

Food Circle

Supporting Ireland's National Food Waste Prevention Roadmap



Rialtas na hÉireann
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FoodCloud

REPORT 3 BUILDING COMMUNITY SECTOR CAPACITY FOR FOOD REDISTRIBUTION

for the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment

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Executive Summary

This report, developed through the Food Circle project funded by the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, explores how the community sector can be supported to significantly expand surplus food distribution (SFR) in Ireland. Insights and recommendations in this report support the delivery of key actions in Ireland's Food Waste Prevention Roadmap, particularly actions #17 and #19, increasing the scale of SFR for beneficiaries and strengthening community-based initiatives.

Drawing on a literature review, interviews, focus groups and a survey with community organisations and other stakeholders, insights highlight that while physical infrastructure is essential, scaling of the sector depends on broader investments in coordination, relationships, and capacity building.

Infrastructure is a foundational concern. Many community groups operate in unsuitable buildings and lack cold storage and transport, particularly refrigerated vans. Stakeholders expressed frustration that capital grants often exclude ongoing running costs, limiting the sustainability of infrastructural investments. There is strong interest in developing local food hubs to improve access to shared infrastructure. Notably, where infrastructure is in place, organisations are better able to operate flexibly, creatively, and responsively, underscoring its enabling potential.

Local networks and coordination structures play a vital role in the success of food redistribution. While some areas benefit from strong informal networks or emerging food partnerships, many organisations operate in isolation. There is a clear demand for local food coordinators and stronger national networks to support knowledge sharing and collaboration. Best practice examples include County Wicklow Food Partnerships and Limerick Food Partnership. Both of these examples are led by local food coordinators partly funded under two different Healthy Ireland Programmes (Sláintecare Healthy Communities and Healthy Cities and Counties). In these instances, Healthy Ireland Programmes have proven to be an ideal fit to fund this position, and will enable the role to build and maintain local community networks between community organisations, donors, and wider local food systems.

Relationships with food donors vary widely. Where strong relationships exist, they significantly boost capacity. However, many community partners face inconsistent supply and burdensome donation processes. Community stakeholders expressed strong interest in building relationships with small-scale retail donors and local growers. The latter is particularly valued for its potential to improve the nutritional quality of surplus food and strengthen local food systems.

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Resourcing and staffing capacity remain key challenges. SFR is labour-intensive and often falls on a few overextended staff or volunteers. Many organisations are vulnerable to burnout or loss of momentum. The proposed expansion of a local food coordinator role could offer much-needed continuity, relationship-building, and operational support. Core funding, capital funding and operational funding are required. CLÁR and the Local Enhancement Programme funds, administered by local government for infrastructural and community enhancement respectively, can meet capital costs. National Lottery Funding (through the HSE) and community development grants administered by local authorities are welcome, but again cover once-off projects rather than day-to-day running costs. The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) supports diverse food poverty measures across Local Development Companies (LDCs), but needs some adaptation to enable its use more broadly. There is a lack of targeted funding for operational overheads, and community work in the SFR space needs to be more widely promoted and recognised.

Education and capacity building are highly valued. Stakeholders want practical training on safe and creative surplus food use, and train-the-trainer models are highly sought after for established community roles. As many groups shift towards social supermarkets and wraparound service models, new forms of financial and non-financial support will be needed. Food is also recognised as a gateway to wider social inclusion efforts and should be supported as such.

The report concludes that SFR will only scale and endure if it is embedded within healthy, localised yet interconnected food systems. This will require government investment not only in physical infrastructure but also in coordination roles, peer learning structures, and long-term capacity building.

Recommendations

A. Infrastructure

A.1	Invest in capital and operational funding to cover not only equipment (e.g. fridges, freezers, vehicles) but also ongoing running costs.
A.2	Fund the development of local food hubs. [see WP4 report for more on this]
A.3	Support acquisition or upgrade of fit-for-purpose buildings.
A.4	Enable shared infrastructure models to allow multiple groups to access cold storage and transport.

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B. Local networks

B.1	Fund Local Food Coordinator positions to build and maintain community networks between organisations, donors and local food systems.
B.2	Facilitate a national network of food coordinators to enable knowledge exchange, peer learning, shared resources and input at a strategic level.
B.3	Support the development of local, place-based food partnerships.
B.4	Provide seed funding for collaborative pilot projects, encouraging organisations to test and evaluate cooperative working models.

C. Donor and community partner relationships

C.1	Establish strengthened national guidelines and standards for food donations to improve the consistency and quality of surplus food.
C.2	Create incentives or support initiatives that enable local retailers, food producers, and growers to donate high-quality, nutritious food locally.
C.2	Support initiatives that connect local growers with community groups.
C.4	Fund capacity-building and network building initiatives between community groups and donors.

D. Resourcing and capacity

D.1	Provide multi-annual core funding for community food organisations engaging in surplus food redistribution to reduce reliance on short-term grants and voluntary labour.
D.2	Embed the Local Food Coordinator role within formal and sustained funding streams, such as Sláintecare Healthy Communities or the Healthy Ireland fund, to support operational coordination and enable long-term continuity in SFR.

E. Education and capacity building

E.1	Fund hands-on, practical training programmes on food waste prevention, and using surplus food safely, creatively, and effectively.
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E.2	Invest in 'train-the-trainer' models to build local capacity and allow knowledge to be shared more widely within communities. Include food waste prevention, including interventions from sector leaders. ¹
E.3	Provide targeted grants and support for the establishment of innovative food sharing models, such as social supermarkets or wrap-around service pilots, leveraging the unique leadership of Local Development Companies and their access to SICAP funding.
E.4	In wider policy, recognise community food provision and surplus food redistribution as an engagement gateway and fund programmes that build bridges from food to wider social services and supports.

