

Food Circle

Supporting Ireland's National Food Waste Prevention Roadmap



Rialtas na hÉireann
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FoodCloud

REPORT 4 **SUPPORTING THE INFRASTRUCTURE** **OF FOOD REDISTRIBUTION**

for the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment

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Executive Summary

There is a long tradition in Ireland of food donation being used as a social support to help combat poverty. The role of large-scale surplus food rescue and redistribution to support this cause has grown significantly in the last 15 years. FoodCloud has been the main driver in the development of a national redistribution infrastructure, through the use of three warehouse Hubs, in Dublin, Cork and Galway, operating in conjunction with a bespoke technology platform, Foodiverse, which facilitates virtual food banking; an online platform where food donation and food sharing can occur in the place where the surplus exists, rather than bringing it to a central warehouse. At the time of writing a small number of other platforms also now operate in Ireland, normalising the use of surplus food and increasing the number of people interacting with surplus food.

While the system of large-scale collection and distribution from FoodCloud and through other channels to smaller local charities and community groups works very well, with more than 4,000 tonnes of surplus food redistributed in 2025, challenges do remain. With resources stretched to address cost of living increases and demand for services growing all the time, it can be challenging for local community groups to have adequate storage and volunteers to make sure food is redistributed in a safe, efficient manner. The logistics of coordinating the redistribution of food that often has a short shelf life to charities with limited or time bound capacity, means that the current system needs to do more, but can be constrained. In recent years, several mid-level redistribution organisations have emerged, operating from larger spaces and able to accept and redistribute larger volumes to small groups they work with. These mid-level organisations represent an important layer in the redistribution infrastructure, easing some of the administrative burden on smaller local groups while facilitating the redistribution of greater levels of surplus food to their network.

By June 2027, Ireland will transpose the revised EU Waste Framework Directive, which has introduced binding food waste reduction targets of 10% for the manufacturing and processing sector by 2030, and 30% per capita, jointly in retail and other distribution of food, in restaurants and food services and in households by 2030. The revised Waste Framework Directive includes a donation clause for certain 'economic operators' to propose food donation agreements to food banks or redistribution organisations. The implementation of the Waste Framework Directive offers a valuable opportunity to support the current infrastructure to maximise the amount of surplus food that can be rescued at a large-scale, thereby reducing food waste, and to make sure it moves through the system quickly and efficiently, to ensure all of that food gets to the people needing support, enabling people and communities to thrive.

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Based on desktop research of the current food redistribution infrastructure in Ireland, and qualitative research with those carrying out these activities to understand the current constraints on the system, this report puts forward 3 key recommendations on how the food redistribution infrastructure in Ireland could be supported to ensure that food donation and redistribution become a cornerstone of delivering our food waste reduction and other climate-related targets, while also supporting those in our communities experiencing food insecurity and poverty.

A. Support for large-scale redistribution organisations – National Centre of Excellence

A.1

Support the establishment of a National Centre of Excellence for Circular Food Systems - supporting innovation, policy development, and cross-sector collaboration to unlock more surplus food in the supply chain.

B. Support for mid-level redistribution organisations – regional hubs

B.1

Support the creation of a network of regional food hubs that would provide a range of services including food redistribution, wraparound social service, a social supermarket and a community kitchen and cafe.

C. Support for local level community groups - meeting ongoing running costs

C.1

Creation of a dedicated annual fund providing flexibility for small community groups to support infrastructural upgrades and/or ongoing running costs.

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1. Introduction

Background - the Food Circle Project

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, it includes project partners Clean Technology Centre and food loss and waste (FLW) expert Kai Robertson. Through collaboration with food businesses, policymakers and community groups, the purpose of this project is to identify and promote best practice and explore potential policy interventions in food redistribution and food waste reduction that can reduce FLW in Ireland.

FLW is a complex problem that affects every stage in the food supply chain and requires a multifaceted, multi-stakeholder solution. Likewise, the priority actions in the Roadmap are interconnected. This report focuses on surplus food redistribution activities and the infrastructure through which they take place in Ireland. The issues discussed in this report correlate closely with those presented in Report 3, examining how to increase community capacity. The full series of reports in the Food Circle project, each addressing the food redistribution priorities referred to in the Roadmap, are:

Report	Topic
1	Policy levers for food redistribution
2	Supporting a voluntary target for surplus food donation
3	Building community sector capacity for surplus food redistribution
4	Supporting the infrastructure of food redistribution (this report)
5	Farm-level food loss in Ireland: causes and solutions

This report focuses on Roadmap priority Action 18:

#18	Support surplus food redistribution initiatives including redistribution of surplus food arising from sectors such as retail and primary production. Identify and support surplus food redistribution activities that can further combat food poverty.
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Structure and methodology

This report presents an overview and examination of the surplus food redistribution (SFR) infrastructure currently in operation in Ireland. Based on interviews with involved stakeholders, it presents several recommendations on how the infrastructure could be enhanced to allow for further scaling and development of SFR in Ireland.

Section 2 of the report provides an overview of the role SFR plays in addressing food poverty and food insecurity and addresses the policy context in which these activities sit in Ireland, with reference to the recently revised EU Waste Framework Directive and the requirements that this might place on the SFR infrastructure. Section 3 introduces the actors operating at the differing levels of the SFR infrastructure in Ireland and presents feedback from qualitative research carried out with these actors.

Section 4 presents the challenges and opportunities in providing infrastructure support for SFR in Ireland section 5 presents opportunities and recommendations. Section 6 concludes the report.

This report is informed by qualitative research carried out in 2025, with 9 identified large or mid-level SFR organisations carrying out food redistribution activities in Ireland. The qualitative research undertaken was designed to gain a better understanding of the challenges they face in their operations and examine what support they themselves would like to see to support their activities.

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2. Surplus food redistribution overview

What is surplus food?

