



Food systems stories and statistics: A mixed methods evaluation of the outcomes and impacts of VicHealth's Future Healthy food hubs

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A mixed methods evaluation of the outcomes and impacts of VicHealth's Future Healthy food hubs



September 2026

FINAL REPORT

Food systems stories and statistics: A mixed methods evaluation of the outcomes and impacts of VicHealth's Future Healthy food hubs

Report prepared by Dr Rebecca Lindberg, Dr Kate Wingrove, Associate Professor Kristy Bolton, Dr Erica Reeve, Dr Penny Love, Professor Steve Allender, Professor Gary Sacks and Professor Colin Bell.

There's a whole chain of benefits. It's not just feeding people...it's a community, right? It revolves around food, relief and community food programs...a whole ecosystem of things are coming out of it.

- Volunteer, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

It's not just food production. It's a community space. It's well-being. It's education. There are many layers.

- Community Partner, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Project team: The project was led by Dr Rebecca Lindberg together with Dr Kate Wingrove, and Associate Professor Kristy Bolton from Deakin's Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN) and Dr Erica Reeve from Deakin's Global Centre for Preventive Health and Nutrition (GLOBE) within the Institute for Health Transformation (IHT). The team also included Advisory Group members: Dr Penny Love (IPAN), Professor Gary Sacks (IHT-GLOBE), Professor Steven Allender (IHT-GLOBE), and Professor Colin Bell (IHT-GLOBE). Ethics advice from Dr Christina Zorbas (IHT-GLOBE) If you have questions and/or would like to request access to the appendix contact: r.lindberg@deakin.edu.au

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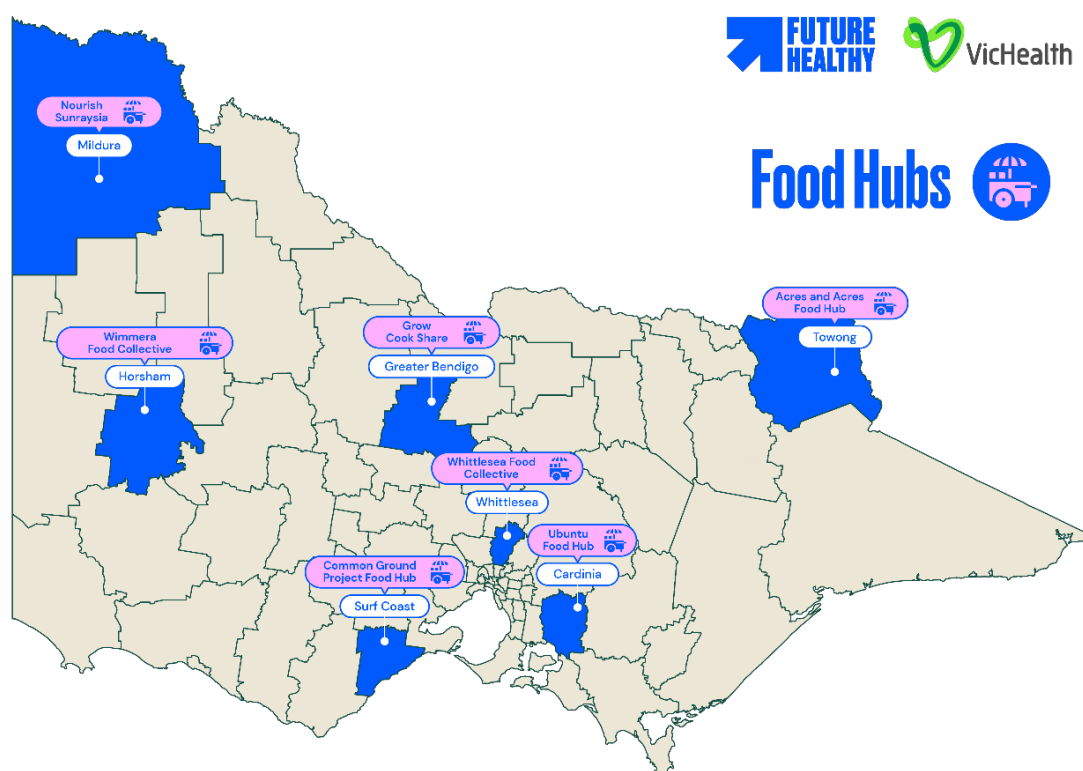


Figure 1. Location of the seven Future Healthy Food Hubs

Source: <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/programs-projects/our-future-healthy-food-hubs-partners>

Table 1. Description of the seven Future Healthy Food Hubs

Food hub name (Organisation name)	Local Government Area	Description (Source: VicHealth website)
Acres and Acres Food Hub	Towong	Hub will address barriers to short supply chain, age demographics of farming industry, social isolation, food literacy and access to seasonal and affordable foods. It will provide opportunities to come together and celebrate community and food. This critical work creates invaluable benefits to producers and consumers and improves economic resilience and community health.
Common Ground Project Food Hub (Common Ground Project)	Surf Coast	A 4-acre regenerative farm and social enterprise that focuses on promoting food security, empowering agency and advocacy, and fostering community collaboration. The hub provides a connection to regenerative agriculture through produce grown onsite, whilst creating a hyper-local network of the region's small-scale food producers and supporting community empowerment and education through workshops on food and farming systems.
Grow Cook Share Food Hub (Bendigo Food Share)	Greater Bendigo	Hub is an agreed vision with Bendigo Foodshare and the Bendigo community to further strengthen Greater Bendigo as a leader in food sustainability, as Australia's first UNESCO City of Gastronomy and with a Food Systems Strategy that places the whole community at the centre of the solution.
Nourish Sunraysia (Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council (SMECC) and Food Next Door)	Mildura	Hub aims to nourish Sunraysia's diverse multicultural community with access to locally grown, culturally appropriate healthy food. To achieve this goal, SMECC will partner with Food Next Door (FND), which is committed to nurturing land and nourishing people. Partnering new migrant and refugee farmers with unused farmland, FND trains and supports them, using regenerative farming practices to strengthen resilience in community.
Ubuntu Food Hub (United African Farm)	Cardinia	The Hub will infuse culture into agricultural practices to work towards a healthy, harmonious, and empowered community by increasing and promoting equitable access to fresh, affordable, and culturally appropriate food for all.
Wimmera Food Collective Food Hub (Centre for Participation)	Horsham	An inclusive and vibrant space providing food programs, where people can sell, buy, and celebrate local, affordable, and culturally desired fruit, vegetables, herbs, grains, and legumes.
Whittlesea Food Collective Food Hub (Whittlesea Community Connections)	Whittlesea	Hub will create a more equitable and sustainable food system, by supporting households experiencing financial hardship, strengthening community connections, improving health and wellbeing, and increasing training and employment opportunities through community-based food production and distribution.

1.0 Executive Summary

In 2022, VicHealth invested \$4.4 million over three years in seven Future Healthy Food Hubs across Victoria. The aim was to strengthen local food systems by building existing relationships, infrastructure, and services to create spaces where communities could access affordable, local, and culturally appropriate food. This investment seeded community-driven action in regional Victoria and outer metropolitan growth corridors and positioned local leaders to address food systems challenges and help generate food system transformations.

This report, written by researchers at Deakin University and commissioned by VicHealth, describes the impact and outcome evaluation of the Future Healthy Food Hubs (hereafter food hubs) and answers the questions:

