

Sustainability impacts

OF FOOD SHARING in Smart Balbriggan

July 2022



A Meals on Wheels volunteer prepares fresh vegetables in Balbriggan

Photo: [f @BalbrigganMealsOnWheels](#)

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PRESENTED TO

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Our Balbriggan
Smart Balbriggan



Trinity College Dublin
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The University of Dublin



Jan 17, 2019 · 2 min read

Industrial Food waste being Dumped on Balbriggan Beach.

Updated: Jan 29, 2019

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Acting locally and thinking globally in getting to grips with child poverty in our communities



ASTER Family Resource Centre

21 October 2021 ·

A snippet from our Poverty Webinar last Tuesday. Thank you to the children of Balbriggan Educate Together National school representing the voice of the children in Balbriggan and the world to say "NO! TO CHILD POVERTY."

Poverty talk set for Balbriggan

April 25, 2021

Tackling food waste in Fingal as student novel idea at Balbriggan 'Hackathon'



Balbriggan ETNS
@BalbrigganETNS

On Monday we protested with our friends @AsterFRC @Fingalcoco @OurBalbriggan @BalbrigganIF @MayorofFingal to highlight the issue associated with child poverty in our area. #17Oct19



Join the Discussion with ASTER on zoom

CHILD POVERTY IN COMMUNITIES, THE EFFECTS, LIVED EXPERIENCES & PROPOSED ACTIONS.

Principal Maedhbh Daltún, Mayor of Fingal Cllr. Seána O Rodaigh, Students, Síofra Nic Mánaís, Ruaidhrí Ó Baoill Cathal Mac Aoidh and Alisha Ní Riain, with TY teacher, Fiona Ní Shuilleabháin, ECC on Aishling Hyland.

5 Young mother tool

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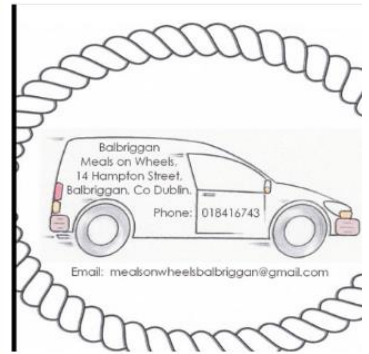
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Introduction

Balbriggan is the youngest, most diverse and fastest growing town in Ireland. It has experienced significant population growth over the past 10 years, with recreational infrastructure and local employment opportunities yet to catch up. This creates a challenging but also a dynamic situation when it comes to improving the sustainability of the area to meet the sustainable development goals ‘leaving no-one behind’ ([UN General Assembly, 2015](#)). While some challenges in Balbriggan and elsewhere have been exacerbated by the past two years of living with COVID, there have also been positive developments stimulated by the pandemic identified, particularly in relation to mutual aid organisations that have helped to reimagine local food systems within communities ([Lofton et al., 2022](#)). Food sharing initiatives - collaborative activities around food from community gardens to surplus food redistribution - form a central pillar of these mutual aid initiatives and are the focus of this report which sets out the findings of research conducted by a research team from the SFI ENABLE spoke based in Trinity College Dublin as part of the Smart Balbriggan initiative. Specifically it reports the findings of a mapping and sustainability impact assessment exercise related to food sharing in the town which has been identified internationally as a means to build community, create economic benefits and provide for stronger green infrastructure in the public realm ([Davies, 2019](#)).

Background

Balbriggan is a district of Fingal County Council, [which includes rural Balbriggan and urban Balbriggan](#). In this report we primarily consider food sharing activities in Balbriggan town (urban Balbriggan). From 2006 to 2022, Balbriggan’s population has more than doubled, from 9,500 to 21,700, with most of the population growth happening through housing estate developments outside the main town. In 2016, 53% of the Balbriggan population was under the age of 24. Additionally, Balbriggan has a large migrant population with 28% of the population born outside Ireland, compared to the national average of 13%. Before COVID, unemployment in the town was also above the 2018 national average (5.7%) at 10.8% ([Fingal Co Co, 2018](#)).

In terms of development planning in the town, the Our Balbriggan Rejuvenation programme is a key strategy led by Fingal County Council’s Economic, Enterprise, Cultural and Tourism Department. After a consultation with 25% of Balbriggan residents the [‘Our Balbriggan 2019 – 2025 Rejuvenation Plan’](#) (€30 million) was developed.

Free public Wi-Fi, renovations to the local library, two new playgrounds and a skate park have already been delivered, as part of [20 actions in 12 months](#). Another aim is to establish a new ‘food and arts quarter’ that will provide more sustainable and nutritious food options by activating derelict buildings for food enterprise and developing an ethnic annual food festival. The food and arts quarter plan was supported by 43% of the local residents surveyed.

The activities of Our Balbriggan also include a plan for town transformation, as well as participation in EU projects Urbact and Time4EU, with new green recreational areas such as a green corridor, pedestrian and cycle scheme, regional. Our Balbriggan’s Smart Balbriggan initiative, developed in collaboration with the Smart Dublin programme, that aims to ensure Balbriggan benefits from ‘smart’ and ‘digital’ initiatives, with three priorities: community building; job creation and economic growth and improved services and public realm.

Our Research

As part of the SFI ENABLE Spoke’s activities on smart and sustainable citizen engagement and in partnership with Smart Balbriggan, emerging and established food sharing activities in Balbriggan were identified and the sustainability impacts of four case study projects were measured. The findings

of this research are presented here to inform strategic planning on community-based food initiatives and their role in meeting the core priorities set out in Our Balbriggan.

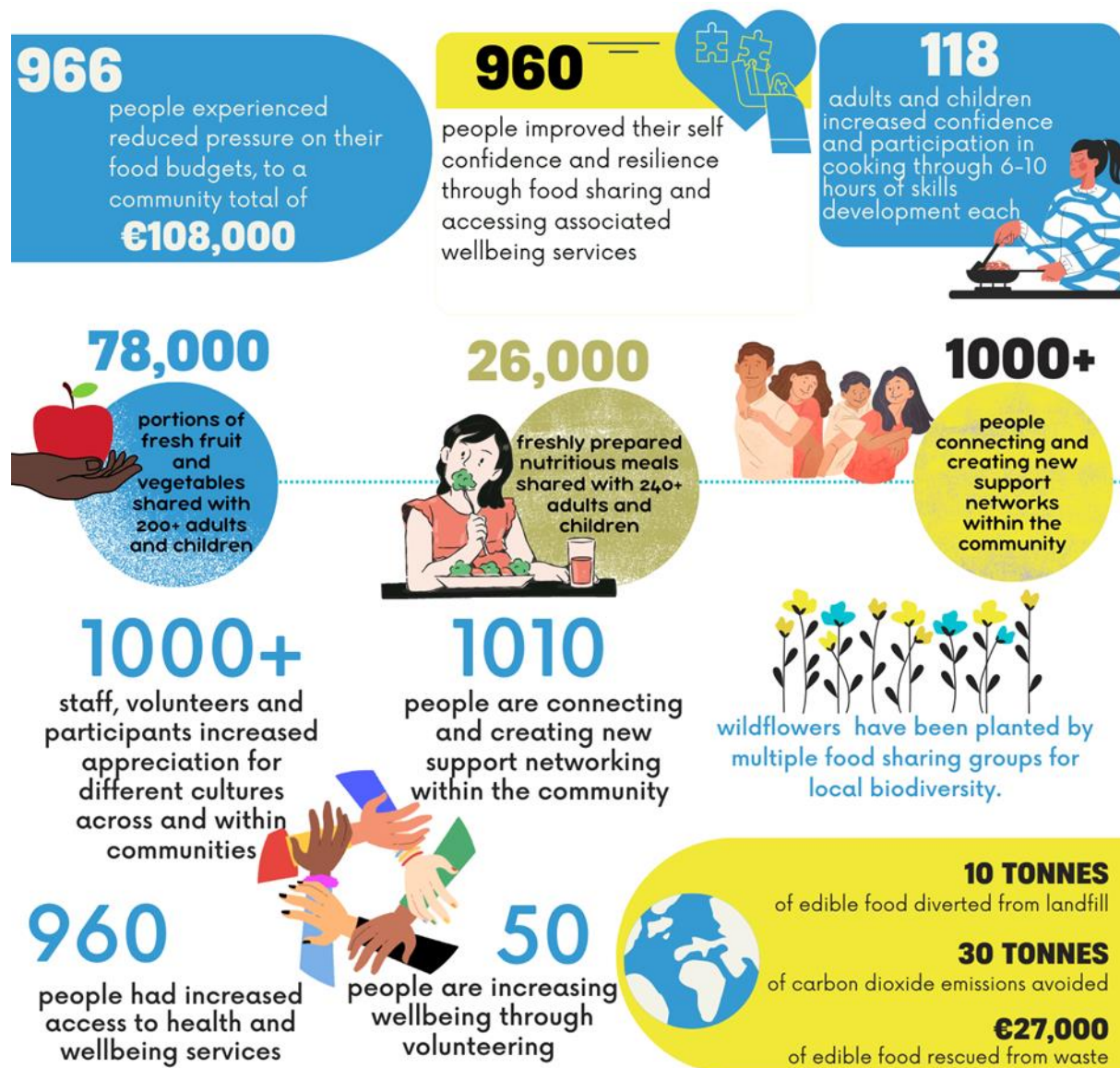
The research employed the mapping and assessment approaches co-designed in the European Research Council-funded [SHARECITY](#) project, in particular employing the [SHARE IT](#) sustainability impact assessment toolkit to conduct a sustainability impact assessment (SIA) of FSIs. The tool is backed by five years of internationally conducted and verified research in the area food sharing.

This report maps and presents the social, economic and environmental benefits being achieved in Balbriggan by groups who grow food together, cook and/or eat food together and are redistributing surplus food. We also highlight key challenges, resources and opportunities for food sharing, and conclude with four recommendations to maintain and increase the positive sustainability impacts of food sharing in Balbriggan

Executive Summary

Working in Balbriggan from May to June 2021 food sharing activities (growing food together, eating/cooking food together and redistributing surplus food) were mapped and nine examples were found. Groups shared a wide range of food related stuff, space and skills (including food, meals, plants and seeds, compost, tools, land, kitchen space and equipment). Food sharing in Balbriggan is primarily led by charity organisations, as well as a few public bodies.