The EU Commission's Guidelines on Food Donation¹ define surplus food as 'finished food products (including fresh meat, fruit and vegetables), partly formulated products or food ingredients that may arise at any stage of the food production and distribution chain for a variety of reasons'. The guidelines outline that food can be redistributed provided it is fit for human consumption and compliant with all food safety requirements. Surplus food is food that has become surplus because costs, systems, processes, regulations and/or laws make supplying it to consumers too complex and inefficient. The EPA's food waste measurement protocol refers to 'food surplus' as 'food that was destined for sale but due to different reasons (e.g. product returns, off spec, packaging issues) didn't reach the intended customer'².

As interest and awareness of the need to reduce food waste has grown over the last two decades, the role that surplus food can play in achieving that has also attracted more attention. While there will always be some levels of surplus food in the food system, it is estimated that, globally, up to 40% of food produced never gets eaten³. At the same time the United Nations' 2025 State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World Report⁴ estimated that the number of people facing hunger in 2023 was 673 million. That's 1 in 11 people globally, but 1 in 5 in Africa, where hunger is still on the rise. Nearly 28% of the global population - 2.3 billion people - are moderately or severely food insecure. In Ireland, more than 1 in 11 people experience food poverty⁵, a reality seen by many of FoodCloud community partners daily. Redistributing food from where it is surplus to where it is needed not only plays a hugely important role in reducing the levels of food that end up being wasted, but by getting that food to those who need it, it helps address the needs of those facing food insecurity.

Models of surplus food redistribution

Food banks are one of the most recognised models of SFR, though the term varies internationally. In Europe, food banks act as intermediaries redistributing surplus food to organisations, while in the United States they often provide direct support to individuals⁶. Despite their prevalence, food banks have been criticised for being paternalistic, offering limited choice and potentially fostering dependency rather

¹ European Commission, DG SANTE, n.d.

² See for example: <https://www.epa.ie/publications/circular-economy/resources/Food-Waste-Protocol-for-Manufacturing-Sector-2022.pdf>

³ WWF-UK 2021.

⁴ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO 2025.

⁵ Department of Social Protection 2022.

⁶ Taylor, N. et al 2024.

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than addressing the root causes of food insecurity⁷. Much of this criticism centres on the use of food parcels. While highly effective for emergencies and short-term relief⁸ parcels can restrict personal and cultural food preferences and may create stigma for recipients. Yet many households rely on this support, and it remains an essential safety net.

The 2022 More than Food⁹ report emphasises that food provision often serves as a gateway to wider support, enabling organisations to build trust and understand underlying needs. Community meals and meals-on-wheels illustrate this, offering nutrition alongside vital social interaction. These services, however, are resource-intensive; surplus food can help reduce costs but may still limit menu flexibility.

Food pantries and social supermarkets are emerging as more dignified models. Operating like small shops where people choose their own items, sometimes through membership or a low fee, pantries reduce stigma, respect autonomy, and minimise waste. Student pantries have grown rapidly across Irish universities in response to rising living costs. Social supermarkets take this further by offering discounted surplus food in a retail-style setting while requiring engagement with wrap-around services. This model combines dignity, choice, and a pathway toward long-term stability, though it demands significant infrastructure and reliable supply.

Ultimately, organisations must decide which SFR model aligns with their resources, capacities, and community needs, while ensuring dignity remains central to food support.

Setting a food redistribution target

An important element of the SFR conversation is an understanding of how much surplus food exists in the food supply chain. The absence of more detailed and granular food waste and food surplus data, segregated by supply chain sources and whether food is still edible or not, makes this a difficult question to answer. FoodCloud is actively investigating this, but more research is required to be able to give a more accurate assessment of this issue. In Food Circle Report 1 FoodCloud recommends an Irish target of 3% of food that would otherwise be wasted being redistributed by 2030. Based on the 2024 food waste figures for Ireland of 708,000, 3% food redistributed would prevent approximately 21,640 tonnes of waste, save approximately 48,976 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent emissions from going to waste, and provide 50.6 million meals¹⁰ annually to food-insecure individuals in Ireland. Please see section 2 of Report 1 for more information.

⁷ Ranta, R. et al 2024.

⁸ Papargyropoulou, E. et al 2022.

⁹ Share, M. et al. 2022.

¹⁰ One meal is measured as the equivalent of 420g of food. WRAP 2020.

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By the end of 2025, FoodCloud had redistributed almost 30,000 tonnes of surplus food in Ireland, since 2013, the equivalent of approximately 68 million meals. The provision of this food has allowed over 700 community partners and thousands of people around the country to benefit from a resource that before this intervention would have gone to waste. FoodCloud's ambition is to continue to unlock more surplus in the system, with a goal of redistributing 16,100 tonnes annually in Ireland, by 2030. It is projected that approximately 5,000 tonnes of this could come from agricultural recovery by 2030. FoodCloud's agricultural recovery programme, the Growers' project, supports growers to harvest and distribute surplus vegetables, either before or after harvest and packing. Being able to access fresh healthy nutritious foods is especially important to directly address food poverty, by providing foods that individuals and community groups need and want. In 2025 FoodCloud rescued over 4,165 tonnes of surplus food, 300 tonnes of which came through the Growers' Project, and enabling access to this surplus is critical to Action 18. For more see Food Circle Report 5.

SFR policy context

In line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 12.3, Ireland is committed to reducing food waste by 50% by 2030. The Roadmap includes 38 priority actions, a number of which are focused on food donation and redistribution.

The revision of the EU Waste Framework Directive (WFD)¹¹ introduces food waste reduction targets to be achieved by 2030. These targets require a 10% reduction in manufacturing and processing and a 30% reduction in food waste per capita, jointly in retail and other distribution of food, in restaurants and food services, and in households. The WFD entered into force in October 2025 and Member States have to transpose it into national law, a process that has to be completed by June 2027.