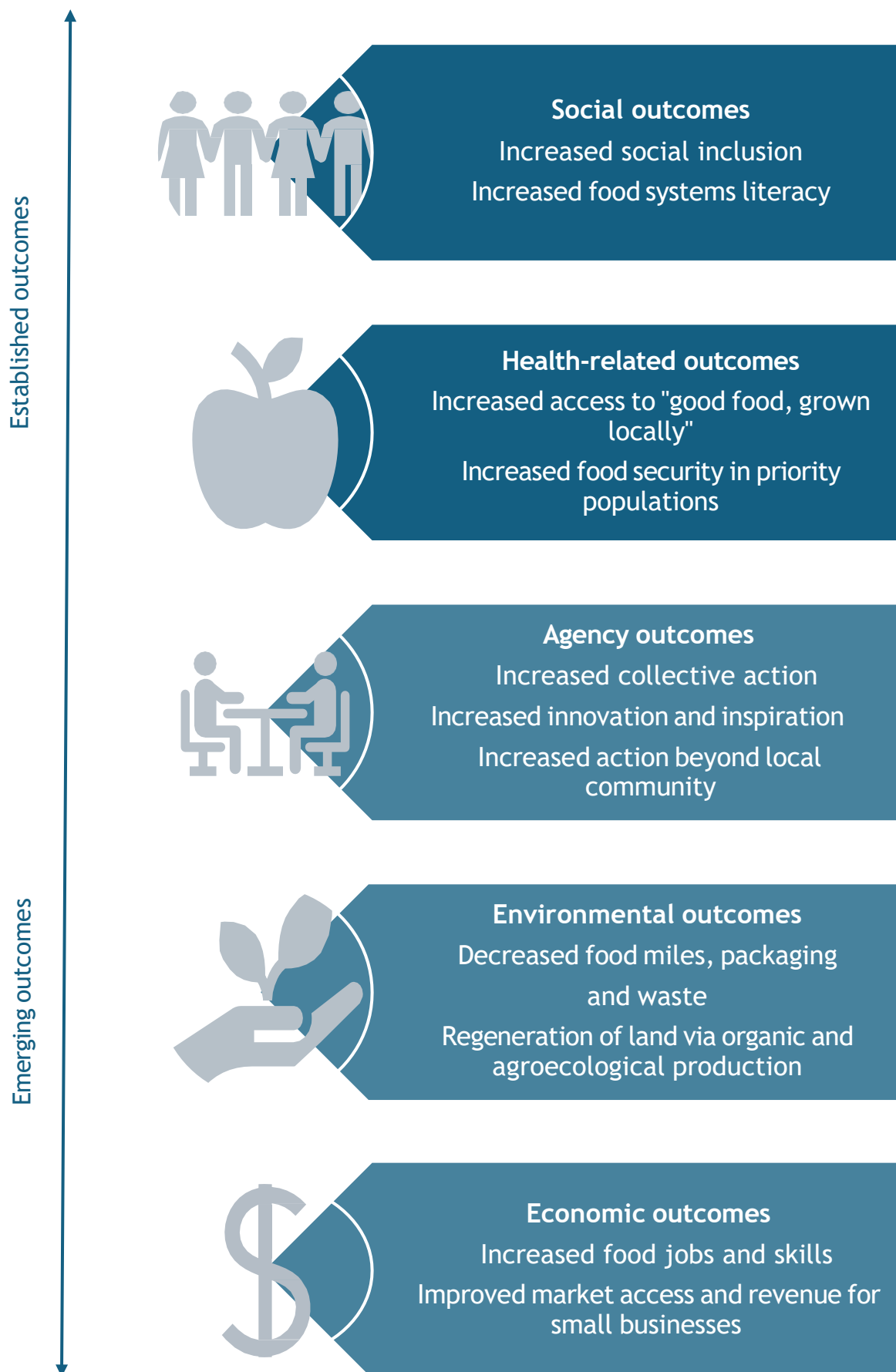
1. How are food hubs achieving outcomes and impacts and changing their local food systems?
2. What would it take to enhance the societal impacts of food hubs?

To gather data for the report, we consulted with food hub leaders, conducted interviews and surveys with interest holders and analysed operational data. A framework was used to direct the evaluation towards health-related, economic, environmental, social and agency outcomes.

Key findings

Food hubs had a common long-term vision (to create a local food system that is healthy, fair and environmentally sustainable), but the activities to achieve this vision were unique to each hub. Activities were locally relevant and included markets/shops, box schemes, conventional and regenerative farming, community meals and cafes, training kitchens, food relief, and much more, selling local food directly to local people.

- **Social outcomes:** food hubs increased **social inclusion** via inclusive spaces for multicultural communities, youth, and local food system actors, and increased community members' **food systems literacy** through hands on and experiential activities. There were an estimated 47,000 interactions with the food hubs over the 3-year period.
- **Health-related outcomes:** food hubs improved community members' **access to locally sourced food** (e.g. by selling an estimated 1 million serves of fruit and vegetables over the 3-year period) and **promoted food security** in priority populations, including young people, multicultural communities, people living with disabilities or health conditions, low-income households, and First Nations households.
- **Agency, environmental, and economic outcomes:** some food hubs increased **collective action, innovation and inspiration, policy influence, regeneration of farmland via organic and agroecological production, increased food jobs and skills, market access and revenue** and decreased **food miles, packaging and waste**. These were considered 'emerging' rather than 'established' outcomes.



Summary of evaluation findings – community food hubs achieved these outcomes and strengthened local food systems

Barriers to future impact

- Food hubs, in their current form, cannot cover costs of goods, wages, and operations through consumer-orientated food sales and hence, **financial viability** is a challenge.
- Several factors constrained the **operational viability** of food hubs, including commercial food suppliers being unable/unwilling to participate, food sourcing and logistical challenges, and community farming producing low yields.
- Food hubs also face substantive **systemic constraints** including strong competition from well-established major retailers, fast-food dominance, consumer habits, and industrial farming efficiencies.

Opportunities to strengthen future impact

- For food hubs to be financially viable, continue to deliver outcomes, and tackle major food system challenges, **consistent funding** is required. Larger subsidies and grants are likely to be needed for the 'start-up' phase, e.g. a 5–7-year horizon pending maturity. Over time, other mechanisms (e.g. increased productivity on hub farms, reliable wholesale income streams, matured network of growers and partners, greater customer volume, complementary social enterprise income streams through training/services/cafes/events, and/or public procurement contracts) would need to be developed to help increase the financial viability and *reduce the proportion of* (but not entirely remove) granting/subsidy requirements.
- **Regional food hub networks** are needed to enable collaboration and specialisation in geographical proximity to each other (e.g. 50km).
- Further **evaluation and research** are needed to establish a typology of food hub models, optimal design/business models for better assured viability, outcomes, impacts, and scale.
- Further **learning resources and capability** are needed to guide hub operations, feasibility studies, funding/income stream options and models, food and social entrepreneurship, scale up and success factors.
- Systemic policy support is needed for food hubs aiming to balance fair farmer prices, affordability for communities, outreach to priority populations and activities that build resilience and systemic change.

Summary

- The Future Healthy Food Hub investment has helped to further support local food systems in Victoria that are healthier, fairer and more environmentally sustainable. **Acceleration requires large-scale investment, policy support and continued community-led mobilisation.**
- Food hubs offer **substantial cross-cutting food systems outcomes** for communities, such as increased social inclusion, access to healthy local food and food security for priority populations.
- Food hubs in this study struggle to be financially and operationally viable and sufficiently scalable to have a substantial population-level impact without a coordinated suite of supports, including funding in the start-up phase and core funding thereafter.
- Areas to **investigate further via research include financial and impact modelling** of different food hub operational approaches to understand and share the mechanisms for viability and scalability in the Victorian context.

2.0 Introduction

All around the world, communities are facing major and inter-linked challenges from diet-related diseases, social inequities, and environmentally unsustainable food systems and Australia is not immune. In the modern era, Australians benefit from industrialised food systems which generally enable food to be safe, abundant and traded. At the same time, modern mass food production systems reduce biodiversity and contribute to climate change (HLPE, 2017). Globalised food chains and corporate concentration dominate, at the expense of regionality, food sovereignty and tradition (HLPE, 2017). Food insecurity affects more than 1 in 8 households nationwide, with higher rates in priority populations including 1 in 3 single-parent families and 41% of First Nations households (ABS 2023, 2025). Revolutionising how food is produced, processed, distributed, and consumed has therefore become an absolute necessity.

Box 1. VicHealth definition of a community food hub

A community-led physical space where food is sold... the primary purpose of a food hub is to increase access and availability of nutritious fresh affordable and culturally appropriate food to a local community. In doing so, supporting local food (and potentially other) enterprises and producers. Mandatory activities are a fresh food market for the local community... hubs may also feature the following activities: food education, food culture workshops, cooking classes, community gardens and healthy eating programs.

Food hubs are one way to strengthen local food systems and offer an alternative to the status quo - promoting human and planetary health, community leadership and food security. Whilst there are varied models of food hubs including non-profit and commercial, wholesale and direct-to-consumer, the scope of this report and evaluation focuses on 'community food hubs' (Box 1).

Victoria has demonstrated innovation and leadership in food hubs for more than 20 years. Several feasibility studies have been conducted, and a range of food hub models have been implemented and evaluated across the state. Between July 2022 and June 2025 VicHealth invested \$4 million in the next generation of community food hubs. These seven hubs were implemented, as part of the *Future Healthy* VicHealth strategy, to help 'increase access to locally produced, culturally appropriate and healthy foods in regional and urban fringe communities where there is greater prevalence of unhealthy food outlets and lower access to culturally appropriate food'.

2.1 Evaluation scope

The mixed methods evaluation included three main interlinked phases. In Phase 1, a review was conducted to synthesise evidence from evaluations of food hubs in Australia and other high-income countries, delivered April 2024. In Phase 2, project and knowledge translation plans were developed, informed by the evidence review. The project plan was reviewed and approved by VicHealth and Deakin University Human Ethics board in September 2024. In Phase 3, the project was implemented, and evaluation data collection and analysis occurred across the seven sites in collaboration with food hub staff, organised into three studies. This final report provides the results of Phase 3.

The evaluation was designed to establish the outcomes and impacts of food hubs on changing their local food systems and draw lessons that could help to enhance the societal impacts of food hubs in the future. The *Future Healthy* business accelerator program that was delivered throughout the granting period (provided by social entrepreneurs and The Difference Incubator) provided evidence to VicHealth and hub leaders about the business viability of the food hubs, and hence was not included within this Deakin project. A pre-post program evaluation, cost-benefit analysis or process evaluation were also outside of available resources and timescale. The evaluation of the food hub youth traineeships (Zorbas et al.,) is in preparation and was carried out independently. Finally, VicHealth articulated a preference for an evaluation that did not compare individual food hubs but sought evidence of collective changes and lessons learned.

In a constrained funding environment where evaluation must be pragmatic and streamlined, an outcome and impact evaluation provides an important contribution. Independently designed, theory-informed and participatory in approach, the evaluation evidence about successes and challenges is intended to be relevant to all interest holders – from program leaders to funders – to help refine strategies and amplify benefits. Ultimately, evaluation is another tool to help ensure that food hubs fulfill their promise of creating healthier, more equitable food systems.

