

# Nourishing Norfolk: a Model for Stronger Communities

Executive Summary of UEA's Nourishing Norfolk Network Evaluation



## INTRODUCTION

The Nourishing Norfolk programme evolved from a pilot activity in Thetford in 2020. As the leading grant maker of community activity in Norfolk, the Community Foundation has a unique view of emerging community challenges, identified through the applications we receive for grant funding. During Covid-19, we had seen a growing demand from community charities to pivot their offer and provide food in addition to their usual support. It was clear that until households could afford to eat, they were not able to tackle issues that led them to or kept them in poverty. Our aspiration with the programme has always been to understand what levers need to be in place to help individuals and communities to thrive.

From the beginning, our community conversations told us this offered so much more than food support. There have been countless individual stories of how people have found this wider offer transformational in building confidence, stability and creating social networks to grow skills and connections. Many have commented that the programme works because it treats everyone as individuals and builds on the strengths and resources that already exist within local communities

Through undertaking an external evaluation, we wanted to understand the depth and breadth of this offer to local communities and the financial value to a wider system. Always critical to us is that our communities are in the driving seat, and our role is to help to break down barriers, facilitate support and enable the creation of the future they want to see.

Following a competitive process, we commissioned UEA for their academic rigour, proven skill in listening to and working alongside communities, and their expansive expertise spanning public health, nutrition, social policy and economics.



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## What am I reading?

This executive summary shares the key findings from independent research by Dr Sarah Hanson and Anna Sweeting from the University of East Anglia (UEA), commissioned by Norfolk Community Foundation in September 2024, and funded by The National Lottery Community Fund.

The research was able to look at the wider impact of Nourishing Norfolk beyond food access, encompassing people's health, wellbeing and everyday lives. It also explored how the programme is helping shift local systems and services to better serve communities. Over the course of nine months, the evaluation team spoke to over 200 people (staff, partners, members of food hubs) using a range of methods such as interviews, creative workshops and surveys. Qualitative, quantitative and economic data was collected to provide an in-depth understanding of the processes, outcomes and impacts of the network.

One major milestone included is the first Social Value International-assured assessment of the social return on investment for a programme of this kind. This sets a new benchmark in understanding the full value of affordable food networks in the UK.

## What is and isn't Nourishing Norfolk?

Nourishing Norfolk is a network of affordable food hubs across the county. These are not food banks, but supermarket-style spaces where people can choose what they need and pay for it. Set up in communities where people are finding it harder to make ends meet, the hubs make it possible for their members to buy food at lower prices, often saving around 50% on the cost of a weekly shop. Each hub is shaped by its local community and run in partnership with trusted local organisations who understand the area.

The food is only part of the offer. Because the hubs build strong relationships with their members, they also become places where people can get help with other challenges, such as money worries, health concerns, employment, or loneliness. The support is joined-up, local and built on trust. So far, Nourishing Norfolk has helped over 40,000 people in more than 15,000 households across 30 communities. And the number is still growing.

This evaluation was made possible thanks to funding from



# **SIX STRENGTHS OF THE NOURISHING NORFOLK PROGRAMME**

The evaluation shows that Nourishing Norfolk is delivering far-reaching change, improving wellbeing and building stronger, more resilient communities across the region.

## **1. Reaching people before crisis**

Nourishing Norfolk food hubs are welcoming and easy to access, with no strict rules or complicated referral processes. People can come in when they need to, without fear of being judged or turned away. Because the hubs feel like regular shops and are open to anyone who needs them, they remove the sense of stigma – a barrier that often comes with asking for help. This makes them a safe space where people feel comfortable, even if they're only just starting to struggle. For those on the edge of needing support, that early connection can make a huge difference.

**95% said they felt comfortable or very comfortable using the hub.**

*"We were dealing with people who weren't the type to turn up at a formal office and ask for help. It's a very different kind of interaction, very close to people's homes."*

We know that Nourishing Norfolk hubs are reaching people who are often missed by other services, indeed 46.5% of those surveyed said the food hub was the only support they'd used that year. The hubs provide early support in a way that feels safe, local and dignified. This matters because helping people before crisis improves individual lives and builds stronger, more resilient communities over time.