Food donation has been specifically highlighted within the WFD, as one means to help achieve the waste reduction targets. The wording of this clause is outlined below.

Member States shall, after consulting with food banks and other food redistribution organisations, take measures, where appropriate on the basis of any existing national food donation system, to ensure that economic operators having a significant role in the prevention and generation of food waste as identified by the Member States propose donation agreements to food banks and other food redistribution organisations so as to facilitate the donation of unsold food that is safe for human consumption, and at reasonable costs for the economic operators.

¹¹ Directive (EU) 2025/1892 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 September 2025 amending Directive 2008/98/EC on waste.

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As the process for transposition of the WFD begins, a number of issues need to be examined in detail. Member States will be obliged to decide who are the economic operators that these targets should apply to within their jurisdiction. It will also need to be established, what might be a reasonable cost, that these economic operators might have to incur, as part of this process, and what support might be required to help support them in this process.

From a food donation perspective this wording crucially outlines that economic operators are encouraged to consult with food banks or food redistribution organisations and to propose donation agreements to facilitate the donation of unsold food. Understanding how the current donation and redistribution system operates is crucial to being able to implement a system that will work for all involved and deliver on the differing requirements of reducing food waste, while also supporting those experiencing food poverty and food insecurity.

Learnings from France: the Garot Law and food donation agreements

In 2016 France introduced the Garot Law, which included a donation clause which obliged retail stores over 400 m² to donate food with 48 hours or more of shelf life remaining, to food banks rather than destroy it. This donation clause was one of many measures in the Garot Law, targeting reduction of food waste. French food waste statistics show a reduction of overall food waste by 10% between 2016 and 2020¹². The proportion of fruit and vegetables being redistributed in that time also increased from 18% to 26% of the total food distributed¹³.

Some analysis points out that the obligation to sign a contract neither implies that supermarkets must donate a minimum quantity of their unsold products, nor that they have to give at regular frequency¹⁴. However, French food banks and redistribution organisations were involved in the development of this law and advocated for a donation agreement rather than donation targets, to ensure they maintained flexibility and choice in the amounts and types of food they were offered, and to avoid becoming the dumping ground for unsuitable unsold food from supermarkets. In 2020 a donation quality management plan was introduced as an additional measure, to ensure the food donations were meeting a sufficient quality threshold and requiring supermarkets to provide staff training and awareness of where this food was going. A Ministry of Agriculture and Food (2019) evaluation of the law states that food donation seemed to be more diversified after the introduction of the quality management

¹² Norton, E. 2024.

¹³ Mourad, M. and Finn, S. 2019.

¹⁴ Mourad, M. and Finn, S. 2019.

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plan, with an increased share of fresh products and fruit and vegetables being donated¹⁵.

Lessons can be learned from the French policy experience. Donation agreements must be designed in such a manner as to ensure that the food waste hierarchy is promoted, surplus food is prioritised for donation and human consumption and results in quality surplus food being offered to redistribution organisations. The 2019 report also highlights that support to strengthen logistical and infrastructure resources are required to enable food aid organisations to be able to capitalise on the increase in surplus food donation facilitated by these agreements. French legislators recognised that the fight against food waste cannot be achieved only through volunteering and goodwill, so a national law was proposed to amplify, coordinate and make efforts more effective against this challenge¹⁶.

3. SFR landscape in Ireland

Ireland's national food redistribution infrastructure operates across three separate but connected levels. FoodCloud currently operates at the largest scale, working nationally with all the major retailers in Ireland and over 200 food businesses around the country. The local level is a vibrant mix of smaller scale localised operations, nearly 700 of which work with FoodCloud. Please see section 4 for the challenges and opportunities identified by SFR organisations.. 4,165 tonnes of surplus food were shared with these organisations in 2025. A third mid-level is now emerging with a mix of larger capacity organisations, who can play a crucial role in unlocking large amounts of surplus food and being able to redistribute it faster and more efficiently to the local level operators.

National co-ordination / digital infrastructure / brokerage

FoodCloud

FoodCloud, a non-profit social enterprise driven by a vision to ensure no good food goes to waste, has been working to develop the system and grow the scale of SFR by connecting food businesses who have surplus food, with the community groups supporting people experiencing food insecurity in their local area. Operating three large-scale hubs and a purpose-built technology platform, FoodCloud is focused on rescuing large amounts of surplus food from across the food supply chain and breaking that into more manageable quantities for individual charities. The technology platform also allows for localised smaller scale donations of surplus food from retailers to community groups to occur in a more streamlined and

¹⁵ French Ministry of Agriculture and Food 2019.

¹⁶ Interreg 2019.

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orchestrated manner. This approach, to move higher up the food supply chain to access and unlock large quantities of surplus food, combined with a technological solution to promote smaller scale localised collection by community groups, has resulted in the equivalent of 68 million meals being redistributed in Ireland since 2013. The introduction of the FoodCloud Kitchen has opened further opportunities for FoodCloud to use and maximise the potential of surplus food to create meals and products for its food truck or to provide community meals for some of FoodCloud's community partners.

FoodCloud is also the delivery partner of the EU funded food aid programme (ESF+) on behalf of the Department of Social Protection, where 160 community groups nationwide have access to €4m worth of food aid to support those most at risk of food poverty in our communities. The EU funded programme provides for the provision of basic foodstuffs to ensure a reliable supply of food to the charity sector to support people to take their first steps out of poverty and social exclusion. FoodCloud is responsible for food procurement, storage and distribution of ESF+ food supplies. This is not surplus food but is purchased with EU and Irish Government funding. Many charity groups who access ESF+ food support would also access surplus food from FoodCloud to supplement their provisions and provide a greater range of food to those they support.

