

# LEWISHAM HOMES' COMMUNITY FOOD STORES

## IMPACT EVALUATION



January 2022

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## Abbreviations

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
AAH UK	Action Against Hunger UK
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
KGEB	Kelvin Grove Elliot Bank
KII	Key informant interview
LH	Lewisham Homes

## Executive Summary

In recent years, **food insecurity rates in the UK have been among the highest in Europe**<sup>1</sup>. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation increasing the incidence of “food poverty” for many families<sup>2</sup>. The Trussell Trust’s UK wide network distributed **2.5 million emergency food parcels in 2020/21**, an increase of 33% from the previous year<sup>3</sup>.

**Lewisham Homes (LH) is operating four community food stores in Lewisham, which enable low income families to buy food for a voluntary membership fee of £3.50 per week.** Each community food store is also its own “**local community hub**” that offers a range of services and initiatives aiming to tackle food poverty and its underlying causes. These include community gardens, debt advice, employment support, digital training, financial education and counselling during COVID-19.

In December 2020, Action Against Hunger UK (AAH UK) received funding from Barclays to implement the “Healthy Meals, Healthy Lives” project, which involves supporting local charities in the UK to tackle food poverty through community food stores. In addition to financial support, **AAH UK supported LH in carrying out an impact evaluation of their community food store concept, focusing on three of its stores.**

**The key purposes of the evaluation are to 1) inform future LH community food stores as well as other organisations interested in setting up community food stores and 2) to demonstrate the impact that community food stores and their associated activities can have on local people’s lives.** A desk review was conducted of monitoring data collected by LH and volunteers and of periodic reports provided by the store managers. Primary data was collected through 14 key informant interviews with members, volunteers and store managers as well as with LH community relations staff.

Interviews with community members and store volunteers have shown that **impact is achieved on people’s sense of dignity, their financial stability, nutrition and health.** Members mentioned how paying a **membership fee** gives them a sense of “fairness” and lessens the feeling of receiving “charity”. The **minimal bureaucratic procedures** to register as a member also contributes to a stronger sense of dignity among people who need to access support. All members that were interviewed said that they are **saving money** when visiting the store, meaning they could avoid falling into debt or would have more money for other needs such as transportation or clothing. Members also said they now eat healthier and more varied diets, as the stores **offer healthy food at a lower cost.**

Interviews with volunteers indicated that there is often significant **impact on volunteers’ personal and professional development.** A key element of the community food store concept is that it is “run by residents for residents”. Instead of hiring external staff, members themselves are encouraged to volunteer and help run the store. **Interviews indicate that volunteering has given members the opportunity to not only “give back” and engage in their community, but also to grow professionally.**

At a community level, we noted a strong **sense of inclusion and a “community within a community”** that provides a social safety net for its members. Key informants felt that this is one of the key elements of Lewisham Homes’ community food stores which distinguishes them from food banks. The evaluation shows how each store also helps tackle social exclusion and loneliness while providing an entry point to reach vulnerable households and community

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF (2017) Building the future. Children and the sustainable development goals in rich countries, June 2017

<sup>2</sup> Food poverty is defined by the UK Department of Health as the “Inability to afford, or have access to, food to make up a healthy diet” (2021) <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpoverty/whatisfoodpoverty>

<sup>3</sup> The Trussell Trust (2021) End of year stats. <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/>

members. The community stores enable members' needs and struggles to be identified and linked to the wider support network available in the borough.

LH staff and store managers and volunteers face a range of challenges in running the stores. The main challenges are **fundraising**, increases in demand and limited time or human resources to meet the needs of all members.

The evaluation report also lists good practices and recommendations made throughout interviews, the key one being to focus on **empowerment and ownership**: reaching out to community members and giving them the resources and tools to set up their own store and coming up with their own concept based on what they think their community needs.

## Introduction

### Food poverty in the UK

In recent years, food insecurity rates in the UK have been among the highest in Europe<sup>4</sup>. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation increasing the incidence of “food poverty” for many families<sup>5</sup>. As a consequence of the pandemic, low-income families lost their main sources of income and/or have had to use their savings to pay bills and to try to put food on the table.

The Trussell Trust’s UK wide network distributed 2.5 million emergency food parcels in 2020/21, an increase of 33% from the previous year<sup>6</sup>. Children are especially vulnerable to food poverty. Before the pandemic, 4.3 million children in the UK were already living in poverty<sup>7</sup> and a further 200,000 children are estimated to have fallen into poverty since the pandemic began.

Lewisham in southeast London has some of the highest child deprivation rates in the country. This is driven principally by the cost of housing, which is soaring in London leading to more and more families with children becoming homeless. The number of children living in poverty in private rented accommodation has tripled in the last decade. Other drivers of food insecurity include low pay, maternal unemployment, delays in access to benefits, and childcare costs.

### Lewisham Homes’ Community Food Stores

#### *The concept*

Lewisham Homes (LH) is operating four community food stores in Lewisham, which enable low income families to buy food for a voluntary membership fee of £3.50 per week. A community food store differs from a food bank in that it is 1) community led, run by residents for residents, 2) it is open to all and needs no referral by a professional or third party, 3) it provides choice of food and non-food items, 4) it offers quality nutritious foods and 5) membership is not time-limited<sup>8</sup>. LH’s community food stores go beyond just the provision of food. Each community food store is its own “local community hub” that offers a range of services and initiatives aiming to tackle food poverty and its underlying causes. These can include community gardens, debt advice, employment support, digital training, financial education and counselling during COVID-19.

#### *Three community food stores*

This evaluation focuses on three of LH’s community food stores in Lewisham, which are detailed in the table below.

