

Understanding the Support Provided by Social Supermarkets in South Tyneside

This project aimed to explore the support provided by social supermarkets across South Tyneside, an area of the North East of England. Client, staff and volunteer perspectives revealed that social supermarkets provide vital immediate relief from food insecurity and financial burdens. This research also uncovered the wider benefits of use including community connection and social support, dietary improvement and individual empowerment.

Food insecurity in the current climate

Food security is having regular access to enough healthy, nutritious food that meets individual needs and preferences to live a healthy, active life. Food insecurity is when people don't have that reliable access. Eating enough good food is vital for both physical and mental health, and links to social occasions, which makes food security an important factor in overall health and wellbeing.

In the UK, not everyone has equal access to healthy food. This problem has gotten worse because of the cost-of-living crisis, with food prices now at their highest in 40 years. People on low incomes are the most affected by price rises because they spend a larger share of their income on food and other essentials, making them more likely to experience food insecurity.



Figure 2 Fresh produce on board the Key Community Bus



Figure 1 Products at the Hudson Street community shop

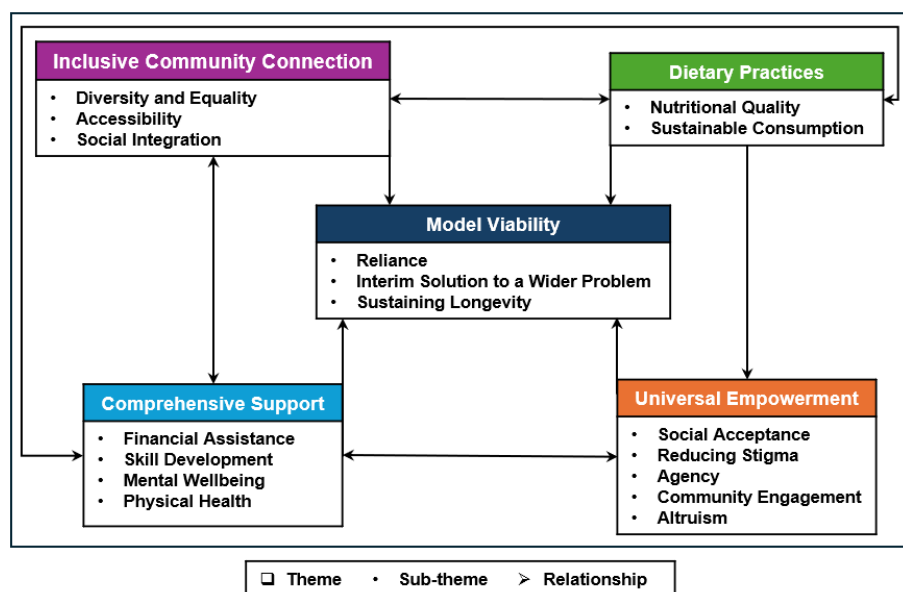
The role of social supermarkets

Given the current economic situation, more people are relying on food aid. Food banks play an important role in providing emergency help, but they have been criticised for only treating the symptoms of food insecurity, rather than dealing with the bigger problems that cause it in the first place. They are also met with a large amount of stigma.

Social supermarkets offer a different approach. They provide a dignified shopping experience and offer additional support to tackle the root causes of food insecurity and associated issues of social isolation and excess food waste. Their goal is to provide long-term help, not just short-term fixes.

Key findings

- This research found that people generally had a positive view of social supermarkets, particularly in terms of affordability, inclusivity and community connections.
- The survey showed that 100% of clients agreed the services were good value for money. 97% felt welcomed and accepted and 93% agreed that they felt more connected to their community because of it.
- Five themes came out of the research, shown in the figure below. The biggest theme was inclusive community connection which included ideas about diversity, equality, accessibility and helping people feel a part of something important.
- People who use social supermarkets were thankful for the support, especially with the current high cost of living. They also worried about what would happen if the services were stopped. Most understood that social supermarkets alone can't solve the wider problems causing food insecurity.
- Ultimately, this project supports existing research showing that social supermarkets help move towards fairer, more sustainable and empowering practices of food access.
- The dignified shopping experience and appropriate choice of high quality, culturally relevant foods promote control and replicate more traditional supermarket shopping.
- By making food more affordable, social supermarkets help clients to eat healthier and address the economic inequalities that affect nutrition.
- Clients are encouraged to engage with their community and develop meaningful relationships. This challenges the stereotype that receiving food aid is shameful or passive.



Future recommendations

Because food insecurity is a complicated problem, strong, well-rounded policies are needed to tackle its root causes. Until those wider changes happen, social supermarkets will keep playing an important role in helping vulnerable communities. Ideally, they should receive funding as part of a broader plan that includes changes to social policies, aimed at reducing unfairness in access to food.

Figure 3 Thematic map portraying themes from qualitative data analysis

Further Information

You can find out more about social supermarkets in South Tyneside via Hospitality & Hope

(<https://hospitalityandhope.org.uk/community-shops/>) and the Key Project

(<https://keycommunity.org.uk/key-community-bus/>). If you have queries about this research, contact Dr Shelina Visram at Newcastle University (Shelina.visram@newcastle.ac.uk).