Prioritisation of recommendations

This set of recommendations was presented to participants in a focus group (n=6) and a sector-wide survey (n=31). Both groups were asked to reflect on the relevance, urgency, and potential impact of each recommendation. The results from the two groups were combined. Rather than suggesting major changes, participants strongly affirmed that the recommendations were comprehensive and addressed their needs. They then prioritised them based on which would most benefit their organisations, helping to identify the actions with the broadest support and greatest potential impact. The six top-ranked recommendations are listed below in order of importance (Please see Appendix 2 for the full ranking).

D.2	Embed the Local Food Coordinator role within formal and sustained funding streams, such as Sláintecare Healthy Communities or the Healthy Ireland fund, to support operational coordination and enable long-term continuity in SFR.
A.1	Invest in capital and operational funding to cover not only equipment (e.g., fridges, freezers, vehicles) but also ongoing running costs.
B.1	Fund Local Food Coordinator positions to build and maintain community networks between organisations, donors and local food systems.

¹ Examples include CTC and Grow It Yourself Ireland.

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E.4

In wider policy, recognise community food provision and surplus food redistribution as an engagement gateway and fund programmes that build bridges from food to wider social services and supports.

D.1

Provide multi-annual core funding for community food organisations engaging in surplus food redistribution to reduce reliance on short-term grants and voluntary labour.

E.3

Provide targeted grants and support for the establishment of innovative food sharing models, such as social supermarkets or wrap-around service pilots, leveraging the unique leadership of Local Development Companies and their access to SICAP funding.

1. Introduction

The Food Circle project is a two-year research and engagement project funded by the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment primarily examining the priority actions from Ireland's National Food Waste Prevention Roadmap (2023–2025) (the Roadmap) relating to food donation and redistribution. Led by FoodCloud, the project is delivered in collaboration with the Clean Technology Centre (an independent, non-profit research organisation at Munster Technological University) and Kai Robertson (a global expert on food loss and waste). Together, the partners are working with food businesses, policymakers, and community groups to strengthen food redistribution and donation efforts, in line with Ireland's National Food Waste Prevention Roadmap (2023-2025) (the Roadmap).

This report focuses on two priority actions from the Roadmap:

17

Examine options that support a significant increase in the capacity and scale of the surplus food redistribution sector (e.g. in the charity sector).

19

Support social enterprises and community-based initiatives that promote surplus food redistribution.

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Specifically, it explores how the community sector² can be supported with the costs, resources, and infrastructure needed to significantly expand SFR's capacity and scale.

In an Irish context, while other local food sharing initiatives exist, FoodCloud has emerged as the primary facilitator of SFR since it was established in 2013. FoodCloud is a non-profit social enterprise that works to tackle the twin issues of food waste and food security. It does this by distributing surplus food from the food industry to a network of over 674 community and voluntary organisations across Ireland.

FoodCloud provides two services to distribute surplus food to this network:

- A technology platform - Foodiverse - that connects over 500 supermarkets and food service (including Tesco, Lidl, Aldi, Dunnes Stores, BWG, Musgraves, KFC, Nandos) with surplus food to the charity network
- A network of three warehouses - FoodCloud Hubs - in Dublin, Cork and Galway that distribute surplus from +195 food producers, manufacturers and distributors to the charity network

Through these services, in 2025, FoodCloud rescued 4,165 tonnes of surplus food in Ireland, saving 9,580 tonnes of carbon emissions from going to waste, and providing approximately 9.9 million meals equivalent. The charity network of 674 charities is diverse and includes approximately 23% food sharing or food bank initiatives, 15% homeless and housing services, 15% community services, 10% meals on wheels or adult day services and 9% youth services among others. This broad community network offers a strong foundation to be harnessed in efforts to significantly scale SFR nationwide.

2. Methodology

This report is informed by both a context-setting literature review and qualitative research with stakeholders engaged in SFR in Ireland. The research was designed to capture the experiences, challenges, and needs of community organisations, and to explore opportunities to strengthen the broader infrastructure that supports this work.

² The community sector includes a diverse range of organisations that receive surplus food. These organisations typically either redistribute the food through food banks, community pantries or social supermarkets or incorporate it into prepared meals as part of their service delivery. Common types of organisations in this sector include food banks, homeless and housing support services, community centres, meals on wheels programmes and youth and education services.

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Literature review

A targeted review of national and international literature was conducted to establish the context for the research. This included policy documents, academic studies and other literature focused on FLW, SFR, and the role of community-based organisations. The review identified key trends, best practices, and challenges in the field, and informed the design of the qualitative research tools.

Qualitative research

A. Interviews with community organisations

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 16 community-based organisations engaged in food redistribution across Ireland - see Appendix 1 for more detail. These interviews explored participants' current activities, capacity and infrastructure, challenges faced, and perspectives on how to scale up SFR in their communities.

B. Interviews with the Wider Infrastructural Network

To better understand the systemic context in which community redistribution operates, interviews were also conducted with stakeholders involved in supporting food redistribution at a regional and national level. This included:

- 3 community food and nutrition workers
- 2 food partnership coordinators³
- 3 infrastructural community partners (e.g. logistics and regional support organisations)

These conversations provided insights into the broader enabling environment and the kinds of supports needed to increase capacity and scale.

C. Online focus groups

Two online focus groups were held with representatives from community organisations:

- Focus Group 1 explored similar themes to the interviews, such as current practices, barriers to scale, and support needs.

³ This included the coordinator of an established food partnership and a Healthy Ireland-funded food coordinator position. Both roles focus primarily on addressing food poverty by supporting community food initiatives and systems, improving access to healthy food, and fostering collaboration among local service providers. While not solely focused on surplus food redistribution, their work contributes to a more coordinated and responsive local food system, within which SFR can play an important role.

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- Focus Group 2 focused on reviewing and prioritising the emerging recommendations identified from the interviews and the first focus group. Participants were asked to assess which recommendations would have the greatest impact and should be prioritised for action, helping to refine and validate the most urgent and actionable areas for intervention.

In total, 14 participants took part in the focus groups.