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<sup>4</sup> UNICEF (2017) Building the future. Children and the sustainable development goals in rich countries, June 2017

<sup>5</sup> Food poverty is defined by the UK Department of Health as the “Inability to afford, or have access to, food to make up a healthy diet” (2021) <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpoverty/whatisfoodpoverty>

<sup>6</sup> The Trussell Trust (2021) End of year stats. <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/>

<sup>7</sup> Households Below Average Income, Statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low income households for financial years 1994/95 to 2019/20, Table 4\_5db. Department for Work and Pensions, 2021

<sup>8</sup> Dr. N. Maynard & Dr. F. Tweedie (2021) Your Local Pantry – Social Impact Report

**Table 1: LH community food stores**

Name	Location	Opening date <sup>9</sup>	Services offered	Approx. number of active store members in Nov 2021
Evelyn Community store	Deptford, SE8 5TQ	26th February 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community store</li> <li>• Food deliveries for vulnerable households</li> <li>• Signposting service</li> <li>• Mental Health First Aid</li> <li>• COVID-19 Vaccination programme</li> </ul>	118
Feed the Hill community supermarket	New Cross, SE14 6AT	March 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community store</li> <li>• Food deliveries for vulnerable households</li> </ul>	50 (via the store) 200 (via deliveries)
Kelvin Grove Elliot Bank community store	Sydenham, SE26 6BB	June 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Store</li> <li>• Job seeking advice</li> <li>• Signposting service</li> </ul>	60

### Lewisham Homes and Action Against Hunger UK partnership

In December 2020, Action Against Hunger UK (AAH UK) received funding from Barclays to implement the “Healthy Meals, Healthy Lives” project. The project continued until December 2021 and involved supporting local charities in three areas of the UK with high rates of poverty to tackle food poverty through community food stores (operated based on the “Your Local Pantry” and “social supermarkets” models), the distribution of hot meals and other community food initiatives. LH is one of the organisations that AAH UK is supporting. In addition to providing financial support, AAH UK supported LH to carry out this impact evaluation of their community food stores.

## Methodology

### Evaluation objectives and scope

The **key purposes** of the evaluation are to 1) inform future LH community food stores as well as other organisations interested in setting up community food stores and 2) to demonstrate the impact that community food stores and their associated activities can have on local people’s lives.

### The objectives were:

1. To assess the effectiveness of LH community food stores (in terms of outputs and what works well on a day-to-day basis);
2. To assess the social impact of the LH community food stores (exploring changes in people’s sense of dignity, social inclusion, confidence, financial stability and health as well as the impact on social cohesion and community building);
3. To assess the relevance of LH services and activities (in terms of relevance to the context and needs of communities);

<sup>9</sup> Opening date of community store (ie using the Community store concept summarised above). All structures were offering support to community members with emergency food provision (eg as Food Banks or similar) prior to launching the community store concept.

4. To assess the sustainability of the LH community food store concept (in terms of having long-term and wider impact);
5. To identify and extract tools and good practices for running/building a community store as well as extracting lessons learnt from LH;
6. To detect the most significant changes experienced by members and volunteers and identify impact stories.

The criteria “effectiveness”, “impact”, “relevance” and “sustainability” are further unpacked in the evaluation matrix included in the annex.

The evaluation included three of Lewisham Homes’ community food stores and focused on the time period March 2020 to December 2021. It looked at the concept as a whole, also considering elements of the stores that go beyond the provision of food.

## Evaluation criteria and questions

### Data collection and analysis

#### *Desk review*

During inception phase, the evaluation team reviewed a number of documents provided by Lewisham Homes to gain a better understanding of the context and the community food store concept.

#### *Secondary data collection*

Quantitative monitoring data collected by Lewisham Homes and volunteers was made available to the evaluation team. This data was reviewed and triangulated with the primary data where possible.

#### *Primary data collection*

A total of 14 key informants were interviewed, as illustrated in table 2.

**Table 2: Number of Key Informant Interviews per store and stakeholder group**

Stakeholder group	KGEB	Evelyn	Feed the Hill	Lewisham Homes
Member	3	2		-
Volunteer/member	1	2		-
Store manager/coordinator	1	1	1	-
Store founder		1		-
Community relations staff	-	-	-	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>			

Interviews with store managers, founders and Lewisham Homes staff focused primarily on gaining a better understanding of the concept as a whole, the day-to-day running of stores, the challenges they face and any recommendations they may have. Interviews with members and volunteers on the other hand focused more on gaining deeper insights into their particular experiences that demonstrate the impact the store has had on them personally.

Interviews were conducted in-person at the stores, except for two that were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted about 30-60 minutes and was guided by

one of two interview guides or a combination of both. The interview guides can be found in the annex. The interviewers took notes while 10 of the 14 interviews were also audio recorded.

### *Data analysis*

Interview data (transcripts and notes) were analysed thematically with a focus on impact and extracting challenges and good practices/recommendations. Qualitative findings were triangulated with secondary quantitative data where possible.

### **Limitations**

Owing to various challenges, it was not possible to reach the target sample size of key informants and to answer all of the evaluation questions set out at the planning stage. These challenges resulted in the evaluation team lacking data to answer questions under the “effectiveness” and “sustainability” criteria in particular.

Challenges included:

- **Unavailability of different target key informants, or groups of key informants.** For example, the evaluation team was unable to speak to any groups of children or former members due to unavailability of willing respondents.
- **Organisation of group discussions:** When the evaluation team arrived at community stores to collect data, it was challenging for the store managers to organise specific groups of key informants on the days and times allocated for data collection. This was partly due to the unpredictable visiting schedule of members during half term week and partly due to the time required to complete focus group discussions. As such, during data collection visits to community stores, the evaluation team had to adapt their data collection methods and tools and interview members and volunteers who were available at the time of visits.
- **Lack of quantitative data:** Limited monitoring data was available from the community stores resulting in the evaluation findings being based only on the qualitative data provided during interviews and discussions. As such it was difficult to measure the impact each store has on its members and volunteers based on different indicators (e.g. change in diet and consumption habits, improvement in financial security, change in well-being).

However, the rich qualitative data that was collected does provide many valuable insights that enabled the evaluation team to assess how the stores are impacting various aspects of the lives of members and volunteers. The responses to interviews and discussions also illustrated many of the key challenges and good practices of operating community stores.

It should also be noted that there was a risk of sampling bias as the members and volunteers selected for interview were those that were contacted by store managers and expressed willingness to be interviewed. As such they were likely to be more engaged and positively impacted by the store.