Role of technology in unlocking surplus food

A meat processor in Co Monaghan approached FoodCloud about donating surplus stock. While there was a steady volume of surplus food available, FoodCloud could not facilitate a cost-effective collection model due to the manufacturer's location, and the manufacturer could not deliver directly to the nearest FoodCloud hub. As a result, the surplus was not recovered. In 2025, FoodCloud developed a project plan to expand virtual surplus redistribution beyond the retail sector to include manufacturers facing such barriers to redistribution. In H2 2025, FoodCloud began a trial with this meat producer, using Foodiverse, FoodCloud's virtual donation platform, as the method for redistributing surplus directly to local charities and community groups. To date, the equivalent of more than 3,000 meals have been redistributed through this trial, opening up access to valuable high-protein food that previously was going to waste. The SFR organisation stated, *'The collection went well. We received one pallet load which was amazing. We got all the sausages distributed by the end of Wednesday evening which was a great achievement, considering the amount. Parents were extremely grateful.'*

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Other digital infrastructure

Olio and Neighbourly are two technology platforms enabling nationwide surplus food redistribution. Olio provides a community-based, peer-to-peer model: volunteers collect unsold food from businesses, list it on the app, and share it locally, with impact reported back to donors. Neighbourly functions as a broader giving platform, helping businesses donate surplus food, toiletries, books, and household goods - as well as volunteer time and funding - to charities and community groups across Ireland and the UK.

Community food organisations

While FoodCloud and other tech platforms are essential for SFR at scale, they rely on a network of charities and community groups that range hugely in terms of size, core focus of activity and scale of operation. These SFR community organisations are involved in the provision of a wide range of social services, and the extent to which food is a core or peripheral service to their operations fluctuates widely. As can be seen from Figure 1, the reasons community groups use and access surplus food can also differ greatly; for over 40% they use food as a gateway to open up wider conversations, almost 30% use it in direct meal provisions and 14% use food as a social connector, a way to combat isolation.

FoodCloud's community network includes...



How FoodCloud's partners shared food...



Why partners share food...

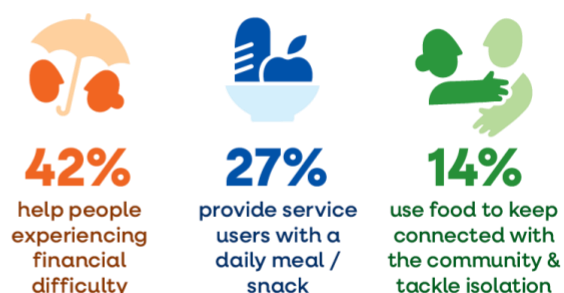


Figure 1: Profile of FoodCloud's Community Partners

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Many of these organisations are small operations with very limited budgets. For many, the value of surplus food lies in the savings it offers. They have very little resource available, however, to invest or build out their capacity to increase the levels of surplus food they can attract or use. Figure 2 plots the profile of 434 community groups that are members of FoodCloud's charity network. It illustrates that the vast majority operate with little or no budget, helping a small number of people. It is very challenging for groups of this size to be able to put infrastructure in place to allow them to work with surplus food. Being able to access centralised or shared resources, such as storage space, fridges or freezers would be very beneficial for such groups.

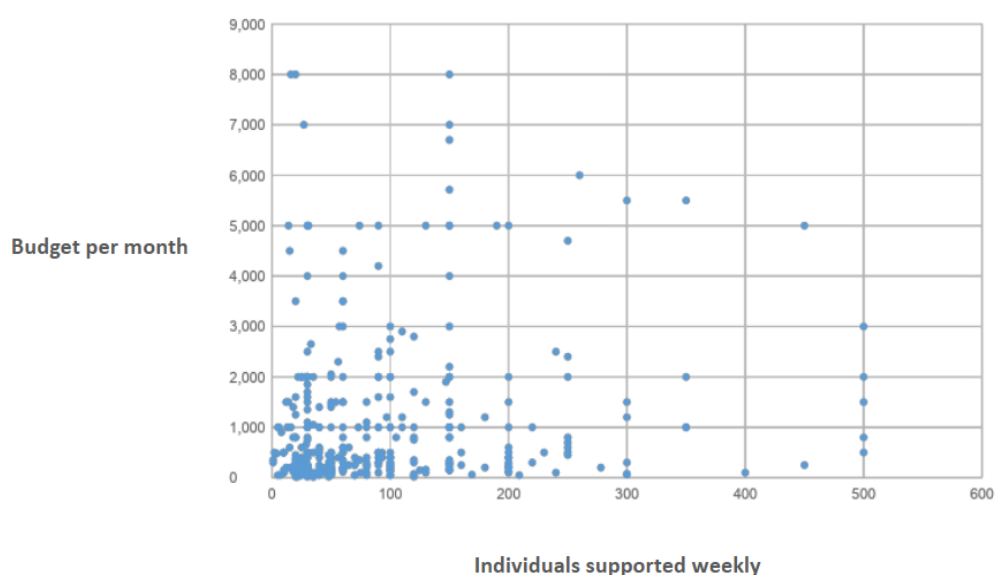


Figure 2: Profile of community groups working with FoodCloud

Intermediate redistribution organisations - regional food hubs

In recent years, a number of organisations have developed and grown into what can be categorised as mid-level operators, supporting larger numbers of people and handling significant volumes of food. Some of these organisations have warehouse facilities, with varying levels of transport resources and volunteers contributing to their work. As a result, they are accessing and managing larger quantities of food and even moving towards newer models of redistribution such as food pantries and social supermarkets. FoodCloud believes these intermediate redistribution organisations play a critical role in enhancing food rescue and redistribution.