## **2. Building local community**

Nourishing Norfolk hubs are spaces where people can come together. Whether it's chatting while shopping, volunteering, or simply being recognised by a friendly face, the hubs create moments of connection that help build a sense of belonging. Hubs are a regular part of local life, informal and familiar, they are a safe, welcoming space to meet others, get support, and feel part of something.

**80% shoppers and more than 70% of staff and volunteers said they felt a stronger sense of community because of the hub.**

**Over half of shoppers reported feeling less lonely.**

Regular shoppers, having been supported, are inspired to help their local hub by volunteering, building a shared sense of pride in their community. The evidence shows how vital these volunteers are to the model; over 270 people gave more than 44,000 hours across the network in a single year. Whether it's because they want to 'give back' to the place that supported them, or for the chance to grow and try something new, in the hub volunteers and members can connect in an everyday setting. By reducing isolation and encouraging people to support one another, the hubs foster a sense of belonging and inclusion that strengthens both individual wellbeing and the community as a whole.

## **3. More than just food**

While the main focus of Nourishing Norfolk hubs is affordable food, their impact goes well beyond that. Because they are open and accessible, the hubs have become trusted spaces where people can get support. Their light-touch, informal approach is often enough to prevent challenges like debt, anxiety and isolation from reaching crisis point.

The research supports this. Sixty-two percent of shoppers said their wellbeing had improved, and the same number said they now had a better understanding of how to access help. One local government stakeholder described the hubs as "multipurpose community assets" that provide open access and quick support, especially for families, comparable to children's centres or family hubs.

Nourishing Norfolk hubs are quietly filling a vital gap by offering the kind of early, local support that can prevent bigger problems later on. They are not a replacement for formal services, but they are helping to reduce pressure on them. By catching issues early, building trust, and strengthening local networks, the hubs show how community-led support can play a role in health and crisis prevention.

## **4. Saving enough to get by**

Nourishing Norfolk hubs make a real difference to families under financial strain. They help people meet their essential food needs without falling into crisis, meaning fewer impossible choices, like skipping meals to keep the heating on. This gives people more space to manage day-to-day life,

lifting the pressure just enough to focus on what matters beyond just getting by.

**75% of shoppers said they felt less worried about money**

**54% said they felt their children now had better opportunities.**

For some, this meant being able to buy school uniform or afford the bus fare to school. For others, it meant taking their family out for the first time in a long while. One shopper, living with a terminal illness, put it simply: *"I need warmth. I'd rather be hungry."* Even modest savings can ease worry and create breathing room to plan ahead. By helping to cover the basics, food hubs reduce stress and help people focus on work, skills, connections, and caring for their families.

## 5. Stepping stones to opportunities

Nourishing Norfolk hubs are places where people can grow and make changes in their lives. They create space where people can think about their next steps. Support is offered through everyday conversations, informal advice, and activities like CV writing or budgeting sessions, in an environment filled with encouragement and care. As one member put it, *"To actually have been at the point where you can start making choices. Feel supported. All of that. I think it's wonderful what they've done."*

Over a third of shoppers reported feeling more in control of their lives. Volunteers and staff also gained from being part of the hub, reporting better skills and a stronger sense of self-belief. A hub leader underscored the link between the need for food support and the significance of the wider support offered: *"It's getting people realising we're more than just one thing... The food is just not the issue, it's everything else, isn't it? Loneliness and everything.... This is an access point and we're trying to give that wrap around care".* Food can act as a "hook" to get people over the threshold, allowing the

hubs to help members address deeper, underlying challenges at their own pace.

Hubs are not just a safety net, but a stepping stone. They help people build confidence, make decisions and feel more in control, supporting their personal growth and longer-term independence. Supporting these outcomes and building capability can help reduce the need for more intensive intervention in future.