## Findings

The following section presents the key findings from this evaluation that demonstrate the impact, challenges and good practices of food pantries.

### Impact

Interviews with community members and store volunteers have shown that **impact is achieved on both the individual and community level**. On an individual and/or family level, we see an impact on people's **sense of dignity, their financial stability, nutrition and health**. Volunteering further shows to have impact on an individual's **professional and personal development**. On a community level, we see a strong **sense of inclusion and a growing "community within a community"** that provides a social safety net for its members.

#### *Dignity*

Interviews indicate that community food stores enable members to retain a sense of dignity when benefiting from the services they offer. Members mentioned how paying a **membership fee** gives them a sense of "fairness" and lessens the feeling of receiving "charity". The **minimal bureaucratic procedures** to register as a member also seems to contribute to a stronger sense of dignity among people who need to access support. Two members mentioned how they appreciate the quick and easy process, not having to be referred and being able to join and leave when needed. Extensive registration processes may also exclude people that are illiterate.

All members that were interviewed spoke of the **wide variety of food** offered at the stores and the **ability to choose what they want and need themselves**. **The layout of the stores is also similar** to regular supermarkets, which members seem to appreciate.

Moreover, two members said they have recommended the store to others and one of the store managers confirmed she gets many requests from members to have a friend be signed up. This suggests that there may be **less stigma** around visiting such community food stores in comparison with food banks.

#### *Financial stability*

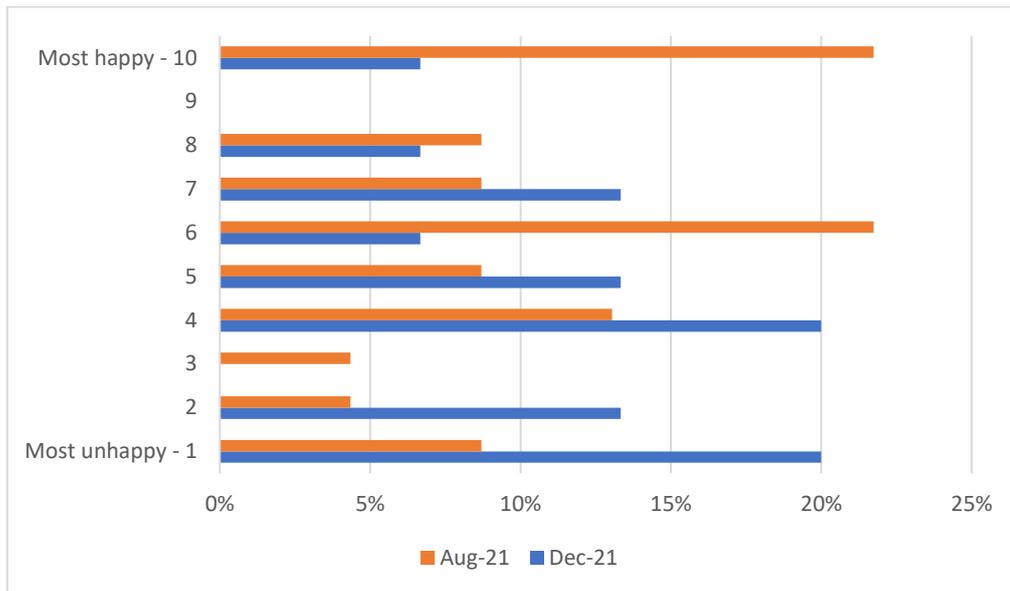
All members that were interviewed said that they are **saving money** when visiting the store. One member specified that they save approximately 30 GBP per week. While for some people this means **avoiding falling into debt**, for others it means having **more money for other needs such as transportation or clothing**.

In August and December 2021 surveys were conducted with some members of the KGEB store asking them about their financial circumstances. Results indicate that financial stability was worse for many members in December 2021 compared to August 2021. No reasons were collected from members during the survey. However they are likely to be due to:

- The £20 increase to Universal Credit introduced during the Covid 19 pandemic which ended in October 2021
- Energy price increases in autumn 2021
- The fact that families generally are under more financial burden generally during the winter months and in the run up to Christmas

This highlights the need for continued operation of the community food stores and the financial savings that they can bring.

**Figure 1: Member responses to question: How do you feel about your financial circumstances?<sup>10</sup>**



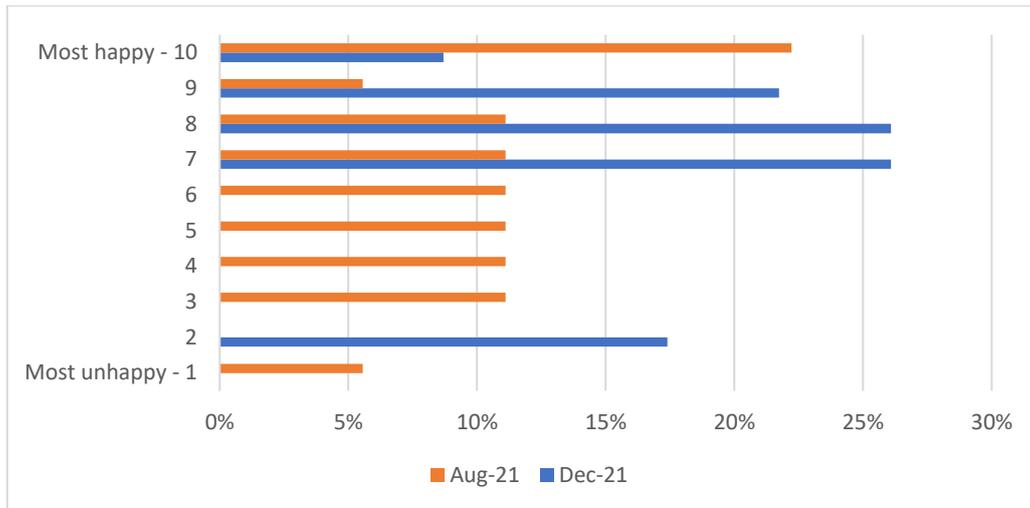
*Nutrition and health*

Evidence indicates that **members' nutrition and health has improved** since visiting one of Lewisham Homes' community food stores. Surveys conducted with members of the KGEB store show that the majority feel good about their physical health and are happy to cook meals at home and eat environmentally friendly food. Members who were interviewed said they now eat healthier and more varied diets, as the stores **offer healthy food at a lower cost. In regular supermarkets the items of food stocked in community stores are often unaffordable for people on a low income.** This indicates that often the choice of unhealthy food is due to a lack of alternative healthy options (availability) rather than knowledge about nutrition. However, findings also show that the conversations members have whilst visiting the community stores and exchanges about food and recipes are also important to encourage members to buy and cook more healthy foods.