D. Survey of Community Partners

A survey was distributed to a broader group of community partners, to validate and prioritise emerging recommendations from the interviews and initial focus group discussion. This helped to ensure that the most urgent and actionable areas for intervention were identified and grounded in the wider sector's experiences.

In total, there were 31 responses to the survey.

Data analysis and use of findings

The qualitative data from interviews and focus groups was compiled and analysed thematically. Recurring themes and key insights are presented in the following sections of the report. Findings from both the literature review and the qualitative research informed the development of the report's recommendations.

3. Literature Review

Policy context and need

Ireland's Climate Action Plan commits to halving food waste by 2030, and the Roadmap sets out priority actions on SFR. SFR is complex and resource intensive. Midgley (2020) observes that, although industry donors can easily identify surplus food, ensuring it reaches people instead of going to waste depends on several factors - including supportive policies, the presence of a redistribution organisation network, and, crucially, the community organisation or the beneficiary's capacity to manage the food effectively. This underlines the importance of investing in robust, well-resourced community infrastructure to ensure surplus food is channelled towards consumption rather than disposal.

This literature review explores the key enabling factors and persistent barriers to community-level SFR. It aims to inform practical recommendations for supporting the community sector with the funding, resources, and systems necessary to significantly increase its capacity to manage and scale up SFR.

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Investment in infrastructure and labour

Redistributing surplus food entails an intricate network of actors and practices across the supply chain. Spring and Biddulph note that SFR 'must be seen as something more than 'simply moving the food waste around' (2020, p.12). Surplus food is highly perishable, bulky and variable, so distribution demands careful logistics - reliable vehicles (vans, refrigerated trucks), cold storage (fridges/freezers), and food safety protocols - alongside rapid coordination. In technology-driven initiatives, e.g. app-based collection networks, logistical challenges can be 'quite complex and difficult' (Share et al., 2022).

Infrastructural costs are substantial. Community groups note that staff, and the management of volunteers, as well as transport represent major expenses. A report commissioned by FoodCloud, titled *More Than Food*, found that even experienced community and voluntary organisations must shoulder 'significant costs for infrastructure and transportation' when engaging in SFR (Share et al., 2022). The work is labour-intensive: moving tonnes of food involves identification, sorting and redistribution (Midgley, 2019). Participants in *More Than Food* described many types of labour - physical, emotional and organisational (Share et al., 2022). For example, workers regularly carry crates of produce, endure long sorting days, and provide emotional support to recipients, all largely via volunteers. This indicates a need for both 'investment in spatial infrastructures as well as adequate labour' (Spring and Biddulph 2020, p. 5).

Governance and policy levers

Besides physical resources and adequate resourcing, effective redistribution relies on supportive governance. Midgley (2020) points out that policy and legal frameworks are key enablers: EU law treats surplus food for donation/redistribution as food, not waste, provided it remains intended for human consumption and has not been discarded.⁴ The European Commission's guidance clarifies that standard food-law traceability rules apply to donated food.⁵ Several EU countries have introduced further laws or agreements to encourage donation - for instance Belgium now requires large supermarkets to offer unsold edible food to charities before disposal (for more see Food Circle Report 1). In Ireland, the EPA has responsibility to establish national food waste prevention programmes and implements measures to support awareness and reduce food waste generated through the Circular Economy Programme. StopFoodWaste is the national food waste prevention campaign, providing guidance and resources to help people adopt good food management behaviours and reduce

⁴ Commission Notice: EU Guidelines on Food Donation (2017/C 361/01).

⁵ Commission Notice: EU Guidelines on Food Donation (2017/C 361/01).

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their food waste. The Food Waste Charter is the business-focused national voluntary agreement, providing guidance for food and drink businesses to follow the 'food use hierarchy' prioritising prevention including redistribution for human consumption over disposal).

These frameworks and supports reduce uncertainty for donors. Currently, Ireland does not have a formal Good Samaritan law. Accompanying Food Circle report 1 considers the possibility of enacting one to give donors strengthened legal protection.

Social dimensions

Community food services are recognised as vital access points for building relationships and engaging with underserved populations. The *Prevalence of Food Poverty in Ireland* report notes that signposting to other services - such as income supports, education, or health - works best when delivered through trusted, existing relationships (Department of Social Protection, 2023). Community food initiatives offer a proven platform for this kind of relational outreach (Share et al., 2022). This presents a clear opportunity: SFR can serve a dual purpose by addressing immediate nutritional needs while also acting as a gateway to broader services and long-term support. To maximise this potential, community organisations must be resourced and supported to develop interventions that go beyond food provision and actively respond to the structural drivers of food insecurity - such as low income, housing insecurity, and energy poverty (Caraher and Furey, 2018; Share et al., 2022).

SFR involves social as well as logistical complexity. One significant critique, raised by Kenny and Sage (2021), is that traditional food sharing models can unintentionally disempower recipients by removing their agency and reinforcing dependency. Beneficiaries may have little choice or control over the types and quality of food provided, leading to a passive role in the exchange. Additionally, a dominant moral framing - that surplus food 'should be eaten rather than thrown out' - can create pressure on community organisations to accept and distribute food beyond their capacity or actual need (Kenny and Sage, 2021). Separately, research shows that low-income households aspire to eat healthily as much as higher-income groups do. However, the conditions of poverty combined with the structure of some SFR initiatives, can inhibit their ability to do so (Kenny and Sage, 2021). Addressing these issues requires a rights-based approach that prioritises dignity, autonomy, and the lived experiences of recipients.

The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) is called out in the *Action Plan on Food Poverty (2024)* as a fund that already supports diverse food poverty measures across Local Development Companies (LDCs). SICAP has already demonstrated itself as a mechanism for developing and sustaining community-led

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food innovations. Through SICAP, LDCs can access the funding essential for the resourcing, capital costs, and the training required to move beyond basic food aid models. Additionally, SICAP and LDCs bring the expertise and experience that can ensure that models like social supermarkets, are designed with inclusion and dignity, and linked with the complementary services and supports which go beyond food to tackle the structural drivers of food insecurity.