Key impacts achieved in 2021 by Balbriggan's food sharing projects, and our concluding recommendations are summarised below:



RECOMENDATIONS

Food sharing in Balbriggan

1

A new food officer

Feedback during this research flagged the challenges of engaging with Fingal Co Co to be a roadblock for food sharing activities. Depending on whether the food project has a social focus, environmental focus, economic development focus, or often a mix of multiple social, environmental and economic goals, food sharing initiatives do not know who to approach in Fingal Co Co and get mixed responses and support when they reach out. A dedicated food officer at local authority level, that could activate appropriate internal Fingal Co Co departments, resources and officers as appropriate, on behalf of community requests, could streamline and accelerate scaling up of existing, and emergence of new food sharing initiatives

Food poverty risk assessment

Fingal Co Co have delivered many community consultations, development plans, action plans and other assessments. Using these expertise, we would recommend an urgent priority of carrying out a food poverty risk assessment for the Balbriggan area. There is an abundance of anecdotal and proxy data indicating many people in Balbriggan are experiencing food insecurity. Further scrutiny of the extent and causes of this needs to be assessed. Food poverty can be assessed through a variety of approaches, with a recent example being Healy (2019) which used deprivation indicators to consider food poverty across four areas: nutritional adequacy, absolute deprivation, cultural acceptability and social inclusion

2

A public food bank & food security strategy

as an emergency response to a possible food security crisis in Balbriggan, we would recommend Fingal Co Co and Our Balbriggan continue their engagement with and support of emerging local collaborations to establish a food bank in Balbriggan. Food banks can benefit greatly from local authority endorsement, regulation and investment. This project could be a meanwhile food poverty response, with our wider recommendation being to develop a food security action plan for Balbriggan (led by Recommendation 1, informed by Recommendation 2). This strategy should include an associated cost assessment to deliver this action plan, similar to the recent work of Fingal's Biodiversity Action Plan, where it was calculated that 6 full time staff and 4million a year would be needed to fully restore local biodiversity. Sharing these cost assessment expertise across the council, could assess what resources would be needed to restore food security in Balbriggan. This innovative pilot could also serve other local authorities and Fingal Co Co could lead the way in responding to the ongoing cost of living crisis.

3

Activate community resources for new food & arts quarter

While curating new enterprise (including social enterprises) and optimising technological innovation can be effective means of achieving local economic development, food is as much social and environmental as it is economic. As such, there is a wealth of untapped cultural and green experience, expertise, interests, skill and insights in Balbriggan. Concerns were expressed to us that food sharing and community work could be threatened by over professionalization, shoe horned into an economic lens that prioritises economic impact and efficiency over social benefits. Balbriggan has untapped community resources that may fall below the radar of traditional entrepreneurial focused local development plans. Community cohesion and support, informal collaborations for local environmental and social enhancement, volunteer human capital and NGO led social services in Balbriggan all have potential roles to play in the success of new food and arts quarter.

4

Food sharing initiatives in Balbriggan

Through a process of observation, interviews and content analysis, a range of food sharing activities in Balbriggan were identified. These are summarized below under three food sharing categories: growing food together; cooking and/or eating food together and redistributing surplus food. In some cases initiatives cover more than one of these areas of food sharing and this is indicated by the colour-coding in Figure 1.

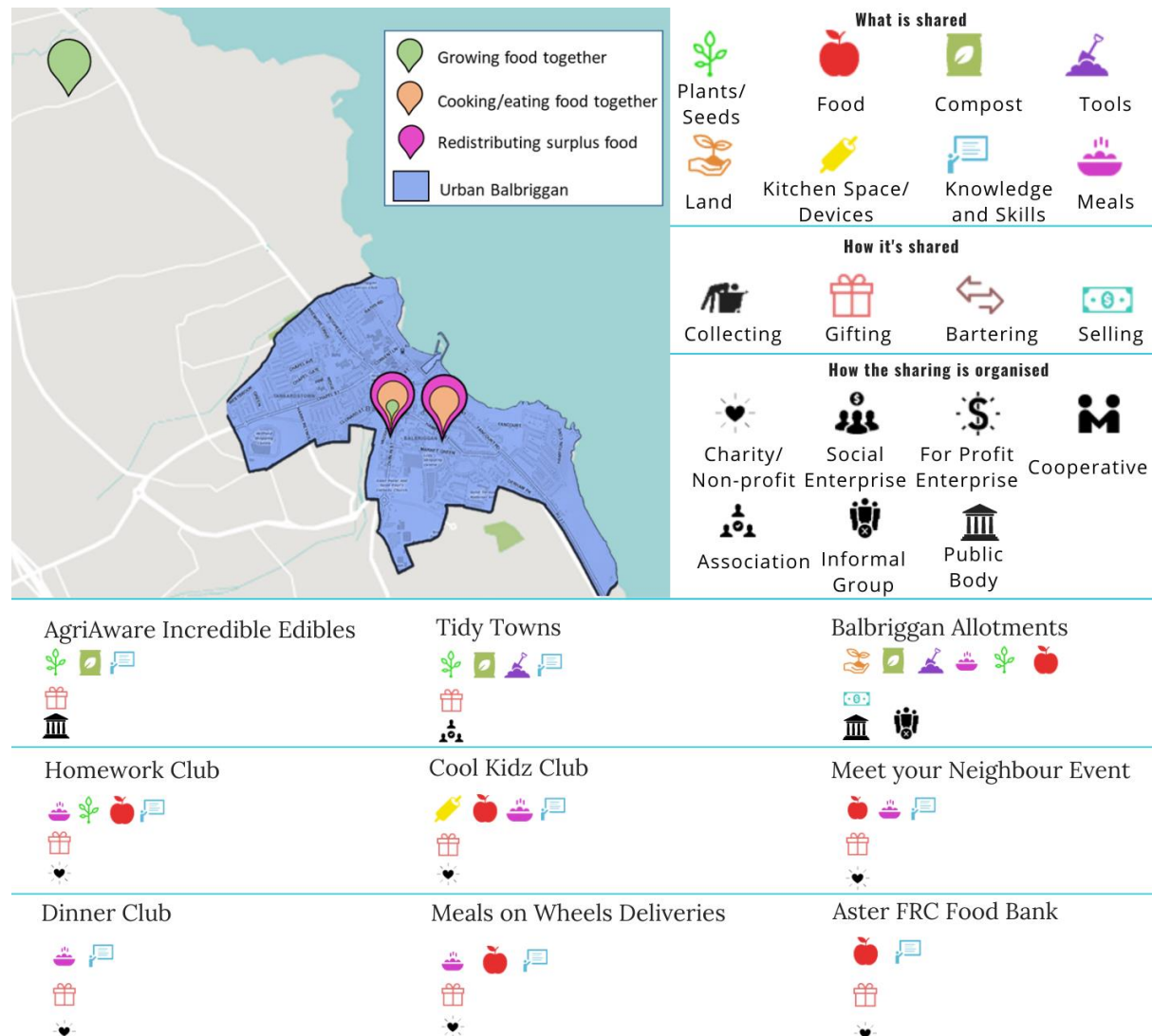


Figure 1: Map of food sharing activities found in Balbriggan, led by Aster FRC, meals on wheels and the Balbriggan allotment users

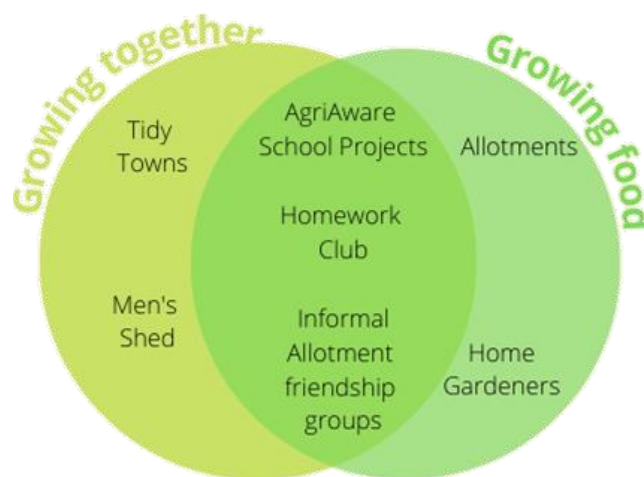
Growing food & growing food together in Balbriggan

A range of growing and food growing activities take place in Balbriggan and its environs (Figure 2), while there are examples of collective activities involving horticultural activities, such as Tidy Towns, food growing is not a major part of that activity. Similarly while growing food is the main activity in the Balbriggan Allotments, this growing takes place primarily in single plots allocated to one license holder rather than being an exemplar of collective growing activity. Nonetheless there are indications that there is a shared food growing component to these two organisations which is ripe for expansion.

More explicit food sharing activities are undertaken by:

Incredible edibles by AgriAware is active in three primary schools in Balbriggan and provides free grow packs to equip children in ‘[sowing, growing, cooking and eating fruit, vegetables and herbs through a hands-on and engaging learning experience.](#)’

Aster FRC’s homework club includes fun learning activities like growing your own vegetables, although providing hot nutritious meals is a more core food sharing focus in this program (see ‘cooking and eating together’)



Balbriggan Allotments is managed by Fingal Co Co and located on the outskirts of Balbriggan town, in rural Balbriggan, approximately 3 km from the town centre (Figure 1) and accessed via a road with no pavement or cycle path affecting its accessibility. It offers over 200 plots for local residents to lease and grow their own food. The site is 6.8 ha and is secured by electronic gates, coded access and security cameras. The responsibility for managing the allotments is part of the Water Safety Officer’s role in Fingal Co Co.

