RESEARCH NOTE

A community-based participatory research approach to understanding social eating for food well-being [version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

'Social eating initiatives' are a specific type of community-based food service that provides opportunities for people to eat together in local spaces using surplus food. These initiatives provide a meal that is fresh, affordable and more environmentally friendly than fast or convenience foods. In this research, we build upon the food well-being model to explore how food consumption is experienced in these community settings and the role of social eating projects in shaping the different dimensions of people's foodscapes. We adopted a community-based participatory approach and engaged in a series of dialogues with staff volunteers and coordinators at four 'social eating initiatives'. We also conducted 45 interviews with service users and volunteers at three sites in the Midlands region.

The role of community-based food initiatives responding to hunger by utilising surplus food to feed local populations is often conceptualised critically. The conjoining of food insecurity and surplus food appears to instrumentally feed customers and reduce food wastage, but in ways that are stigmatising, and which position customers as passive recipients of food charity. However, closer attention to the experiences of staff, volunteers and customers at these spaces, reveals them as sites where knowledge and experience of food is being developed with this contributing to a sense of well-being beyond nutrition. Shared food practices and eating together contribute to social capital and are important dimensions of food well-being that are significantly restricted by food insecurity. The 'food well-being' model envisages a shift in focus from health, defined as the absence of illness, towards well-being as a positive relationship with food at the individual and societal level. In the concluding remarks of this article, it is suggested that this holistic conception is required to understand the role and function of social eating initiatives.
Keywords
social eating initiatives, community food, food insecurity, food waste, surplus, community-based participatory research, food well-being

This article is included in the Sustainable Food Systems gateway.

This article is included in the N8 AgriFood collection.

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**Author roles:** Luca NR: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Funding Acquisition, Methodology, Project Administration, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing; Smith M: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing; Hibbert S: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation

**Competing interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Grant information:** This work is supported by N8 AgriFood: over the last five years, N8 AgriFood has united the expertise of food systems thinkers across the eight most research intensive universities in the North of England, in a programme working to address key issues around food systems resilience across the themes of food production, supply chains and consumer health. The authors of this paper consider the benefits of taking a community-based participatory research approach to understanding social eating for food well-being.

The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

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**How to cite this article:** Luca NR, Smith M and Hibbert S. A community-based participatory research approach to understanding social eating for food well-being [version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations] Emerald Open Research 2021, 3:11 https://doi.org/10.35241/emeraldopenres.14066.1

**First published:** 10 Jun 2021, 3:11 https://doi.org/10.35241/emeraldopenres.14066.1
**Introduction**

Food insecurity is a multi-faceted and iniquitous social problem in contemporary UK society (Caplan, 2017). It is described as the inability to access an adequate, healthy diet or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so, as well as having concerns about accessing foods that are socially and culturally appropriate (Dowler & O’Connor, 2012; Lambie-Mumford & Dowler, 2015). Against this backdrop, WRAP (2020) estimates that in 2018, 9.5 million tonnes of food were wasted within the UK, 70% of which was intended for consumption. Surplus food aid is positioned as ‘the second tier of our food system’ (Tarasuk & Eakin, 2005: 178) with recipients of free food parcels feeling obligated, ashamed, and stigmatised (Dowler & O’Connor, 2012; Garthwaite, 2016; Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012). Being in receipt of food aid also positions individuals as passive beneficiaries with little agency and choice over the food they consume (Caraher & Furey, 2017) with community food organisations characterised as distributing ‘leftover food for left behind people’ (Riches & Gerlings, 2019).

Moreover, food insecurity in the UK coexists within a broader foodscape, where the traditional structuring of mealtimes has undergone a transition to ‘culinary plurality’, as eating practices continue to diversify and fragment (Mäkelä, 2009: 45). The diminishment or ‘de-structuration’ of mealtimes limits the capacity to engage in mealtime reciprocity and has impacts beyond physical sustenance and nutrition, which may be amplified for those experiencing food insecurity.

In response, there has been an unprecedented scaling-up of food-provisioning organisations, one of which are ‘social eating’ initiatives. These initiatives utilise surplus food to create cheap, public meals, which are eaten at social mealtimes. Generally, these social eating initiatives access surplus food distributed by FareShare and other organisations including supermarkets. Local volunteers use this surplus resource to cook and provide nutritious meals in a community venue for a suggested donation (such as £2.50) per three course meal for adults and children eating for free (Luca et al., 2019a). These initiatives are not well-conceptualised by the current critiques of food aid, and a more sensitive framing which considers the broader dimensions of food may articulate a clearer understanding of the role and function of social eating initiatives, beyond the provision of cheap meals. This also calls for more research to understand consumers’ experiences in the context of these initiatives using surplus food.