Access and awareness

A recent Department of Social Protection and Amárach study found nearly 50% of those experiencing food poverty did not know where to seek help (Flannery and McLoughlin, 2023). This lack of awareness is particularly concerning given that surplus food initiatives rely on community uptake to achieve their goals (Share et al., 2022). This underscores that while community level SFR is vital, food provision must be coupled with signposting strategy to improve access and awareness as well as wrap around supports in income, education and services.

Trusted community organisations – such as schools, health clinics, and community centres – play a crucial role in signposting people to food supports and related services (Caraher and Furey, 2018). Investing in communications and outreach through existing relationships is a proven method to improve access, particularly in marginalised communities (Share, M et al., 2022).

Collaboration and coordination

The challenges around access and awareness point to a wider collaboration and coordination need. Addressing SFR at scale requires more than isolated efforts - it demands structured collaboration and coordination across sectors and levels. Regional reports such as *Falling Through the Cracks – A Look at Hidden Poverty in Co. Wicklow*, and *Spinning Plates – Addressing Food Poverty in Cherry Orchard and Ballyfermot* highlight the importance of strengthening coordination among local services (Wicklow Partnership, 2022; Liffey Partnership, 2025).

One concrete recommendation from *Spinning Plates* is the establishment of a Food Poverty Alliance for Ballyfermot and Cherry Orchard. The report recommends this multi-agency action group to collaboratively develop a local food poverty action plan, drawing inspiration from models such as the Cork Food Policy Council and the Limerick Food Partnership (Liffey Partnership, 2025). Notably, *Falling Through the Cracks* (Wicklow Partnership, 2022) led to the establishment of a dedicated food coordinator post in Wicklow. This role has been instrumental in setting up and coordinating three local food partnerships across the county - providing a clear

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example of how investment in coordination capacity can translate into tangible, system-level improvements.

In terms of European research, Fusion's report *Advancing social supermarkets across Europe* (2025), suggests that local action must be embedded within a national structure to achieve meaningful and sustainable impact. One of the report's key recommendations is the creation of a national-level umbrella network in each country to support social food initiatives. Such a body could provide critical resources including shared infrastructure (e.g., vehicles, cold storage), capacity-building tools, national-level data collection, and advocacy. It would also offer training in logistics, food safety, and social engagement, while coordinating partnerships with retailers, producers, and government agencies.

The report highlights the importance of strengthening local ties both with suppliers (e.g. supermarkets, growers) and with social services (e.g. debt advice, housing supports). It reiterates a call for integrated approaches that combine food provision with wraparound services and social supports, recognising that SFR initiatives often work best when beneficiaries can access more than food - such as advice, social interaction, or skills development. This echoes findings from Irish reports which note that trusted community organisations are well-positioned to act as access points for broader social interventions.

Critically, the *Advancing social supermarkets* report emphasises that national coordination enables scale, consistency, and visibility, while still allowing local adaptability (Fusions, 2015). In the Irish context, this suggests the need for a national framework that can:

- Support the development of regional food alliances.
- Facilitate the sharing of infrastructure and logistics systems.
- Develop national partnerships and training programmes.
- Act as an advocate and policy influencer for SFR at national and EU levels.
- Promote shared learning and innovation across community-led initiatives.

In short, community-led SFR requires both horizontal integration at the local level - linking local services and voluntary groups - and vertical integration with national strategies and infrastructure. Regional food alliances should not exist in silos but as part of a connected national ecosystem, supported by clear governance, shared resources and consistent funding. Without this coordination, efforts to scale up SFR risk duplication, inefficiency, and burnout among frontline organisations.

Surplus food distribution offers real potential to reduce waste and address food poverty in Ireland. However, the literature shows it is resource-intensive, socially complex, and reliant on community capacity. Effective SFR requires more than surplus

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supply - it needs investment in infrastructure and labour, supportive governance, inclusive social supports, and strong coordination mechanisms.

Promising local models are emerging, such as the Limerick Food Partnership and the Bray, Arklow and West Wicklow food partnerships, but without national coordination and consistent funding, efforts may remain fragmented and become unsustainable. Community organisations cannot be expected to absorb growing demands without structured support.

SICAP has already demonstrated itself as a mechanism for developing, sustaining and scaling community-led food innovations, and LDCs are in a unique position to spearhead these potential innovations. SICAP has great potential to develop and scale best practice models such as social supermarkets which address the lack of agency and long-term support needs that traditional food poverty interventions, like community food banks, may miss.

Importantly, Ireland already has a strong foundation upon which to build. FoodCloud's extensive and embedded network of over 670 community partners, including many LDCs, provides a strong foundation for scaling SFR in a way that is community-led and socially responsive. As the More Than Food report notes, '[local SFR food projects] provide examples of community-led and sustainable innovations that can be shared and expanded' (Share et al., 2022). This underscores the opportunity to harness existing infrastructure and relationships to significantly expand SFR's capacity and scale.

4. Qualitative Research

Understanding the need for support

Efforts to scale surplus food distribution often centre around donors and intermediary logistical infrastructure, but community partners are essential to its success. As one stakeholder put it:

'My project wouldn't exist without FoodCloud, but FoodCloud wouldn't exist without the partners, right?' - Interviewee 9

Community organisations involved in surplus food distribution are under increasing pressure as demand continues to rise.

'Our numbers have increased greatly over the last probably six months or more and we've really seen impact that the cost of living' - Interviewee 1

Many are now at capacity and are struggling to keep up,

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'And we probably need more and now it's like do we need a bigger social supermarket now because we're at capacity' - Interviewee 7

'The need hasn't gone away you know for us. It's just that we can't meet it anymore unfortunately' - Interviewee 16

Meanwhile, others report significant growth in operations:

'We started with 40 / 50 meals a day we do almost triple that now' - Interviewee 8

All of these experiences indicate a clear need for the government to support the community sector with the costs, resources, and infrastructure needed to significantly expand SFR's capacity and scale.

