

Appetite for Organic

How Rose Vouchers and Discounts Are
Bridging the Gap to Affordable Organic
Fruit and Veg in Tower Hamlets



Summary

- **Cost is the primary barrier to purchasing organic produce**, with price and value for money the top priorities for food insecure residents, heavily influencing their food shopping decisions.
- Residents in Tower Hamlets have replaced on average **£8 of non-organic produce with organic alternatives each week**. This is thanks to a 45% discount on organic food combined with Rose Vouchers, allowing many **households living on low incomes to try organic produce for the first time**.
- **Rose Vouchers play a crucial role in engaging residents on low incomes**, with 37% of regular shoppers relying on them to make their purchases.
- The project has strengthened local sustainable food supply chains, supporting 25 local and UK farms, with **farmers receiving 84% of the revenue from their produce sales**.
- Cash and voucher schemes can offer dual climate and health benefits for communities. **Greater policy action is needed to make climate and nature-friendly food accessible and affordable** in areas of high deprivation, to create a sustainable food system for all.



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Introduction

The UK faces a set of interconnective challenges: rising levels of food-related ill health, food supply disruptions, climate change and nature loss. Food that is good for people and the planet, benefits communities and supports decent livelihoods is currently more expensive than food that is bad for health and produced in ways that damage the planet.

Bridging the Gap, led by Sustain together with Growing Communities, Alexandra Rose Charity and nation partners Food Sense Wales, Nourish NI and Nourish Scotland, seeks to address some of these challenges by exploring the most effective financial mechanisms that create access to agroecological or organic food for people on low incomes. One such approach, run by us at Alexandra Rose Charity, is to discount organic fruit and veg to the price of non-organic produce alongside our Rose Vouchers for Fruit and Veg Project, which supports families living on low incomes.

In November 2023, we worked in partnership with Sustain, the Women's Environmental Network (WEN) and Leaders in Community, to establish the first Bridging the Gap pilot project in Tower Hamlets. Two food co-ops at the Teviot Centre and Limehouse Town Hall swapped the produce they were selling to organic fruit and veg from the Better Food Shed, at no extra cost to customers. As well as offering this discount, the co-ops also accept Rose Vouchers for Fruit & Veg.

At the start of the project, we conducted a baseline survey with 109 people to understand the demographics of residents, their food security status, perceptions and knowledge of organic food, diet and shopping habits. Follow up interviews, focus groups, and surveys were conducted with 35 residents between March and July 2024. These qualitative insights were combined with Rose Voucher redemption data, financial records from retailers, and supplier accounts to understand the impact of the project. This report highlights what we have learnt over the last 12 months.



Sylvie Belbouab

Overweight and obesity costs the NHS £19 billion a year¹

Nearly 10 million adults and children live in households struggling to afford or access sufficient food²

Fruit and veg consumption has fallen to its lowest level in 50 years³

Only 17% of the fruit and 55% of the vegetables we eat are produced in the UK⁴

95% of our food is sold through just 12 retailers⁵

Fruit and veg consumption must increase by 30% by 2032 to meet health, climate and nature goals⁶



Our project in Tower Hamlets

Tower Hamlets is one of the country's most deprived boroughs, with 4,767 households, including 3,283 children experiencing food insecurity.^{7,8} Only 25% of adults in the borough eat the Government's recommended five portions of fruit and veg a day, compared to 41% of their wealthier neighbours in Kensington and Chelsea.⁹

Better Food Shed is the wholesale arm of Growing Communities. Their mission is to supply local produce grown on organic farms to households, food businesses and council services. Every week, they distribute up to 20 tonnes of fresh organic produce, sourced directly from 25 small and medium organic UK farms. Many of their UK farms are within 70 miles of East London and Tower Hamlets.

“It's important to us to get food into our local communities. The Tower Hamlets food co-ops are the only co-ops that have produce from us. Organic usually goes out to areas where there are lower obesity levels, lower tooth decay levels, fewer health issues.”