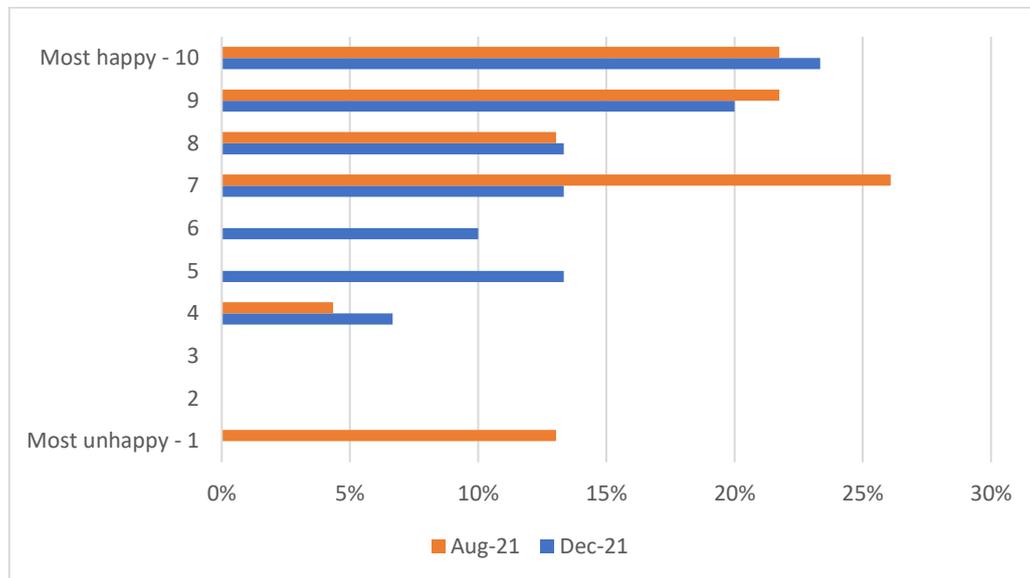
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<sup>10</sup> This was one of the questions included in the member survey in August and December 2021. The other questions are detailed in charts below. In August an average of 22 members provided responses to questions; in December an average of 29 members provided responses to questions. All surveys were completed anonymously so there is no guarantee that the same members responded during August and December.

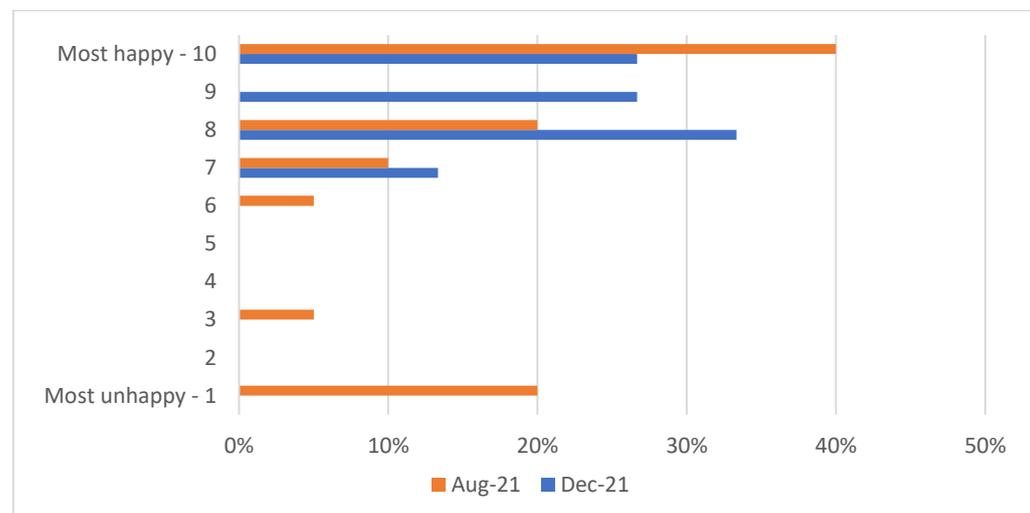
**Figure 2: Member responses to question: How do you feel about your physical health?**



**Figure 3: Member responses to: How do you feel about cooking meals at home?**



**Figure 4: Member responses to: How do you feel about eating more meat-free meals and food that is better for the environment?**



**Focus box: Anna<sup>11</sup>**

Anna is a single mother of a 1-year-old daughter and told us her story of how the community store has helped them. Having separated from her husband when she was pregnant, when her daughter was born, she felt alone and had no-one to support her. Anna struggled when her daughter was born and was worried about being able to provide for her baby. When she started visiting the community store in July 2021, she found the support net she needed.

“Since I started using the supermarket, I feel like I have everything I want”. She explained how she and her daughter have been able to eat more varied and healthy food, how they have both gained weight and how her daughter needs the doctor less. Anna lights up when she speaks of the friends she has made at the store and how she looks forward to the next time she can visit. She describes how helpful people in the store have been, giving her advice on child care and “giving positive mind”. “It saved my life, I don’t want to lie.”

*Social inclusion and community building*

**One of the elements of Lewisham Homes’ community food stores that distinguishes them from food banks is the community aspect of the stores.** As the founder of the Evelyn store said, her long-term vision is to “build a community within a community” that provides a **social support net people can fall back on and in which people are looked out for.** The stores provide an entry point for Lewisham Homes to identify needs and vulnerable individuals. Volunteers are trained in Mental Health First Aid and actively reach out to those people that seem in need of additional support. At the same time members know they can reach out to volunteers for information and advice. As a member said, connections are key when it comes to accessing support, which the community food store facilitates.

