established important foundations that can support future action. These include local government food strategies, community food programs, local food production, food relief services, community gardens and strong regional partnerships.

Local government policies and strategies provide an important foundation for strengthening regional food security. The City of Greater Geelong Food Policy provides a framework for a healthy, sustainable, prosperous and fair food system in which all community members can access sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their cultural and dietary needs (City of Greater Geelong, 2015).

The City’s Community Health and Wellbeing Strategy similarly identifies equitable access to safe, healthy and sustainable food as a municipal priority (City of Greater Geelong, 2025).

The Good Neighbourhood Project is an absolute standout in our region;- Their neighbourhood level approach is nuanced, dignified and empowering.

Surf Coast Shire’s Local Food Program adopts a whole-of-food-system approach by supporting community gardens, local food supply chains, producer-consumer connections, waste reduction and food literacy (Surf Coast Shire Council, 2018).

Community participation and local food initiatives also represent important strengths across the region. The vouchers are so supportive; they also provide an opportunity for our guests to have a meal with their families, and encourage community engagement too.

“A key concern for Common Ground Project, is the limited access to healthy and nutritious produce and meals for various communities in our region. Through our food relief program and food education programs, we recognise the importance of providing food access and education to those facing barriers”
- Common Ground Project

Golden Plains Shire has established a range of community assets that strengthen local food security, including community gardens, farmers’ markets, neighbourhood houses, food relief organisations and food literacy initiatives (Ciesielski & Simpson, 2024). Community participation is also a notable strength, with 72% of surveyed residents reporting that they grow food at home, alongside widespread participation in composting, worm farming and other community food activities (Ciesielski & Simpson, 2024).

Building on these existing strengths, the Golden Plains Local Food Network Strategic Framework (2025-2028) prioritises strengthening local food systems, improving food literacy, supporting community partnerships and enhancing equitable food access (Golden Plains Local Food Network, n.d.).

Planned actions include improving food system coordination, expanding community and school gardens, strengthening food relief partnerships and increasing awareness of local food resources.

Strong collaboration between organisations further strengthens the regional food system. Organisational perspectives from the Food for Thought survey further highlighted collaboration as one of the region’s key strengths. Respondents identified partnerships between community organisations, local government and food relief providers as central to supporting food access.



9. CONCLUSION

Existing initiatives, including Geelong Foodshare, regional food networks, school food programs and the Good Neighbourhood Project, were recognised as important examples of coordinated community action.

“Geelong Foodshare’s coordinaton and distribution of rescue food and food supply is a huge help to our operations.”
- Geelong Foodshare

Local food production and community assets also contribute to food security across the region, although opportunities remain to strengthen equitable access. Colac Otway also has significant local food production strengths, including dairy, meat, fruit and specialty products.

However, local production does not necessarily translate into equitable local food access because

of distribution gaps and limited coordination between producers and communities (Colac Area Health et al., 2013).

The Borough of Queenscliffe demonstrates several protective factors, including comparatively lower food insecurity, higher fruit and vegetable consumption, strong volunteering, social connectedness and good access to health services (Borough of Queenscliffe, 2025). However, its older population profile highlights the continuing importance of transport, mobility and service accessibility.

At the regional level, the Barwon South West Population Health Catchment Plan identifies healthy eating as a regional priority and emphasises coordinated action across local governments, health services and community organisations (Barwon South West Public Health Unit, 2023).

Despite rising food insecurity and the growing pressures on organisations, the Geelong region has strong foundations for coordinated action. Local government strategies, community-led programs, food relief networks, neighbourhood houses, community gardens and local food initiatives provide valuable regional assets, supported by strong collaboration across organisations.

However, workforce, funding and food supply constraints continue to limit the sector’s capacity to meet rising and increasingly complex demand.

Strengthening food security will require immediate support for people experiencing food insecurity, action to reduce barriers to accessing that support, and sustained efforts to address underlying causes such as housing, transport and cost-of-living pressures.

Regional priorities include sustainable funding and staffing, stronger service coordination, improved access to information and support, greater investment in food literacy and community education, and expanded school and holiday food programs.





IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should use place-based journey mapping to explore the experiences of people facing the greatest structural barriers to food security. Priority groups include low-income households, renters, unemployed people, single-parent families, healthcare card holders, younger people, people living with disability and households experiencing housing stress.

Priority locations include Corio, Norlane, North Shore, Breakwater, Moolap, Newcomb, St Albans Park, Thomson and Whittington, as well as communities in Colac Otway Shire and Golden Plains Shire where transport, geographic isolation and access to fresh food present particular challenges.

Journey mapping should examine how housing costs, food affordability, transport and local food environments shape people’s experiences; how people navigate available support; and where barriers and system gaps occur.

This will help identify practical opportunities to improve prevention, access and coordination, build on community assets, and address both immediate needs and the underlying causes of food insecurity.