3.0 Evaluation design



Figure 2. Overview of the evaluation design

The methods used for this evaluation have been previously described in full in a report prepared for VicHealth (Lindberg et al. 2024). In short, the evaluation team were engaged approximately two years into the investment and the approach required pragmatism, consultation and relatively low-cost and low-burden data collection. Deakin University ethics approval was granted (2024/HE000337). VicHealth and hubs were advisors and independent from data collection, analysis and reporting.

The evaluation team consulted with leaders at each food hub to:

- Co-create a tailored logic model to underpin the evaluation and discuss intended outcomes and impacts
- Identify people (interest holders such as volunteers, partner agencies, food suppliers) who could be interviewed to explore the most significant changes that have occurred in the local food system because of the food hub, and to understand barriers and enablers to wider societal impacts
- Distribute surveys to community members (aged >18) to understand who was connected to food hubs (e.g. demographic and food security status), why they participate (e.g. buying food, growing food, attending events) and what outcomes they benefit from

- Distribute surveys to suppliers to understand which businesses connected to food hubs, why they participate and what outcomes they benefit from

The evaluation team then:

- Recruited interviewees, conducted interviews, and analysed interview data
- Supported hubs to launch surveys (including several translated versions) and then analysed survey data
- Analysed data from operational reports, progress reports, and final reports (submitted by food hub leaders to VicHealth throughout the funding period, known hereafter as ‘operational data’)

Five broad and interlinked outcome categories influenced the evaluation design and analysis. An existing framework (Nelson & Landman, 2015; Nelson & Landman, 2020) which proposes four groups of common positive outcomes that community food hubs want to achieve was initially used and then adapted. In order to also include the dimensions of food security (Clapp et al., 2021) a fifth outcome category was added to the existing framework. Community food hubs often aspire to challenge power inequities in food systems, therefore ‘agency outcomes’ (defined as the capacity of individuals/groups to make informed choices about food and to participate in decision-making that shape their food systems) were added. The five-outcome category framework was then cross referenced against the VicHealth funding objectives to confirm relevance and finally, modified with minor editing and grouping, to improve the fit for this evaluation. In summary, the categories of food hub outcomes were:

- **Social outcomes:** Such as people reporting increased wellbeing; increased engagement in community activities; increased relations and connections; increased sense of inclusion; increased knowledge and self-confidence.
- **Health-related outcomes:** Such as increasing people’s access to and demand for healthy local food; increased access to healthy local food for marginalized communities; increased number of outlets supplying healthy local foods.
- **Agency outcomes:** Such as increased leadership and decision making by community; customers being informed; engagement with policy makers and implementation of policies that are supporting food hubs and local food systems.
- **Environmental outcomes:** Such as increasing biodiversity from local/more regenerative production; improved soil quality on local farms; reduced food waste in the food chain; reduced greenhouse gas emissions from paddock to plate.
- **Economic outcomes:** Such as increasing local food business viability; new employment opportunities; increased revenue for local businesses/farms; increased market access for farmers, growers and manufacturers.

Across the data collection period, all seven hubs co-created a bespoke program logic and participated in consultations with the evaluators. The program logics helped to inform the evaluation, characterize their activities, hypothesized outcomes and impacts (available in the appendix, Figures A1-7). All seven hubs also completed, to the best of their ability, operational reporting to VicHealth and several key indicators across the 2023-25 period have been analysed for inclusion in the evaluation.

Most hubs assisted in the recruitment of partners (e.g. volunteers, suppliers, direct community agency partners) or wider interest holder interviewees (e.g. local council, regional food leaders – see appendix

for further details, Table A1) and all hubs had internal spokespeople interviewed (in total n=34 interviewees). All interviews were recorded and transcribed with permission. Experienced qualitative researchers analysed the transcripts with the assistance of NVIVO and examples from interviews are used below to illustrate themes, key concepts and commonly reported views of participants.

Three of the hubs promoted participant surveys (n=91) to gain community perspectives, in English and other languages (see appendix for further details, Table A2 and Table A3) and data were analysed in Microsoft Excel and descriptively. Responses to the six-item household food security questionnaire were analysed to assess the prevalence and severity of food insecurity (Williams, 2022). Due to the small sample size (n=1) the supplier survey has been excluded from the evaluation results.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Community food hub reach, vision and activities

Operational reporting indicates 16,738 customers¹ purchased food from hubs in the early reporting period (Aug 2023-Jun 2024), growing to 17,177 by the following year (Aug 2024-Jun 2025). Further, 13,406 people engaged in a community-related food hub activity (Table A4, appendix). In total, the hubs (via customers purchasing food and attendance at activities) had an *estimated* 47,321 interactions with Victorians.

Food hubs generally had similar vision and impact aspirations for their local communities. How and where they worked to achieve this impact within the grant period of three years (in terms of their activities, partners, broader organisational and community context) led to variations in the model of each hub. In turn, hubs differed in their desired or achieved outcomes. In other words, their implementation models varied, outcomes varied, but the desired impact for healthier, more inclusive, sustainable and fairer food systems was shared. Figure 3 provides a collective summary of food hub activities and examples of the outcomes and impacts that hubs strived to achieve.

¹ Customer numbers were estimated from hubs reporting 'number of direct-paying customers that visited the food hub markets'.

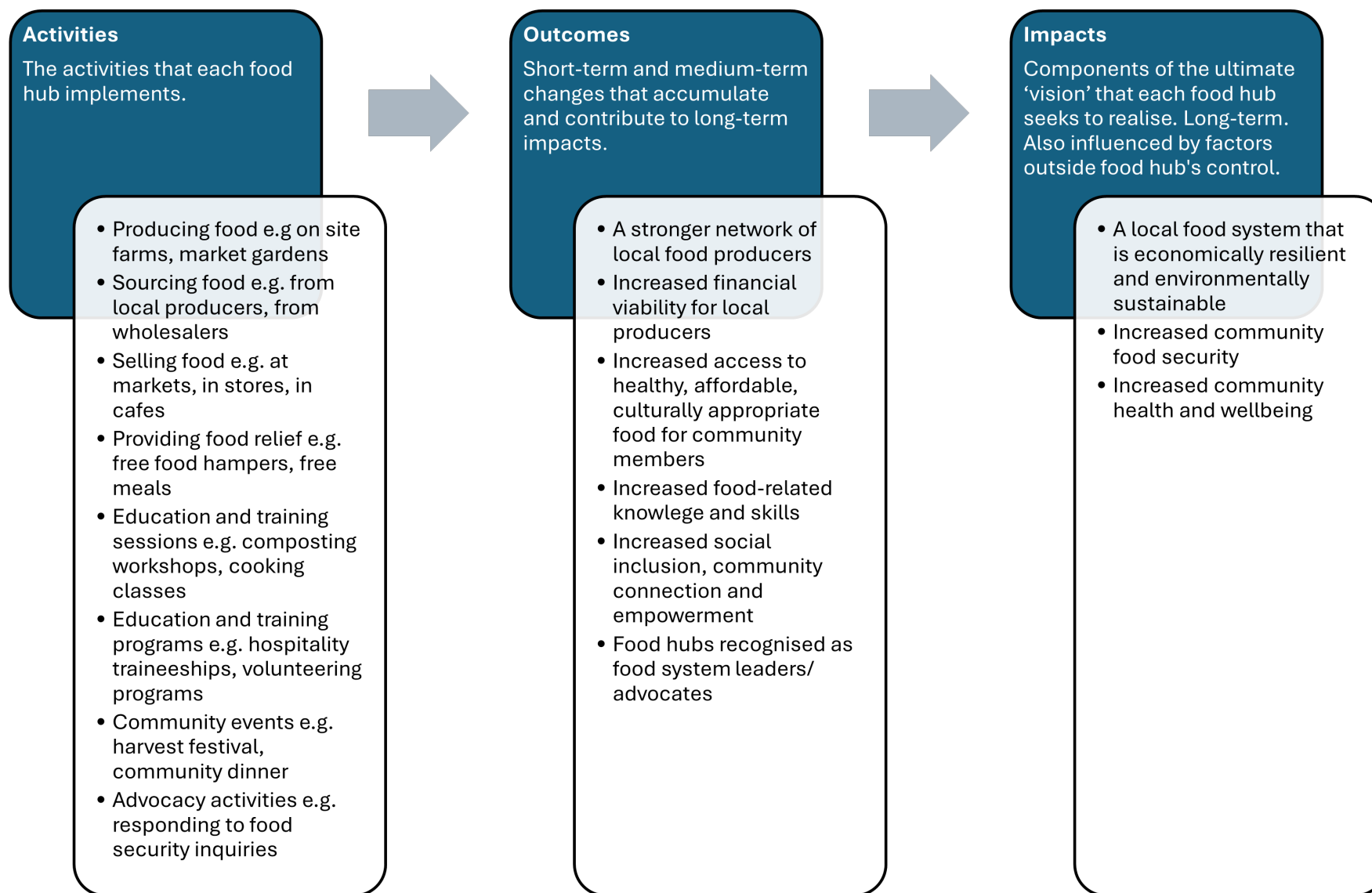


Figure 3. Logic model – summary of food hub activities, and examples of intended outcomes and impacts

4.2 How are food hubs achieving outcomes and impacts and changing local food systems?

The evaluation found that the *Future Healthy* Food Hubs developed models embedded within their communities, to deliver a range of activities that achieved outcomes across every domain in the system (Figure 4). From their food sourcing, to selling, to education and advocacy, their core activities embedded a food systems approach deliberately seeking varied and synergistic social, health, environmental, economic and agency outcomes.