Danny, Better Food Shed



Alexandra Rose Charity runs two voucher projects in Tower Hamlets. Our Rose Vouchers for Fruit & Veg project works with five community hubs to distribute Rose Vouchers to families living on a low income with preschool children, as well as pregnant women.

Families receive an average of £9.30 a week in Rose Vouchers.

Our Fruit & Veg on Prescription project works with GPs and social prescribers at the Bromley-By-Bow Centre to prescribe fresh fruit and veg, via weekly collections of Rose Vouchers, to adults with long-term health conditions that could be improved or reversed with better diet.

Participants receive an average of £9.95 a week in Rose Vouchers.

Rose Vouchers can be redeemed at the Teviot food co-op and retailers on Chrisp Street market.

Over the last two years, we have supported 239 families and 533 young children across the borough.



Key Findings

Subsidising the cost of organic fruit and veg enables residents to make a genuine choice between organic and non-organic produce, often for the first time

Our baseline survey revealed that cost (83%) and value for money (75%) were the main deciding factors of food choices for food insecure residents. With the cost barrier reduced thanks to the discount on the produce, alongside support from Rose Vouchers to help families pay for the fruit and veg, residents felt they were freer to make a genuine choice between organic and non-organic fruit and veg for the first time. This has enabled them to think more critically about where they buy their food and make decisions that align with their values and preferences. Residents have been able to consider other reasons to buy organic such as freshness, taste, shelf life, or potential health benefits.

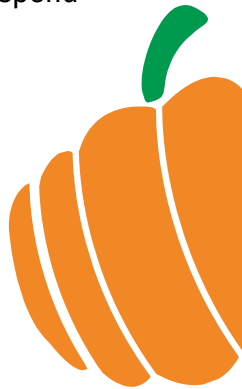
This is reflected in sales with shoppers increasing the amount of organic produce they buy, replacing on average £8 of non-organic fruit and veg with organic

alternatives. At the Teviot Centre food co-op, up to two-thirds of customers are likely to live on low incomes, and 37% are using Rose Vouchers to make their purchases.

Incentivised by their experience at the food co-op, residents also report they are now diversifying where they shop, splitting their food shop between the food co-ops and local street markets or supermarkets. So far, families have reported that spending less time in supermarkets means they “don’t overspend” as much and have “less food waste”.

Shoppers replace £8 of non-organic fruit and veg with organic alternatives

37% of the Teviot Centre food co-op customers receive Rose Vouchers



“Organic is cheaper at the food co-ops so I’m happy to pay that for the benefit it has on my four kids.”

“It’s given me the opportunity to use organic fruit and vegetables at an affordable price for the first time.”

Sylvie Belbouab

Improving access to organic food gives residents a sense of control over their food choices, food environment and their children's health

During focus group discussions, residents revealed high levels of anxiety about their food environment and were particularly concerned with the nutritional value of the food they can afford for their families in supermarkets and out of the home. These concerns are particularly acute for residents who are food insecure, with 72% stating that health and nutrition is a key priority when buying food. The anxiety they felt is unsurprising given that fast food outlets are abundant in Tower Hamlets, with 97% of residents being within ten minutes of one.¹⁰ The availability of discounted organic fruit and veg from a trusted local food co-op, eased these concerns, helping residents regain their trust in their food environment and feel more in control of their food choices.

Organic provides a reassurance that it's not as bad for you."

This impact is likely due to the perceptions of organic produce, particularly amongst food insecure residents, who were more likely to define organic food as being free from chemicals or pesticides, having health benefits, being fresh and of higher quality.

Parents also reported using organic produce as a springboard to challenge negative associations and habits created by their child's food environment. One parent told us that she uses the organic label to entice her children to try new types of fruit and veg. This has helped to break her child's growing aversion to vegetables.

