



Evaluation of local council funding for food aid organisations since the cost-of-living crisis in the UK

TUKFS Conference
23 March 2026

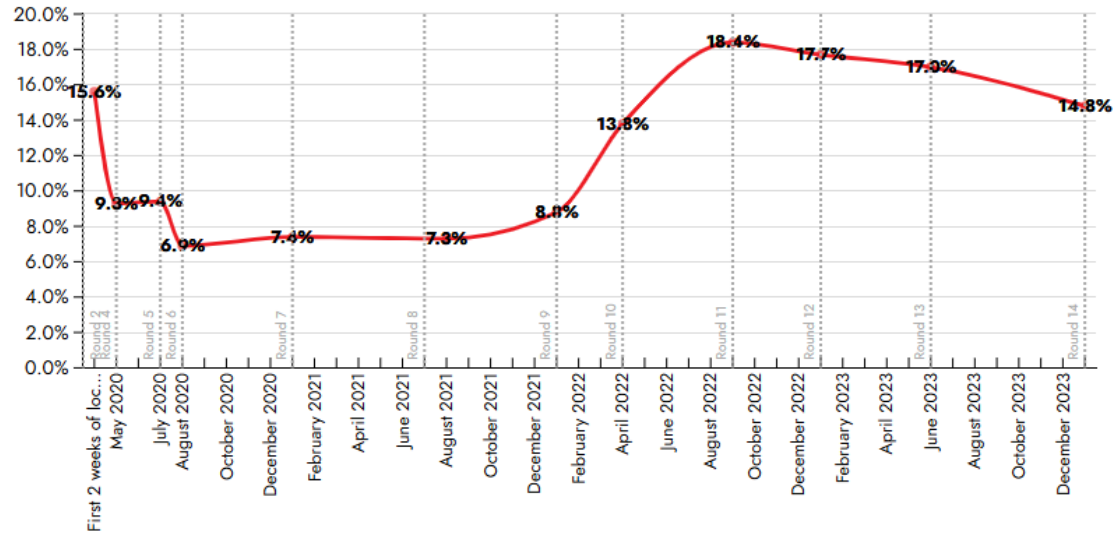
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<https://www.mandala-consortium.org/>

Background

Percentage of households experiencing food insecurity*:



■ Moderate or severe food insecurity

* 1-month recall period



Cost of living: Food banks at 'breaking point' as 1.3 million emergency parcels given out in just six months

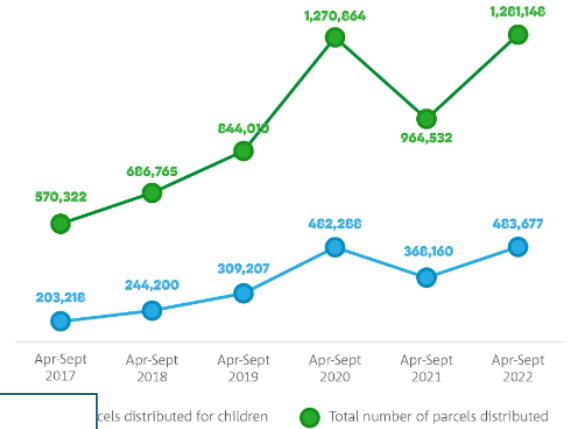
The Trussell Trust issues a stark warning as new research shows record-breaking levels of need, with 320,000 being forced to turn to food banks for the first time in the last six months.

Megan Baynes
Cost of living reporter @megobaynes

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NUMBER OF EMERGENCY FOOD PARCELS DISTRIBUTED BY FOOD BANKS IN THE TRUSSELL TRUST NETWORK



'We're terrified at what we're seeing': food banks tell of soaring demand

Thousands more households, many with two working parents, are turning to the UK's food banks as the cost of living crisis deepens



HELP KEEP FOOD BANKS GOING THIS WINTER

EMERGENCY FUND APPEAL

Ⓜ A volunteer at Earlsfield food bank, south London, where the numbers of beneficiaries has 'gone crazy' in the past two months. Photograph: Charlotte White/PA