Allotments are not strictly ‘food sharing’ because they are intended for individualised use. However, Fingal Co Co has provided large communal composting facilities on the site and informal social groups have emerged among the allotment users which involve co-ordinating meeting up to garden together, sharing equipment and eating together on site. Anecdotal stories were shared with us by plot tenants of groups sitting out in the sunshine while their children picked fruits, and neighbouring plots coming together to have picnics and other social get together. One allotment grower mentioned he could be leaving as late as 9pm on a summers evening and the place is still alive with chatting and picnicking. There is clearly a level of sociality in the practice of maintaining an allotment in Balbriggan for many users which is reminiscent of traditional dacha-style developments found in post-soviet countries across Europe (Punga, 2019; Visser et al, 2019). Dacha traditionally provide for a summer cottage or plot which provides a retreat from the city and a space to grow, cook and eat food with others. Brief observation of the site indicates that these practices have emerged spontaneously within the Balbriggan allotments and suggest an appetite for more collective activities.

Recommendation: Analysis conducted of food sharing in Smart Dublin 8 ([McGeever and Davies, 2022](#)) found that shared growing in allotments significantly increases the sustainability impacts that can be produced. However, expanding such activities could require a more hands-on management of the site, at least initially, than is currently allocated.

Tidy Towns Balbriggan (TTB) was established over 40 years ago and its activities has evolved over the years including: a biodiversity action plan, a bird survey group, active transport campaigns, ongoing school-based projects, and beach clean-up days. TTB have about 20 volunteers meeting regularly to garden together, and about 50 local residents will join them on beach clean-up days and other such events. Across Balbriggan town there is a patchwork of biodiversity beds for pollinators and local wildlife. This patchwork came about from one individual who was planting flowers in public spaces (sometimes called guerrilla gardening ([Millie, 2022](#)), who approached the tidy towns volunteers while they were litter picking to ask for help maintaining the wildflower beds she had grown. Subsequently TTB agreed to help her maintain and expand the flower beds, and this has evolved into a biodiversity strategy. With no food focus, Tidy Towns are not a food sharing initiative per se, but they do have a thriving community of people gardening together, learning gardening skills

that can be applied to food at home, and availing of many of the same social benefits volunteers in a food focused community garden get; new friendships and support networks, accessible regular exercise, opportunities to learn about different cultures, and learning new skills. Indeed, TTB has just set up three small apple orchards in Balbriggan (2021), and manage a small herb garden. However the apple trees, planted in collaboration with local residents and schools, are more aimed at feeding pollinators with their blossoms and other wildlife with their fruits and seeds than feeding people. However, when these trees are fully mature (c. 2030), the total yield could easily exceed 10,000 apples a year (c. €3000 of fresh fruit at 2022 market value, and other environmental benefits such as zero carbon miles or plastic packaging).



Figure 2: Local residents, gardai and tidy town volunteers gather to plant apple trees near a Balbriggan housing estate, May 14th 2019.
Photo: www.balbriggan.info/tree-planting-bath-road-community-garden/

A few example pathways for wider development of the orchards includes¹:

- **Supporting sustainable foraging:** the ‘lowest hanging fruit’ and easiest way to activate food sharing with these orchards would be to simply add the trees to the Falling Fruits Ireland map. This online map shares the location of any publically available fruit trees so that foragers, freegans, food entrepreneurs and others can harvest fruits. Annually Fallen Fruits Ireland collaborate with FoodCloud to harvest all open access apples to make apple juice, which is sold to support the work of FoodCloud in rescuing food from landfill and donating it to community groups (such as Balbriggan meals on wheels). Currently there are no edible trees registered in Balbriggan, compared to neighbouring Lusk having 5 entries, and Swords having 4. Dublin city has over 1000 entries of edible trees and bushes on Falling Fruits.
- **Supporting a community food co-ops:** Groups like Bee8 in Dublin and Espigoladors in Spain have established successful community-led food enterprises using foraging, gleaning and producing food in public and community spaces. Bee8 in Dublin, for example, has partnered with schools, businesses and the city council to place their hives in over 20 locations. The pocket orchards in Balbriggan could be expanded - hosted on public and private land - into a Balbriggan Fruits project, where the yields are cumulated for sale as fresh fruits, or offer further employment by valorising them into Balbriggan Fruits products (e.g. apple pies, juice, sauce, pastries, etc.). This option could support Our Balbriggan’s plans establishing a new art and food quarter. To support more local economy innovation, one community worker suggested an affordable shared kitchen could be developed in one of the currently derelict buildings, *with childcare facilities included*, because there is a huge untapped resource in Balbriggan of mothers who want to work but cannot access affordable childcare. A feasibility study for similar activities could be undertaken for the pocket orchards, to further explore the yields which might be generated and

¹ SHARECITY can make introductions to Utrecht County Council, Bee8, Espigoladors, FoodCloud, Falling Fruits or other such groups if Fingal Co Co or Our Balbriggan would like to learn more about any of these projects.

product potential of those yields. If viable, such resources could support plans to establish healthy food enterprises in a new art and food quarter.

- **Establishing an edible neighbourhood:** Another approach could be to replicate the impressive patchwork of biodiversity gardens in Balbriggan, to create a foodscape of freely available forgeable edible plants. An example of this can be seen in [Rijnvliet, Utrecht](#), which was co-designed to plant over 200 species of edible plants, that doubles up as green infrastructure offering recreational benefits and ecosystem services including water management, reduction of heat, and cleaning the air. Each resident gets a free recipe book of things they can make with the fruits, vegetables, herbs and nuts growing within their neighbourhood

Recommendation: Further exploration of the benefits of food growing by TTB (and other actors) in Balbriggan could be explored to establish more clearly the kind of social and environmental return on investment such activities might generate.

Challenges

Some of the challenges that would need to be overcome to activate growing food together include:

Volunteer labour force - Firstly, it can be difficult to maintain consistent human resources and challenging to make plans when you are ‘encouraging not ordering’ people to do necessary gardening tasks. This is less of a problem with biodiversity gardening where low maintenance re-wilding is part the work plan. But for food plants, there are more specific time bound tasks needed, this creates a higher management and planning workload, which would depend on inconsistent and unpredictable volunteer support. Additional staff support from Fingal Co Co could help provide the stability and consistency, if some aspects of crop management could be integrated into their maintenance of public spaces plans. However it has been difficult and slow to change maintenance plans; currently reducing mowing frequency and hedge cutting are priority asks, before collaborating on cultivating could be explored. There are limited public resources for food activities; allotment management is added to water safety duties instead of its own role, and the recent biodiversity action plan warns that Fingal Co Co does not have the staffing and funding to fully deliver the 2030 biodiversity ambitions.

Insurance liabilities: Secondly, costs related to acquiring insurance for collective or public activities are considered to be high across Ireland ([RTE, 2022](#)) Tidy Towns spends 10% of its annual income on the minimum possible insurance cover. Increasing gardening activities, planting valuable food plants, and purchasing more expensive equipment could increase insurance premiums and administration.

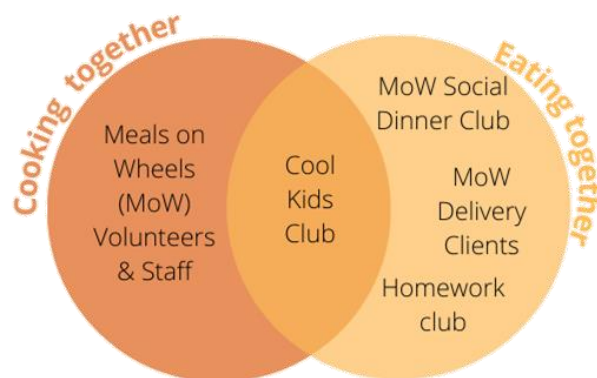
Governance leadership: Thirdly, there is no designated food officer in Fingal Co Co to support expansion of collective growing activities. Currently TTB have to find and speak to lots of different officers for their many environmental projects (e.g. biodiversity officer, water safety officer, transport officer). It would be helpful if there was just one person that could liaise with Fingal Co Co on behalf of community group needs.

Cooking and Eating together in Balbriggan

Within urban Balbriggan there are several examples of NGO led food projects that involve cooking or eating food together (Figure 1). These initiatives and projects have emerged in response to social needs from food insecurity and food poverty. Savings to food budgets and increasing access to nutritious meals being core values of the food sharing initiatives identified.

Aster Family Resource Centre

Funded by the national child and family agency, Túsla, Aster FRC mission is to ‘nurture children, their parents or guardians by working with them to increase their capacity for day to day living and by building trust with them to support them to be healthy and to stay together’. As part of a national expansion, they opened a new family resource centre in Balbriggan in 2018, and since then have established multiple programs that include budgetary advice, parental support, play therapy and other household assistance. From the start food poverty and food insecurity was raised as a very serious issue for families in Balbriggan. Aster has initiated several food focused programs, some of which are discussed below and have SHARE IT assessment reports in the Appendices of this document.



Cool Kidz Club

Supported by Empower and funded by Healthy Ireland and the HSE, Aster FRC delivers 6-10 sessions with parent and child groups on how to plan, cook and enjoy healthy meals on a budget. This program typically runs in the centre, but during Covid it was run via video calls and the relevant ingredients were delivered to the separate households of participating parents and children. This worked out more expensive than purchasing the ingredients in bulk for group sessions in the centre, but it also allowed the whole family at home to participate and they were able to take on more participants than the capacity of their centre. As a result, an online version of Cool Kidz Club might be explored further in the future.