We build upon the food as well-being model (Block et al., 2011; Bublitz et al., 2019) to examine the food experience of social eating cafés service users and the role of such initiatives in addressing key dimensions of food well-being. Food well-being is defined as ‘a positive psychological, physical, emotional, and social relationship with food at both individual and societal levels’ which is influenced by socialization, literacy, marketing, food availability and policy (Block et al., 2011: 5).

**Methods**

We adopted a community-based participatory approach to support co-creation of the project with the organisations and customers involved in this service context. Participatory mapping was used to allow participants to contribute their views of the initiatives, their needs, challenges and impact. We engaged in a series of dialogues with staff volunteers and coordinators at four ‘social eating’ initiatives. We also conducted 45 semi-structured interviews with service users and volunteers at three sites in the Midlands region in order to understand how the role and function of community food services fit within their wider foodscales (see Table 1 for the interview guide). These are briefly described in vignettes, which contextualise the research topic and the social eating initiatives participating in this research in an attempt to both ‘bring life to research [and] bring research to life’ (Ellis, 1998: 4). The interview length ranged from 30 minutes to one hour. Two researchers visited the social eating venues during mealtimes and invited volunteers and service users to participate in the study. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and the data were inductively and deductively coded and organised thematically. The authors iteratively reviewed the coding framework and emerging themes at team meetings. The study received approval from the University Research Ethics Committee. Written informed consent for participation in this research was obtained from all participants.

Pseudonyms are used to protect participant identities and the research sites are anonymised.

**Vignettes**

_Cool Café_ is located in an inner city in the East Midlands. It offers a mixture of ethnic and traditional UK cuisines from a church hall space. The café with its £2 weekly lunch offer attracts a diverse array of around 30 customers from students, local residents, food bank attendees, the church congregation and members of a local arts hub.

**Orange Café** is located in a small church on a side street in a small town in the East Midlands. The café has revivified a space that was due to close because of dwindling church attendance. A small but busy kitchen serves a free weekly soup made from surplus alongside a two or three-course meal. There is a fruit and veg ‘stall’ at the side of the space where customers can leave a donation and take fresh foods. Volunteer greeters welcome around 30 diners each week.

**Participate Community Centre** is located in a smaller adjunct to a large council estate in the south of a city in the East Midlands area. The café offers a weekly, table service meal, as well as a pay-as-you-feel food shop. Staffed by a team of long-standing, dedicated volunteers, this social eating space primarily caters for families and elders. The borough is a predominantly white, working class area and this is reflected in the make-up of the diners. The café serves traditional meals and a friendship group also operates in the same venue at the same time to encourage isolated people to socialise. Approximately 55–60 people come for a meal each week at this social eating venue, which has

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1 All research sites have been anonymised and social eating initiatives have been given fictive names.
Table 1. Interview topic guide (service user and volunteers).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Examples of guiding questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of the café and its operations</td>
<td>• Can you tell me about the community food café that you visit?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What things are done at your café to make people feel welcome?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Why do you volunteer at this place?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The value of surplus</td>
<td>• What role do you think your community café/group has in providing foods to people in the community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How would you characterise the food surplus received?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How does this project work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What kinds of initiatives or strategies have been used at your community café to influence the nutritional quality of food provided?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food practices, nutrition and perceptions about the idea of food made with surplus</td>
<td>• How much time do you spend cooking and preparing your meals?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What is your typical meal?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What percentage of your household income do you believe is spent on food?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How is the food offered in this outlet?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Have you tried any new foods since you've started coming here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What do you think of this idea to use food surplus in this way?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Do you normally eat with other people or on your own?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and social connections</td>
<td>• Why do you come to this place?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Have you met other people or have you made any friends since you started coming to this place?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Do you feel that you learned anything since you've been involved with this community group?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Can you talk a little bit about your social life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Could you describe the community here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of food issues; the experience of food insecurity</td>
<td>• What do you think there are some problems around food in today's society?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Have you heard of the term ‘food insecurity’ or food poverty?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Do you think something is missing in terms of the food provision in your community?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How would you describe the local food culture?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of impact</td>
<td>• What are the changes generated by this project in the community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How well is the programme engaging with intended beneficiaries?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What would you change about this project?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

engaged widely with local supermarkets and food retailers to augment their FareShare delivery to produce a three-course meal each Friday lunchtime.