**Many examples came up throughout interviews that demonstrate the impact of this support net.** The KGEB store, for instance, would speak to mothers wanting to go back to work and/or set up their own business, referring them to professionals that can advise them further. One member of the KGEB store said she benefited hugely from the advice on child care when she joined the store with her baby daughter (more information in Anna’s “focus box”). The founder of the Evelyn community food store spoke of numerous occasions in which members were supported by volunteers, such as setting up an appointment at the NHS, dealing with bullying at school, reaching Lewisham Council for housing purposes or seeking support during COVID-19 while shielding. They emphasised that when help is offered, in most cases they help a person solve their problem themselves, rather than solving it for them: “Just giving them that power to be able to just request their own subscriptions, or make their own appointment, can be so empowering to someone.” **It is especially the older people living in isolation and loneliness that need support.**

**The Evelyn store also ran a COVID-19 vaccination programme.** All volunteers were trained as vaccinators and one was appointed as a vaccination champion, encouraging members of the food community to get vaccinated. People were vaccinated within the store, which helped those that were hesitant as they **felt safer to be vaccinated in a familiar space by familiar people.** This again shows how the store is able to provide further support due to its strong sense of community.

Most members and volunteers highlighted in their interviews their appreciation of the sense of community and connection the store gives them. **Next to providing advice and information, the stores provide also a space for casual conversation and interaction, where people can**

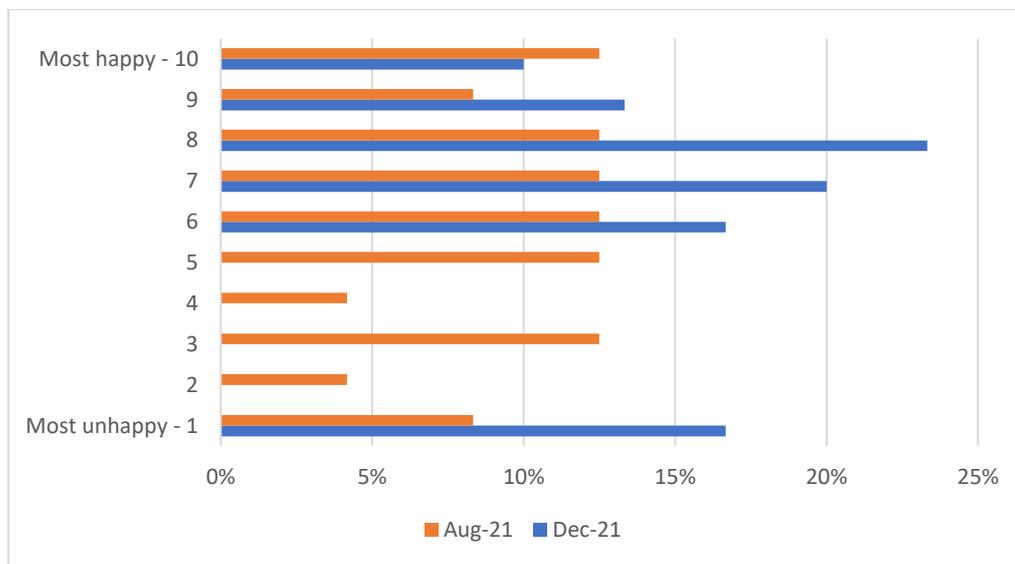
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<sup>11</sup> Name has been changed to protect the identity of the respondent

share their worries and be listened to and where neighbours get to know each other and connect. One volunteer, for example, explained how her engagement in the store has helped her connect to her community despite her social anxiety. Another volunteer said it “opens people’s eyes” and allows them to recognise that they are not alone.

Surveys conducted with KGEB store members indicate that the majority of members feel relatively good about their mental health and that a greater percentage felt better about their mental health in December 2021 in comparison with August 2021. It is not possible to attribute this increase solely to their member of the community store, but it presents an overall positive trend. However, some members were still struggling with their mental health in December 2021.

Figure 3: Member responses to: How do you feel about your mental health?



One possible risk of the strong community aspect is that it may inhibit some people from joining the store due to the lack of anonymity. The founder of the Evelyn store highlights **the need to build trust**, but then again the concept of the food community store has shown to decrease stigma all together and interviewed members did not indicate any hesitancy or shame. According to interviewees, for those that do wish to stay more anonymous food banks would be the preferred option.

**To conclude, the community food store clearly goes beyond just the provision of food. It also tackles social exclusion and loneliness while providing an entry point to reach vulnerable households and community members. The community stores enable members’ needs and struggles to be identified and linked to the wider support networks available in the borough.**

### Focus box: Hakim<sup>12</sup>

For Hakim the store is all about community and inclusion. Hakim is 16 years old and volunteers at a community store together with his mother. He volunteered during lockdown, while schools were closed, and now volunteers occasionally, such as during half term. Hakim sees how the store brings people together and, especially during lockdown, offered a space for people to find connection and feel part of something when they would otherwise feel isolated. "You tend to be nervous at first, but as you get to know more people, you feel more welcome and safe."

Hakim recommends every store to focus on making people feel welcome and organise social events that "create memory", as he puts it. One memory of his is the time when the footballer Marcus Rashford visited the store to film a documentary and Hakim showed him around. This was a huge surprise for Hakim.

Hakim has met many different people during his volunteering and one thing he has learnt is "never to judge". In the future, he would like to work in the humanitarian sector, helping people and making his community happier. Having experienced the need for support himself and being a member of the store, he knows how powerful the impact of such community food stores can be.

### *Professional development*

A key element of the community food store concept is that it is "run by residents for residents". Instead of hiring external staff, members themselves are encouraged to volunteer and help run the store. **Interviews indicate that volunteering has given members the opportunity to not only "give back" and engage in their community, but also to grow professionally.** While gaining work experience in their particular role, volunteers are also able to participate in trainings offered by Lewisham Homes. Anything that volunteers are keen to receive training in, Lewisham Homes seeks to provide.