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APPENDIX 1

List of participating organisations:

- 3216 Connect
- Feed Me Inc
- Meredith Community Centre
- Barwon Health
- Forrest & District Neighbourhood House
- Pass the Snacks Geelong
- Bellarine Community Health
- Gateway Stronger Communities Initiative
- Samaritan House Geelong
- Bluebird Foundation
- Geelong Foodshare
- St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria, Geelong Region
- Christ Church Community Meals Program
- Geelong Regional Library Corporation
- Surf Coast Shire Council
- City of Greater Geelong
- GGQ Mental Health & Wellbeing Local
- The Good Neighbourhood Project
- Cloverdale Community Centre
- Golden Plains Shire
- The Local
- Colac Otway Council
- Great Ocean Road Health
- The Outpost
- Common Ground Project
- Headspace Geelong/Corio
- Uniting Vic.Tas
- Cool.org
- Hesse Rural Health
- Wyld Work Projects
- Cottage by the Sea
- Lazarus Community Centre
- Cultura
- Deakin University Student Association

APPENDIX 2

Profile of Food for Thought Organisational Survey Respondents

Survey overview

The Food for Thought organisational survey was conducted to gather insights from organisations involved in food access, food security and the broader food system across the Geelong region.

The survey received 35 responses representing 33 organisations operating across all Geelong local

government areas. Respondents represented a diverse range of organisations involved in food relief, community health, local government, community development and broader food system activities.

Participating organisation

Table 1. Organisations represented in the Food for Thought organisational survey

Organisation	Number of responses
Headspace Geelong/Corio	1
Individual respondent (not representing an organisation)	1
Wyld Work Projects	1
Barwon Health	1
Cottage by the Sea	1
St Vincent de Paul Society Vic (Geelong Region)	1
Bluebird Foundation	1
Great Ocean Road Health	1
Pass the Snacks Geelong	1
City of Greater Geelong	1
Forrest & District Neighbourhood House	1
The Outpost	1
Bellarine Community Health	1
Deakin University Student Association	2
GGQ Mental Health & Wellbeing-Local	1
Meredith Community Centre	1



Organisation	Number of responses
Farm My School	1
Gateway Stronger Communities Initiative	2
Christ Church Community Meal Program	1
Hesse Rural Health	1
Surf Coast Shire Council	1
Samaritan House Geelong	1
Colac Otway Council	1
Geelong Regional Library Corporation	1
The Local	1
3216 Connect	1
Uniting Vic & Tas	1
Lazarus Community Centre	1
Common Ground Project	1
Cloverdale Community Centre	1
Feed Me Inc	1
Geelong Foodshare	1
The Good Neighbourhood Project	1

Note: Thirty-five responses were received, representing 33 organisations. Two organisations (Deakin University Student Association and Gateway Stronger Communities Initiative) each had two respondents complete the survey. One response was submitted by an individual rather than on behalf of an organisation.

Table 2. Organisation type

Organisation	Number
Community service organisation / not-for-profit	14
Community health organisation	4
Faith-based organisation	4
Neighbourhood or community house	4
Local government	3
Targeted support organisation	2
*Other	4

*Other responses included youth, teacher, social enterprise (not specific to the food sector or food relief), and public library.

Table 3. Food-related activities provided by responding organisations

Activity	Number
Food parcels / hampers / groceries	23
Prepared meals (to take home)	4
Community meals (to eat on site)	4
Food programs (e.g. cooking, food education)	4
Food vouchers	3
Community gardens or food production	2
Referrals to food relief services	4
Advocacy, research or coordination related to food security	8
Social supermarket	5
Food rescue or redistribution	4
Other (children’s camp programs)	1

Note: Organisations could select more than one activity.



Geographical coverage Participating organisation

Table 4. Local government areas served by responding organisations

Local Government Area	Number
Greater Geelong	26
Surf Coast	11
Colac Otway	8
Borough of Queenscliff	7
Golden Plains	6
Corangamite	1
North Bellarine	1
Victoria-wide	1

Note: Organisations could select more than one local government area.

Areas served

Responding organisations reported providing services across the Geelong region, with the greatest concentration of services located in Greater Geelong. Frequently reported suburbs included Corio, Norlane, North Geelong, Belmont, Highton, Geelong, Geelong West, Newcomb, Leopold, Drysdale, Ocean Grove, Armstrong Creek and Whittington.

Services also extended across the Surf Coast (including Torquay, Jan Juc, Anglesea, Aireys Inlet, Lorne and Winchelsea), Colac Otway (including Colac, Apollo Bay, Forrest, Birregurra and Gellibrand), Golden Plains (including

Meredith, Teesdale, Bannockburn, Inverleigh, Smythesdale, Scarsdale and Cape Clear), and the Borough of Queenscliffe (including Queenscliff and Point Lonsdale).

Several organisations also served communities spanning local government boundaries, including Mount Duneed, Armstrong Creek, Deans Marsh and Pennyroyal. One organisation reported providing services across Victoria, one served the entire Geelong region, and two organisations extended services beyond the Geelong region to Camperdown and Skipton.





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