Birmingham City Council's Grants for Food Aid Projects: 2022-2024

Grant scheme	Intended target/purchase	Number and type of organisations funded
Emergency food aid fund (EFAF) Supplementary Emergency Food Aid Fund (SEFAF)	<p>£800 per month for 6 months for projects to purchase food/consumables for distribution to clients/recipients of food aid</p> <p>Introduced due to demand for EFAF – provided with £400 per month for 3 months.</p>	<p>100 organisations funded</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 73 food banks • 26 food club/pantry/social supermarket • 36 ran community cafes • 12 meal distribution on the street • 35 provided wraparound support
Affordable food infrastructure fund (AFIF)	<p>Grants up to £3,000 for infrastructure/ equipment to increase the capacity of Birmingham's food projects for food provision, ideally for providing more food that is nutritious, culturally appropriate, and safe (and hot where appropriate) to more people, in ways that enable dignity, choice, and/or socialisation.</p>	<p>67 projects (of who 41 also received EFAF or SEFAF)</p> <p>(note: these figures not mutually exclusive)</p>
Winter Food Aid Fund <div data-bbox="84 1115 468 1339" style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 15px; background-color: #0056b3; color: white; padding: 10px; display: inline-block;"> <p>Funded from UK Government's Household Support Fund</p> </div>	<p>£5000 to help projects providing food to Birmingham residents (e.g., foodbanks, food clubs, food pantries, social supermarkets and community cafés).</p> <p>Provided as lump sum of £5,000 in November 2023.</p> <p>Specified use for purchase of food and other consumables for organisations to give out to individuals.</p> <p>Had to be spent by 31 March 2024.</p>	<p>169 organisations funded (of whom 31 did not receive funding last year)</p>



Project aims

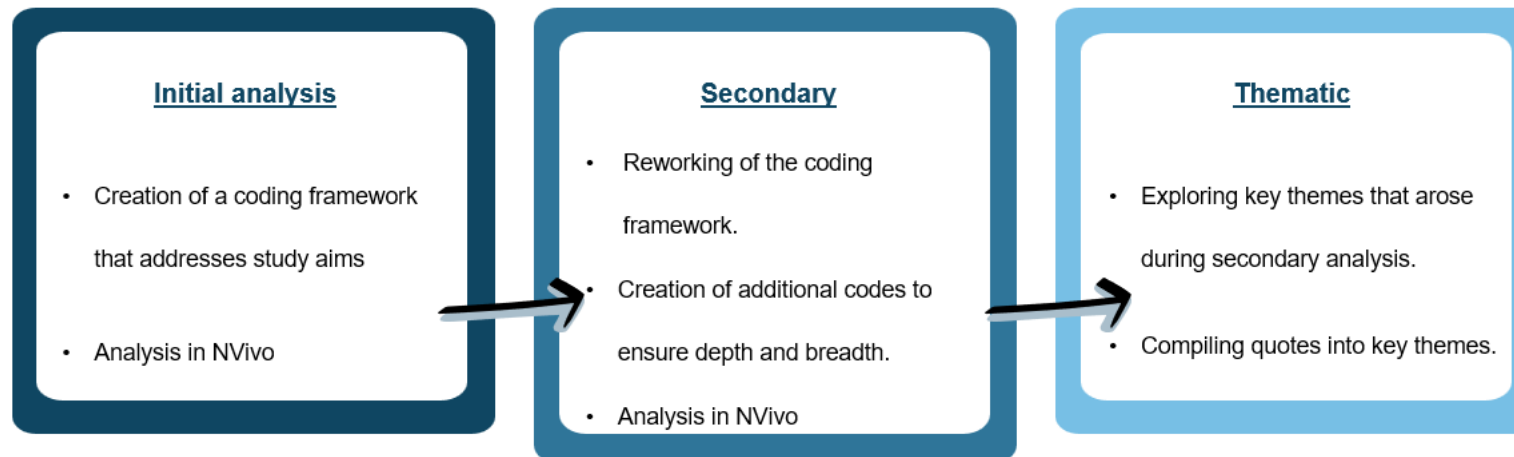
- Evaluate elements of Birmingham City Council's support for the community food aid sector over the cost-of-living crisis;
- Identify methods to enhance intelligence on food insecurity and dietary inequalities and the operations, needs and constraints of the community food sector.

Research questions, methods

Qualitative approach

1. How did organisations use the funding from BCC?
2. What were perceived outcomes of funding?
3. What, if any, impacts has the funding had beyond the funded period? What challenges persisted in face of funding?
4. Value of funding for organisations and people they serve?

- Drafted a Theory of Change prior to the evaluation, in partnership with project stakeholders.
- Conducted interviews with 23 organisations that received funding, exploring how they used the funding and their perceptions of how their service changed over the funded period.