Meal-centred interviews
Food and the sharing of food can facilitate one of the creative kinds of empirical research that are described as ‘community-based participatory research’ or CBPR (Chun-Chung Chow & Crowe, 2005; Faridi et al., 2007; Pettinger et al., 2019; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). CBPR moves beyond ‘traditional research approaches that assume a phenomenon may be separated from its context for purposes of study’ (Holkup et al., 2004:162). In its commitment to involve communities in the research process, CBPR may employ a diverse and creative methodological approach to better understand complex problems and find solutions or points of intervention for participants, using both logic and systematic thinking, as well as intuition and imagination (Heck et al., 2018). This approach seeks to make visible and articulate mundane and hitherto concealed activities and expressions that nonetheless provide insights into the role that social eating initiatives play in constructing experiences of well-being.

One route into understanding the role and function of community food initiatives within communities is through enquiries into the types of commensality they construct. The ‘mingling, observing, and lingering’ (Cattell et al., 2008) around informal mealtimes is framed here as an entry-point to deeper understanding of how well-being is constructed and expressed in non-formal ways. Interpersonal sharing of food is a fundamental feature of social life, both as a ‘mechanism through which sustenance is secured and as a means to cement social relations’ (Davies et al., 2017: 136). Food sharing, or commensality, involves
the creation and reinforcement of social relations; fabricating and consolidating social connections (Giacoman, 2016; Masson et al., 2018), and it can also be considered as a means of undertaking research alongside eaters.

Eating together engaged research participants and created a focus for, and rhythm to, the research dialogue. Sharing food with participants created convivial conditions which helped the research participants feel comfortable, and generated descriptions of their broader foodscapes. Taking this approach, moved the emphasis away from solely conveying experiences of food insecurity towards drawing upon the varying organisational emphases and remits in a spirit of mutualism (Björnvinsson et al., 2010; DiSalvo et al., 2012).

The research occurring in these spaces afforded everyone involved an opportunity to understand how citizens can become ‘beneficiaries and co-creators of value’ (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003) as the descriptions provided by customers were reported back to the organisers to help shape the services of local social eating initiatives. Grassroots commensality-activism can be understood here in terms of progressive possibilities, articulating newly emerging and not-yet-formed responses to broader social challenges around the access, availability and affordability of food (Blake, 2019a; Blake, 2019b; Marovelli, 2019; Smith, 2020).

Eating with the ‘social eating’ organisers and customers, then created opportunities to gather data not necessarily afforded during formal consulting events. It immersed us in the foodscape of the initiative and enabled us to draw upon the foodscapes of both the organisers and customers in situ.

Findings
Our emerging findings support other studies regarding the positive role of community-based surplus food initiatives (Midgley, 2014). In the UK, community-based initiatives such as social eating initiatives use surplus food to provide an integrated model for recovering and using surplus food, localising food and providing spaces for interaction that can contribute to alleviating food insecurity and support health and well-being. In this research note, we briefly present one of the key findings of our study:

Social eating initiatives go beyond supporting community food availability. They play a key role in facilitating social connections and addressing social isolation.

Our findings show that these initiatives serve people from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Service users range from older people to people who cannot work, people with mental health conditions and local residents who simply appreciate the good food which is served in these spaces. These initiatives provide opportunities for people to access a homemade nutritious meal once a week:

‘I think it has a very important role in that, some people may not be able to have a substantial meal during the day or whatever, and this is one where they know they’ll get quite a lot of different food and it’s for low-cost…’ (Janis, service user).

Our findings emphasise the social dimension of eating and food more broadly. The social eating initiatives emerged as ‘social hubs’, which can facilitate community belonging and address social isolation by emphasising the commensurate qualities of food. These initiatives add to the body of evidence that food insecurity means not only hunger but also limited ability to participate in a range of food practices (Dowler & O’Connor, 2012; Lambie-Mumford & Dowler, 2015). They enable socialising spaces and create opportunities for people to contribute to their community. Some of the service users choose to volunteer and support the social eating café showing the potential for these initiatives to stimulate participation:

‘…you [through this initiative] give volunteers a sense of belonging to something and a sense of usefulness.’ (Matt, volunteer).

Bella reflects on how her experience with the social eating café and seeing other people help each other made her see things in a more positive way and volunteer:

‘…I’ve been on my own for about three years. I suppose it were just me on my own, and I’d got used to that, and then I’d come to have a meal here and that changed my outlook on [life]…[…] I do help out here now and again, yes.’ (Brenda, service user).