**71% of shoppers said their children were eating more healthily**

**46% said their own food choices had improved**

**Fruit and veg intake rose for 67% of children and 38% of adults.**

## 6. Thinking of food differently

*"I feel a little bit more upbeat. I have more energy. I'm not as ill as I was. I'm getting proper food. I know that I can feed little man and that's seriously important to me... he has choices, and he's happy."*

Nourishing Norfolk food hubs help people think about food not as something to get by on, but as part of a healthier life. The hubs make it easier to access nutritious food and build better habits.

Many hubs offer cooking classes, growing projects and food education sessions, helping people to explore healthier eating habits. One hub leader put it simply: *"We're not feeding Norfolk — we're nourishing Norfolk."*

Hubs support lasting change by combining healthy food with practical learning. People who might otherwise struggle to access or afford healthy food are getting the support they need to improve their physical wellbeing and reduce longer-term health risks. There is huge potential in this space.





# FIVE FACTORS CRITICAL TO SUCCESS

The success of the Nourishing Norfolk programme is largely due to how it has been put together and the values that underpin it. These elements were carefully planned and implemented by communities and the Norfolk Community Foundation team with backing and input from diverse partners. UEA have found the following to be the critical factors to success.

## 1. Reliable access to affordable food

*"The pull on my time was rather a lot before we partnered with n-Able and Norse... now it's delivered, and the drivers are absolutely wonderful."*

In the early stages of Nourishing Norfolk, many hubs found it difficult to keep their shelves stocked. Sourcing food was time-consuming, unpredictable, and placed extra pressure on already stretched staff and volunteers. To tackle this, the Foundation created a central food distribution model, a rare feature in affordable food networks. Initially piloted with the Royal Norfolk Agricultural Association, it quickly developed into a full warehouse and distribution system with help from n-Able and Norse Group. This approach has transformed how the network operates.

**70% of hubs order from the warehouse each week**

**85 store cupboard basics available from the warehouse**

**Between October 2023 and October 2024...**

- **More than 41,000 food items were donated**
- **Over 123,000kg of product was delivered to hubs**

This model makes the programme more stable and scalable. It reduces pressure on local food hubs, allowing them to focus on what they do well: supporting their members, building relationships, and responding to local needs.

## 2. Local Ownership

Nourishing Norfolk thrives because local people make all the decisions. Leaders and residents are given real control over how their hubs are shaped and run, with support rather than instruction from Norfolk Community Foundation. This autonomy allows each hub to reflect its own community's character, priorities, and ways of working.

Local ownership means that solutions are not only better tailored to local needs but are also more resilient. When people feel that something belongs to them, they are more likely to invest their time, creativity, and resources into making it work. This has fostered strong local commitment, built trust between residents and service providers, and ensured hubs are relevant and able to respond quickly to change.

*"[Norfolk Community Foundation] understood that no one size fits all, but there was common ground. They said, 'have you thought about x, y, z'... but never said, 'you must operate this way.'"*

## 3. Person-centred approach

Nourishing Norfolk food hub's support starts with the person, not the problem. Food hubs are places where people feel known. Staff and volunteers remember names, ask after children, and understand what people are going through. Over time, these relationships grow, and this helps people feel safe enough to share their challenges and ask for help. When people go in, they are can feel part of something.

Nearly 99% of shoppers return to the hub, and any embarrassment usually fades quickly after the first visit. Staff and volunteers are recognised for their kindness and care, creating the kind of spaces where people who might otherwise be reluctant to seek support feel comfortable asking for help.

*"When I come in here, I'm not the lady in the wheelchair."*

*"I'm ignored by most of the world, this place makes me feel noticed and has saved my life by talking to me like I'm a human being not a statistic."*

We know that how support is offered is just as important as the support itself. By working with people over time, listening without judgement, and responding to the whole person, the hubs build trust and confidence. Hubs can help people get through a crisis but also help build resilience to face whatever comes next.