A wider ecosystem

To understand the broader conditions necessary for scaling surplus food redistribution (SFR), a collaborative stakeholder mapping exercise was undertaken as part of this work package. This exercise helped identify a wider community-level SFR ecosystem, comprising key elements such as:

- Infrastructure
- Networks
- Resourcing and Capacity
- Education and Capacity Building

The following map illustrates the range of actors and systems involved in enabling effective SFR. It highlights the interdependencies between these elements and underscores the need for a coordinated, well-resourced approach. The insights that follow explain why and how these interconnected components must be supported, managed and aligned to help the community sector meet rising demand and scale its impact.

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Infrastructural network



Insights

Infrastructure emerged as a central concern. Many community organisations operate in buildings that are not fit for purpose, with inadequate space and storage, significantly limiting their ability to sustain and scale up SFR.

The council house has been converted into a family resource centre so it's tiny like and so even storage is an issue. Sometimes we've had to turn down donations because we can't fit it in (Interviewee 16).

We do have two flights of stairs to come into our building which is a pain, everything has to come up the stairs. Volunteers by their nature tend to be retirees, with health issues so they struggle carrying everything up and down the stairs (Interviewee 1).

Arrangements also often tend to be informal, putting organisations at risk of losing access to space. Such limitations put a strain on sustaining operations as well as limiting the ability to scale or consider alternative food sharing models.

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Cold storage - particularly fridges and freezers - is a frequent barrier. Again, not only is cold storage essential to sustain levels of SFR but also essential to allow the expansion and scaling towards alternative food sharing models such as social supermarkets.

[in order to open their social supermarket] We have to get in two freezers and a big fridge, you know the ones you can look into, the display ones like you'd see in a shop, they are essential to bringing the social supermarket element to life (Interviewee 7).

Transport is also a key infrastructural enabler or barrier to SFR depending on provision. Delivery is preferred among organisations, who often have limited time and resources.

The biggest challenge for us is the logistics of having to go to [Hub] every six or eight weeks to collect it (Interviewee 8).

In terms of transporting to here, yeah, we need to be here all the time, I can't leave the place (Interviewee 15).

Often, the cost of transport falls on individuals, with organisations not in a position to cover costs.

Look, it cost me money because the company doesn't pay collections, you know what I mean? (Interviewee 9).

Again, local arrangements exist between certain organisations, but leave them in a precarious situation if this support was ever to be ceased.

In terms of transport we have a company that helps us and another food bank every month, they collect the food and then bring back to us. If they were to stop doing that that would be difficult and situation for us (Interviewee 6).

Stakeholders also expressed frustration that capital grants or donations often exclude ongoing running costs, limiting the sustainability of infrastructural investments and suggested that grants should be made available that cover running costs of infrastructure, not just capital grants for the physical infrastructure.

All of the vehicles were donated to us from corporate sponsors, so that covered the cost of them, but the running costs of them the maintenance, fuel, insurance etc. We have to fund ourselves again through fundraising (Interviewee 23).

Similar to cold storage, the demand for refrigerated vans is high, as delivery is often preferred but difficult to manage with current resources. Organisations that have been lucky enough to secure cold storage, or refrigerated vans, often through donations from retail donor partners, report an increase in their capacity to engage in SFR.

We're lucky that we have a big walk-in fridge and freezer (Interviewee 8).

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But I mean it's fantastic. It's a fantastic van because it allows us to pick up refrigerated and frozen things you know so it's expanded our ability to help people which is fantastic (Interviewee 1).

There is strong support for the opportunity to share infrastructure locally and for the development of local hubs which are seen as critical potential infrastructure for the effective scaling of SFR.

Something that we've kind of spoken about is it would be absolutely great if we had you know like a central hub to kind of store all the food so that the [individual] doesn't have to go to all the way to Dublin and then to each of us (Interviewee 6).

Some kind of hub where a local network or organisations could access food from. That would be a game changer for a lot of services (Interviewee 21).

If I was to pick one thing to get support with I would probably say a more local hub (Interviewee 17).

Notably, where supportive infrastructure is in place, organisations are better able to operate flexibly, creatively, and responsively, underscoring its enabling potential.

We get a lot of fruit which would be on its last day. So we bought an ice cream maker and use it to make sorbets and ice creams with fruit that we would never use otherwise. It's just brilliant (Interviewee 12).

Local networks play a vital role in determining the success of SFR activities, though engagement is uneven. Many organisations are unaware of what others are doing in their local area, which limits collaboration and results in the duplication of effort.

I was actually trying to do with that last year [map local food provision in their area] because we had so many people from all over come to the food bank and everyone was adamant that there was no food supports in their area and we just know that there had to be (Interviewee 7).

In contrast, those embedded in strong local networks tend to deliver more effectively. Informal local networks have supported SFR efforts to date:

Sometimes we get, you know, spicy food that we wouldn't use here. We would distribute that out to you know to people whoever if the staff or people in the community (Interviewee 11).

We live in [county] and there's no food delivery down here so is a big Challenge [...] but we're lucky that somebody [a local transport company] helps us out, [...] we probably wouldn't be able to do this if we had to pay for that service (Interviewee 7).

But there is a growing need for more formal coordination mechanisms:

There would be great value in a network being formed, if there's a way like we could share the delivery with other organisations in a more organised way (Interviewee 8).

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A lot more of us are doing food mapping so I think that it's only a matter of time before that becomes the norm in every region because that's such a key piece - working together and collaborating together is so important (Interviewee 19).

It is important that these networks and this support exists at a local, regional level.

Well, I think the important thing is that you keep it local, whoever is [...] in the area (Interviewee 12).

Emerging regional food partnerships exist in certain areas of the country such as Limerick and Wicklow and these are showing promise but require sustained support. Mapping local supports, establishing channels of communication between local organisations and meeting in person are key drivers for success.