More specifically, social outcomes and health-related outcomes were demonstrated consistently. Across all hubs and using data from multiple sources (i.e. the consultations with food hub leaders, interviews, surveys, and operational data), there was evidence of four established outcomes. For those who accessed food hubs, these were increased **social inclusion, food systems literacy, access to good food, grown locally** and **food security in priority populations**. However, agency outcomes, environmental outcomes and economic outcomes were demonstrated less consistently (across some but not all hubs and using evidence from single data sources e.g. from interviews only). The seven emerging outcomes evident in some hubs were increased: **collective action, innovation and inspiration, policy influence, regeneration of farmland via organic and agroecological production, jobs and skills, market access and revenue** (particularly for small business) and decreased **food miles, packaging and waste**.

Overall, these outcomes demonstrate what is possible when conditions enable community leadership to take on complex challenges and seize opportunities for food systems improvement. A brief evaluation report per hub was developed and delivered to each organisation (December 1, 2025). This report was prepared to give insights at the collective level.

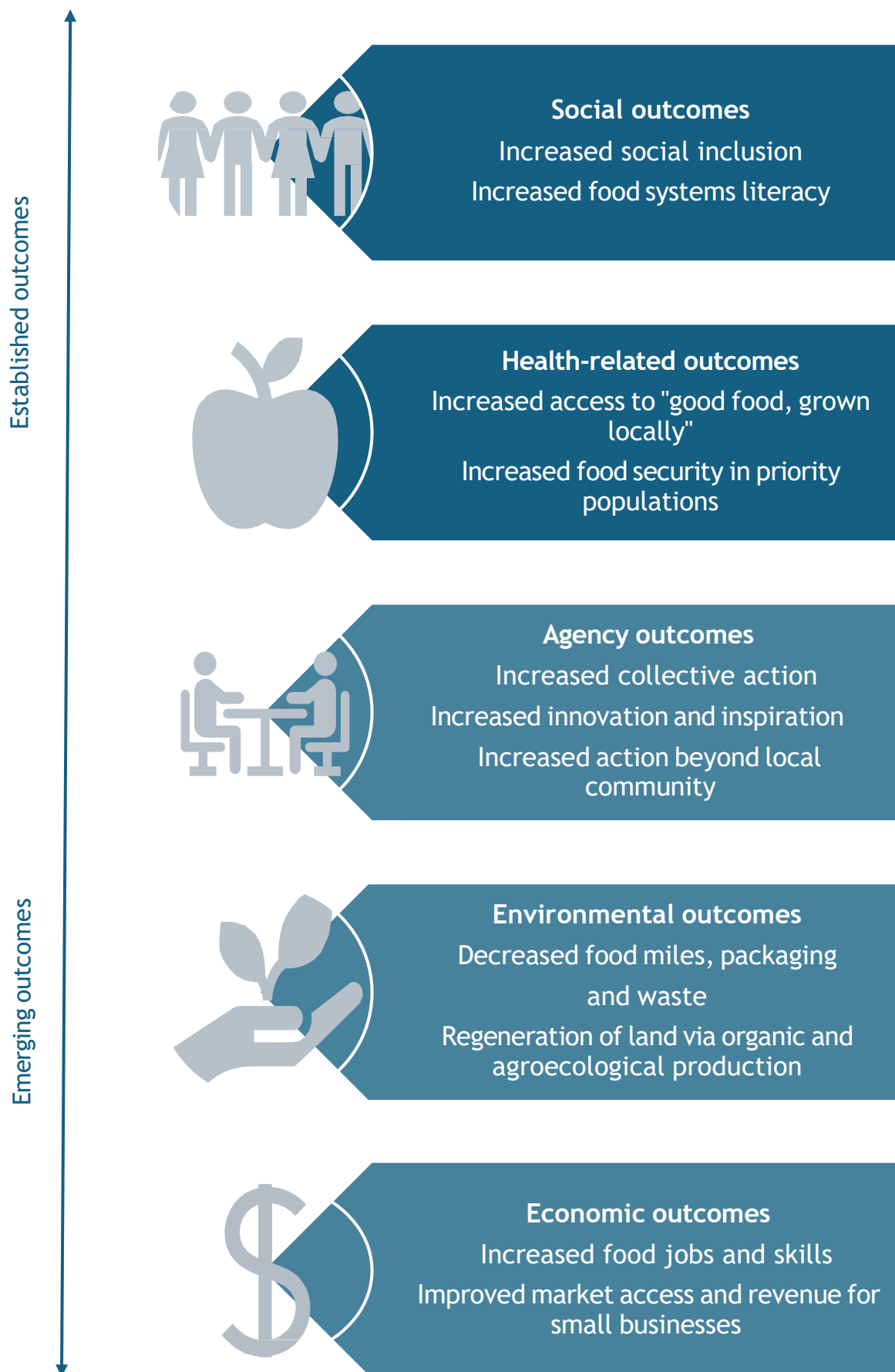


Figure 4. Summary of evaluation findings - community food hubs achieved these outcomes and strengthened local food systems

4.2.1 Social outcomes

Box 2. Key findings: social outcomes

All food hubs were contributing meaningfully to social outcomes, and these varied by model. This indicates that integration of activities and initiatives to achieve outcomes can be done flexibly and in multiple ways across different food hubs. Food hubs increased **social inclusion**, creating inclusive spaces for multicultural communities, youth and local food system actors. Secondly, communities across regional Victoria benefited from increased **food systems literacy**, gained through hands on and experiential food systems activities at food hubs.

Increased social inclusion

Food hubs were delivering a range of activities to engage the community with the food system, including public talks, school visits, corporate or general volunteering, workshops, cafes, conversations with customers, dinners, harvests and more. These were seen as 'critical' to their delivery and impact. As one interviewee described:

We've really forgotten...the culture (part) of agriculture.... And that's around food... and gathering people together...the community part of growing...the social component... (it) is really critical.

- Organisation Farmer, Common Ground Project Food Hub

The activities were designed sensitively and purposefully by food hubs for their local setting. Food hub leaders described their thinking and planning:

How can we strengthen the people that are here? How can we...give them access to things that make it feel like they belong...

- Food Hub Coordinator, Wimmera Food Collective Food Hub

Young people certainly told us...and particularly working with vulnerable communities or multicultural communities. It's about meeting them where they are...at.. and where they feel safe and connected.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

The food hubs have engagement with a cross-section of local people as customers/participants, typically recruited from, and reflective of, each network of hub partners. Activities that purposefully engaged multicultural and young people were a key focus across all hubs, as well as connections between growers and eaters. Further, hubs partnered with a range of other services including disability agencies, aged care, neighborhood houses and/or programs for people who were previously incarcerated. Surveys provide some further insights into who hubs reached (see table A2 in appendix for full details, and selected summary demographics table below), however the data should be interpreted with caution as this is a relatively small convenience sample (n=91) from only 3 of 7 hubs.

Table 2. Selected demographics of a sample of food hub participants/customers (n=91)*

Age	%
18-24 years old	9.9
25-34 years old	16.5
35-44 years old	22
45-54 years old	19.8
55-64 years old	18.7
65+ years old	13.2
Total	100
Country of birth	%
Australia	61.5
Outside Australia	38.5
Total	100
Language other than English spoken at home	%
Yes	40.7
No	58.2
Don't know/prefer not to answer	1.1
Total	100
Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?	%
No	92.3
Yes, Aboriginal	2.2
Yes, Torres Strait Islander	0
Yes, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	0
Don't know/prefer not to answer	5.5
Total	100
What cultural and ethnic groups do you identify with? Please select all that apply	%
Oceanian (including Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Pacific Islands)	45.1
North-West, Southern or Eastern European	16.5
North African and Middle Eastern	14.3
South-East Asian	15.4
North-East Asian	3.3
Southern and Central Asian	3.3
Peoples of the Americas	1.1
Sub-Saharan African	2.2
Other	8.8
Gender identity	%
Female	78
Male	18.7
Gender queer/gender non-conforming	1.1
Don't know/prefer not to answer	2.2
Total	100
Level of highest educational attainment	%
Year 9 or below	11
High school	25.3
Trade, diploma or certificate	23.1
University degree	36.3
Other	1.1
Don't know/prefer not to answer	3.3
Total	100
Health Care Card status	%
Yes – have card	50.5

No – do not have card	47.3
Don't know/prefer not to answer	2.2
Total	100
Pensioner Concession Card status	%
Yes – have card	30.8
No – do not have card	64.8
Don't know/prefer not to answer	4.4
Total	100
Current employment status	%
Working full time	17.6
Working part time	20.9
Unemployed and looking for work	12.1
A home-maker or stay at home parent	6.6
Student	17.6
Retired	14.3
Other	7.7
Total	100
<i>* See Table A2 in appendix for further details</i>	

The hubs used food to help forge understanding between cultures and the pleasure and joy of food, to reduce racism and support cultural exchange and celebration. A hub customer described multiculturalism in her local hub: “there's no violence, hatred, harassment”.