The communal meal offered at these social eating spaces becomes a reason for people to visit ‘the community’ and to escape their routine. This is also an opportunity for reaching those who may experience consumer vulnerability, and those with mental health conditions who may not have access to community services. This is illustrated by Rachel’s reflections on the benefits of the social eating café:

‘Just coming out, because I do struggle coming out. That’s a big importance in my life because I struggle getting out, and obviously meeting my friends. I love meeting my friends here and having this dinner together. […] It’s just done so much for me because if I didn’t come here, I’d just be at home in bed…’ (Rachel, service user).

Social eating spaces facilitate conversations and connections, but also act as hubs where people can ‘establish, receive, or be signposted to other services.’ (Luca et al., 2019a). More than food, often these initiatives facilitate access to other resources such as health and well-being services, cooking classes and holiday clubs for children, as well as arts and crafts. Service users can access support to deal with paperwork and health and hygiene training:

‘Somebody was bringing in a laptop where you could do Food and Hygiene Certificate. […] Whether it’s training as in cooking skills, or whether it’s training as in qualifications, there’s quite a bit of scope for that, or just building confidence, building self-confidence, self-esteem.’ (Dan, service user and volunteer).

Discussion and conclusion
Our findings highlight the key role that such community groups promoting social eating could play in supporting health and well-being, and the role of food in community development. Our
research indicates that surplus food is revalued through these initiatives and employed to facilitate the delivery of services concerned with sustenance, as well as those designed to enhance health and well-being (Luca et al., 2019a). Our study suggests that these initiatives improve food availability and have potential to support both social capital (Edmondson, 2003) and community development.

Healthy eating programmes would benefit from collaborating with social eating initiatives in accessing harder to reach populations and reframing the issue of ‘healthy diets’ to account for the social, emotional and experiential nature of food and eating. Such programmes can also learn from the experiences shared in these spaces to consider ‘behaviour in context’ (Luca et al., 2019b) and how food insecurity shapes individuals’ perception of healthy food, ability and motivation to adopt a healthy diet (Luca et al., 2019a).

A community-based participatory approach to researching these social eating initiatives affords us an opportunity to understand the social values expressed by people who may be ‘below the level of consumption adequacy’... but who are nonetheless ‘beneficiaries and co-creators of value’ (Baron et al., 2018). Social eating initiatives and their focus on group eating, or commensality, food sharing and mealtime inclusion, participation and contribution can be viewed as expressions of a food well-being-oriented approach, which seeks to prioritise food as a means of developing and sustaining both physical and social capital. These initiatives therefore operate contra to the individualising and instrumental provision of free food parcels by embedding the social value of commensality into their eating services.

Our research points towards the need to reframe these initiatives as an alternative form of community provision, which is more than aid to tackle food insecurity and food waste. De-stigmatising these projects has the potential to broaden participation, expand community food capacity (Dunbar, 2017; Kneafsey et al., 2017) and avoid a ‘two-tier’ food culture that creates further social inequality (Caplan, 2017; Luca et al., 2019a). Furthermore, these emergent findings argue for a more sensitive means of articulating the experiences of both food insecure and broader ‘social eaters’, and their foodscape.

Adopting a ‘food as well-being’ approach shows potential for understanding the different dimensions that influence eating behaviours and diets in order to better contextualise efforts to tackle obesity and food insecurity. It is proposed that further analysis using this framework would form the next stage of scholarship beyond this Research Note.

Data availability
Underlying data cannot be shared owing to anonymity and ethics approval considerations. University of York researchers interested in the data should contact The Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology (ELMPS) Ethics Committee of the University of York (elmps-ethics-group@york.ac.uk) to inquire about the research ethics application process. Each application will be assessed on a case by case basis. More information about data sharing policies at the University of York can be found here: https://www.york.ac.uk/library/info-for/researchers/data/sharing/#tab-1.

Acknowledgements
The authors would like to thank Professor Bob Doherty (University of York) for his comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ?

Reviewer Report 05 July 2021

https://doi.org/10.21956/emeraldopenres.15153.r27560

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Charlotte Spring

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Summary: the article draws on fieldwork with social eating initiatives in the UK to ask what might be concluded about their potential to bring about benefits to health/wellbeing and community cohesion beyond their characterisation as efforts to alleviate food waste and hunger

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
○ Introduction could do with some signposting as to how the paper is structured and how the argument will proceed

○ Some re-structuring would improve clarity of the methods section. Findings could also benefit from some sub-headings to really draw out themes

○ There is some description in the abstract that should be brought into the intro eg. the discursive conjoining of hunger/waste and critiques of eg Arcuri 2019

○ There is certainly additional literature that could be added here, less if you’re keeping to a strictly UK context but have added some suggestions in the PDF comments

○ Discussion section could do with some clear signposting for the reader as to how the argument is unfolding. Paragraphs seem somewhat isolated from each other and could be woven together more tightly (perhaps aided by more explication of the food well being model?)