Key impact areas identified by the SHARE IT report included increased access to and consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables; increased confidence and participation in cooking and reducing pressure on food budgets:



Figure 3: Some specific impacts achieved by Cool Kidz Club. See SHARE IT report, Appendix 1 for further details



Figure 4: Children learning to cook at Aster FRC. Photo: [AsterFRC Facebook page](#)

"Had a fabulous time on the course. It was a great social activity and skill development for children. Will be eager to do more activities here in the future"- Participant of cool kidz club

Our SHARE IT report indicates Cool Kidz Club makes an impact across environmental, economic, social and governance areas, with some of the biggest impacts happening in the ‘community benefits’, ‘individual benefits’ and ‘efficient resource use’ categories. Evidence was also identified of the Cool Kidz Club progressing 13 of

the UN sustainable development goals (see Appendix 1)

Homework club

Funded by Healthy Ireland, a key goal of the homework club is to provide a hot nutritious meal to the 24 children participants. Many of the children come from emergency accommodation, where parent(s) often do not have access to a fridge or oven to provide balanced meals, and all the children are experiencing a diverse range of socio-economic disadvantages. As well as the physical nutritious needs, eating a meal together also serves important social support to the children. Workers have observed children making new friendships and overcoming shyness to try speaking English and learn new words through their peers. Fun activities during the homework club have also included planting their own vegetables in pots.

Key impact areas SHARE IT identified include increased access to and consumption of fresh food, connecting and creating new support networking within the community and improving self-confidence and resilience

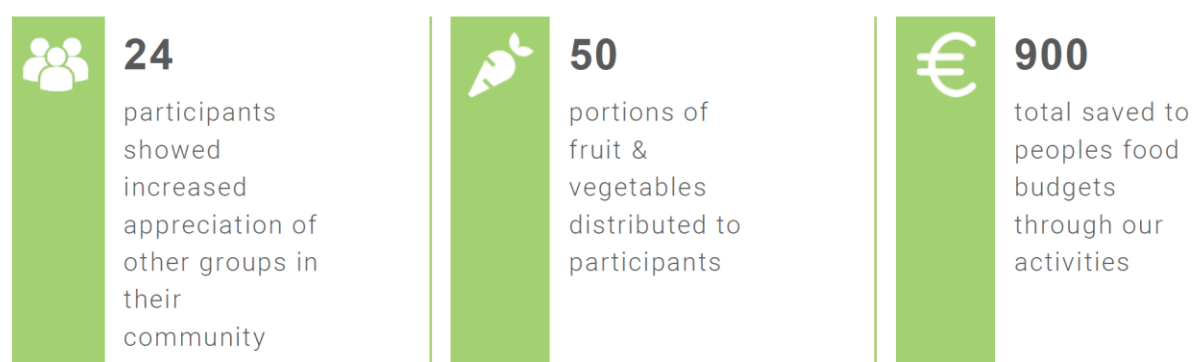


Figure 2: Some specific impacts achieved by the Homework Club in 2021, impacting 24 children, providing 50 portions of fruit and vegetables through the dinners provided and saving the 24 families €900 (c.€40 worth of dinners per family) See SHARE IT report, Appendix 2, for further details

During Covid, the homework club could not proceed. Aster FRC adapted by distributing activity packs for children, which also helped them check in on the families' needs. But they could no longer provide hot meals. They expanded their homework club service, and ended up delivering activity packs to over 100 children in Balbriggan, even though their centre and staff can only provide for 24 children in person:

"I just want to say a big thank you for all the activities packs you send us and all your support! I don't have enough words to thank you, especially in this hard times for everyone. It is a big challenge for me to make my autistic child interested in any activities, especially new ones, but with your activities packs is different, he really enjoys them and he is happy to see the results from his work. So, thank you so so much Aster"- Feedback from parent receiving homework club activity pack during pandemic restrictions

In the SHARE IT assessment, the homework club had particularly evident impacts in the social pillar, through 'individual benefits' and 'community benefits'. Evidence was also identified for progress on 11 of the UN sustainable development goals

Meals on Wheels

Balbriggan Meals on Wheels was founded in 1975 and now delivers 80 meals a day throughout Balbriggan, they also run a Dinner Club three times a week, for 16 people living alone to enable them to socialise and have company. It is part of the national Meals on Wheels, whose aim is to "provide a continuum of care services that enable vulnerable people to remain living in the community or to return to their own homes after hospitalisation. Six staff members and 45 volunteers work together to cook and deliver nutritious, balanced meals and offering social chats and check-ins during their daily

delivery visits. Staff and volunteers have had to make referrals to health and welfare services for about a third of Balbriggan meals on Wheels clients, often being the ‘first responders’ when a client’s health or personal safety circumstances have deteriorated. The regular visits with meals also means Meals on Wheels to have their ‘finger on the pulse’ of local community needs, and they respond by delivering thematic workshops, often attended by about 25 local residents. For example, they recently decided to invite the gardaí to provide a workshop on safety in the home and domestic violence supports.

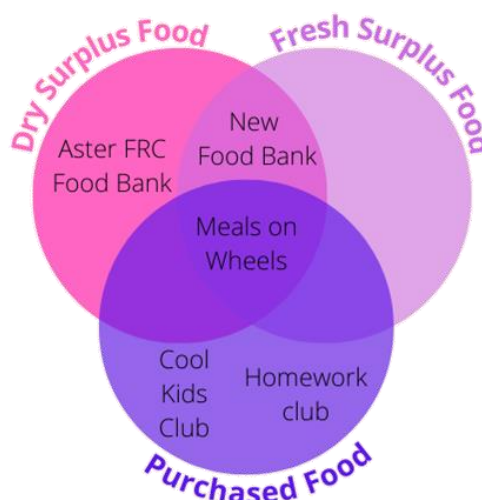
SHARE IT’s impact assessment identified increased access to and consumption of fresh food; increasing wellbeing through volunteering and increasing access to health and wellbeing services as their key impact areas. Meals on Wheels demonstrated significant environmental, social and economic impacts (see SHARE IT report, Appendix 4). They also contribute to local and national governance, often invited to give feedback to the HSE, and other such agencies, on their services and policies. Their work is progressing 13 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

“Volunteering is a two way street- it’s an opportunity for volunteers to feel needed and that they play an important role, the volunteers meet the clients when they are delivering food and check in if people are ok and if they need any help.” Meals on Wheels employee

Redistributing surplus food

Food businesses in Balbriggan often have surplus edible food products that would typically go to landfill, or possibly anaerobic digestion or compost if the business segregates waste and uses a brown bin service. Local charities can offer a solution to this waste stream by rescuing the surplus food and use it to supplement their food based projects, such as providing food parcels or meals to those experiencing food poverty in the area.

FoodCloud is a national charity that uses digital innovation to connect surplus edible food waste among food producers, manufacturers and food retailers, with community groups that can rescue and use that food as part of their social services. In Balbriggan there are five community groups and two food retailers using FoodCloud technology to redistribute surplus food.



Olio and **Too Good to Go** are both digital apps where individuals can rescue surplus food from supermarkets and restaurants respectively. Both are present in Ireland, but neither had the necessary critical mass of active business or consumer users in Balbriggan to be considered active at the time of the research.

Aster FRC food bank project - In response to the food poverty crisis in Balbriggan, the FRC started using the FEAD program and FoodCloud to access surplus food and share it with those in need. They run food parcel collections on Thursday mornings, and simultaneously operate a drop in family support clinic to help families with debt, budgeting, welfare and other supports. The food bank is not advertised online because they already cannot meet the demand created already just through word of mouth. They have about 400 adults and children using the food bank (Figure 6).

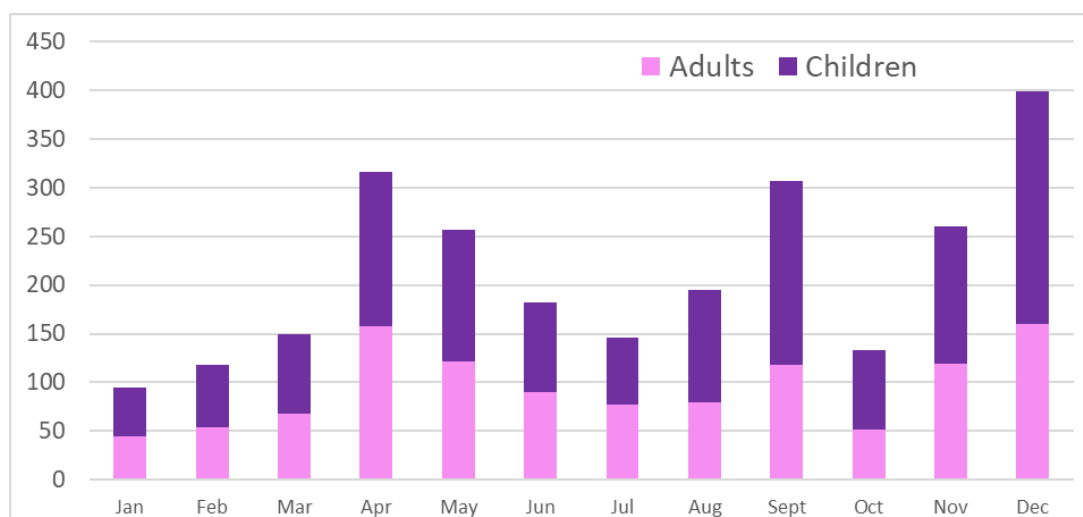


Figure 3: Monthly users of Aster FRC food bank in 2021

Originally they took any food donations they could, including fresh food. This provided increased access to fresh fruit and vegetables, and led to the discovery of new fresh food for families within the community, often instigating social connections about how to cook certain vegetables. However, Aster's struggled to meet food health and safety regulations. This was partially due to limited fridge space, and the timing of surplus food collection slots. Food retailers offer surplus at closing time, late in the evening. A volunteer collects this food, then staff sort the food and throw away out-of-date food the next morning. However, if the health inspector happened to come in the morning, and there was unsorted out of date food in the fridge from the volunteer collection the night before, the whole food bank would be shut down. Therefore, Aster decided to share dried food only, and stopped providing fresh food and all the nutritional benefits that fresh food brings. Food retailers did not want to segregate surplus food between dry and fresh donations, so Aster's lost that access to surplus food. However, the FEAD program allowed Aster to take dry foods only, and other community groups taking surplus collections from food retailers would re-distribute dry surplus to Aster.