We specifically set (cooking groups) up...we've got...three Karen community members...a Vietnamese lady as well, and then a couple of Anglo-saxons. And although there's a language barrier at times, the laughter just comes... they have the best time.

- Community partner, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

We've just had a chef start and she's Thai, and so she's cooking Thai food...people love it...through food, you can have different cultures come in...(then, when people enjoy the food being made) they become superstars...it can (otherwise) be a bit tricky sometimes in regional towns for cultural acceptance.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Acres and Acres

A lot of them have been farmers in the refugee camps and very small scale... there's been that missing conduit for the families to grow food, but through (the hub) having the farm that's really connected them (to food growing again).

- Community partner, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

The food relief is different to the produce and boxing, because food relief – obviously, people get that food for free because it's donated by food bank, whereas (the food hub's) market and produce...people do pay for it, or they get a voucher...The quality is better. Also at the market, there's more options and variety for people....more culturally appropriate compared to a free (pantry).

- Food Hub Coordinator, Whittlesea Food Collective Food Hub

The examples in Table 3 highlight the efforts made to meet the needs of the cultures represented among hub communities, which further supports this theme of hubs providing social inclusion via culturally inclusive spaces.

Table 3. Examples of multicultural food offerings

Grow Cook Share Food Hub	Whittlesea Food Collective Food Hub	Acres and Acres Food Hub	Ubuntu Food Hub	Wimmera Food Collective Food Hub
Sempasi, Vietnamese cucumber, water spinach, fennel, karkalla, saltbush, Karen chicken curry, Buddha bowl inspired dal lentil with vegetables, Burmese inspired meals, Hazara bread, and Bolani	Lebanese cucumbers, Lebanese zucchini, Persian lentils, red lentils, okra, snake beans, Lebanese bread, pandan leaves, spinach, Turkish chilli, and bull horn peppers	Specific spices, okra, a selection of Asian vegetables (e.g. bok choy, pak choy, and garlic in multiple varieties), and Malaysian meals	Sweet potato leaves, sweet potato, corn, tomatoes, chillies, ginger, garlic, onion, and spring onion	Snake beans, okra, chillies, local grains, legumes and beans used by various cultural groups, local Indigenous (bush) foods

The hubs also created a space for children and young adults to engage in local food systems. Working outside on farms, gardens or markets, letting students lead and enjoy, were key features of these activities. For many hubs, it was important to create experiences for young people to showcase local food and the hubs' values, whilst also making the setting welcoming and enjoyable.

Music is a big part of our community life. So food, music, storytelling...(That's the) secret sauce in...gathering people...the students, when they come and we put the speaker on...music just takes your mind off everything...you come and sit down to eat...just talking with each other... you see the young people waving when they're going and saying....Can we come back?

- Food Hub Coordinator, Ubuntu Food Hub

(We host) prep, ones, twos... They're just like (here at the hub) constantly... But we also just had 110 three-year-old kinder kids come out too...And then a lot of...year eleven and twelves.

- Organisational Education Manager, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Unlike modern food systems where there are long-supply chains, in hubs, local farmers, growers, hub staff and trainees, retailers and consumers were closely connected.

There's been so much value in that...interchange...someone at a market being like, Oh, who's this olive oil you have here? And you talk about the... region, the olive collective that...have shared groves.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Hubs were able to showcase local foods and businesses, highlighting the diversity of local people and products.

The whole spectrum of different products we offer...tell the story of those local producers...and their story...is unique to them.

- Organisation Farmer, Common Ground Project Food Hub

The implications of these inclusive activities and outcomes are evidenced in reports of belonging and safety, improved mental health, connections with locally grown food, shared stories and pleasure around food, and the provision of positive spaces for priority populations.

The social outcomes described above are supported by the following community survey results (n=91):

- 80% agreed/strongly agreed food hub activities increased my sense of community connection
- 76% agreed/strongly agreed food hub activities have increased my sense of wellbeing

Increased food systems literacy

Food hubs primarily strengthened community members' food literacy through hands-on, skill-building activities focused on food systems. Hubs delivered this outcome by providing farm or food hub tours, tool libraries, preserving and cooking workshops, showcasing recipes on YouTube, local newsletters or cookbooks, local food relief guides and more. They also offered demonstration gardens and market gardens, market stalls/shops and box schemes, as well as training on composting, worm farms, soil health and seasonal growing. These activities enabled a range of food systems literacy gains, from confidence in cooking, growing and sustainable food, to nutrition knowledge, awareness of how to access the food people want and need, and familiarity with regional Victorian and/or cultural foods.

They come in, they help us plant stuff and then they come back for the harvest, and just seeing that 'oh, I actually planted that'...you should see their faces!

- Food Hub Coordinator, Ubuntu Food Hub

The community garden...is (a) demonstration...of what's possible. Engaged with... students, including Indigenous students around food production.

- Interest holder (consultant social enterprise), Whittlesea Food Collective Food Hub

A common learning objective was to build a greater understanding of the connection between different actors within the food system.

With a group of students...not only they do preparation of food... It's like, let's consider the food systems of where your food actually comes from when you purchase that locally. Then also the composting components that come with the food.

- Community partner, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

Equally, hubs may have had to adapt the learning objectives to the visiting group and due to their multi-faceted and systems activities, hubs were well placed to do so. Illustrated below:

So (there is) farm restoration... and harvesting...(also) the culinary side of food, or the growing of foods or soil. Health is the other really big one that people like to focus on...So students will actually get hands on...Whether that's like a worm farm or a seedling... the community groups are (all getting different outcomes)...I don't know if I can give you a ...generalised rounding of them, because it's literally every group wants something different.

- Organisational Education Manager, Common Ground Project Food Hub

For community members that were refugees, asylum seekers or new migrants, food hub programs were designed to increase confidence and competence in a new food system.

You might only have access to...okra here... for 3 months but being able to know how to use that okra, preserve that okra. If you freeze that okra, cook with that okra, (you) extend that period.

- Food Hub Coordinator and Organization Manager, Nourish Sunraysia

(The food hub and partner services) have been running some workshops for newly arrived Karen refugees, so that they're able to get their heads around the different climate and growing conditions and types of things that you grow in Australia

- Community Partner, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

Schools and educational facilities that partnered with hubs used these as settings for curriculum-aligned content and learning objectives.

Most of my students... are from the Karen culture...from Myanmar, and...mostly refugee students...the way I teach is very hands on, and food is a huge connector to all cultures. So when (the hub) came to me with a proposal to bring that into our school, it fitted perfectly with the curriculum that I was teaching.

- Community partner, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

Food hubs enabled people to have access to food systems directly and to experience, in-situ, some of the complexity and significance of their efforts to make these systems healthier, fairer and more sustainable.

I think what having volunteer days does...it brings people into better connection with the natural world. ... the importance of ecology and climate...I know they've also done work with youth, climate groups with council, and a number of other things... Not just where people sit in an office...and talk about like climate but being able to do that properly in a setting which really fosters that...

- Interest holder (policy), Common Ground Project Food Hub

I think no-one had any awareness....the team I work in is...privileged. You hear about it in the news, but you never experience it. What's it called, food insecurity? Yeah, nobody understood that was a real thing until they actually heard stories, and we're standing on the ground where I think it was only a few kilometres away where we had floods recently. And yeah, people were displaced and didn't have food.

- Volunteer, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

They can see the chickens, they can see...chefs going out of the kitchen picking the food and coming back...while if someone's sitting in the café...if you have soup, you know, the items are from the garden. So you're being exposed to many different things. Just through being there.

- Community partner, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Community members, via the open-ended question in the survey, further illustrated the key role of food hubs in increasing food systems literacy:

Our community needs this opportunity for people to meet, eat good food and learn about local food systems. Children love the environment and this will translate into more knowledgeable food choices as they develop.

- Food hub participant, Common Ground Project Food Hub

(The hub is) a community minded place that helps to educate consumers on how to grow their own food and what produce is in season. A full circle of growing, cooking, sharing, selling and composting to ensure minimisation of waste. The loss of this food hub would be such a waste after the impact it has just started to make within the community having found how best to function.

- Food hub participant, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

(The hub) helps in many ways for not just myself but for the community such as mental health, physical health, communication skills, food information (cooking/safety) and many more.

- Food hub participant, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

Box 3. Key findings: health-related outcomes

All food hubs were promoting health-related outcomes through the provision of healthy local food, with most targeting this benefit at communities facing barriers in accessing nutritious and culturally relevant foods. These outcomes were summarised as: increased **access to “good food, grown locally”** and increased **food security in priority populations**. Food hubs made healthy food available via markets/shops, farm visits, box schemes, community meals, gardening and farming projects, celebrations, food relief and more. Considering the importance of fruit and vegetable intake for disease-prevention and general wellbeing, as well as the role that food plays in people’s identity and culture, these were valuable health promoting outcomes across all hubs.

