

Good Food Connections

Place-based grantmaking linking access to food with wider support



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Community Food Hubs

In early 2025, Devon Community Foundation, in partnership with Devon County Council's public health and communities teams, made two-year grants to five (latterly six) community food hubs. The programme responded to the findings of several pieces of quantitative and qualitative research, developed collectively with local stakeholders, that suggested a rapidly changing picture of household food insecurity locally. Far from being an acute situation, food insecurity was observed to be becoming a chronic problem for many households, faced with a rising cost of living. New responses were needed that minimised stigma and prioritised choice and quality, providing opportunities to link residents with a wider range of support, including access to public health offers.

We were also interested in testing the generic value of a model of grantmaking that supported a way of doing something (place-based, partnership-focused) rather than precise activities. Government support for hardship provision through the Household Support Fund was considered excessively restrictive, often resulting in it costing organisations money to distribute, so our community food hubs work was a modest counterbalance to this.

Through this innovative grantmaking, we want to understand the range of different models that emerge from different locations and organisational set-ups. We are tracking how they respond to changes in the local food ecosystem, and how place-based hubs can link relevant public and voluntary sector support. We will use this insight to 'speak to the system', drawing from granular examples and advocating for systemwide change in pursuit of fair access to healthy food for everyone, alongside a more integrated, neighbourhood-based approach to supporting health and wellbeing.

This report is a summary of what we are learning after the first year of the programme.

Key Learning

- A hub model can unlock a wide range of **inter-connection between local services and activities**, but it does not happen instantly or automatically.
- We have learned to value diverse **forms of engagement with different cohorts**.
- The most successful work is predicated on a principle of **high-quality relationships and high-quality food**, building the conditions for engaging effectively with service users and understanding what other support could be useful, while paying attention to the nutritional and environmental aspects of eating well.
- **Issues with food supply**, and especially the availability of food surplus threaten organisations' business models and need solving at a systems level.
- **Organisational health** is critical to building long-term community-based solutions to food access challenges.

The grantholders

Grantholder	Community
Project Food	Axminster
LoveFood CIC	St Thomas, Exeter
Involve/QE School	Crediton
Wellmoor/Knead to Connect	Moretonhampstead
Stepping Stones CIC	Bridgetown, Totnes

Better Places, running social supermarkets in Bovey Tracey, Buckfastleigh and Ashburton, joined the programme as a grantholder at the end of the first year.

Co-location and cross-connection

One hypothesis for this work was that a 'hub' model could support cross-connection with other related activities and support. We have seen that this is the case.

Grantholders have built connections with or cross-referred to:

- Wider financial/hardship support offered by the grantholder (including from DCC's Household Support Fund)
- Other forms of public health support, including staff training, Healthy Start, drug and alcohol services, etc.
- Other forms of local food support, including Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programmes
- Schools, both as 'referrers' and as partners in targeted activity
- Advice services
- Social prescribers
- GPs and health centres
- Homelessness services
- Libraries
- Digital support
- Other voluntary sector organisations, both smaller place-based ones, and larger bodies such as Learn Devon and Active Devon

There is a full spectrum of connection, from passive signposting through to close partnerships, and everything in between. Unsurprisingly, we have seen how this cross-connection manifests differently in different contexts. Importantly, far from being an automatic benefit of a hub model, it requires significant and ongoing effort.

Effective links between food provision and other support require opportunities to engage with service users, build relationships, and understand what other support could be useful. This necessitates regular available points of connection, building on ad hoc events. All the grantholders are working in this space, either through planning structured courses, establishing regular (mostly weekly) drop-in slots that become known locally, or coming regularly into others' spaces. However, we have seen that providing the

opportunity for repeat engagement is only part of what is needed: strong retention can require careful, targeted recruitment and close attention to creating an environment in which people feel comfortable, respected and heard.

We also anticipated that an ongoing offer of connection with the public health team would be an advantage in forming links with other offers. This has proved to be the case, although it has taken time to gain momentum. An initial open invitation to collaborate was accompanied by some examples of potential training and services that might be beneficial to each hub's particular audience. This was followed up with in-person visits. Hubs have been able to engage with the offer in different ways and at different times, and it has been valuable to have time for familiarity and relationships to build. Once a successful engagement had happened, it was then much easier to decide on others, although capacity has sometimes limited ambition. Having a link public health officer in priority places will support this way of working.