So we physically meet, and sit down for an hour [...] But that's the best source, engaging in in person [...] even locally the value meeting as a group is sharing ideas, the networking obviously, and just the ability to connect and support each other (Interviewee 8).

The main objectives of the food partnership is to identify how we can bring people out of food poverty and to find out what other key drivers are, where the key supports are, where there may be some gaps in that support, how we can work collaboratively, how we can raise money, how we can improve facilities. But our main role at the moment is food mapping- so that we have a good sense of what is going on and what is needed in our area (Interviewee 19).

However, these partnerships require coordination and organisation that community organisations often don't have the capacity to deliver.

You're just trying to keep going every day like you know you'd love to be able to kind of hear more about what other people doing or give support if you can but we don't have the time to orchestrate it (Interviewee 7).

A more connected local approach is definitely needed but a Family Resource Centre might not be the one to lead that out. It'd be great if somebody else could lead that out or if a food coordinator was employed in the area and they could lead locally (Interviewee 16).

In the UK there's so many different food partnerships and things over there and people need to manage that people need to be overseeing them, a lot of the work around food poverty [in Ireland] is based off and volunteers and peoples' own good will but it doesn't necessarily have to be that way (Interviewee 17).

There is a clear and consistent call for dedicated coordination roles at the local level. Where such roles have been established - for example, through the coordinator in Wicklow funded by Healthy Ireland - Sláintecare Healthy Communities, the PAUL Partnership food coordinator in Limerick, or the Sláintecare Community Food and Nutrition Workers - they have already begun to demonstrate tangible impact. These roles need to be sustained and expanded to maintain and scale this potential.

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Funding for this role [food coordinator] is essential. [...] if this role doesn't exist, those partnerships are just going to fall apart. There'll be no connection. There has to be funded roles for coordination pieces and roles throughout the counties throughout all of Ireland. Otherwise, you're not going to be able to connect community groups. They're too at capacity. There's too much else going on - it has to be a separate entity (Interviewee 6).

There is also a call out for national support structures that facilitate peer learning and knowledge exchange. Connecting local food coordinators through a national forum could strengthen this ecosystem and facilitate such peer learning.

There's so many people doing so much good work all across the country so to tap into that as more of a network (Interviewee 8).

There is also strong evidence that if supported with coordination many organisations would engage further in SFR:

We now have a building which will become our new home for the social grocery and other things. It will have a large warehouse space available, an ideal physical structure for a distribution hub, but at the same time we have other [resource] demands obviously (Interviewee 23).

Other organisations have disengaged from SFR due to the lack of coordination support and indicated that they would re-engage if such support was available.

The need hasn't gone away for us, it's just that we can't meet it anymore unfortunately so if there was stuff that was like supporting staff or coordination resources we'd be open to that (Interviewee 16).

Donor and community-voluntary organisation relationships were identified as mixed. Some organisations benefit from strong, flexible partnerships with donors that include tailored donation schedules, equipment and higher volumes and quality of donations. These relationships, usually formed in informal ways by community organisations, boost SFR capacity significantly.

We have two quite large fridges that were donated to us [by food donor partner] (Interviewee 1).

And then the vans from Tesco that was through more of a local relationship was it? Yes, it was and we just got a new one there for a new pilot (Interviewee 1).

However, others face poor donor relationships that reduce quantity and quality of donations and make the collection process burdensome.

Sometimes they wouldn't give it to you. Okay.

And what would be the reason for that, do you know?

I don't know, it depends on what manager is on really (Interviewee 11).

We were relying on volunteers to collect and that wasn't ideal. [...] Staff can change, new managers and new rules come into place with regard to collections, so you've

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always to be on the ball and the volunteers there wouldn't be listening enough (Interviewee 12).

Interviewees expressed a clear desire for more structured and intentional engagement with donors, particularly at the floor staff level, to improve the donation process, enhance the collection experience, and increase both the quality and quantity of surplus food received.

that local relationship [between charities and food donors] is something to look at and work on and nurture maybe (Interviewee 16).

Educating the donors, so that all the staff understand that you are part of something that is bigger than you (Interviewee 9).

Stakeholders also expressed strong interest in building relationships with small-scale retail donors and local growers. The latter is particularly valued for its potential to improve the nutritional quality of surplus food and strengthen local food systems.

I just wonder if it would be possible if there could be a grant for the government to kind of support local businesses or local growers to donate some of their surplus foods to our food bank. We do have a local centra, local Spar and stuff and we don't do much work and with them (Interviewee 6).

Something more streamlined for farmers to be able to donate would be amazing (Interviewee 16).

If we made some links with the European shops, there's quite a number of them and there is the halal shop in town, what would be good if we had some of those because we do have different groups of people coming in (Interviewee 13).

Connecting with local growers would overcome one of the shortcomings of SFR, the lack of nutritional food.

What we were getting from the supermarkets at that time was really not beneficial to us [...] We prefer fruit or meat or veg or whatever we were getting random stuff (Interviewee 8).

The type of food, the lack of healthy food and the lack of variety of food. I think certainly was a challenge to them (Interviewee 20).

Resourcing and capacity constraints remain a fundamental challenge. SFR is time-intensive and resource-heavy, and many staff carry out this work in addition to their core responsibilities. The 'last mile' of redistribution often falls on community partners, adding to their workload.

[to make SFR work] you need manpower, woman power, person power, and then also the knowledge that's built up (Interviewee 4).

I suppose I went and said oh yeah well this will be a great idea. I didn't realise how much work was involved and operating (Interviewee 7).

I suppose we're all for the concept certainly [hub and host] but the issue we have is spreading our resources too thinly you know we are ultimately a homeless charity that that is our main reason for existence (Interviewee 23).

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The work is also heavily reliant on a small number of committed individuals, meaning that momentum can be lost when they move on. Volunteer dependency adds to this fragility.