**By supporting professional development, the community food stores therefore also address the underlying causes of food poverty and/or exclusion, contributing to more sustainable and long-term financial security.**

### Focus box: Nathan

Nathan works as a coordinator at Feed the Hill and shared with us his experience in his "first proper job". He started volunteering when he finished school, at a time when he was not yet sure about the direction he wanted to go in. When a maternity cover was needed for the coordinator of the store, he took over as coordinator giving him the opportunity to grow professionally and personally.

"It's been an amazing experience... I've enjoyed the journey, coming here as a pretty innocent appointee ... who didn't know much about the organisation, learning, and working hard to be organising everything." He describes how he has built confidence, learning to deal with difficult situations and "to hold one's nerve in the face of chaos", communicating with people that know only a little English or are deaf, and being proactive which is not his "natural instinct", as he put it. "It's been quite overwhelming", he explains, feeling the pressure to do well for the person he is covering and who is relying on him. It is this "belief and trust in him", he explains, that gives him his drive and motivation.

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<sup>12</sup> Name has been changed to protect the identity of the respondent

## Challenges

This section presents the challenges that Lewisham Homes and the teams have faced in setting up and running their stores. These indicate areas needing external support/funding or exploration of in-house solutions and aims to provide guidance for other pantries.

### *Fundraising*

**“The biggest challenge is making sure that we have money in order to buy what we need to support [our members]” – Kim (store manager at KGEB)**

Interviews indicate that the key challenge lies in a lack of funds and the time spent on fundraising. **According to store managers, donations and funding have significantly decreased since the easing of lockdown while the needs and the number of members has increased.** One store manager pointed out the high price of non-food items, such as toiletries and sanitary products, which she would not want to give up. **Stores have been falling back on the money collected through the membership fees**, but as one store manager said, she would rather save this money to eventually “give back to members in the form of a celebration”.

### *Managing the increasing need*

Managing the increase in need as funding decreases poses a big challenge especially for the Evelyn store. **The number of people wanting to join the Evelyn store during the pandemic increased significantly and despite the many donations and volunteers, the team struggled to support all.** The founder explained how the team was forced to put a cap on the number of members allowed to join. “As much as it's really hard to do it, we have to cap it, because then it compromises the amount of food that we can give out”, she explained. Decisions are made based on a person's vulnerability and if people do not come regularly, their space is given to someone else on the waiting list.

Higher member numbers can also lead to store managers prioritising certain members over others. For example, the most vulnerable, including older people and those with health conditions, are given the opportunity to visit in the first slot of the store's opening hours, while the less vulnerable are asked to visit in the second slot. This sometimes poses challenges, as less vulnerable members arrive earlier and have to be asked to come back later.

**Finally, during the Covid-19 pandemic the increase in support needs of the most vulnerable, especially elderly people and those needing to shield, posed greater challenges for the teams.** For example, while delivering food, volunteers were also ready to support in other ways, such as picking up prescriptions. However, the crisis did also show great community initiative and dedication, which highlights again the value of community within such support structures.

### *Maintaining social interactions during lockdown*

The COVID-19 pandemic inevitably brought several challenges with it. **All key informants mentioned that during the pandemic it was difficult to maintain the social interactions that were such a valuable part of the weekly visits. Even in November 2021, at the time of data collection, this was still missing to some extent. The main challenge seems to be the lack of space brought on by social distancing.** One of the volunteers at the KGEB store said that a larger space to enable people to stay and chat would be important for supporting people's mental health during these times. Reaching individuals in need has therefore been increasingly challenging and attention to the needs of individuals has become all the more important.

### *Reliance on volunteers*

Respondents indicated that there is generally a lack of volunteers and that the high turnover of volunteers is a challenge. Many volunteers were lost as the pandemic hit, for example because they had to shield, and although new volunteers joined at this time, many of them left again as they returned back to work. One of the store managers mentioned the constant pressure of knowing that volunteers can leave at any moment. **Nevertheless, key informants felt strongly about continuing with volunteers rather than hiring payed staff, as this is a key element of the concept and paying some staff would change power dynamics and the concept as a whole.**

Further challenges mentioned included managing **inter-personal dynamics** among volunteers or recognising and respecting each other's **boundaries**. One interviewee highlighted the challenge of **managing the expectations of volunteers who are also members** and ensuring that there is no preferential treatment.

### *Lack of transport*

A challenge mentioned by store managers and Lewisham Homes staff was the **lack of vehicles for the transportation of food** as well as the **national shortage of drivers**. One idea proposed is to provide Cargo Bikes to support the delivery of food and other items.

### *Risk mitigation*

One key informant interview highlighted the **risk of members seeing the store as a solution rather than a "step toward the solution"** and becoming too reliant on the store to cover their needs in the long-term. It is therefore important to remind members that there are further services available that can help them find long-term solutions.

Also mentioned was the **risk of members not showing up when they do not have the money to pay the weekly membership fee**. Although the fee is voluntary, it seems that some people do not feel comfortable visiting the store without paying the fee. This does show how impactful the concept of a membership fee is, but it **can risk pushing the most vulnerable members away**.

### *Outreach and inclusion*

**Interviews with members suggest that reaching those in need and finding an approach that accommodates the various circumstances of individuals and families can be challenging.** For example, **health conditions** may create barriers to be able to visit the store regularly. One member explained that when they experience neurogenic pain, they are unable to come to the store. On these days, a volunteer would deliver them their food for that week.

Another example is **child care and family responsibilities**. As one of the store managers explained, during half term or school holidays it is difficult for parents with young children to visit the store, either because they do not have the time as they care for their children or because it is difficult for them to bring their children along. One member also mentioned a period when they were not able to visit the store as they were taking their older daughter to work during the store's opening time slot.

### *Further challenges*

Further challenges mentioned by key informants included the **management of (poor) quality food donations**, getting good **impact stories** for advocacy and fundraising purposes, and dealing with **conflict and racism** outside of the store while people are queuing.

## Good practices and recommendations

This section presents good practices for setting up and running a community food store as well as key recommendations provided by store managers and volunteers.