#### 4. A strong structure

Each hub becomes a member of the Nourishing Norfolk Network, a framework that underpins the whole programme. The Network connects individual food hubs together, enabling them to access practical help, shared resources, and funding opportunities that would otherwise be hard to secure alone.

By acting as a single point of contact, the Network removes complexity for external partners as well as ensuring a joined-up approach across the county. Identifying pertinent data and collecting it as a network enables the Foundation to demonstrate how investment has been allocated and the difference it has made, while offering local hubs the reassurance that they are part of something bigger, stronger, and built to last.

#### 5. Sharing and building skills through volunteering

While most hubs are led by community organisations with some paid staff, the day-to-day running and success of each hub relies on the dedication, skill, and care of volunteers. As well as stacking shelves, they are trusted faces who offer a warm welcome, listen with empathy, and support people through difficult times.

Some volunteers start as members, unsure of their skills or confidence. Over time, they find a place where they belong, take on new responsibilities, and realise what they're capable of. As one volunteer shared, *"It really, really boosted my confidence and self-esteem... I would never have thought of working in retail. And now I'm really enjoying it."*

Volunteers help people feel welcome, build resilience in others, and often find their own potential along the way. Their contribution is essential, their skills extensive, and their impact stretches far beyond the food on the shelves.



Volunteers at Shrublands Community Food Club, Gorleston

### SOCIAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Social Return on Investment (SROI) is a way to measure the social, environmental, and economic value created by a programme like Nourishing Norfolk. Unlike traditional accounting, SROI looks beyond just monetary figures to capture the full spectrum of outcomes. In short: it shows how modest investments can create significant value through social good.

The overall SROI ratio indicates that for every £1 invested in the Nourishing Norfolk Network, there was a return of £6.54 of social value to shoppers and wider stakeholders' well-being.



# FOUR STRENGTHS OF NORFOLK COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

UEA found that the role of Norfolk Community Foundation was pivotal in the development of the programme for the following reasons.

## 1. Strategic vision and agile response

Norfolk Community Foundation's strategic vision was central to the rapid growth of the Nourishing Norfolk network. The Foundation took the model from 1 pilot to 26 hubs operating across the county, with the programme delivering at speed and scale.

*"I've never seen anything that has grown so quickly and effectively like this. There's only one reason that's happened and that's because it works."*

Notable was their agility to overcome barriers, clear reporting and network coordination.

## 2. Convening and mobilising

The unique space occupied by the Foundation enables cross-sector partnerships that create opportunities beyond the capacity of any other single organisation. As one statutory partner explained, *"I see Nourishing Norfolk as helping organisations like mine to work and evolve more... sometimes we need our hand held to do that."*

By connecting the right people and building trust across sectors, the Foundation created the conditions for local groups to lead change, and brought others together to support them in doing so.

## 3. Trusting communities to take action

Drawing on the Asset-Based Community Development approach, the Foundation identified local partners with the will and capacity to make change, listened closely to what each community

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach works with the resources, skills, and relationships that every community already has, mobilising them to create change. By focusing on what was strong, rather than what was missing, Nourishing Norfolk avoided imposing pre-set solutions and instead helped communities build from the ground up.

needed, and convened funding, support, and practical resources to bring their ideas to life.

*"This is ours, and we have been given permission to make it what we want it to be. It works because of the level of collaboration and partnership."*

The result has been solutions that feel owned by the community, are more sustainable, and generate wider benefits such as stronger local networks and pride in place, enduring beyond the life of any single project.

## 4. Driving innovation and best practice

Beyond coordination and delivery, the Foundation helps to ensure that the programme remains effective, innovative, and grounded in best practice. They have created an environment where food hubs can share learning, test new ideas, and adapt based on what works.

Through leadership, the Nourishing Norfolk Network exposes grassroots projects to local partners and opportunities as well as high-quality examples and innovative approaches from across the country. This commitment to reflection and incremental progress means the programme evolves with the needs of its communities. Hubs, therefore, not only meet current challenges but are also better equipped to respond to whatever comes next.