It's the commitment where people fail a little bit, you know, because it does require something. It does, by the concept, be passionate about that, and then being consistent. So there is solutions, it's the commitment where people fail (Interviewee 9).

The place was without management for a period [...] I started in this role last year in March it was only that I went through some of the emails to see that I saw the FoodCloud as well, but before that I didn't know (Interviewee 15).

Before we were relying on volunteers to collect and that wasn't ideal (Interviewee 12).

Conversely, supportive working environments and infrastructure enable a more adaptive, solution-oriented approach.

I was totally enthusiastic when I saw it [FoodCloud] for the first time and I remain enthusiastic 10 years later - the concept is fabulous, it's absolutely fabulous (Interviewee 9).

As detailed above, participants highlighted the potential value of a local food coordinator role - someone who could relieve administrative burden, build local connections, sustain momentum, and support long-term planning and collaboration. *How they want to be supported is administratively. You know take all the kind of hard work out of getting the meeting's going, finding the venues, facility, documenting everything you know? The ideas are coming from them, that's not us. It's just coordination (Interviewee 6).*

Education and capacity building efforts are essential for supporting the sector's growth. Hands-on, practical training is highly valued by stakeholders, especially around how to use surplus food creatively and safely.

I have been at some events where they've brought along people who have spoken about different models and how they've used surplus food. I would actually think that maybe doing some kind of examples, but then also actually workshop in some of those examples for real life (Interviewee 17).

interactive things, hands-on, you know, that's what people like (Interviewee 9).

There is interest in train-the-trainer models for key community-facing roles such as Community Climate Action Officers and Community Food and Nutrition Workers.

The climate action officer in Tipperary is working with the Healthy Food Made Easy coordinator to merge health and climate content into an eight-week course. They shared it with me for feedback, but ideally someone with more time and support could help build it properly (Interviewee 19).

As discussed earlier, when discussing local networks, peer learning - both formal and informal - is seen as crucial, with value placed on opportunities to share practices and experiences at both local and national levels.

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I would love to see little seminars, little, you know, so maybe having two or three people who are already using FoodCloud and being their voice to say, oh, look, I'm using it this way or that way (Interviewee 9).

There is a notable shift in food redistribution models, with many organisations moving towards Social Supermarket Models (SSMs) and community pantries that integrate wrap-around supports.

I think that those kind of models [pantries, SSMs] reduce that kind of tendency to over rely on it and to expect it but they also provide bit of a more dignified way to people who might be more apprehensive (Interviewee 8).

I think some form of training around how maybe using just kind of food parcels isn't necessarily always the right way just because I think that's really something that I've come across which is quite a difficult thing to change people's minds on. It would be good for them to see that there might be other initiatives out there that people could use or different models or whatever (Interviewee 17).

These models require additional resourcing and coordinated support.

I was really interested in the social supermarket model, but I'm not sure our volunteers could manage it - it takes a lot more, including training and a shift in mindset (Interviewee 13).

Crucially, across all models food is often the entry point for engagement and education, offering a low-barrier way to connect people to wider supports they might not otherwise access.

From a university point of view it's great for us in terms of meeting SDGs and making sure that we are actually helping students to engage in positive action and learning by doing - so it's an education tool for us as well as the food pantry helping students in need (Interviewee 4).

People who never had contact with a home school liaison are coming for the first time with the excuse of collecting food. When we started he only worked with two families. The week after, he had seven, and now he has 20-something. It's just the power of food to connect us (Interviewee 9).

They come looking for food and then they are way more willing to talk about other stuff that is going on in their lives, so it's been great in terms of relationship building you know (Interviewee 16).

This highlights the broader social value of food-led engagement and the importance of maintaining and resourcing these pathways.

Conclusion

While infrastructure was repeatedly identified as a key enabler, the research findings suggest that surplus food distribution will only scale sustainably if embedded within

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a broader, healthy, localised yet interconnected food system. This requires investment not only in physical infrastructure but also in coordination, peer learning, and long-term capacity building.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are grounded in the findings from the literature review and qualitative research outlined earlier in this report. They respond directly to the challenges identified by community organisations and infrastructure partners working in SFR across Ireland. While infrastructure emerged as a core enabling factor, stakeholders consistently emphasised the importance of broader, systemic supports - such as coordination roles, sustainable funding, and capacity building - to ensure lasting impact. The recommendations aim to address both the immediate and the strategic needs of the sector, and are presented in thematic areas to support clarity and action. Given FoodCloud's existing national community network, some of these actions may be led or facilitated by them, in partnership with and with support from government and relevant agencies, as part of a coordinated national approach to scaling SFR.

A. Infrastructure

A.1	Invest in capital and operational funding to cover not only equipment (e.g., fridges, freezers, vehicles) but also ongoing running costs.
A.2	Fund the development of local food hubs.
A.3	Support acquisition or upgrade of fit-for-purpose buildings.
A.4	Enable shared infrastructure models to allow multiple groups to access cold storage and transport.

B. Local networks

B.1	Fund Local Food Coordinator positions to build and maintain community networks between organisations, donors and local food systems. <i>[See also 4.2 on operational delivery and continuity]</i>
B.2	Facilitate a national network of food coordinators to enable knowledge exchange, peer learning, shared resources and input at a strategic level.
B.3	Support the development of local, place-based food partnerships.
B.4	Provide seed funding for collaborative pilot projects, encouraging organisations to test and evaluate cooperative working models.

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C. Donor and community partner relationships

C.1	Establish strengthened national guidelines and standards for food donations to improve the consistency and quality of surplus food.
C.2	Create incentives or support initiatives that enable local retailers, food producers, and growers to donate high-quality, nutritious food locally
C.3	Support initiatives that connect local growers with community groups.
C.4	Fund capacity-building and network building initiatives between community groups and donors.