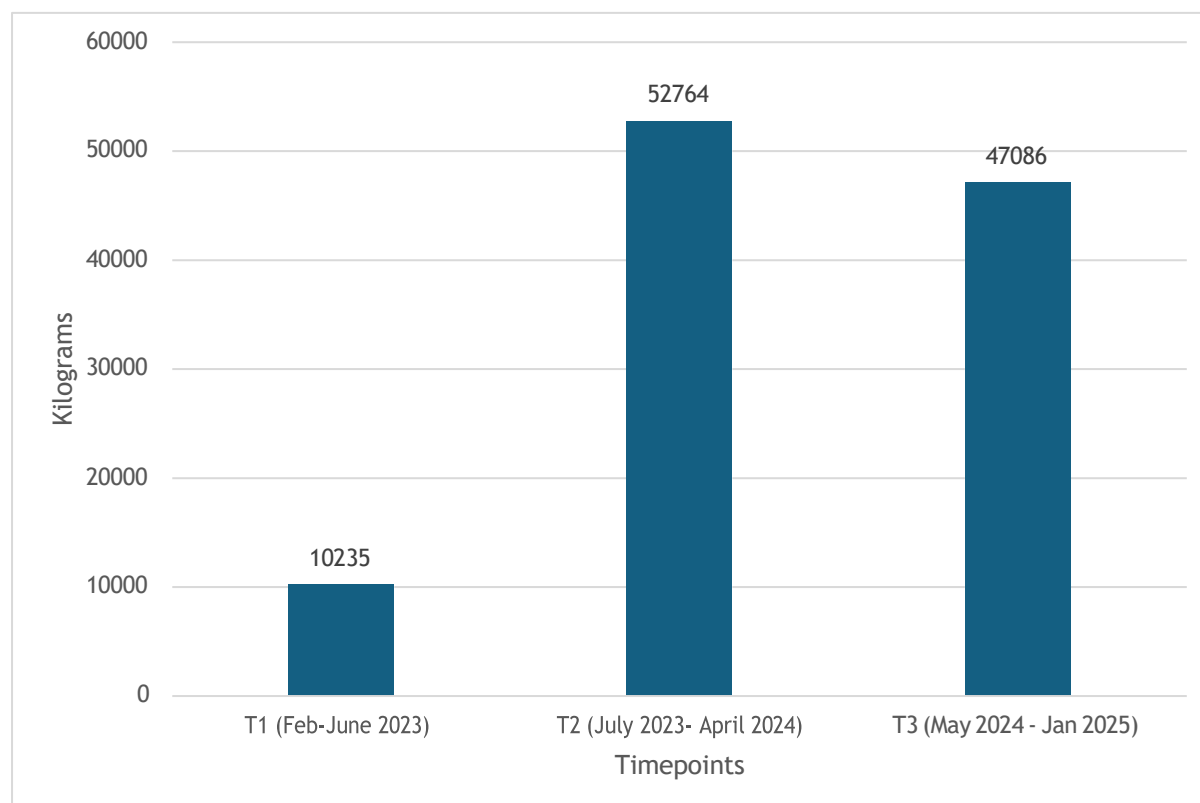
4.2.2 Health-related outcomes

Increased access to “good food, grown locally”

Hubs generally increased the volume of fruit and vegetables sold, month on month, and supplied additional products to reflect customer preferences and local suppliers. In total, an estimated² 110,085 kilograms of fresh fruit and vegetables were reported as sold by food hubs over the reporting period (Figure 5, organised into three time points) estimated as equivalent to 366,950 serves of fruit and 733,900 serves of vegetables (see Appendix Table A5). To contextualise the quantities of fruit and vegetable serves, only 3.5% of Victorian adults meet the recommended daily fruit and vegetable consumption guidelines (Victorian Population Health Survey 2023), and fewer than 3 in 100 Victorian children (2.7%) were consuming enough vegetables each day (Victorian Child Health and Wellbeing Survey Summary Report 2023).

² NB Estimates only as operational reporting could not be verified and data was incomplete for some reporting periods

Figure 5. Indicative volume (kilograms) of fresh fruit and vegetables sold at food hubs, from operational reports February 2023 to January 2025



Hubs were established within existing organisations to augment, scale up and/or diversify current food programs and initiatives. They therefore enhanced the food environments within their own organisations.

We're not growing this food (at the food hub) at the expense of food relief. It's alongside, and it's to provide a different access point for community.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

This health-promoting change, for some hubs at least, also triggered a shift in thinking and ways of working. This included adding food hub markets to existing food programs, such as food relief.

We did some emergency relief. But...what we're doing now (running a food hub) is probably where we think...the sustainability will be built in from what we're hoping to do now.

- Interest holder (consultant social enterprise), Whittlesea Food Collective Food Hub

(The food hub was)...not just the bandaid food relief model, very much promoting choice and dignity, and a lot of the work that they were doing was around that next level up from food relief...developing the fruit and vegetable market, for example, that sells fruit and vegetables at 60 to 70% less than the supermarkets, but allows people that choice and dignity in choosing what they want, but also supporting that wraparound care around how to cook it, how to prepare it and promoting that social connection aspect as well.

- Community Partner, Whittlesea Food Collective Food Hub

Partners such as neighbourhood houses and multicultural services improved their spaces, practices, and food options—including nutrition, cultural foods, and inclusive activities—thanks to the hubs.

We have a mini food pantry here and we receive items through (the food hub)... And we also get frozen meals...there a number of people that, for whatever reason, can't cook for themselves, or just don't know how to put a healthy meal together... They (the hub) have been doing some pop up markets, selling produce from their garden and the farm they have. We were kind of a little bit unsure how that would work because our produce is given away. (However, the food hub coordinator) actually came up with the idea of having little vouchers that we could put in our newsletter. People could bring in a \$10 voucher to entice them to come to the market and start to spend a little bit on freshly grown local produce...and that has worked really, really well.

- Community Partner, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

(The hub) brings affordable organic produce that's sold to our community members, and ... they make a really big effort to try and make it affordable, but also make it culturally appropriate.

- Community partner, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Nearly half our population speaks a language other than English at home, whereas the emergency relief centres are probably stocked with standard, maybe Aussie kind of food. We (wanted the food hub in our community because) we ...like to see more culturally appropriate food in our food relief spaces.

- Community partner, Whittlesea Food Collective Food Hub

Food hubs prioritised healthy, culturally appropriate, affordable and quality food for the community.

I have to say that the quality of the produce is much better than the ones we see in the large supermarket chains, and even some local markets. I would say the quality is very good...and the price is extremely economical.

- Volunteer, Whittlesea Food Collective Food Hub

The critical role of food hubs in increasing access to healthy local food is further supported by the following community survey results (n=91):

- 86% agreed/strongly agreed I have increased access to locally grown/produced food because of the food hub
- 82% agreed/strongly agreed I have increased access to healthy food because of the food hub

Community members shared, in an open-ended survey question, the lived experience being able to access healthy food at the food hub:

"(If the hub closed)... I would lose a significant local place to engage with community, access fresh local produce and access to delicious, nutritious meals."

- Food hub participant, Common Ground Project Food Hub

"I struggle with daily expenses and wouldn't eat as good without the food hub"

- Food hub participant, Whittlesea Food Collective Food Hub

"(If the hub closed)...our sense of hope would be diminished even more, and (I would) not be buying or eating and experiencing...the amazing food, culture and local community we have."

- Food hub participant, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Increased food security in priority populations

All hubs – using a range of strategies - enhanced food security in priority populations. Hubs were reaching communities disproportionately impacted by food insecurity, including young people, multicultural communities, people living with disabilities or health conditions, low-income households, and First Nations households.

The youth...really were going under the radar, a lot with food poverty, food scarcity, food insecurity. And now with (the food hub), because they're doing (programs) through the schools, everyone (can) come and have breakfast at the Breakfast Club. Everyone come and have some toasties at lunchtime, grab a piece of fruit. A lot of our students economically, it's difficult for them to use the canteen. So I was finding students weren't eating all day.

- Community partner, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

You have a lot of people doing life really rough so they cannot afford to go to greengrocer (even) when they have their stuff on sale...We can call people on the farm and say, Oh, today we're having a volunteer's day. Come, pick whatever you can, and just donate. Or if you don't have money to donate, that's fine. But just come.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Ubuntu Food Hub

Food grown, procured, sold and/or provided at hubs aimed to reflect community preferences and needs. Hubs were able to sell food at more affordable prices, increase access to cultural foods and showcase their region. For example, within a single hub different methods were used to reach community.

The food hub has...5 day a week...produce from the farm and from other local producers. 4 days a week (there is a) veg box pickup and a 3 day week delivery option....We also have the (general) markets that we do and the like low cost market - where all the prices are slashed.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Interviewees described typical food environments – including mainstream retail or hospitality – as not always welcoming of communities who have higher rates of food insecurity. Hubs aimed to be welcoming and hence increase people's social access to food.

One thing that we did identify with our multicultural community that can be quite daunting - is going into a large supermarket, especially trying to find food and trying to communicate with staff members. So in our shop we do have a friendly environment where a lot of our food that we do sell, we do have our price points in 8 different languages.

– Food Hub Coordinator and Organization Manager, Nourish Sunraysia

Particularly migrants and people with a disability, they're able to then have food on site that's healthy and appropriate for them.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Wimmera Food Collective Food Hub

We have quite a large demographic of old people...we help them... And then...young farm families is probably...the other big group of people that we have and that really care about feeding their family healthy.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Acres and Acres

Due to the cross-sectional design and single time point with only 91 community participants from 3 of the 7 food hubs, the survey results on food security status should be interpreted with caution. Below, table 4 provides a summary of the survey respondent's household food security status, suggesting 38% reported food insecurity. This rate is substantially higher than the general population (13.2%), providing further evidence that hubs reach priority populations facing food system inequities. See Table A2 in appendix for further details.