Recommendation: At a national level, good Samaritan laws, like implemented in France, could alleviate some of the compliance and liability issues around redistributing fresh food. At a local level, commercial cold chain storage options could be explored for community group use out of hours. Groups such as FoodCloud could also explore ways to make food retailer surplus donations more flexible and accommodating of the community groups needs

The SHARE IT assessment identified key impact areas of increased appreciation for different cultures across and within communities, connecting and creating new support networking within the community and reducing pressure on food budgets.



Figure 4: Some specific impacts achieved by the food bank in 2021, See SHARE IT report for further details; Appendix 3

Emerging Food bank: Aster FRC’s food parcels discussed above are very much an emergency response. It is already clear that the current service cannot meet the community need and Aster itself is already at capacity with the many vital services it runs. Preliminary conversations and meetings have begun between Aster FRC, several other community organisations, and Our Balbriggan, about setting up a designated food bank for Balbriggan². Currently, none of the community organisations involved in discussions have the staff capacity to designate human resources to running a new food bank. Based on the significant social, economic and environmental impacts Aster has achieved with their small weekly food parcel collection point (SHARE IT report, Appendix 3), early indications are that a future designated food bank could achieve very significant sustainability impacts in Balbriggan.

Recommendation: Conduct a feasibility study and proof of concept trial of a new food bank, identifying key stakeholders, appropriate organisational model, resources required and leadership responsibilities.

Meals on Wheels have the storage facilities to take both fresh and dried surplus from food retailers, through FoodCloud, and also avail of the FEAD program. In the past year they have diverted 8.3 tonnes of food from landfill, equivalent to 26.3 tonnes of carbon dioxide and €24,900). However, surplus donations do not equate to nutritious, balanced meals. So Meals on Wheels also purchases high quality meat and vegetables from a local butcher and a local vegetable producer, and accepts food donations from food drives with the public and local schools, to ensure the nutritious needs of their clients are met. Meals on Wheels are careful not to waste any food, if they have a surplus of dried food they can redistribute it to Aster’s food bank, if they have too much surplus fresh fruit and vegetables they will make up fresh food parcels and give them to certain clients with their meal delivery.

However, as food poverty has worsened in the area following COVID and due to the current cost of living crisis, Meals on Wheels have to turn clients in need of nutritious meals away. If Meals on Wheels had a larger kitchen and more vital storage facilities far more people in need could be provided for.

Recommendation: Invest in larger facilities for meals on wheels as an early intervention measure that will (a) mitigate future public health and welfare costs and (b) widen the ‘window of opportunity’ to implement preventative policies to address increasing food insecurity in Balbriggan



Figure 5: Some specific impacts achieved by Balbriggan Meals on Wheels. See SHARE IT report, Appendix 4, for further details

Challenges

A common theme for community groups using surplus food was the variable nature of such donations. Rather than being seen as providing a valuable service by diverting food waste from

² Food Banks are an immediate response to an urgent need, a much wider strategy and action plan is needed from national and local government level to address the ongoing cost of living crisis and the uphold the human right to have access to nutrition needs.

landfill and reducing the carbon footprint of local food businesses, volunteers experience an expectation that they take what they are given and can be met with exasperation when they only wish to take the food that is HSE compliant with the NGO's storage and cooking facilities. Surplus food redistribution infrastructure is very much set up to meet the environmental and CSR needs of the food retailer donor, rather than the needs of the recipients. This is particularly the case in (a) the timing of the surplus food 'donations'; (b) the content of the donations and (c) the all-or-nothing requirements for collection of the donations.

- a) Donations are available at store closing time, usually around 9pm. This means they are often picked up by a community volunteer, not a staff member, and there are not people available at the NGO to sort through the donations and dispose of the non-HSE compliant donations (out of date food or food that the NGO does not have correct storage facilities for).
- b) The donation content is also unpredictable, with one anecdote being shared with us where a volunteer went to pick up 10kg of food, and it was 10l of bottled water. Community groups also still fundraise and purchase a significant amount of food, because the variable nature of the surplus food on offer may not be nutritionally rich or balanced enough for the NGO's health policies around meals.
- c) One group had to stop taking donations from food retailers all together, because they were not allowed to only take what they needed and had to take food they could not use. When they stopped taking donations, they experienced irritation and a tense relationship with the food business, who was frustrated not to be able to meet its environmental and CSR KPIs.

Concluding remarks

Food sharing in Balbriggan is making an impact

Our key finding is that there is food sharing happening in Balbriggan, despite limited investment, and it is making a significant social, environmental and economic impact, and progressing 13 of the UN Sustainable Development goals (See SHARE IT reports; Appendices 1-4). More difficult to quantify is the public health costs avoided by food sharing's early social interventions in Balbriggan. The wellbeing benefits of volunteering, developing new support networks and connecting needs with correct services all contribute towards a reduced public health load. Food sharing also has an impact on Balbriggan's local economy by providing employment, professional development, opportunities specifically for unemployed persons to enter employment.

Challenges

There were several challenges identified that need to be strategically considered by Local Authorities, community groups, social enterprises and other stakeholders that aim to sustain and amplify the social, environmental and economic benefits of food sharing in Balbriggan:

- × **Working with vulnerable adults and children:** Best practices around Garda vetting and screening of staff and volunteers (and the resources and capacity needed for this administrative workload) need to be factored in to the cost assessments and timelines of maintaining or establishing food sharing in Balbriggan. Our wider research on food sharing initiatives in the Dublin area and Balbriggan has included examples of vulnerable people, especially those in addiction cycles, being put at risk due to well-meaning groups enabling the wrong people to access vulnerable adults through food sharing ([McGeever and Davies 2022](#))
- × **Food donations quality, quantity and content:** Food sharing cannot rely solely on surplus food donations, due to their supply inconsistency and nutritional limitations, especially if the surplus food is being relied upon to create healthy balanced meals. Currently in Balbriggan, nutritional services need to purchase food to supplement (or instead of) surplus edible food. Surplus food redistribution is an important environmental service that community groups provide to food retailers, and it can support social services, helping food retailers achieve their CSR KPIs. However, sustainable healthy food sharing will require funding to purchase and store healthy, fresh foods to effectively deliver the food sharing initiative's sustainability impacts.
- × **Food safety compliance:** Related to fresh food use in nutritional services, compliance with the HSE's food safety regulations is another challenge for food sharing in Balbriggan, with both the management and monitoring workload, and the infrastructural cost barrier for cold storage. In the medium-term future there are increasing policies from EU levels to provide 'good Samaritan laws' to reduce the compliance barriers for community use of surplus food. In the short term future, the HSE has offered support and funding to increase the kitchen and storage capacity of Meals on Wheels, and similar such resourcing will need to be factored in to plans to establish a new food bank.
- × **Food poverty data:** Anecdotally food poverty has been consistently observed and strategically prioritised by the community sector in Balbriggan, with comments made to use that 'food poverty is crazy here' and 'people can't put food on the table' and 'it's an emergency' and 'It's not just people on welfare anymore, there are now a lot of the working poor needing our help'. However, as of yet no formal study has been conducted on the extent of food poverty in Balbriggan. Addressing this data gap could equip the community sector and public services to maximise their strategic impact on addressing and eradicating food insecurity.

Resources for food sharing

Food sharing initiatives voiced that their work is enhanced significantly through the contributions of volunteers and community employment schemes. They do not wish to over-professionalise the community sector, and feel there is a risk of local corporate expectations pushing towards more

efficient, profitable models. But the priority is to ‘keep it human’; increasing profit and efficiency is not a proxy for impact. Some of the key resources that emerged during our discussions are highlighted below:

- **Volunteers:** Balbriggan has a thriving volunteer culture, with ongoing active volunteer recruitments consistently visible on the national volunteer database, IVOL. Tidy Towns and Meals on Wheels both reported a significant increase in volunteers during the pandemic restrictions, which has not fallen away even with the ‘return to normal’. Tidy Towns is entirely volunteer run, and Meals on Wheels has a staff to volunteer ratio of 1:8, neither of these initiatives would be viable without volunteers.
- **Fundraising and donations:** All of the community groups we spoke with rely at least partially on fundraising campaigns. Before using grants, Tidy Towns relied solely on a church gate collection. Meals on Wheels had to fundraise half the costs of their new larger kitchen facilities, and use fundraising to buy fresh healthy produce to supplement what surplus food donations they collect. They also collaborate with local food retailers to do annual food drives, where members of the public buy food products for them.
- **Corporate sponsorship and donations:** Local businesses often make corporate donations to local food sharing initiatives. A local butcher provides an Irish breakfast hamper for Christmas morning for families using the Aster FRC every year. Meals on Wheels recently were able to provide a new outdoor seating area for their social dinner club, thanks to a donation from Lidl. Tidy Towns received a once off donation from mana drones. And two food retailers in Balbriggan offer their surplus food designated for waste to local groups, through FoodCloud
- **Local grants:** Tidy Towns particularly benefits from local grants to enable their community gardening activities. One limitation mentioned is that they have to translate their more continuous goals and work plans into boundaries sub-projects, because of how grants are structured. However they benefit from a less ring-fenced national grant to cover ongoing costs that are not project specific.
- **National funding:** HSE has emerged as a significant funder for food sharing in Balbriggan. Meals on wheels received half of the funding for their new kitchen from the HSE, and the cost of their meals are supplemented by the HSE. In Aster FRC, Healthy Ireland (a HSE agency) funds the Cool Kidz Club, as a version of Healthy Ireland’s ‘Healthy Food made Easy’ course, the the homework club.
- **Employment schemes:** Food sharing initiatives in Balbriggan benefit from the Tús and CE scheme to supplement their human resourcing, and invest in their employees through the scheme with professional development courses and professional experience.