Examples of such mid-level organisations include:

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- Foodshare Kerry, a social enterprise, is registered with the charity regulator. It was established to help local charity groups combat food poverty by connecting local charities and community projects with surplus food. Since 2015 it has been redistributing surplus food and now has 3 full time staff and approximately 20 volunteers operating a 10,000 sq ft warehouse. It works with over 30 community groups across the county. Foodshare Kerry administers the ESF+ programme in partnership with SVP to collect and deliver basic food supports available through the ESF+ programme to accredited charities in Kerry. The ESF+ food parcels are supplemented by surplus food sourced from food producers in the Kerry area and from FoodCloud, as Foodshare Kerry is a member of FoodCloud's network of charities. In 2025 the organisation helped almost 7,500 people with food support.
- The Donegal Food Response Network (DFRN) is a network of 21 community and voluntary organisations working together to address food poverty and reduce food waste in County Donegal. It is led by a voluntary steering committee with an elected Chairperson. The network is facilitated by the Donegal Local Development Company who help with coordination of activities, capacity-building, and provide administrative and governance support. Donegal Local Development Company is a local development company and is registered with the charity regulator. The DFRN recently devised a strategic plan for the network, central to which is the establishment of a network members central hub to help them store and redistribute more food, but also to provide more wrap-around services for members of the network.
- The Bray and North Wicklow Area Partnership is a local development company and is registered with the charity regulator. It runs the BIA project, supporting 70 local families and up to 100 individuals experiencing food poverty by providing food parcels to community groups in the surrounding area.
- Buíon Phort Láirge (formerly known as Waterford Area Partnership) is a local development company and is registered with the charity regulator. Waterford Food Bank is a Buíon Phort Láirge Programme. Operating from a warehouse in Waterford City, the food bank works closely with St Vincent de Paul and delivers food parcels to over 250 families each week, as well as supporting 210 students daily with breakfast clubs in primary schools. The food bank receives ESF+ food support as well as accessing surplus food through FoodCloud.
- Mid-West Simon Community (MWS) is a registered charity, supporting individuals and families who are homeless, at risk of homelessness or

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experiencing housing difficulties. It operates food banks in Limerick and Clare and North Tipperary, in community-owned facilities. Accessing ESF+ food support, surplus food through FoodCloud and food directly from local suppliers, MWS operate its own warehouse which provides a central storage point from which they distribute food to the various food banks they operate. The organisation currently supports about 6,000 clients a year through their food banks.

- Kilkenny Leader Company is a local development company and is registered with the charity regulator. The Kilkenny Food Hub project, led by Kilkenny LEADER Partnership, is seeking to establish a food hub in Co Kilkenny. This project is currently running a pilot programme in partnership with a local community centre who are providing a premises for them to operate from. When fully operational, this hub in Kilkenny will have its own warehouse and transport infrastructure and aims to reduce food waste and address food insecurity within the areas of Kilkenny, Laois and Tipperary by collecting, storing, and redistributing surplus food to charities and organisations in those areas.

Hub and Host

Funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine and the Golden Jubilee Trust, FoodCloud is currently working with 3 regional partners to scope and design a Hub and Host partnership model, where the partners would act as a hub for their region. Regional hubs receive food from FoodCloud and are supported with food safety training, educational resources, and funding to cover the onward transportation of food to smaller community groups in the area. By providing the local logistical infrastructure and volunteer capacity to ensure the safe, efficient redistribution of this food out into their surrounding communities, these partner hub organisations are helping to get more food into less well serviced, rural or hard-to-reach areas. DFRN, Foodshare Kerry and Kilkenny LEADER Food hub are all taking part in this pilot project.

The emergence of these mid-level organisations presents an opportunity, as something of a missing piece in the system, to empower localisation of food redistribution around the country. Regional mid-level food redistribution organisations and the hubs they provide, can act as regional conduits to take in large amounts of surplus food, either from FoodCloud or directly from food producers in their area, and redistribute that on to the well-established network of charities and community groups operating around the country. Acting in a similar manner to FoodCloud, these regional mid-level redistribution organisations can take in that food and break it down into more manageable, locally available, quantities of surplus food. Being able to turn around larger quantities of produce allows FoodCloud in turn, to accept more food and manage its warehouse capacity more effectively. The more distribution points and partners the system has, the

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more food can pass through it quickly and efficiently, ensuring more of the food goes to feeding people.