Table 4. Food security status of a sample of food hub customers/participants (n=91)

Food security status	Number (%)
Food secure	56 (62%)
Marginal food insecurity	10 (11%)
Moderate food insecurity	11 (12%)
Severe food insecurity	14 (15%)
Total	91

4.2.3 Agency outcomes

Box 4. Key findings: agency outcomes

Food hubs provided opportunities for communities to work together, to work differently and work for broader systems change. In sum, they created the conditions to increase agency in their local food systems. All of their networks of varied partners connected and strengthened actors across local systems to create **collective action** outcomes. Many of the hubs also delivered **innovation and inspiration** outcomes (e.g. experimenting, innovating, pilot testing). Several hubs dedicated time to government relations and participation in policy processes to help influence food governance within and beyond their local food systems. This was summarised as **policy influence**.

Increased collective action

Each of the seven food hubs was linked to a diverse network of partners. Networks ensured hubs had customers, suppliers, and aligned activities essential for everyday operations. Further, the networks also helped seed new projects, shared expertise and built solidarity.

We've...brought more people into this conversation, and...allowed more space for...the sector to talk about the issues that...they're facing...like a Food Systems Forum we did...it felt really... pivotal and impactful.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Common Ground Project Food Hub

We've been connecting local farmers in the ...regenerative agroforestry space to participate in...a seasonal catch up... Hosted on someone's farm.... that's been a really great way to build that social cohesion between the different producers of our region as well as building links...knowledge sharing.

- Organisation Farmer, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Food hub leaders and interest holders understood that to create the impact hubs wanted and the vision they set, hubs could not work in isolation. For example, some partners would help educate

community members about food, others would source local foods or help deliver equity or business outcomes. Partners also increased efficiencies and extended reach.

Connected, resilient, fair local food system. Like, those words together...they're a little bit impossible (therefore, we developed) ...partnerships with the food relief agencies...(because) not everyone can afford...organic local produce.

- Organisation Leader, Common Ground Project Food Hub

We're going to be working...across Western Victoria and using our centre here as a distribution point ...to get food into our region and out into the smaller areas

- Food Hub Coordinator, Wimmera Food Collective

These partnerships required trust and reciprocity. They included schools, local food growers and businesses, health services, libraries, community agencies, neighbourhood houses, emergency relief, volunteers and for some, local councils.

I guess they know and trust us...what we deliver is of high quality.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

I wouldn't give my land to anybody. And I really do trust Bendigo Foodshare as being good at project management, good communicators...they are responsive to us.

- Community partner, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

...As a community member, I certainly feel a sense of trust. From the Hub, and any businesses or farms or small food agencies that...are associated.

- Community partner, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Increased innovation and inspiration

Interviewees described how the multi-year investment to develop and deliver a food hub allowed projects to evolve, 'test concepts' and innovate.

....I think...overall, the real value of Acres and Acres is that they've just tried so many different things...and although you know some of them work better than others... I think, it...sets an example...for other people about the things that are possible.

- Supplier, Acres and Acres

...being able to experiment with the farm...We've found that most of these (tropical) products can be grown.... The seasons might be short lived. It might not be as long as the season you get up north...But being able to grow...does show the community that you can grow these foods, especially at home as well...we (do not necessarily) need that tropical climate.

- Food Hub Coordinator and Organisation Manager³, Nourish Sunraysia

It's the old story....there's a (new) strategy and governments release money. And then everyone wants to know whether they've worked or not...But I think its capacity, (our hub has been) building capacity around what needs to happen...the experiment needs to be done.

- Farm consultant, Ubuntu Food Hub

³ Interview included two staff from one organisation

The security of the funding commitment and ambition of the remit helped demonstrate new possibilities, the benefits of local food and market opportunities to the broader community. In regional townships, where there can be negative feelings because 'farming doesn't work' and services, shops and projects close, the several years of ongoing hub projects were extra valued.

(All) 7 (food hubs) throughout Victoria for those 2 or 3 years...it's like, this is actually what's possible...when we put money into things that are important.

- Interest holder (policy), Common Ground Project Food Hub

So sometimes it's showing local businesses that there is a market for (local) stuff... in regional areas. There's...a lot of market failure...services... (for example) post offices closing down....And so...we can try to demonstrate that there is a market for...(local) things...

- Interest holder (consultant social enterprise), Wimmera Food Collective Food Hub

I think (food hubs) bring a lot to the food system conversation...where it can be a little bit (otherwise) one dimensional. I think they add a dimension to it...You know, thinking about climate change, thinking about growing local, you know, thinking about regenerative agriculture. It's about community. It's not just, you know. Food is something that we buy at the shops. Food is a part of a really bigger system that brings us all together...we need to nurture and nourish that system.

- Local partner, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Some hubs inspired new and aligned community projects and businesses to offer more local sourcing. Several interviewees described more farm-gate sales in the surrounding towns and greater profiling of local food.

So before we started...We were the only people selling stuff at the farmers market...now there's like three others. And...other grocers...using ... local growers...and doing whole foods as well, and moving towards healthier models with less chemicals... they could have already had that plan, but it's definitely changing since we've been here...So that's systemic change.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Acres and Acres

...This project has...really has elevated in a visible way, growing food locally.

- Community partner, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

Increased policy influence

Interest holders identified that food hubs were often leaders in their region, inviting community to join them and elevating community voices.

They provide a voice...for...everyone in the community, or...different...voices rather than just...the stronger players. That's important, that...everyone is given a voice, and that voice is heard...For...people who are...concerned about (food) security and climate change....They've been a good advocate...

- Local partner, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Local government engagement with hubs varied. While some hubs didn't find ways of working directly with councils, others found local government could be an ally, boosting the hubs' profiles or integrating into local policy.

The council...they don't talk about us...they can't talk about business...they find it hard to understand who we are....They really don't understand food problems....like we've had no engagement until two weeks ago...And so now we've got this champion who wishes we had it two years ago...trying to be a link between...things in the area.... And it feels like...too little too late.

- Food Hub Coordinator

The thing I'd say about what this project has done is, it really has elevated in a visible way, growing food locally...the example that I give you is that... the photos of the (food hub) farm and (food hub staff) and volunteers and interns...have been in every council plan. (The council) is a UNESCO city of creativity and region for gastronomy.

- Community partner, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

We're part of a planning committee for the Refugee Day fusion celebration by the...Council. SoCouncil is one of our big partners.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Ubuntu

The local government has been completely absent from this space. I've been lobbying them pretty hard for a while. We'll see we'll see what happens... I think there's a piece of work that could be done to try and bring all those people into the room together and kind of figure out what role could they be playing...taking this really to the next level?

- Interest holder (local food leader)

Whilst not a core activity for most food hubs, several participated in the Victorian (2024) and Federal (2023) food security related parliamentary inquiries and at least one hosted visits or events with government leaders.

We're sort of not trying to be the lead, but trying to really support a...growers' network down here. And we're...starting to get a bit political because we realise...if we don't voice for ourselves, no one will.

- Organisation Leader, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Politicians have been out the (food hub) to sort of either see what it's about, or I think (the food hub) was like one of the locations for regional inquiry submission hearings. And I think when you get sort of decision makers or policy makers out into these spaces and like, show them what's possible, then that really does sort of bleed into policy decisions...

- Interest holder (policy), Common Ground Project Food Hub

In line with the outcomes discussed throughout this section, survey results (n=91) indicated that many people who participated in food hub activities did so as active food citizens:

- 88% agreed/strongly agreed I participate in food hub activities because I want to contribute to my local community
- 76% agreed/strongly agreed I participate in food hub activities because I want to transform food systems

4.2.4 Environmental outcomes

Box 4. Key findings: environmental outcomes

Food hubs offered 'care for the land, and...care for the climate'. The way of 'caring' and changing their local food system varied by model, and data have been grouped into two main outcomes.

These are: **decreased food miles, packaging and waste**, and applicable for a few hubs, **regeneration of farmland via organic and agroecological production**. All hubs locally sourced foods, mostly from the regional Victorian growers in their area. Local foods – particularly plant-based foods – typically have a lower environmental footprint than the food that moves through the dominant retail system. All hubs aimed to redistribute any of their surplus products as food relief or social enterprise meals, or if inedible, used for worm farms (or similar). Food produced using organic and agroecological methods have known benefits for soil health, biodiversity and more, and two hubs produced and sourced from suppliers that adopted these standards. Two other hubs grew food via conventional methods.

Decreased food miles, packaging and waste

Hubs sourced food locally, from farms (their own or others), small businesses and even local gardens.

The 'pick a branch program'...It's been designed to encourage and support backyard schools, community gardens to share their excess harvest with us.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

Sourcing locally enabled community members to choose local options, which supported purchasing in bulk, with less packaging and transport.

Certainly (there are) a lot of the local grains and legumes that are here (available at the hub). A lot of the migrants buy in bulk (and) ...they bring their own containers. So it's cheap. It's grown often within a 20 to 50 K radius of town sometimes, even...5 K....Before (our hub offered this, people)... were going to the supermarket and buying it in cans, and, you know, might have been grown overseas and packaged...somewhere in Asia, and then gets on a ship and transported to...Melbourne, and then out to (us).