Opportunities

- **Skills and expertise:** Balbriggan has a rich tapestry of diverse skills and expertise among its food sharing initiatives’ staff and volunteers. Within food sharing there are skills in cooking meals at scale, working with vulnerable persons, grant management, fundraising skills, nutritional expertise, budgetary expertise and many more. Adjacent to food sharing, Tidy Towns, Men’s shed and other such groups enhance Balbriggan with gardening skills, DIY, construction, biodiversity expertise, environmental knowledge and more. At a more informal, grassroots level we see examples of neighbours sharing skills with each other, such as the carpentry and food production skills shared among neighbouring plots in the allotments.
- **Volunteers:** Food sharing is made possible in Balbriggan because of a culture of volunteering within the community, which was especially amplified during pandemic restrictions. Meals on Wheels alone has 45 active volunteers, Tidy Towns could have over 50 people join a beach clean-up day and the national volunteer database, IVOL, advertises ongoing volunteer opportunities in Balbriggan. There are also more volunteers that could be activated through enhancement of local transport infrastructure; there are many people on the outskirts of

Balbriggan who cannot get involved in the local community because they do not have accessible transport available. Also, with the lack of childcare, women that want to offer skills and time to the community are locked out.

- **Multi-cultural community:** Events like ‘Meet your neighbour’, where about 60 people attend annually to taste food from different cultures, are possible due to the diverse nationalities and ethnicities of people living in Balbriggan. Different nationalities enhance Balbriggan’s food sharing by introducing new food enterprises (e.g. Balbriggan’s first sustainable (Brazilian) Cabana café), new culinary dishes (during the annual meet your neighbour event), and new approaches to growing food together (with the Eastern European Dacha-like use of allotment plots).
- **Our Balbriggan and a new Food Quarter:** Plans to develop a new food and arts quarter in Balbriggan offers an exciting opportunity to enhance existing, and enable new, food sharing initiatives in Balbriggan. This could be the catalyst to activate the untapped potential of human capital locked out by inadequate transport to town centre and lack of child care infrastructure, and to address the food insecurity crisis by cultivating social enterprise food models that increase access to affordable, nutritious food and increase household incomes by providing inclusive local employment opportunities.

Acknowledgements

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Please cite this report as: McGeever, A. and Davies, A.R. (2022) Sustainability impacts of food sharing in Smart Balbriggan, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: SHARE IT report for Aster FRC Cool Kidz Club

Appendix 2: SHARE IT report for Aster FRC Homework Club

Appendix 3: SHARE IT report for Aster FRC Food Bank

Appendix 4: SHARE IT report for Meals on Wheels

Sustainability Impact Summary



WHO WE ARE

Name: Aster FRC Cool Kids Club

Location: Balbriggan



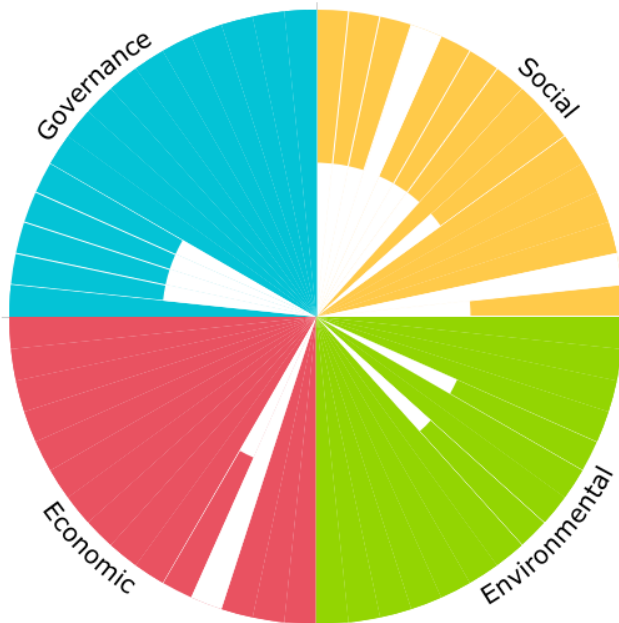
GOALS AND ACTIVITIES

Goals: Offer activities where parents and children plan, cook and enjoy healthy meals together on a budget

Activities: Shared Cooking/Eating, Educational



OUR IMPACT AREAS



► Our key areas of significant impact are

- Increased access to and consumption of fruit and vegetables
- Increased confidence and participation in cooking
- Reducing pressure on food budgets



Indicator where we have reported our impact



Indicator where we are having a significant impact



SPECIFIC IMPACTS INCLUDE



1800

portions of fruit & vegetables distributed to participants



118

people attended events aimed at improving cooking skills



1000

total saved to peoples food budgets through our activities



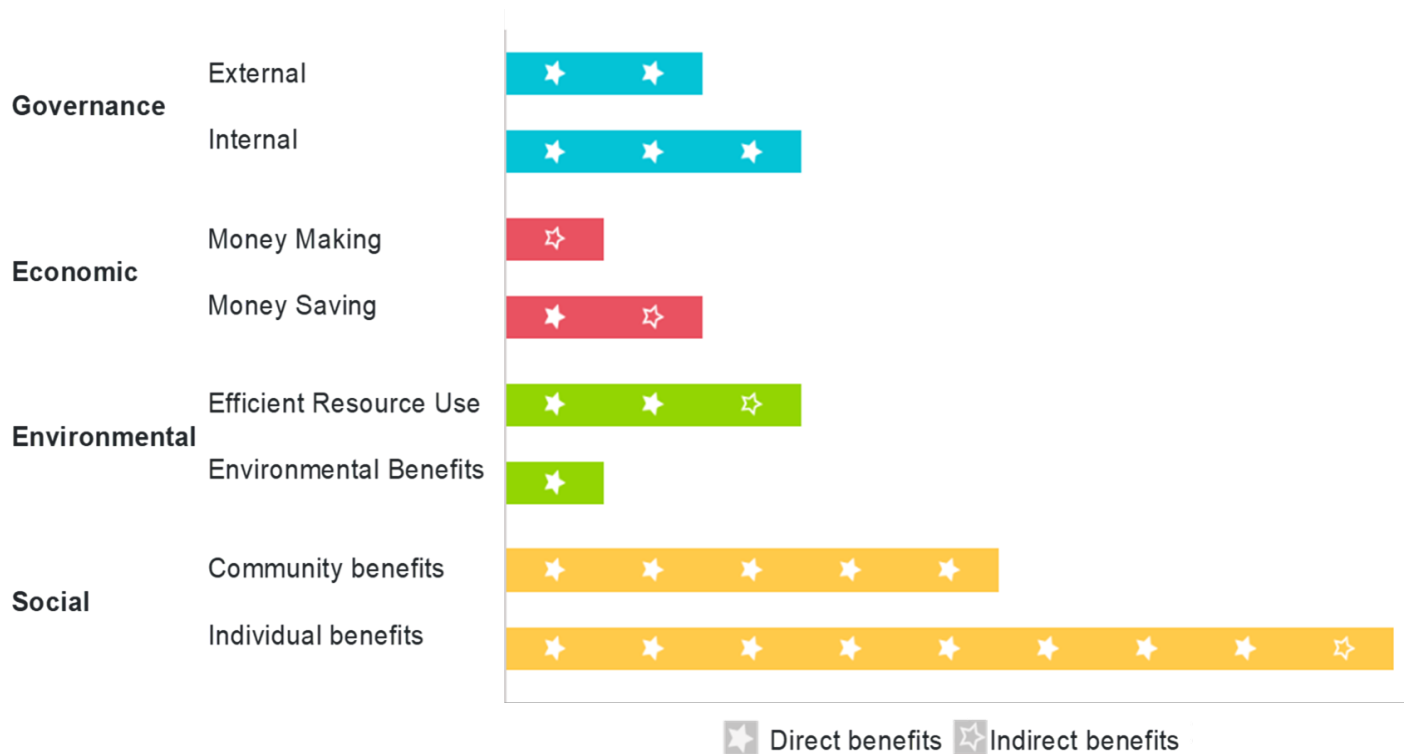
WHY WE SHARE FOOD

- 1 In Ireland, one in ten households experience “Food poverty”. Socially disadvantaged groups have reduced access to good quality, nutritious and affordable food.
- 2 Working with our friends in Empower, the Cool Kids Club do 6-10 sessions with parent and child groups to cook healthy meals on a budget
- 3 We use a relaxed and fun approach to equip and empower families to overcome health inequalities through meal planning, budgeting tips and cooking lessons



BENEFITS FROM SHARING: OUR SHARESTARS

Food sharing can create multiple positive benefits from fostering social cohesion to reducing food waste. A summary of the areas where we benefits are shown in the graphic below based on the number of stars in each category.





SHARING IMPACT STORIES

Story 1

Our parent and child participants in the Cool Kids Club collectively prepared over 700 healthy meals together

Story 2

"Had a fabulous time on the course. It was a great social activity and skill development for children. Will be eager to do more activities here in the future"

Story 3

A part of the Cool Kids Club sessions includes how to plan meals, that are healthy and nutritious, on a budget. Meal planning is a great way to reduce the risk of household food waste and save money



HOW WE CONTRIBUTE TO THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Sustainability Impact Summary



WHO WE ARE

Name: Aster FRC Homework Club

Location: Balbriggan



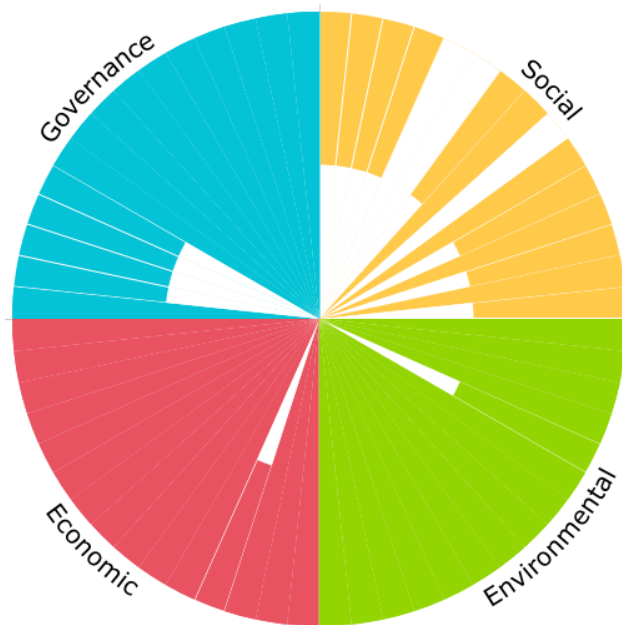
GOALS AND ACTIVITIES

Goals: Provide an afterschool space for children experiencing homelessness, and a hot nutritious meal