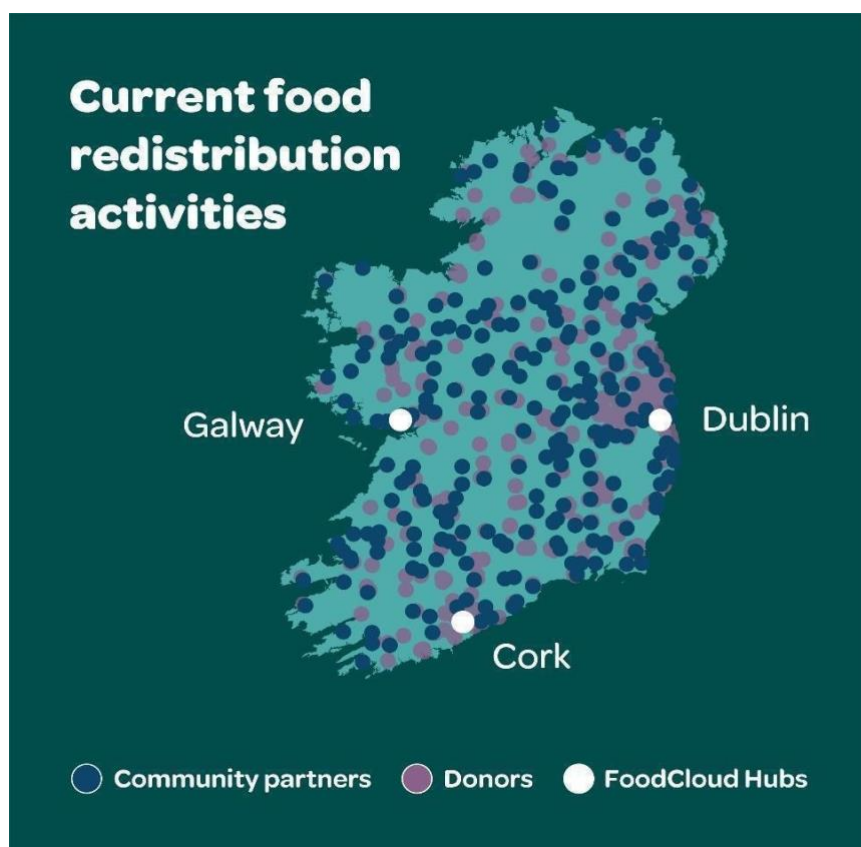


Figure 3: FoodCloud's network of donors, community partners and FoodCloud Hubs

4. Challenges and opportunities in the current infrastructural system - qualitative research

To gain a better understanding of how the current food redistribution infrastructure operates from a logistical and infrastructural perspective, a series of interviews and a follow-up survey were carried out with the large and mid-level operators identified above, from September to October 2025 (interviews were carried out with smaller community groups for Food Circle Report 3). The key themes and challenges that emerged from these discussions are highlighted and presented below. Direct quotes and direct feedback from SFR organisation stakeholders are included in italics below.

Throughout these discussions it became quite clear that despite differences in types or scale of operations between infrastructure actors, they were generally experiencing the same limiting factors and pointed towards a similar set of solutions to allow them to scale the work that they are doing and to be able to

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access more, and better quality surplus food, to help more people facing food poverty and insecurity.

Sustainability and funding

While all of the organisations involved in the interviews were incredibly passionate about the work they are doing, many struggle to make their operations sustainable. Funding is generally restricted by calendar year or tied to a specific project. Stakeholders spoke of difficulties in making their operations fit into either waste prevention or waste management and often redistribution falls between these two so it can be difficult to secure funding. Operating on skeletal staffing levels means focus can often be diverted away from the organisation's core aim by the continuous need to fundraise or secure future funding.

Trying to make money for something that is looked on that you should be giving it away for free. It is very hard to generate an income working with surplus food (Interviewee 1).

There can be a different set of people working on waste prevention and waste management and if we can't begin to work together and get recognition of prevention measures from the waste management side, then we can't make progress. We need more joined up thinking how funding resources can be linked up better (Interviewee 4).

I always feel like we are firefighting and that takes the focus away from how we could be building the business to be more sustainable (Interviewee 5).

This sense of frustration is particularly relevant in relation to staffing. All of the organizations involved in the research avail of and rely heavily on volunteers and community scheme employees to help run their operations. Likewise all feel that it is not appropriate to have volunteers solely responsible for managing a food redistribution project.

we're spending a lot of money on the building and we are getting corporate and philanthropic donations for that as it's a kind of a standalone ask. The same for the vans - we have had success in getting vehicles but looking for sponsorship on staff costs, it's just it doesn't fit the model and yet obviously it's critical to delivery (Interviewee 3).

Staffing

The sense of frustration around funding is particularly relevant in relation to staff. All of the organisations involved in the research avail of and rely heavily on volunteers and community scheme employees to help run their operations. There is a recognition that it can be challenging for volunteers in food banks to offer or

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provide wrap-around services and to have the skills to help people get out of poverty. While the provision of food is incredibly important for those receiving it, in the absence of a wider support offering it can be difficult for service users to move on from that situation.

All respondents felt that it is not appropriate to have volunteers solely responsible for managing a food redistribution project.

There is too much change with volunteers and you can't place expectations on them to deal with health and safety, food safety and governance issues - these tasks are too important to be shared among volunteers who could be here one week and not the next. You need full time staff to give these important elements the focus they need (Interviewee 4).

Those working in the food banks wouldn't have the skills, or even they would be a little bit reluctant to make suggestions (of help) to people, because a lot of the time these people are known to them. There's that relationship there, where they don't want to break the trust of the person that's coming in for the supplies (Interviewee 5).

We are very cautious not to deal with primary schools because we don't have the skill set nor the resource (Interviewee 6).

Operations and logistics

There are significant hurdles related to procuring, storing, and distributing donated and surplus food, including the need for proper facilities, vehicles, administration systems, and adequate staffing. Logistical concerns ranked highly in discussions with these SFR operators. Securing ongoing access to suitable warehousing space, with adequate room for the necessary storage equipment is a concern for most operators. Most organisations stated that if they could address some of these logistical and operational challenges they could definitely redistribute more food in their areas.

We are definitely turning down food as we do not have enough freezer space to store it. We have the demand to take more, but we can't manage it in a safe manner so we can't accept it (Interviewee 7).

We're often offered something that has a day or two remaining on shelf life which is fine, but our food banks only operate once or twice a month so if we get the stuff on the wrong date obviously it becomes unusable very quickly (Interviewee 3).

Logistics is always a major concern. We have to constantly match supply with demand, if we don't have the people to pass this food to, or the means to get it to them, there is no point in us rescuing it (Interviewee 7).

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It can be less challenging to get the vans as people are interested in donating to specific things like that but the real challenge is keeping them on the road - fuel, insurance, maintenance (Interviewee 5).

Our biggest obstacle to doing more at the moment is another driver and another van. I know I could capture more if I had the resources to go and get it (Interviewee 1).

Food sourcing and relationships with food donors

Accessing and securing adequate and varied types of foods is an ongoing task for those working in SFR. We know that surplus food exists in the food supply chain but accessing it, for organisations whose resources are already stretched, can be a challenge. Having more resources and/or more time to dedicate to relationships with food donors is essential, as is having a strong local relationship for increased buy-in from businesses.

The ease of operations that we offer to supermarkets is very reassuring to them. Our driver has a great relationship with the staff in the shops which is really important (Interviewee 1).