### Before opening of community food stores:

- **Think about whether this concept would work in your particular area/community and consider the location and accessibility of the store.** For example, one key informant assumes that the concept works better in denser urban areas than less connected rural areas.
- **Focus on empowerment and encouraging ownership.** The concept should be developed by the community itself and by those who will be implementing it. Lewisham Homes offered the community funds to invest to tackle food poverty, but let individuals develop their specific concept independently, based on what they thought would work and add value in their community. Lewisham Homes has been there to provide the necessary resources where possible and to support and facilitate the process.
- **Set up a committee** that meets regularly to discuss feedback, challenges, gaps, ideas and fundraising.
- **Find an initial entry point to reach potential community store members.** For example, Lewisham Homes had a list of residents who were struggling with rent, that they reached out to.
- **Participate in Food Networks and exchange with other food banks and pantries.** Although all are competing for resources, the Lewisham Food Network fostered collaboration and exchange of good practices and tools.
- **Develop a constitution, branding, policy and agreement for volunteers**
- **Develop an application form and information pack for members**

### After community food stores have opened:

- **Focus on and invest in your volunteers.** Ensuring you have a pool of volunteers so they can rotate and you are not too reliant on a few.
- **Build relationships with local businesses.** As well as applying for funds, it is just as important to make connections and build good relations with local business and organisations that have the resources and capacity to support – either through food donations, training, money, etc. For example, the team running the Evelyn store reached out to the CEOs of Waitrose and Tesco, who provided and will maintain the costs of a van for 5 years.
- **Continuously assess needs and collect feedback from members.** Although Lewisham Homes has a formal monitoring and evaluation mechanism in place which assesses impact and needs periodically, most of the information is collected through informal conversation with members as they come through the door or at events.
- Ensure the store manager and volunteers are **well connected to and knowledgeable about the wider support services to enable them to refer people** to the appropriate support service. It is recommended to have one dedicated “sign-poster” within a team.
- **“Be yourself”** – pay attention to your own boundaries and limits, admitting when things are stressful.
- **Set up a WhatsApp Group** for communication with members about store opening times, food options and other events.
- Collect as many **shopping bags** as you can.

## Conclusion

This evaluation demonstrates what impact the community food stores supported by Lewisham Homes have had on the lives of their members and volunteers during 2021. It also shows how a community food store can complement the important role played by food banks. Future evaluations may want to explore certain aspects in more depth, such as the impact of the stores on children, the long-term impact on those that stop visiting stores as they no longer require the support they offer or how working at a store can influence a volunteer's future paid employment. It would also be important to understand who may be excluded from community food stores and why, as well as the extent to which certain links to the wider support network could be strengthened.

Strong monitoring data is key to assessing impact. It would be beneficial for LH to develop a monitoring framework based around the indicators and changes that they want to assess. If possible, the same respondents should be surveyed with the same questions at regular intervals to assess the impact that the store is having on their lives, and to understand what additional support they need. Survey questions should also be carefully phrased to better understand the extent to which the store has contributed to a certain change.

Despite the limitations of this evaluation, it has provided valuable insights into the experiences of members and volunteers engaged in LH community food stores. It has provided an understanding of the kind of impact a community food store can have on individuals and their community and its potential to provide wider support beyond hunger and food poverty. A community food store has the potential to reach the most vulnerable and link them to the support they need while providing a safe space for those that feel excluded and alone.

## Recommendations for monitoring and evaluating community food stores in future

As this was the first evaluation conducted of a community food store, the authors have identified a few recommendations for the future evaluation and monitoring of community food stores:

- **During initial visits, regular visits and after “graduation” from community supermarkets, seek from members permission to contact them to collect evaluation and monitoring data.** In this way, future evaluators could randomly select and contact members to collect monitoring and evaluation data from rather than only being able to access members who store managers select (which would therefore avoid the risk of bias). This would also ease the burden on store managers and it would also be easier to contact and interview former members of community supermarkets.
- **Arrange focus group discussions with members from different stores and ensure that discussion only focuses on user experience at community food stores.** This may address concerns expressed by one store manager that FGDs may raise awkward topics which members are not willing to talk about with people they know.
- **If collecting data in community supermarkets, ensure that interviews are conducted in a private space, ideally a room with a door.**
- **Design appropriate monitoring framework in collaboration with store manager.** The monitoring framework should ideally monitor the same members at regular intervals and should zoom in on the impact that the community supermarket has on different aspects of their life (eg mental health, financial situation, physical health, consumption of fresh fruit and veg and other healthy foods)

- **Ensure that questions used in monitoring ask members to specify how the store has impacted different aspects of their lives.** For example, include questions such as “To what extent has the store impacted your mental health”.
- **Community supermarket supply data can also be used to assess impact on people’s lives.** For example, store managers can assess how much fruit and veg is being purchased by members on a weekly basis (approximately) and compare this to what they were typically consuming before becoming members.
- **Investigate the differences between food banks and food pantries from the user perspective.**