Effective cross-connection is not just an inevitable result of structural choices. It is also reliant on investment in inter-personal value and professional relationships. Developing and maintaining these is an ongoing process, not achieved in a single hit then moved on from.

Nourishing Dartmoor is a partnership between Wellmoor and Knead to Connect, based in Moretonhampstead. We have come together to develop a range of new food-based initiatives in the town.

Knead to Connect has run the weekly *Moretonhampstead Food Club* in the Parish Hall since 2024 and we have worked to increase member numbers. We supported the refurbishment of the hall which now has a full commercial kitchen and improved storage facilities. Participation at the food club is increasing, with more families attending. We introduced weekly recipe cards and tasters to encourage members to cook from scratch using Food Hub ingredients, and continued to encourage members to stay and connect over coffee in our social space. This offer has evolved organically based on members' interests and we plan more hands-on cooking sessions. Most food comes from Fareshare Southwest and there remains a balance to strike between offering processed food that is easy to prepare and promoting healthier, raw ingredients. Recipe cards have appealed mainly to those already confident in cooking, while take-away "health portions" have proved a useful middle ground. There is growing interest from members in low-cost prepared meals.

We have built a productive relationship with *Public Health Devon*, aligning with wider healthy lifestyle initiatives, including Healthy Start vouchers. We have also introduced a range of complementary initiatives, including a tech drop-off, Food Fuel and More vouchers, cancer awareness sessions, and digital support. This has been supported by holiday food activities and the provision of essentials such as nappies, funded by a local benefactor.



We initially piloted a Breakfast Club at *Moretonhampstead Primary School*, involving children in preparing healthy options such as porridge, smoothies, fresh fruit, and yoghurt pots. Sessions also built awareness of food waste, hygiene, and experimenting with flavours. However, longer-term viability was limited by staff capacity. In response, Knead to Connect developed a school-wide *Dartmoor Food Curriculum*, taking a community-focused and sustainable approach to delivering Design & Technology aims. The curriculum has been well received by staff and will be trialled in the coming year.

Wellmoor has run the *Community Allotment* in partnership with the local Health Centre for four years as a green prescribing site. To

extend access for families, an adjacent plot has been taken on as a dedicated family and learning space. The site has been cleared by volunteers, and a small group of families are now attending weekly after-school sessions, beginning to manage their own growing plots. The allotment is working with the school on shared growing activities, as part of the Dartmoor Food Curriculum. A home education group is also using the space weekly.

Range of provision and engagement with a range of cohorts

The grantholders have been exploring engagement with a wide range of cohorts, from bringing school children and their families onto a community allotment, to inviting young people with very complex lives to learn to cook. The results have been very encouraging, with strong retention rates and some very creative ideas.

Grantholders have also trialled a range of open access and more targeted support, exploring the relationship between the two. As a result, we are building a better sense of what each of these can achieve. Open access can feel less stigmatising, especially if it is accompanied by a waste reduction message, or in a community café or holiday activity context – food is a very effective ‘hook’ in this respect. But it can be less effective than we would like in reaching those we would most like to engage with. Counter-intuitively, several organisations have found that a focus on a specific cohort (for example, men, or those living with diabetes), can have an inclusive effect, as people who may be less inclined simply to ‘drop in’ respond well to being specifically invited.

Based in Axminster hospital, **Project Food's Hub** provides a welcoming space where people can access food, cook, eat together and feel less alone. Activities include:

Open Food Hubs offering access to affordable food, shared cooking and meals, and informal nutrition learning

Man with a Pan, a small, supportive cooking course focused on confidence, skills and healthier eating for men and boys

Cooking with Diabetes, a condition-specific programme combining practical cooking with tailored nutrition education

Food surplus redistribution, providing high-quality local produce (we do not accept donations of junk food) while reducing food waste



During 2025-26, the Food Hub recorded 426 attendances, representing around 40 individuals who attended regularly to cook together and stay for lunch. We provided at least 800 meals, either eaten in person or collected. We also redistributed significant quantities of fresh food. More than 250kg of vegetables and 159kg of fruit were

received directly from local farms and supermarkets, alongside eggs, rice, salad items and meat.