The challenge can be time management from our side, relationships with local food donors take time to build and maintain and to ensure that they don't go stale (Interviewee 1).

It can be challenging to provide a balanced offering to the people we support based on the levels of surplus food we have access to. We have to be try to divide it out among families and that can be a real challenge (Interviewee 6).

Greater levels of coordination and leadership

It is evident from the stakeholder interviews conducted for both Food Circle Report 4 and 5, that there is strong support for more centralised help and support that could take some of the operational, infrastructural and logistical burden off individual community groups allowing them to concentrate on the delivery of their core services in their local community.

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 (Report 3 Interviewee 21).

If I was to pick one thing to get support with I would probably say a more local hub (Report 3 Interviewee 17).

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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 (Report 3 Interviewee 8).

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 (Report 3 Interviewee 7).

Something more streamlined for farmers to be able to donate would be amazing (Report 3 Interviewee 16).

Key takeaways from stakeholder engagement

The interviews conducted with large and mid-level redistribution actors asked them about the challenges they face and the areas where they would like to see more support. While there are challenges, everyone working in this area is incredibly passionate about the work that they are doing and are very confident that if they had more resources they could do more to help and support more people in their communities.

The key themes that emerged are ones that can be addressed – logistics and operations, funding and staffing, increased coordination to support the development of sustainable enterprises. The fact that many organisations highlighted such similar issues, presents a great opportunity for solutions to be put in place to address these and move beyond these challenges, to scale up their operations and to deliver more surplus food to support the communities in which they operate.

Greater levels of coordination and leadership

It is evident from the stakeholder interviews conducted for both Food Circle Report 3 and this report, that there is strong support for more centralised help and support that could take some of the operational, infrastructural and logistical burden off individual community groups allowing them to concentrate on the delivery of their core services in their local community.

I think more could be done to address food insecurity than is being done so if we worked together we could raise the profile of everyone's efforts (Interviewee 1).

Having the umbrella of support, I feel, and just personal opinion here, gives us great credibility... (Interviewee 2).

If you operate in a silo there is no social capital being built. There are so many of us doing such great work, but together I feel we could achieve even more. My vision would be to have our own warehouse with office and storage - a really vibrant hub for food is what I would love (Interviewee 1).

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Surplus redistribution isn't recognised enough yet as an important climate action. We are trying to put a value on what we do here but more could be done on this (Interviewee 7).

We do need some leadership on this. You know we do need some points of contact to help people find out where all of this stuff is happening and how they can tap into it (Interviewee 5).

Feedback from smaller community groups in Food Circle Report 3 showed strong interest in developing regional food hubs to access shared infrastructure, support and resources.

5. Opportunities and recommendations to support SFR in Ireland

As outlined above, the food redistribution infrastructure in Ireland operates at three different but interconnected levels. Each level needs the other to be able to operate and ensure that Ireland can meet its food waste reduction targets and achieve a more circular food system, while also supporting those experiencing food poverty and insecurity. The implementation of the donation provisions in the revised WFD, combined with a strong national agri-food recovery programme, and the expansion of technology platforms such as Foodiverse into hard to access areas of surplus food can result in significant increases in the amount of food coming into the redistribution infrastructure. The supports needed at each level of the infrastructure to maximise the use of this food across Ireland are outlined below (see Figure 4).

Empowering localisation

The landscape of food redistribution



Figure 4: Coordinated infrastructure and supportive policy around food redistribution

Supporting the umbrella – the national operation infrastructure

The cost to run FoodCloud's operations in Ireland in 2025 is currently €4.8m. Sustainable income (retailers pay a fee for the service provided, revenues from a corporate volunteer programme, a community membership model, revenue from FoodCloud Kitchen and from administration and delivery of ESF+) covers 35% of the costs. The remainder of the costs are covered via fundraising through Government grants (including the Community Services Programme, Rural Innovation and Development Fund, and others), corporate partnerships and trusts and foundations. The organisation continues to develop income streams to meet running costs, however FoodCloud will need to invest in scaling its infrastructure in order to meet its food rescue target of 16,000 tonnes annually by 2030.

To scale its operations, FoodCloud is working to establish a new headquarters, which would operate as a centre of excellence illustrating what can be achieved if all of the mechanisms to unlock surplus food are fully engaged. It will serve as a national living lab for circular food systems, supporting innovation, policy development, and cross-sector collaboration with retailers, producers, community organisations, local and national government. The headquarters will incorporate:

- A larger warehouse facility with enhanced freezer and cold storage to capture more of the foods that are currently not being rescued.

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- A social supermarket to provide food directly to the community.
- A Community Cafe & Restaurant (with associated Food Truck) to transform surplus food into nutritious meals for the community.
- A full production kitchen to provide community meals, FoodCloud product ranges, ethical corporate catering.
- FoodCloud offices - potentially with a small conference/event space for other circular economy organisations.
- Training and education centre for community organisations, schools, corporates and individuals.
- Increased volunteer and community employment opportunities.
- Demonstration of food waste management (e.g. composting, micro scale digesters).

FoodCloud has completed designs for a preferred site for this headquarters and is currently assessing a range of financing options. These include a blended approach of government capital grant support, philanthropy, and debt financing, potentially through a social impact bond or other green/social lending mechanisms. Early discussions with financial institutions confirm that a social bond structure is feasible and would be more attractive with a government commitment of support.

Supporting regional hubs of redistribution

The emergence of redistribution-focused mid-level organisations such as those highlighted above, shows what can be done by regional mid-level actors in the redistribution infrastructure. A key recommendation of this report is to support not only the already emerging organisations but to establish and create a number of additional regional hubs to scale up distribution in areas that are currently underserved. Similar to the FoodCloud headquarters model, these regional food hubs would offer an array of services. As discussed in Report 3, these regional hubs would also provide many of the social supports required to help individuals and families access the services they need to help them move beyond the need for food banks. Regional food hubs would comprise:

- Food redistribution hub to coordinate delivery to other local community groups.
- Centralised freezer and fridge storage.
- Transportation services for food delivery.
- A social supermarket.
- A community café, providing some income.
- A community kitchen providing community meals, including school meals, using surplus food.
- Provision of wraparound services (for example budgeting advice, counselling services, childcare, community facilities).
- Co-ordinated food support with food education and cookery skills.