## Annex 1: Evaluation matrix

Evaluation Criteria	Key evaluation questions	Examples of sub evaluation questions	Data collection methods	Main sources
<b>Effectiveness</b>	How effective are LH's community food stores?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What outputs have activities achieved and have existing targets been met?</li> <li>• What are the challenges and what is working well?</li> <li>• How effective are trainings and advice sessions in terms of knowledge increase among members and volunteers?</li> <li>• How effective is the process of information dissemination and communication with members?</li> <li>• How accessible are the various activities to members? Are any groups excluded?</li> <li>• How effective is the outreach process and what are the barriers for individuals to become a member?</li> <li>• How well do the systematic monitoring mechanisms and feed-back loops function?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desk review</li> <li>• KIIs</li> <li>• FGDs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community relations manager</li> <li>• Community relations officer</li> <li>• Store managers</li> <li>• Volunteers</li> <li>• Current Members</li> <li>• LH monitoring data</li> </ul>
<b>Impact</b>	What (positive and negative) impact do activities have on members, volunteers and their families?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does the provision of low cost, varied, healthy food impact members (and their families)?</li> <li>• How do other activities (such as debt advice, employment support, financial education, counselling) impact members (and their families)?</li> <li>• What impact does the store's garden have on members and volunteers?</li> <li>• If volunteers and members help manage the store's garden, what impact does this have on their lives?</li> <li>• How do volunteers experience their role?</li> <li>• How do activities change members'/volunteers' sense of dignity, social inclusion, financial stability, health and general well-being?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desk review</li> <li>• KIIs</li> <li>• FGDs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteers</li> <li>• Current and former Members</li> <li>• Store managers</li> <li>• LH monitoring data</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do activities impact the children of members (especially in terms of social inclusion, health, education, well-being)?</li> <li>• Are there any unintended negative effects that activities have? If so, how could these be mitigated?</li> </ul>		
<b>Relevance</b>	Are activities relevant to the context and needs of communities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the choice of activities justified in terms of community needs and priorities? What are the current needs of members and their children?</li> <li>• To what extent do activities complement other services in the area (in terms of types of services as well as target groups)?</li> <li>• What are the needs of members and to what extent are these needs being met through LH food community activities?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• KIIs</li> <li>• FGDs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community relations manager</li> <li>• Community relations officer</li> <li>• Store managers</li> <li>• Volunteers</li> <li>• Current members</li> </ul>
<b>Sustainability</b>	To what extent do activities have long-lasting and wider impact?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What impact do LH's community food stores have at community level?</li> <li>• To what extent is the impact that is achieved on an individual/family level sustainable (well-being, health, financial stability, social inclusion, etc.)?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• KIIs</li> <li>• FGDs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community relations manager</li> <li>• Community relations officer</li> <li>• Store managers</li> <li>• Volunteers</li> <li>• Current and former Members</li> </ul>

## Annex 2: Interview guides

### Semi-structured Interview Guide #1

These interviews aim at gaining a better understanding of the concept as a whole, the day-to-day running of stores, the impact and relevance it has from their perspective and any challenges and good practices.

We understand that some volunteers have been or still are members and benefiting from the food community store, which is why we would want to consult this particular group both from a staff perspective (through these KIIIs) as well as from a member perspective (through focus group discussions and impact story interviews – see separate guides).

The following interview guide is semi-structured with a limited number of core questions and few prompts, enabling interviewees to direct the interview to topics which are most pertinent and relevant to themselves. The guide is to be tailored to each stakeholder group.

#### *Introduction*

10 minutes

- Introduction of interviewer
- Implementing consent protocol (see separate document)
- Providing opportunity to ask questions
- Obtaining verbal consent
- Starting audio recording

#### *Semi Structured Interview questions*

40-70 minutes

- 1) How did you come to work/volunteer for a LH community food store? How would you describe your role/responsibilities?
- 2) Can you describe for me LH's community food store concept? How does it work and what are the key objectives?
- 3) How do you enjoy your role? What kind of impact does it have on you and your life? What kind of skills have you gained? What kind of impact do you expect your role to have on your future employment?
- 4) What challenges do you face in your day-to-day work?
- 5) How is the store relevant to the needs of the community? Are there any needs that remain unaddressed? How do LH's community food stores complement other services offered in the community?
- 6) From your perspective and based on your experience, how do you feel the community food store impacts members and their families/children? Short-term and long-term?

#### *Prompt for:*

- *Sense of dignity*
- *Social inclusion*
- *Financial stability*
- *Health*
- *General well-being*

- 7) How does the store impact the wider community? Are there any negative/unintended effects?
- 8) What works particularly well? What would you recommend to new community food stores?

*Prompt for:*

- *Provision of low cost, varied, healthy foods*
  - *Community gardens (if there's one linked to the store being addressed)*
  - *Social activities for families*
  - *Other supportive services (e.g. debt advice, employment support, digital training, financial education, counselling during COVID-19)*
  - *Signposting process*
  - *Skills training among volunteers*
  - *Monitoring mechanisms and feedback loops*
- 9) Could the community food store concept be improved? If yes, what solutions would you recommend?

*Closing*

10 minutes

- Giving interviewee opportunity to share any last things
- Inviting interviewee to share further information at a later stage (via phone/email, provide contact details on card)
- Reiterating how the information will be used and thanking interviewee
- Giving opportunity to ask questions
- Stopping audio recording

## Semi-structured Interview Guide #2 (focus on impact stories)

These interviews aim at giving members and volunteers the opportunity to share their personal stories and experiences in a more private environment and in more depth. Key will be to derive rich impact stories that demonstrate the challenges that individuals face in their life and the change that the community store is making or has made.

The following interview guide is semi-structured with a limited number of core questions, enabling interviewees to direct the interview to topics which are most pertinent and relevant to themselves. The guide is to be tailored to each stakeholder group.

### *Introduction*

10 minutes

- Introduction of interviewer
- Implementing consent protocol (see separate document)
- Providing opportunity to ask questions
- Obtaining verbal consent
- Starting audio recording

### *Impact Story Interview questions*

40-70 minutes

- 1) How are/were you involved in the community food store? Since when/for how long and how regularly? *(if relevant)* What kind of activities/courses do/did you take part in?
- 2) Can you tell me a bit about your situation when you started to visit/volunteer for the LH community food store? How did you hear of the store and why did you decide to join?
- 3) Do you remember the first time you visited? What did it feel like? How do you feel now?
- 4) What has changed in your life or about your situation since you joined the community food store (as a member/volunteer)? What was the most significant change for you which had the most impact on your situation/life and why do you think that was?
- 5) For former members or volunteers: Why did you decide to stop visiting the store? What motivated you to start volunteering? Do you remember the moment you took this decision? What had changed?
- 6) Is there a particular moment or memory of being part of the community food store (as a member/volunteer) that stands out to you? An achievement you are most proud of or something you have learnt?

### *Closing*

10 minutes

- Giving interviewee opportunity to share any last things
- Inviting interviewee to share further information at a later stage (via phone/email, provide contact details on card)
- Reiterating how the information will be used and thanking interviewee
- Giving opportunity to ask questions
- Stopping audio recording