Activities: Shared Cooking/Eating, Educational



OUR IMPACT AREAS



► Our key areas of significant impact are

- Increased access to and consumption of fresh food
- Connecting and creating new support networks within communities
- Improving self-confidence and resilience



Indicator where we have reported our impact



Indicator where we are having a significant impact



SPECIFIC IMPACTS INCLUDE



24

participants showed increased appreciation of other groups in their community



50

portions of fruit & vegetables distributed to participants



900

total saved to peoples food budgets through our activities



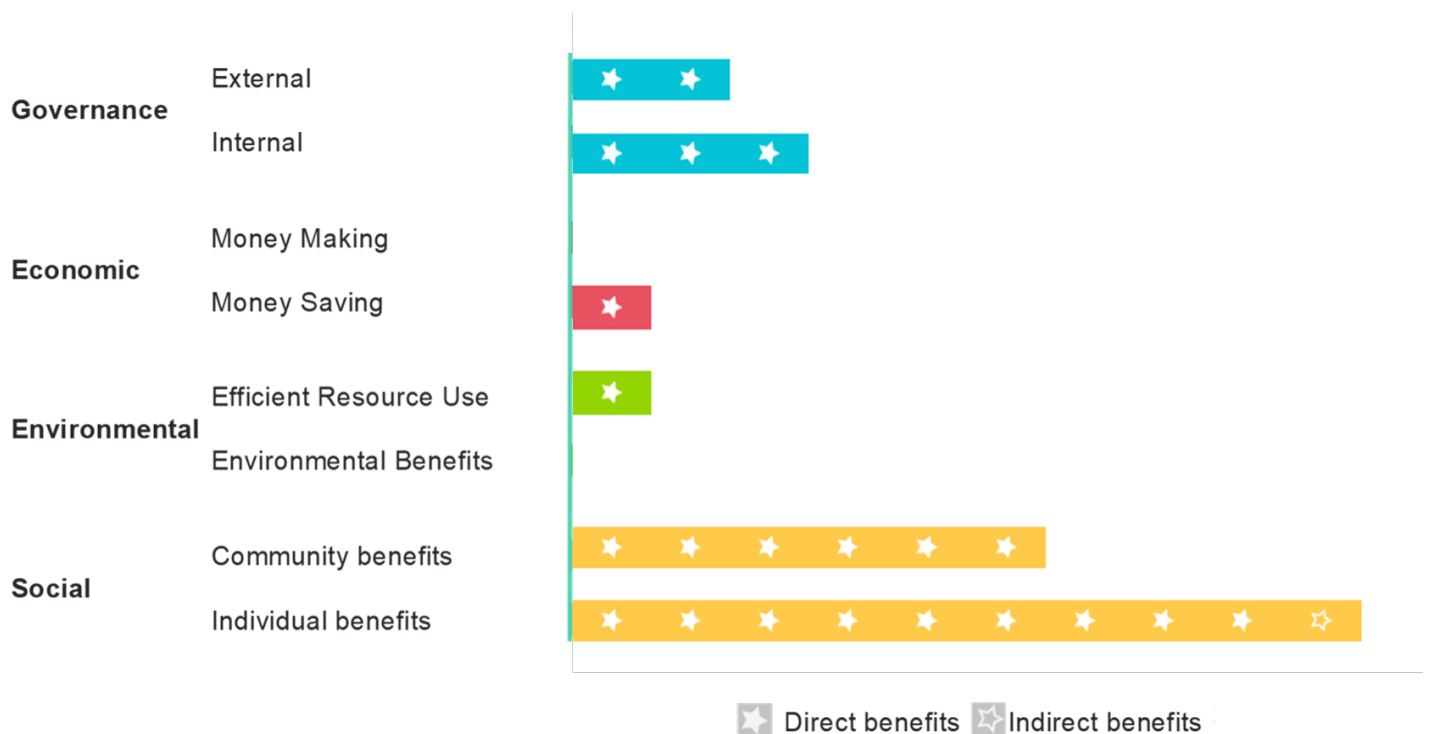
WHY WE SHARE FOOD

- 1 Over 2,500 children live in emergency accommodation in Ireland where their parent(s) may not have cooking or storage facilities to provide them with a hot meal
- 2 Our afterschool program always includes a hot, freshly prepared, nutritious cooked meal while we aim to build resilience in children and offer non-mainstream education programs
- 3 During Covid restrictions, we delivered activity packs because we could not meet together. One parent said "My 8 yr old is missing her family and friends, but the little gifts and arts and crafts materials really lifted her spirits".



BENEFITS FROM SHARING: OUR SHARESTARS

Food sharing can create multiple positive benefits from fostering social cohesion to reducing food waste. A summary of the areas where we benefits are shown in the graphic below based on the number of stars in each category.





SHARING IMPACT STORIES

Story 1

Our Homework Club participants include children from diverse backgrounds that are experiencing homelessness or other disadvantages. A key goal of providing our afterschool space and sharing a meal together is to help them form friendships with each other

Story 2

The children form new friendships, and we hear of sleepovers and other social get togethers that happen after meeting in our space. Parents also can learn about our support services and meet other parents

Story 3

It is empowering for a child to learn English and do their homework in a relaxed environment, not feeling hungry and learning from their new friends peer to peer



HOW WE CONTRIBUTE TO THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



This summary report was built using the SHARE IT toolkit that formed part of the SHARECITY research project which was funded by the European Research Council. Grant Agreement No. 646883.

Sustainability Impact Summary



WHO WE ARE

Name: Aster FRC Food Bank

Location: Balbriggan



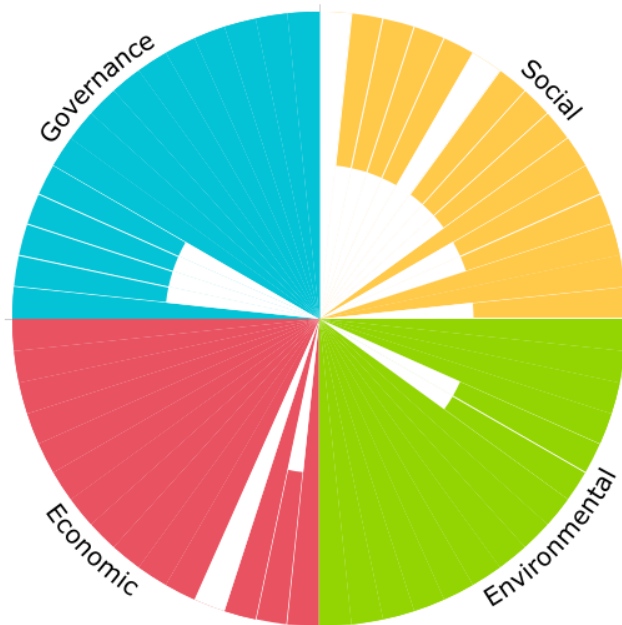
GOALS AND ACTIVITIES

Goals: We aim to support families who are struggling with food poverty in our catchment area

Activities: Redistribution, Educational



OUR IMPACT AREAS



► Our key areas of significant impact are

- Increasing appreciation of different cultures across and within communities
- Connecting and creating new support networks within communities
- Reducing pressure on food budgets



Indicator where we have reported our impact



Indicator where we are having a significant impact



SPECIFIC IMPACTS INCLUDE



400

participants showed increased appreciation of other groups in their community



160

people attended our events that increased access to vital services



5400

total saved to peoples food budgets through our activities



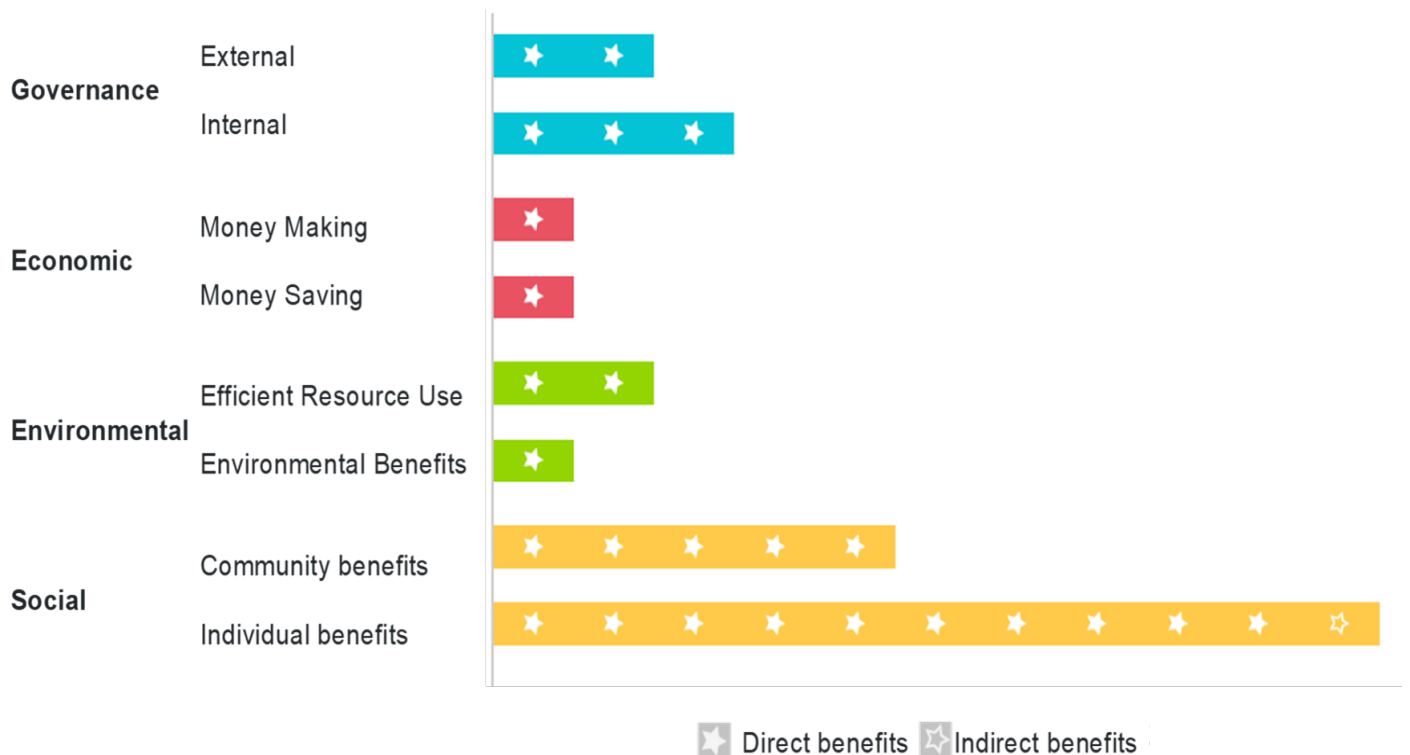
WHY WE SHARE FOOD

- 1 One in four children are living in households experiencing deprivation of two or more basic necessities. Over 100,000 children are living in what's known as 'consistent poverty'.
- 2 Since opening in 2018, Aster FRC quickly identified food poverty as a need in the area. Even though it's not a role they would traditionally undertake, they set up a food bank to help feed struggling families in the community.
- 3 The food bank runs every second Thursday and demand for the parcels, which mainly consist of dry produce, is growing all the time due to word of mouth. Aster FRC's Co-Ordinator described the food bank as "a safety net" for those who need it.