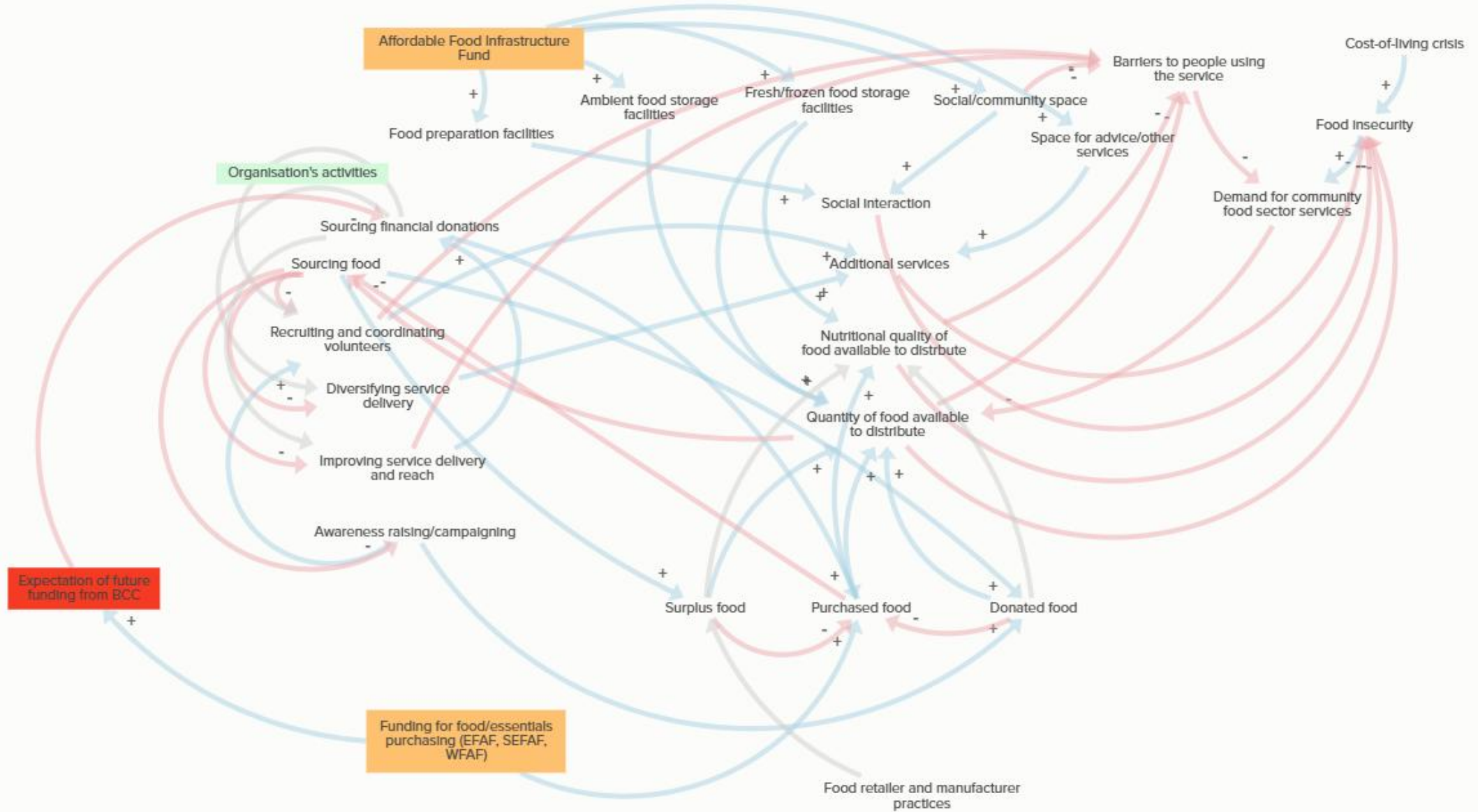


Research questions, methods

Quantitative approach

1. What are the constraints and challenges facing organisations in the community food sector?
 2. Were organisations in receipt of funding less likely to report struggling to meet demand in comparison to baseline?
- Baseline data collected at time of application for funding. A follow-up questionnaire was conducted 6-7 months after the funding was received.
 - Measures included indications of strain on services.
 - Follow-up questionnaire completed by 79 organisations in receipt of funding (46.7% response rate).
 - Pre-post analysis of change in proportion reporting strain on services.