We reach residents largely from in and around Axminster, Seaton and Honiton facing multiple and overlapping disadvantages, including those experiencing: low income; diet-related illness, especially obesity and Type 2 diabetes; mental health challenges; physical disability and SEND; homelessness; and caring responsibilities. There was also significant engagement with participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Food proves a powerful non-stigmatising entry point. Residents are often drawn in through a drop-in activity, allowing us to engage with those who avoid more formal health and education settings. More structured courses were then offered for people with specific confidence or health needs. New activities have developed responsively, most notably the diabetes-specific provision following diagnoses among Food Hub attendees.

Building on our growing connections with other organisations, and through training for staff and volunteers in Making Every Contact Count from the public health team, we are able to connect residents with other relevant support. Strong retention, peer support and progression between services demonstrate the value of this integrated model.

Across all activities, participants gained confidence in cooking from scratch, using affordable ingredients (especially fruit and vegetables) and reducing reliance on takeaways and ultra-processed foods. Participants have developed experience in meal planning, reducing waste, and understanding the links between food, physical health and mental wellbeing. The sessions also had positive social outcomes: several participants described sessions as a highlight of their week. Our main limitation is capacity: working in this way is time-consuming and therefore expensive. Fundraising remains an ongoing challenge.

Emphasis on quality

Our grantholders are clear – the people they work with deserve food and support of the highest quality. This starts with the time taken to establish meaningful relationships, getting to know people as people. Eating together is a very important part of this for many community food hubs: it's a fun, shared experience, which also models positive action people can take to support good physical and mental health, as well as effective use of food resources. In this context, food provision is a very long way from a transactional mechanism. It is more closely linked to strong traditions of hospitality, which connect strangers, and signal a culture of care, respect and belonging – very important in place-based work.

Co-location of food provision alongside other forms of support, such as household budgeting is clearly beneficial for service users, and is a central part of the rationale for this programme. However, in light of this link between food and empathetic relationships, grantholders have noted that a clear distinction between these respective roles can be helpful in maintaining strong rapport with individuals. There is more to explore here.

An emphasis on quality extends to the food itself – its provenance, its production, its nutritional value. Grantholders know that these things are equally important to their clients, and that financial barriers ought not be an obstacle to decent food. They also appreciate the importance of choice for those using any form of food provision. Providing choice means accommodating tastes and preference, and shifts the emphasis from 'teaching' people what healthy eating entails to encouraging them to explore for themselves.

We have seen how these values work to reduce stigma and build enduring relationships which can facilitate a wide range of benefits for residents.

Stepping Stones is a multifaceted community hub addressing food insecurity as well as providing a space for people of all ages to meet, socialise and enjoy good, healthy, freshly cooked food. We run the Totnes Foodbank, TQ9 Food Club (a community supermarket where for £3.50 per week families can choose up to ten items) and the pay-what-you-can Warm Hearts Café, all based at St Johns Church in Bridgetown, Totnes. We cook vegetarian and vegan meals from scratch in our on-site kitchen, which

are either served in the cafe or available as ready meals. We also provide a good quality secondhand clothes rail and teach craft activities. There is a definite overlap in the way our clients use our services; a client may come to the foodbank, eat at the cafe and then join in with the crafting.



In 2024 our services were used nearly 10,000 times. In 2025 this number increased to over 12,500 times, an increase of 27%. Most people are referred by Citizens Advice or from local schools (where we do outreach work), GP surgeries and social services. We also signpost clients to other relevant organisations locally.

While we receive some food donations, we have to buy the vast majority of the products we distribute which costs us in the order of £500 per week. Our Community Food Hub funding has enabled us to launch the Essential Project, which aims to significantly improve the quality of our ambient food offer by replacing ultra-processed options with organic or minimally processed food. The grant has given us the necessary cashflow to

team up with Essential Trading, an ethical food wholesaler, and make cost-effective bulk purchases. We are fortunate in having suitable storage facilities for these large orders. Although bagging up bulk orders for individual household use is time-consuming for our volunteers, this means that we can offer much higher quality food for around the same cost as before.