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Operating as a network of regional hubs would allow for sharing of knowledge and resources, streamlining of processes, efficiencies in food distribution and combined funding potential. The introduction of food waste data reporting that captures the level of edible surplus food would result in a significant increase in the level, accuracy and compatibility of surplus food data.

The benefits of creating regional food hubs

Regional food hubs would further promote the circular economy model for food and become advocates for reducing food waste across the country. As a local focal point they would raise awareness, promote and attract more surplus from food producers and manufacturers in the area, thereby helping to achieve the WFD targets. Operating in partnership with FoodCloud, regional food hubs can offer food businesses peace of mind that all governance and health and safety requirements are in place.

The creation and support of regional food hubs can address many of the logistical challenges that smaller organisations face. Providing regionalised ambient and cold storage, along with regionalised transport services for the redistribution of that food, could significantly reduce the burden on the local community groups. Receiving larger quantities of food from FoodCloud, regional food hubs would be able to provide a greater variety and choice of food to the organisations they support, enabling them to select foodstuffs that better align with their operational timetable and ensure that surplus food can be used in a more efficient way.

Regional food hubs can include more than surplus food redistribution. The inclusion of a community cafe and community kitchen facilities could allow for the cooking of regionalised community meals such as meals on wheels or provision of school meals, using more surplus food ingredients. This can also provide a valuable teaching facility, training people on how to cook using surplus ingredients. Having a regionalised hub can allow for the inclusion of food nutrition and local food coordinator staff that could provide important wrap-around social services (including cooking, budgeting and other supports) enabling people to move beyond food insecurity.

Based on stakeholders' input it is estimated that an upfront cost of €100,000 would be required to establish a regional hub, with ongoing running costs of approximately €150,000 per annum.

Creating a network of regional food hubs partnering with FoodCloud, would provide administration support and governance structures and accountability, with each using coordinated procedures and standards. It could also facilitate the capture of data on food waste and surplus food that has been redistributed, feeding back into more accurate reporting on food waste levels nationally. It would also allow for greater network building enabling regional food hubs to share best

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practices and support each other in reducing food waste and supporting those experiencing food insecurity. FoodCloud has identified a number of areas where a regional hub could be very beneficial to support the current infrastructural set up. Figure 4 illustrates existing FoodCloud Hubs and pilot and potential regional food hubs. Five of the proposed locations have varying levels of existing infrastructure which need support for sustainability and scale (Donegal, Kilkenny, Limerick, Waterford and Kerry). Three of the proposed locations are identified as areas, highly rural and isolated, with no shared infrastructure in place (Wexford, Mayo and Cavan).



Figure 4: existing FoodCloud Hubs and pilot and potential regional food hubs

Local level support

The research conducted for this report and Food Circle Report 3 evidences how community groups are stretched in terms of resources and volunteers and are struggling to meet growing demand for their services. Being able to access sufficient funding, and balancing providing essential services with spending time on fundraising is an ongoing struggle. To help Ireland achieve the WFD food waste reduction targets by increasing food donations, last-mile providers will need greater support.

A dedicated fund to cover running costs such as staffing, utility bills, insurance, transport and so on, designed to allow flexibility in how funds can be used, would

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enable different size organisations to use the funding in the way that is most suited to their needs.

A €350,000 dedicated fund, administered through FoodCloud, local authorities, Pobal, or otherwise, could allow 10% of the charities currently working with FoodCloud to access €5,000 annually. This kind of funding could be very impactful for smaller charities and community groups, who want to do more with surplus food (for example, storage, developing a community pantry/social supermarket, fitting out a kitchen area, or investing in preservation technologies or transport costs). Such a measure could be launched alongside the transposition of the revised WFD to highlight the role that local community groups would have in achieving the food waste reduction targets, and in ensuring the success of the donation programme.

6. Conclusion

This research shows that Ireland has a robust food redistribution infrastructure that is changing and innovating all the time. As Ireland's understanding of how to access and unlock different sources of surplus food grows, an increasing volume and diversity of surplus food can be saved from waste and directed to people who can use it. The introduction of technology such as Foodiverse has been impactful in addressing some of the logistical challenges of connecting those with surplus and those who can use it, as has been seen in both the Growers' project and recent trials with food manufacturers. However, these innovations can only occur with investment and support at all levels of the infrastructure. As FoodCloud continues to unlock valuable surplus from the supply chain, there must be infrastructure in place to ensure that product can get to where it is needed.

This report presents three key recommendations that can enable greater localisation of the redistribution process, moving more food from the large-scale level to mid-level operators that operate from a regional hub. These mid-level operators can offer a wide range of services, providing people locally with both a stronger food offering and a regional support structure to help people move beyond food insecurity and poverty.

A. Support national surplus food redistribution excellence and infrastructure

A.1

Support the establishment of a headquarters for FoodCloud to enable scale and establish Ireland as a centre of excellence for surplus food redistribution and circular food systems, supporting innovation, policy development, and cross-sector collaboration.

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B. Support for mid-level redistribution organisations – regional hubs

B.1

Support the creation of a network of regional food hubs that would provide a range of services from food redistribution, to wraparound social service, social supermarket, café and community kitchen.

C. Support for local level community groups - meeting ongoing running costs

C.1

Creation of a dedicated annual fund (€350,000) providing flexibility for small community groups to support infrastructural upgrades and/or ongoing running costs

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