Conducting UEA Evaluation surveys as a Nourishing Norfolk Network Meeting at SOUL Foundation



# NORFOLK COMMUNITY FOUNDATION'S APPROACH

UEA identified an approach used in this programme that they suggest is replicable across other community contexts.

## LISTEN

The Foundation's response to the Covid-19 pandemic began by listening closely to grassroots groups. This meant spotting early on that food security was essential before people could focus on other aspects of life and wellbeing.

## CONVENE

The Foundation has a rare ability to bring very different partners to the same table – from local charities and councils to businesses like the Norse Group – and turn that mix into real action.

## ACT

The speed at which Nourishing Norfolk grew from a pilot into 26 hubs shows the Foundation's agility and determination to make things happen without getting stuck in red tape.

## ENABLE

Rather than dictating a single model, the Foundation backed local leaders to shape their own hubs, offering support and guidance while trusting them to know what would work best for their communities.

## MOVE AWAY

The aim is never to run everything forever. Once hubs are established and sustainable, the Foundation steps back, giving communities the space and confidence to take ownership.

Together, these five capabilities create a way of working that builds strong, lasting solutions, offering a model adaptable to various community contexts.



*"What is evident from the evaluation of Nourishing Norfolk is the ability of Norfolk Community Foundation to: Listen, Convene, Act, Enable, Inspire and Move away. In this case, it was for the establishment of Nourishing Norfolk, but it is clear that there is huge potential to build on such a model to respond to future needs.*

*The model in place for Nourishing Norfolk is one which works with communities to enable empowerment; for communities to be able to respond with, and build on, the assets and skills they have and therefore to mobilise the changes that are needed by their communities."*

## CONCLUSION

The evaluation shows clearly that Nourishing Norfolk offers an effective model to strengthen communities through food. It trusts local people, builds strong partnerships, and puts the right infrastructure in place to support long-term resilience.

Norfolk Community Foundation's role has been central. It has combined a clear vision with the flexibility to adapt and fostered a strong belief that lasting change comes when communities are trusted to lead. The strong Social Return on Investment shows how far these benefits reach in terms of food access, wellbeing, connection, and opportunity.

As the Foundation looks to the future, Nourishing Norfolk stands as a viable, proven example of what's possible when a funder listens, acts boldly, and backs communities to lead the way. By continuing to grow its preventative and wraparound support, the programme has the potential to reach even more people and create lasting, positive, sustainable change across Norfolk.

## Find out more or get in touch

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Read UEA's full evaluation of Nourishing Norfolk



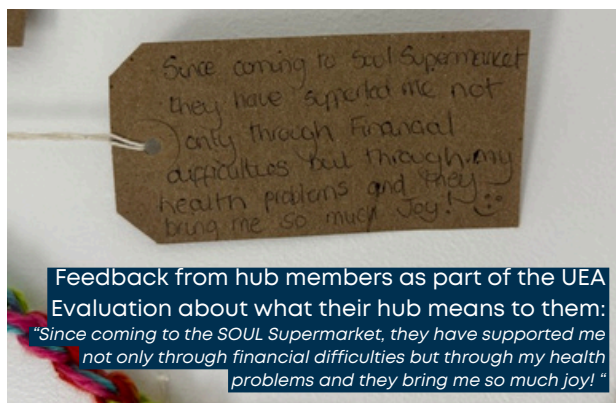
Read UEA's full SROI report for Nourishing Norfolk



Coastal Community Supermarket van, North Norfolk



Allotment donations at The Shelf, Diss



Feedback from hub members as part of the UEA Evaluation about what their hub means to them: "Since coming to the SOUL Supermarket, they have supported me not only through financial difficulties but through my health problems and they bring me so much joy!"



Dereham Food Cabin

*'As the UK seeks to move on from the experiment which has characterised much of the past 15 years - namely, building a mass dependence on food banks and emergency food parcels - this report provides a map and compass, as well as the hope and inspiration, that will enable us to do just that.'*

**Andrew Forsey, Feeding Britain**