The response from clients to the high quality, healthy choices now available has been hugely positive. We still receive donations of ultra processed food, which we make available as an additional option, not a substitute for more nutritional choices.

We are considering wider partnerships, to increase access to sources of income, and enable more bulk purchase options. While bulk-buying is extremely cost effective, ordering goods and managing the delivery is time consuming. We are therefore seeking technical support to establish a digital stocktaking system that enables us to manage this process better.

Supply of food

Suitable affordable food supply is an ongoing and worsening issue. Sourcing surplus food from supermarkets, either directly or via intermediaries such as Fareshare no longer provides a reliable supply, either in terms of quantity or nutritional quality. In some areas of the county, deliveries from intermediaries are not available, or slots are taken by those from other areas. Surplus is anyway by its nature unpredictable, and leans towards processed (or ultra-processed) and ambient foods rather than fresh provision.

Scarcity leads to unprecedented competition between providers, including in areas where organisations focusing on different forms of provision or different cohorts have historically cooperated very effectively. There is also concern that the distribution of this surplus is lengthening supply chains far beyond what is sensible or environmentally responsible, especially in a food-producing region.

The result of this is that providers are increasingly needing to supplement any surplus with food purchased at closer to market rates. Grantholders have explored a range of approaches to this. One had a close relationship with a local farmer, who was willing to 'grow to order' for them, though this has not endured. Another has worked to establish a relationship with a wholesaler for bulk purchases. Nevertheless, business models are needing to be substantially realigned. Addressing chronic household food insecurity with surplus food no longer works. There is an urgent need to seek systems-level solutions to this issue, building mechanisms that allow equitable access to healthy local food for everyone.

LoveFood CIC's St Thomas Community Food Hub has a shop premises in a busy city location. We are keen to demonstrate a more sustainable model for access to affordable healthy food. Among the activities we offer are a community fridge, a weekly pay-what-you-can lunch club, surplus soup-making (to stock the community fridge), cooking sessions of all kinds (including for children and families), and other educational activities. The space has also been used for sessions for home-educated teenagers, and baby



weaning. The Hub regularly hosts events for a wide range of other local organisations, including some commercial cooking classes, which helps diversify income.

The Hub provides a valuable service to its local community, with around 100 regular users. Survey results show that fridge users are more ethnically diverse than Exeter's overall population, and some are homeless. Fridge users tend to be very local, and may be attending on behalf of friends or family members who aren't available during opening hours. People tell us that the fridge helps them to eat more fruit and vegetables (the Hub only

provides vegan food), and other foods that they would not be able to afford otherwise.

Many regular lunch club attendees also attend other local free meal provision, and many do not pay anything, though there are also several participants who are not on a low income, and the local vicar and councillors have also attended as a way of getting to know people. Lots of our lunch club attendees have become friends and meet up at

other times. It has been harder to recruit people to less regular classes and activities, and we know we might be missing some of those who could really benefit, such as those suffering from anxiety.

We work in partnership with a wide range of local organisations including social prescribers, health bodies and voluntary groups. These partnership events help us reach new people. We have connected with Public Health with regard to promoting Healthy Start and employment programmes.

One of our biggest challenges is food supply. We pay for nearly all our surplus food, as it is hard to get free surplus vegan food. We have never collected from supermarkets directly, as it is hard to get collection slots. We normally get some donated fresh 'extras' from our suppliers, and in summer there is more home-grown produce from allotment holders, plus lots of apples for our juicing project in the autumn. Even though we are paying for most of our surplus food, we still don't get a choice, and so we occasionally get items we can't use easily.

"Lunch Club is a tremendous service to the community. It provides a warm social space, an ethical, nourishing and delicious meal, and an opportunity to see friends and make new ones."

'The community fridge is very helpful, welcoming and respectful. It provides essential support, especially for people working hard but still struggling with rising living costs.'