My child came home from school declaring she didn't like tomatoes suddenly. It wasn't until I encouraged her to eat tomatoes at home, bought at the food co-op, that I was able to get her to eat them again."

My child knows when I don't get a cucumber from the co-op, as she will only eat the co-op cucumber!"

For many residents, they only buy organic produce from the food co-ops. This is due to the trust the residents have in the food co-op's marketing as an exclusively organic retailer, cultivated through good relationships with the workers. This is also partly because residents reported that they "do not trust the labels" or "understand the packaging" of organic products in supermarkets. These barriers have led to confusion and doubts that the food marketed as organic in supermarkets is "really organic" – barriers that the food co-ops, with their simple marketing and knowledgeable workers, have been able to break down. As one resident said, "I don't buy organic produce anywhere else".

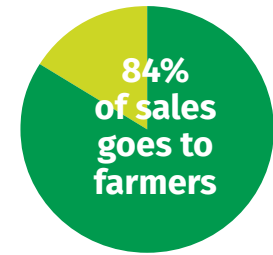


Sylvie Belbouab

Introducing a local and organic supply chain benefits local farmers and the planet

The Better Food Shed connect organic farms in the UK and Europe to customers in the UK. During the pilot's first six months, the project has made up 3% of Better Food Shed's income. In peak growing season, this directly benefits 25 local farmers and UK farms, who receive 84% of the money made from their produce.

Partnering with a sustainable food supplier brings much wider economic, social and environmental benefits. A study by the New Economics Foundation found that every £1 spent on organic veg with Growing Communities generates £3.70 of value for the customer, farmers, and the planet.¹¹



25 UK farms and farmers benefit from the project, receiving 84% of sales



“When we saw the organic farmers at the trip to OrganicLea farm, you could see the love they had for the food.”

Sylvie Belbouab

The Teviot Centre's community garden

What we have learnt

The 45% discount on organic produce, in combination with the Rose Vouchers for those experiencing food insecurity, has demonstrated that if the price point is low enough and the produce is from a trusted local supplier, people living on low incomes will purchase organic food. The first six months of the project have also shown that families experience other benefits, such as more diverse diets, higher engagement with sustainability agendas, and a feeling of control over their families' health and diets in areas otherwise swamped with cheap, convenient fast-food options.

Our top learnings from co-delivering the Bridging the Gap pilot in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets are:

- Knowledgeable and motivated retailers and suppliers are essential to deliver the project.
- Launching retail outlets within walking distance to schools and essential services is important, alongside building good relationships between residents and retailers to create trust in the organic label.
- Food and wellbeing outcomes are consistent regardless of income level. Residents increase their intake of organic produce and households feel more in control and secure about the food they and their children are eating.
- A means-tested voucher project, such as Rose Vouchers, alongside the discount has helped reach a majority low-income customer base within their communities. Rose Vouchers are important for engaging food-insecure households.
- It is important to manage expectations about the retail offer with residents, as well as offer information on seasonal produce in the retail space. Many residents might want a wider range of produce that is not locally available; the pilot will be many people's first exposure to seasonal produce ranges.
- It is important to partner with community hubs where services and groups happen alongside the food co-op's open hours, so residents can socialise around the food co-op times and benefit from other services.

Recommendations

As we continue to monitor the progress of this pilot, we hope to demonstrate how voucher projects and other financial incentives can offer dual climate and health benefits for communities. We encourage policies that recognise the public health benefits of vouchers and cash transfer schemes to improve intake of fruit and veg in areas of high deprivation. Evidence suggests that vouchers are an effective pathway to engage residents with organic and sustainable food sources.

We also encourage more investment in food hubs via the introduction of infrastructure grants for smaller, organic produce suppliers. These grants would enable food hubs to open in areas of high deprivation, providing access to nutritious food as well as strengthening sustainable food supply chains.

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Giving families access to fresh fruit and veg in their communities.

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