D. Resourcing and capacity

D.1	Provide multi-annual core funding for community food organisations engaging in SFR to reduce reliance on short-term grants and voluntary labour.
D.2	Embed the Local Food Coordinator role within formal and sustained funding streams, such as Sláintecare Healthy Communities or the Healthy Ireland fund, to support operational coordination and enable long-term continuity in SFR.

E. Education and capacity building

E.1	Fund hands-on, practical training programmes on food waste prevention, and using surplus food safely, creatively, and effectively.
E.2	Invest in 'train-the-trainer' models to build local capacity and allow knowledge to be shared more widely within communities. Include food waste prevention, including interventions from sector leaders. ⁶
E.3	Provide targeted grants and support for the establishment of innovative food sharing models, such as social supermarkets or wrap-around service pilots, leveraging the unique leadership of Local Development Companies and their access to SICAP funding.
E.4	In wider policy, recognise community food provision and surplus food redistribution as an engagement gateway and fund programmes that build bridges from food to wider social services and supports.

⁶ Examples include CTC and Grow It Yourself Ireland.

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Prioritisation of recommendations

This set of recommendations was presented to participants in Focus Group 2 and the sector-wide survey. Both groups were asked to reflect on the relevance, urgency, and potential impact of each recommendation. Rather than suggesting major changes, participants strongly affirmed that the recommendations were comprehensive and addressed their needs. They then prioritised them based on which would most benefit their organisations, helping to identify the actions with the broadest support and greatest potential impact. The six top-ranked recommendations are listed below in order of importance.

D.2

Embed the Local Food Coordinator role within formal and sustained funding streams, such as Sláintecare Healthy Communities or the Healthy Ireland fund, to support operational coordination and enable long-term continuity in SFR.

A.1

Invest in capital and operational funding to cover not only equipment (e.g., fridges, freezers, vehicles) but also ongoing running costs.

B.1

Fund Local Food Coordinator positions to build and maintain community networks between organisations, donors and local food systems.

E.4

In wider policy, recognise community food provision and surplus food redistribution as an engagement gateway and fund programmes that build bridges from food to wider social services and supports.

D.1

Provide multi-annual core funding for community food organisations engaging in surplus food redistribution to reduce reliance on short-term grants and voluntary labour.

E.3

Provide targeted grants and support for the establishment of innovative food sharing models, such as social supermarkets or wrap-around service pilots, leveraging the unique leadership of Local Development Companies and their access to SICAP funding.

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Appendix 1 - Interview Selection Criteria

A. Interviews with Community Organisations

	Solution	Compliance ⁷	Primary Service
Interviewee 1	Hubs	High	Food Bank
Interviewee 2	Hubs	High	Community Services
Interviewee 3	Hubs	High	School / University
Interviewee 4	Hubs	High	School / University
Interviewee 5	Hubs	Low	Community Services
Interviewee 6	Hubs	Low	Youth Services
Interviewee 7	Hubs	Low	Community Services
Interviewee 8	Hubs	Low	Community Services
Interviewee 9	Foodiverse	High	Adult Education
Interviewee 10	Foodiverse	High	Older Adult Support
Interviewee 11	Foodiverse	Mid	Community Services
Interviewee 12	Foodiverse	Mid	Nursing Home
Interviewee 13	Foodiverse	Low	Community Services
Interviewee 14	Foodiverse	Low	School / University
Interviewee 15	Foodiverse	Drop Off	Community Services

⁷ Compliance refers to the frequency that FoodCloud charity or community partners accept planned food offers via FoodCloud programmes.

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Interviewee 16	Foodiverse	Drop Off	Community Services
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B. Interviews with the Wider Infrastructural Network

	Role
Interviewee 17	Community Food and Nutrition Worker
Interviewee 18	Community Food and Nutrition Worker
Interviewee 19	Community Food and Nutrition Worker
Interviewee 20	Food Coordinator
Interviewee 21	Food Coordinator
Interviewee 22	Infrastructural Community Partners
Interviewee 23	Infrastructural Community Partners
Interviewee 24	Infrastructural Community Partners

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Appendix 2 - Full ranking of recommendations

D.2	Embed the Local Food Coordinator role within formal and sustained funding streams, such as Sláintecare Healthy Communities or the Healthy Ireland fund, to support operational coordination and enable long-term continuity in SFR.
A.1	Invest in capital and operational funding to cover not only equipment (e.g. fridges, freezers, vehicles) but also ongoing running costs.
B.1	Fund local food coordinator positions to build and maintain local community networks between community organisations, donors, and wider local food systems.
E.4	In wider policy, recognise food redistribution as an engagement gateway and fund programmes that build bridges from food to wider social services and supports.
D.1	Provide multi-annual core funding for community food organisations engaging in surplus food redistribution to reduce reliance on short-term grants and voluntary labour.
E.3	Provide targeted grants and support for the establishment of innovative food sharing models, such as social supermarkets or wrap-around service pilots, leveraging the unique leadership of Local Development Companies and their access to SICAP funding.
A.2	Fund the development of local food hubs. [see WP4 report for more on this]
C.3	Support initiatives that connect local growers with community groups.
C.2	Create incentives or support initiatives that enable local retailers, food producers, and growers to donate high-quality, nutritious food locally.
E.2	Invest in 'train-the-trainer' models to build local capacity and allow knowledge to be shared more widely within communities.
C.1	Establish national guidelines and standards for food donations to improve the consistency and quality of surplus food.
C.4	Fund capacity-building and network building initiatives between community groups and donors.

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A.4	Enable shared infrastructure models to allow multiple groups to access cold storage and transport.
B.2	Facilitate a national network of food coordinators to enable knowledge exchange, peer learning, shared resources and input at a strategic level.
E.1	Fund hands-on, practical training programmes on using surplus food safely, creatively, and effectively.
B.3	Support the development of local, place-based food partnerships.
B.4	Provide seed funding for collaborative pilot projects, encouraging organisations to test and evaluate cooperative working models.
A.3	Support acquisition or upgrade of fit-for-purpose buildings.