Organisational considerations: Capacity and mission creep

'what we need to do is bigger than we have time for'

We understood from our previous research that the VCSE sector has shown exceptional agility and creativity in responding to the changing nature of food insecurity in Devon. But we also recognised that this responsiveness has sometimes taken its toll on those organisations. The necessity to put all efforts into frontline delivery, to meet growing demand and ambition, has meant in some cases that organisational structures have not developed at the same rate. The result can be that organisations are 'underpowered' in terms of administrative and strategic capacity. This grant programme was in part a response to this problem, giving organisations the freedom to invest in core organisational assets rather than dictating that money was spent only on service provision. The grantmaking is, unusually, supported by a development pot that can support either collective or individual requests for strategic support, training, or advice that can strengthen an organisation's capacity and resilience.

This has been warmly welcomed in principle, but it has proved more difficult to determine how the funding should be used. One grantholder requested some bespoke facilitation support for a series of strategic conversations to enable the organisation to reflect on past practice and future aims, and to design an organisational development

plan to support this. We have also partnered with a public health research project based at the University of Exeter, which is providing specialist guidance on evaluation and learning for grantholders. However, ongoing operational pressures (particularly in respect of uncertain funding streams) do in some contexts continue to eclipse wider organisational thinking. While the enthusiasm for capacity building is high, we need to recognise that developing a more sustainable organisational base is simply not a realistic aim for many, if not most, small organisations operating in the current climate.

So challenges remain. Demand remains high, and ambitions to link further with public health or other agencies are often limited by team capacity. The ongoing pressure for further fundraising is relentless. The diversity of physical set-ups among the grantholders has shown that, for example, the basis on which an organisation inhabits its premises can influence the possibilities open to an organisation – do you have the full run of a building/facility, or do you need to rent additional space to add activities? How volunteers are used is also a big consideration. Grantholders tell us they are constantly surprised by the ways in which volunteers can step up, if properly supported. In Moretonhampstead, for example, food club volunteers are now more confident in chatting to club users, so there is more potential to use this asset for wider support.

Some grantholders have become aware that, in their enthusiasm to respond to all needs, they may have departed somewhat from their original mission. There are so many aspects to working with food in communities that this is not uncommon in this area. The development resource provides an opportunity to reflect on these shifts, and make strategic decisions about future directions of travel.

The Crediton Community Cookery Hub is a new initiative, established to provide accessible, community-based cooking sessions that build skills, improve confidence, and strengthen community connections. Delivered in partnership with Queen Elizabeth's School, and with invaluable support from the local Lions Club, we make use of school food technology classrooms and experienced teaching staff.

This academic year the programme delivered structured four-week cookery courses to a series of carefully targeted groups. The first of these were secondary-aged children engaging with Crediton youth club, and a cohort selected by QE School itself. These were followed by adult cohorts, identified through partnership with Crediton foodbank and a local support organisation for young adults in complex circumstances. Finally, the project linked with the two local primary schools, asking them to invite year five and six pupils to participate, along with their siblings and parents. The sessions created a supportive and inclusive environment for learning and engagement. Participants prepared a range of dishes including chicken curry, lasagne, pizza, and cottage pie, all of which are designed to be easily replicated at home. They were prepared in quantities designed to feed a family, and were taken home to eat at the end of each session.



Feedback on the cooking sessions has been very positive, and attendance was high. A range of wider benefits has also been observed. The secondary-aged children had the opportunity to experience being in school in a less formal way, and engaging with it more positively. The adult cohorts were keen to develop skills that might help them, in their different ways, lead more independent lives. For the primary-aged children, this was a precious chance to do something fun with their parent, but was also a great way to introduce an aspect of secondary

school, as a support for transition. One set of primary cooking was even moved to the school site closest to the primary school, to encourage participation, and to show pupils the site they will experience first as secondary students.

What has also been wonderful for us to see is the way that the food hub work has begun to reconnect the school with its local community, after a period of dislocation.

Learn More

For further information about the Community Food Hubs programme, please contact: publichealth-mailbox@devon.gov.uk

Find out more about collaborative grantmaking with Devon Community Foundation by emailing: grants@devoncf.com

If you are interested in the wider context of research on household food insecurity in Devon, and local responses to it, you can read more here: [Food Insecurity - Devon Community Foundation](#) or email Nicola Frost: nfrost@devoncf.com.