BENEFITS FROM SHARING: OUR SHARESTARS

Food sharing can create multiple positive benefits from fostering social cohesion to reducing food waste. A summary of the areas where we benefits are shown in the graphic below based on the number of stars in each category.





SHARING IMPACT STORIES

Story 1

Before we switched to dry foods only, our fresh fruit and vegetables gave people the opportunity to try new foods and see if they liked them, before buying them. Often participants would ask us 'what is that?' not recognizing certain Irish vegetables, like turnips for example. And we'll chat about how to cook them and use them in a meal.

Story 2

Price is the bottom line for people making food decisions, because of the levels of food poverty they are experiencing. It is about what they can afford. Environmental sustainability, and even nutrition, is a privilege and a luxury many here cannot consider. Culturally, some of us will try to have one or two meals a month that taste like home, but the African or Asian food is much more expensive, so that is a rare treat, usually just for us parents, our children want 'normal' Irish food

Story 3

We operate a drop in Family Support Clinic during the food parcel collection time on Thursday mornings. We use these clinics to refer people to other services, advocate for renegotiating their loan repayments, giving household budget advice and help them understand their social welfare options



HOW WE CONTRIBUTE TO THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

1 NO POVERTY



2 ZERO HUNGER



3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



4 QUALITY EDUCATION



8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE



10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES



11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES



12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION



13 CLIMATE ACTION



15 LIFE ON LAND



16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS



17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS



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Sustainability Impact Summary



WHO WE ARE

Name: Meals on Wheels Balbriggan

Location: Balbriggan



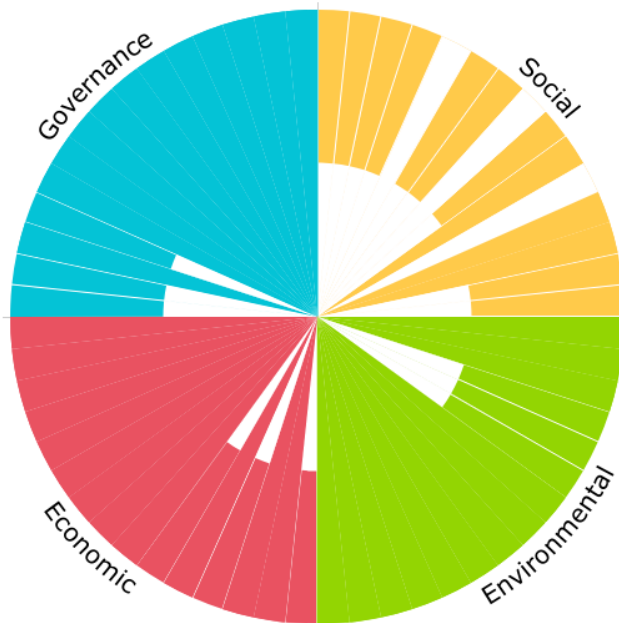
GOALS AND ACTIVITIES

Goals: We provide a nutritional and social service for people who are unable to cook for themselves.

Activities: Shared Cooking/Eating, Redistribution, Educational



OUR IMPACT AREAS



► Our key areas of significant impact are

- Increased access to and consumption of fresh food
- Increasing well-being through volunteering
- Increasing access to health and well-being services



Indicator where we have reported our impact



Indicator where we are having a significant impact



SPECIFIC IMPACTS INCLUDE



76000

portions of fruit & vegetables distributed to participants



8.3

tonnes of food diverted from landfill



100000

total saved to peoples food budgets through our activities



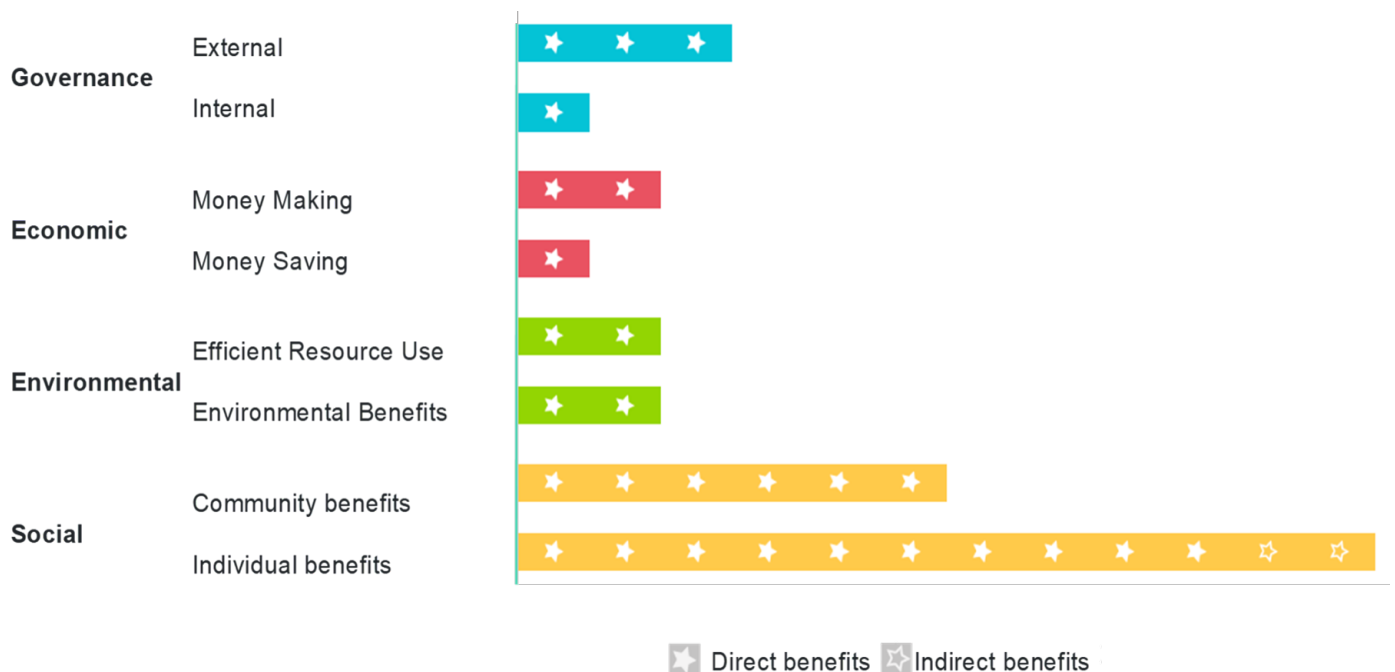
WHY WE SHARE FOOD

- 1 Meals-on-wheels service is a critical component of the continuum of care services that enable vulnerable people to remain living in the community or to return to their own homes after hospitalisation.
- 2 Many people isolated by age, retirement, ill-health, disability, may feel left behind; this can be dispelled by a chat whilst delivering meals, and can offer a feeling of security to those enjoying independence but are reassured by a regular visit
- 3 Balbriggan Meals on Wheels was founded in 1975 and now delivers 80 meals a day throughout Balbriggan, we also run a Dinner Club for people living alone to enable them to socialise and have company



BENEFITS FROM SHARING: OUR SHARESTARS

Food sharing can create multiple positive benefits from fostering social cohesion to reducing food waste. A summary of the areas where we benefits are shown in the graphic below based on the number of stars in each category.





SHARING IMPACT STORIES

Story 1

Our clients are all from diverse backgrounds. They may be elderly, recently out of hospital, new moms, recovering from addiction or availing of our meal service for many other reasons. Our Dinner Club members share a meal together 3 times a week, and learn about different cultures and background. Our volunteers are also from diverse backgrounds and benefit from meeting with each other and sitting with our clients while they enjoy their home delivered meal. It is our policy to have a very inclusive environment, with staff, volunteers and clients all from many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Story 2

All our meals are balanced with at least 2 portions of freshly prepared vegetables (in addition to potatoes), and our deserts are primarily fruit based. Users of our Dinner Club and meal deliveries would not have a balanced meal that day if they didn't receive it from us. The food donations we receive often don't have the right proportions to make a balanced meal, so we often buy directly from a local vegetable supplier to top up the food donations, so all our meals are nutritious and balanced.

Story 3

Volunteering is a two way street- it's an opportunity for volunteers to feel needed and that they play an important role, the volunteers meet the clients when they are delivering food and check in if people are ok and if they need any help.



HOW WE CONTRIBUTE TO THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

1 NO POVERTY



2 ZERO HUNGER



3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



4 QUALITY EDUCATION



8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE



10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES



11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES



12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION



13 CLIMATE ACTION



15 LIFE ON LAND



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