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
○ Explanation of the ‘food well being’ model a little thin in the intro. Could give some more details of this theory e.g. what’s meant by ‘wellbeing’, plus later you imply that it’s conceptualised in terms of capitals theory; more elaboration of this could support the drawing of conclusions from your observations/findings. You could also show how you used the food well-being model in your analysis, again to give theoretical weight to the conclusions (e.g. in ‘findings’ you could be explicit about how various observations/participant narratives express different forms of capital, if this is a central
plank of the model, and then link back to this in the conclusions. However I'm not familiar with the food well-being model, and I recognise that you state that further elaboration will come in later research).

- I'm not sure the word ‘vignette’ is quite right for what are actually descriptions of the research sites (I was expecting snapshots from field encounters to set the tone); I'd suggest re-naming them something like 'Social eating initiatives' or 'site descriptions', or expand them into more vignette-like evocative descriptions. Some of the sites are described in more detail than others e.g. giving more demographic context. You could consider putting these descriptions in a table with comparable columns, equally.

- Findings lack some depth e.g. mentions health but you could elaborate how this institutional setting (charitable/social enterprise) complements/interacts with formal/statutory health provision. Engaging critically with the differences between these sectors would make for some theoretical richness (e.g. what shortcomings in existing provision are being met by these initiatives, and are there any key challenges regarding the sustainability of the latter that should be borne in mind when drawing conclusions)?

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

- Explain ‘participatory mapping’; a little more detail regarding the ‘co-creation’ aspect would be useful in terms of positionality (how were the participating organisations involved in study design; what was researchers' role in initiatives?)

- Some typos in table 1 e.g. ‘What do you think there are some problems around food in today's society?’

- p/4 ‘FareShare’ is mentioned with no explanation

- ‘Meal-centred interviews’- the start of this section dives deeper into CBPR rather than the specific technique; perhaps divide into a separate section? Sentence ‘This approach seeks to make visible and articulate mundane and hitherto concealed activities and expressions that nonetheless provide insights into the role that social eating initiatives play in constructing experiences of well-being.’- rather than being specific to CBPR (and ethnography/participant observation more generally), this sentence would make more sense closer to/just after your description of eating together as research tool; when discussing CBPR I would expect to see a little more on the ‘community’ aspect of the research (which seems to come later in the section starting ‘The research occurring in these spaces…’). Organisationally, I'd suggest moving this section on interview approach to before the ‘vignette’ section to keep the strictly methodological sections together.

- ‘Taking this approach, moved the emphasis away from solely conveying experiences of food insecurity towards drawing upon the varying organisational emphases and remits in a spirit of mutualism’- not clear what you mean here

- ‘It immersed us in the foodscape of the initiative and enabled us to draw upon the foodscape of both the organisers and customers in situ.’- needs definition of what you mean by foodscape here- what does it mean to ‘draw upon’ a foodscape in situ? HOW did eating together immerse you in the organisational foodscape- needs unpacking/clarifying.
In ‘results’, not clear whether the quotes came from interviews or during shared mealtimes or were all interviews ‘meal-centred’? Some sense of how eating together might have affected participant narratives or provided triangulation opportunity could be useful e.g. if recording elicitations during meals, what were implications for confidentiality?

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
- Authors note that they intend to more fully draw out conclusions in future writing; more detailed elaboration of the food wellbeing model would go someway to linking the observations to the conclusions, which authors do note are provisional given the complexity of the subject matter at hand.

Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?
- Some terms throughout could do with explaining (‘destructuration’, ‘foodscapes’, - first time you mention ‘commensality’ it’s not explained, ‘commensurate qualities of food’ - do you mean ‘commensal’?, ‘consumer vulnerability’).

Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?
Yes

Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?
- The paragraph ending ‘these emergent findings argue for a more sensitive means of articulating the experiences of both food insecure and broader ‘social eaters’, and their foodscapes’ could go further in arguing what those sensitive means might look like, and be more explicit in articulating what ‘destigmatising’ and ‘reframing’ these initiatives would look like, and how these reframings might be put into action (beyond academia).

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?
Not applicable

Does the piece present solutions to actual real world challenges?
Yes

**Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?**
Yes

**Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?**
Not applicable

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Reviewer Expertise:** My own research has explored comparable food support initiatives in the UK although I am unfamiliar with the food wellbeing model used in analysis.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.