Theory of Change



Qualitative findings

What was purchased

“The basics:”

“Some of the foods that they couldn’t afford... we were providing tea, coffee, sugar, milk, you know, rice, pasta, cooking oil, some washing up liquid, toilet paper, you know, tins of protein...”

Nutrient-rich foods:

"The winter aid fund was mainly used, you know, we could purchase fresh food, fruit, vegetables, and meat.”

Foods viewed as culturally appropriate:

“The money we got from the winter aid fund was brilliant [...] We were able to purchase food that Afro-Caribbean people would like more.”

Qualitative findings

Perceived short/medium outcomes

No one turned away: “We’ve been able to feed everybody that’s come to the door; we haven’t turned anybody away...”

Kept the organisation open: “It meant that we were able to keep the food bank going throughout the winter, in particular, and we were able to maintain the support at the levels we want to provide.”

An improved food offer: “We could guarantee that people are getting some healthy protein when they come for food.”

Happier clients: “It works well for the [food pantry] shoppers you know. The feedback from shoppers is that they’re very happy with it its good value, good quality.”

Qualitative findings

Potential for long-term impacts: organisation

Networking and
partnerships

Evidence for future
funding bids

Potential for long-term impacts: clients

Choice and agency

Food as a gateway

Community
connection

Choice and Agency

- Funding enabled organisations to shift from rigid supplier-determined models to a bottom-up approach centred on ‘listening to what people would find the most useful’.

“

pantry shoppers [...] were asking for things that we just hadn't got particularly cereals actually, breakfast cereals and stuff like that where we weren't getting those breakfast cereals from [suppliers] but that's what our customers wanted and so, so it was like listening to what people would find the most useful [...] **we were able to give people more choice from their feedback because of the winter aid money.**

”

Food as a gateway

“

well hopefully that people were able to get a meal and feel less hungry [...] I'm pretty confident that we've supported in **developing natural friendships** for people and that they've got involved in the different groups and activities that we've run and that, you know, **their wellbeing in general has improved** and that you know I know through the advice and information that we offer that a lot of people are not on the right benefits that they're entitled to and obviously when you look at that and you apply, **then they're in a better position to budget and live a quality life** when they are, when we have worked with people to ensure that they are, they're eligible for something that we support them to apply...

”

Community Networks

- Creating and sustaining meaningful social connections

“

so **what it [funding] enables is empowerment of the community** so they so the community are then able to **support each other** through an asset-based approach. **They're the asset they're the strength** the people that come in, they're not the problem they're the strength and so what you get is people talking to each other and supporting each other [...] one of our members his wife died a few weeks ago and [...] men they were all sort of supporting him and he's partially sighted he can't get out and he would be totally isolated without the opportunities...

”

Ongoing challenges & unintended consequences

Uncertainty over ability to meet demand in future:

“We’re probably looking every 3/4 months ahead you know, or 6 months ahead, how we are for the next 6 months. So we’re here for... hopefully there will be another you know winter food grant or something similar to that. So yes 6 months you know we can sort of we’re ok and then after that you know hopefully something else will come up you know in terms of longer term.”

Unable to sustain expected level of food quality:

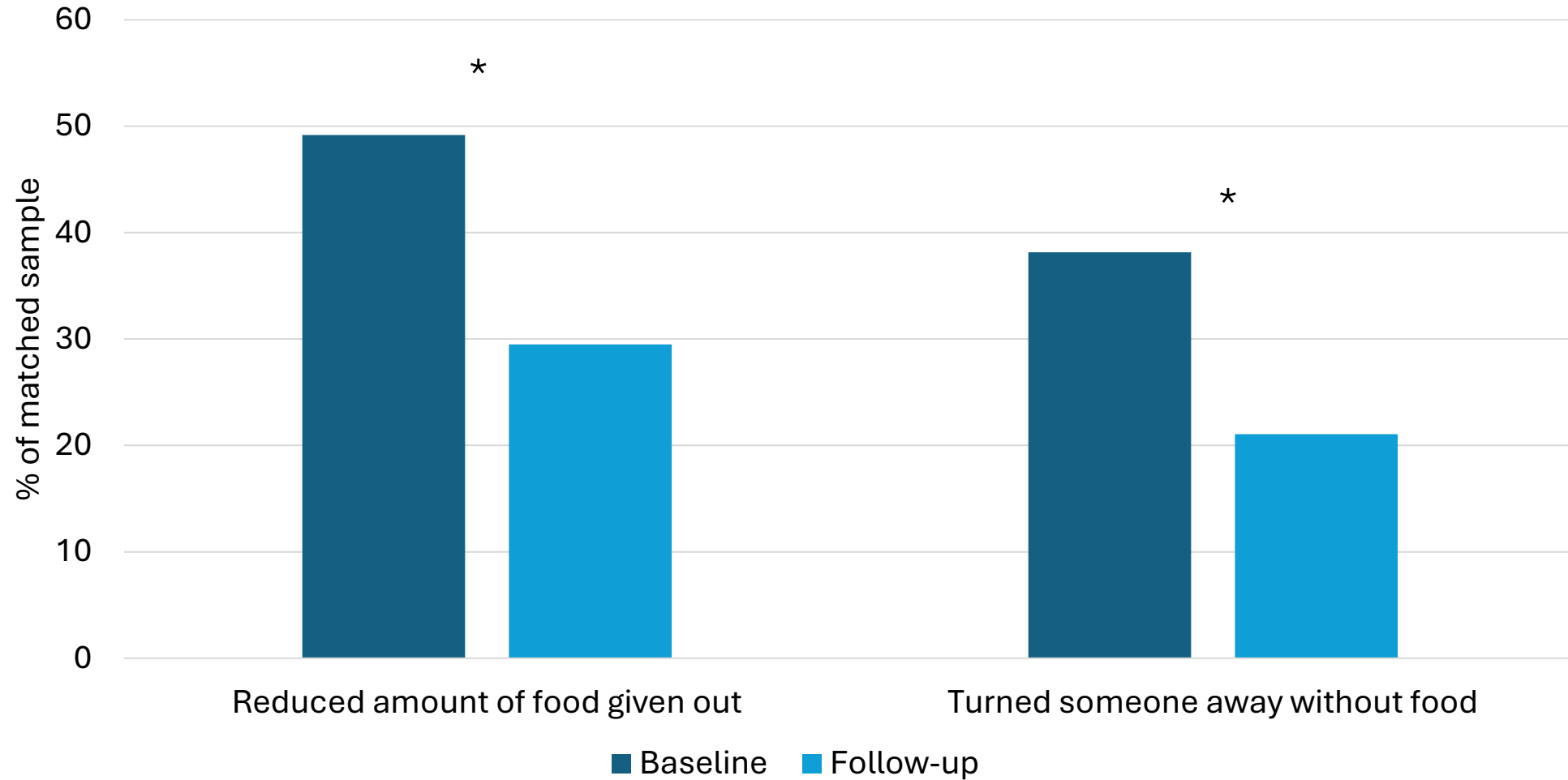
“...because we’re at the end of all of our grants, what’s coming in in terms of our stock is very different. So over the last 2 weeks you know people have sort of you know they’re looking for the certain things that they could always buy... Some people have sort of said they’re not as happy, even though they’re still getting great a great deal, it’s not what they’re looking for now. They’ve gotten accustomed to you know certain things...”

Quantitative findings: Ongoing challenges amongst organisations

- In an average week, is the number of people who receive help from your project matched to capacity?
 - 32% of organisations felt demand exceeded their capacity.
- Do premises pose problems for your food project's operation and/or patrons?
 - 27% lack enough/appropriate space for storage of ambient food.
 - 34% lack enough/appropriate facilities for storage of fresh/frozen food.
- How many volunteers and how many are needed?
 - Only 8% of organisations didn't have volunteers, with most having 5 or more volunteers each week.
 - 34% reported needing at least 3 more volunteers for projects to run optimally each week.
- Certainty of funding
 - 65.8% somewhat or very uncertain of their funding from year-to-year.



Figure: Change in proportion of organisations reporting difficulty with supplies.



*p<0.05

Baseline and follow-up samples include only matched organisations. Sample sizes range from 66-77 organisations due to missing/not applicable responses at baseline or follow-up.

Reflections on findings

- Evidence that BCC funding contributed to food aid organisations being better able to serve clients and reduced strain on services.
- However, benefits for organisations were mostly in short-term, with signs of strain and uncertainty returning once funding ended.
- No monitoring of whether clients' food needs met, but also need to examine a different set of outcomes: wellbeing, connecting with other services, social outcomes.
- Findings reinforce known precarity of the community food aid sector to meet the food and nutrition needs of people experiencing food insecurity, but point to role for sector relating to social needs and wraparound care.
- Implications: new Crisis and Resilience Fund.
 - Cash-first crisis payments from local authority
 - Supporting sector's role in contributing to "resilience"

Acknowledgements

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