- Food Hub Coordinator, Wimmera Food Collective Food Hub

I mean (the food hub sells products that are sourced from) less than 3 miles (which) is good and usually (it is environmentally beneficial) if things have travelled less. Local products usually have less plastic and packaging.

- Supplier, Acres and Acres

Hubs were not always successful in engaging local producers – especially commercial and larger scale - and hence, this constrained potential gains.

(Where our hub is based, we are) one of the main producers of grains, legumes, and beans in Australia, and a lot of it is exported to places like India. And then it comes back to us as packaged lentils and chickpeas. (These products do an) around the world trip. So the focus is trying to connect

with local growers, which we struggle to do to be honest. But we did connect with the grain producers quite well.

- *Interest holder (consultant social enterprise), Wimmera Food Collective Food Hub*

Food waste is usually a substantial contributor to environmental harm in food systems (via CO2 emissions in landfill as well as embodied water, energy and land-waste) however hubs used various strategies to avoid waste and redirect organic matter. Hubs worked with food relief programs, either within their broader organisation or as part of their local network. Composting or worm farms was another way to reduce food waste and contribute environmental outcomes locally.

Anything that went unsold we donated to our food relief. So the shop would run to a Thursday, and then we run our food relief on a Friday. So anything unsold at the end of Thursday was included in the hampers or placed on a table for people to just take, so that it wasn't wasted.

- *Food Hub Coordinator and Organisation Manager, Nourish Sunraysia Food Hub*

(The food hub) actually brings produce that they haven't been able to distribute... literally tons of it (comes) to our community garden for composting, which then helps us produce really good organic matter for the garden bed holders. There are about 28 garden beds that people in the local community can hire, a raised garden bed for a year to grow their own veggies, because, of course, in (our region) most of our soil is toxic from gold mining days.

- *Community Partner, Grow Cook Share Food Hub*

A commitment to local sourcing meant working collaboratively with local growers and small manufacturers, and other hubs. Iteratively improving the procurement processes and connections enabled hubs to strengthen this way of working over time. For at least one hub, their vision was to be a 'closed loop system' – from growing, sourcing, selling and waste – sustainable practices cut across their operations.

We're trying to be closed loop and struggling all the time, but moving... towards that model constantly... And so we've got farm, we support other farmers, we've got the shop, we sell a lot of people our own stuff. And also we buy from the markets and we have whole foods and other products as well. We've got our own composting, one farm system that we engineered with a web specialist. And so that takes all of the waste from the shop... And then that turns it into seed raising mix. And then we use that, and also fertiliser from that output, on the gardens.

- *Food Hub Coordinator, Acres and Acres*

Regeneration of farmland via organic and agroecological production

Hubs farmed using different methods, including one that was organic and one that was regenerative.

We produce organically... also... doing community composting. So it's another way that we are minimising the use of chemicals in production... We...have...a sense as part of our operations that (we) care for the land, and we care for the climate.

- *Food Hub Coordinator, Ubuntu Food Hub*

The money that we received has enabled us to really expand that farm...to expand biodiversity and soil health.

- *Organisation Leader Common Ground Project Food Hub*

The work (of the hub) they continue to do is improving that land. They've really like put a lot of energy into building an ecosystem there, and planting trees, and...setting up natural irrigation and drainage, so that there's lots of habitats for that land that they're on.

- Interest holder (policy), Common Ground Project Food Hub

Sourcing from similar producers, hubs could expand and strengthen the regional focus on producing food in this way.

Cause we're agroecological... We don't have a rigorous certification system or anything, but we do make sure that we go through...onboarding with (our suppliers) to make sure they're not using any sprays, chemicals, pesticides, and that to the best of their sort of knowledge they are practicing organic, but don't have to be certified.

- Organisation Leader, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Community survey results (n=91) indicated that many people who participated in food hub activities did so to support environmental outcomes:

- 84% agreed/strongly agreed I attend/shop at the food hub because the food is produced in environmentally sustainable ways
- 80% agreed/strongly agreed I attend/shop at the food hub because the food has less packaging
- 79% agreed/strongly agreed I attend/shop at the food hub because the food is in season
- 71% agreed/strongly agreed I attend/shop at the food hub because I live locally and want to reduce food miles

4.2.5 Economic outcomes

Box 5. Key findings: economic outcomes

Food hubs strengthened the economics of local food systems in two main ways. The outcome **food jobs and skills** summarises the many people who received vocational skill development at all hubs, including people who face structural barriers to work. Hubs also included training programs for students and were able to employ a small number of food systems trainees and skilled staff within each hub. The second outcome, summarised as **improved market access and revenue**, varied by food hub model. The hubs that were growing their own food, plus sourcing from market gardens, orchards and farms, small scale growers, manufacturers, caterers, and beekeepers (and more) were advancing this outcome. However, procuring and/or producing larger volumes of local food for more substantive economic outcomes and financial sustainability (i.e. the food hub's operational costs were covered by sales) was an aspiration for most, not yet fully realised.

Increased food jobs and skills

Community members developed work readiness and food industry skills as an outcome of the Hubs. This included university students in aligned degrees completing their work-placement or hospitality students in vocational training gaining experiential learning. Also, refugees and migrants, people living with a disability, young people facing barriers to employment and people with mental health conditions had opportunities for skill development on their pathway to employment. The participants gained 'confidence', 'a chance to practice their English' and general work experience, as well as specific skills related to food jobs like coffee making in cafes, harvesting at farms, selling at market stalls and safe food handling at warehouses. Jobs and skills were important economically, socially and culturally for community members and hubs.

(The hub) provides opportunities for our clients to employment pathways. So they're learning about the industry. They're helping sell the produce....coffee and cakes and...we turn some of the produce that we grow in the garden into jams and chutneys that they then they help to make and sell.... They could go on potentially start up a small little micro enterprise if they wanted to.

- Local partner, Common Ground Project Food Hub

The food hub leader has one vision for the farm and the Hub and at the same time...a related but separate vision is to provide employment and opportunities for cultural revival within the South Sudanese community.

- Farm consultant, Ubuntu Food Hub

Year-long paid youth food systems trainees were included in pairs, as part of the VicHealth investment in every hub across the three years of funding (for further details see Zorbas et al, in preparation). Locally recruited, trainees included First Nations and migrant youth who were passionate about improving their food system. In addition, some hubs were involved with certified traineeships/apprenticeships and adult education. Other hubs ran catering businesses for migrant women or social enterprise cafes with cooks and staff who lived with disabilities, enabling paid employment. Hubs were hence a safe place for community members to be encouraged, trained and employed.

Some...people we've hired now as casuals, and hoping to make them permanent...they're people with disabilities...One job (is) shared between twins, both with...autism. And they...(once) were...young

people who...didn't ever look you (in the) face when...spoken to. And now they're running...the cafe on their own pretty much....It's been a great outcome.

- Interest holder (consultant social enterprise), Wimmera Food Collective Food Hub

(There is not) a lot of examples of food hubs (across Australia more generally) with paid roles, you know. Like...(there are) always volunteers, (however this investment meant we had paid)...2 youth roles... that's an amazing positive...

- Food Hub Coordinator, Common Ground Project Food Hub

(The food hub traineeship) employed young people for a certain amount of time that was good, it kept them in the town....that supported a lot of local farmers as well.

- Farmer, Acres and Acres

The employment of highly-skilled food systems people within the hubs as coordinators, farmers, or managers, was also recognised as a component of this outcome and integral to making food systems change happen.

For a farmer to be in that position is really...unique and lucky...for me at this time of my career... (it is) the first (full-)time (job)...working on a farm, (which has allowed)...really quick and deep immersion into our local food system.

- Organisational Farmer, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Back your leaders. You can't expect them to volunteer. It's too much time...they need to be paid so they can live...so they can get the job done.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Acres and Acres

Survey results indicated that many people who participated in food hub activities did so to support employment options for local people (n=91):

- 85% agreed/strongly agreed I attend/shop at the food hub because I want to support local employers/employment options for local people

Improved market access and revenue for small business

The economic gains – in terms of local business benefits via increased outlets, sales or revenue - varied by hub. For hubs that sourced locally, this work was recognised as generating profile and hence potential for consumers to have better, and sometimes unprecedented access, to local products. Hubs described as having 20 or 30 different local suppliers, in contrast to typical retail environments where there is generally a much smaller (if any) focus on local. However, some hubs were constrained by setup costs, staff experience and stage of project. Equally, some suppliers noted the hubs were only a modest outlet for their product lines.

Local food businesses (particularly micro-enterprise and small scale) increased their access to local customers in several of the hubs. As local food systems are fledgling or sometimes non-existent, this work by hubs was significant.

(The hub) has basically opened up new markets for small producers...(previously) ...small producers (were) just going at it alone. And I think by opening up the (food hub) market...they kind of created a

bit more of a space. Markets are hard, really hard....I find...as a small producer. That's what we really needed. We needed networks. And we needed markets. And I have seen that these guys have put a lot of work into doing that. And I just think that's great for the industry.

- Community partner, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

I would say in (our town) there was...just...the supermarket. (Until the food hub opened)...there was nowhere...that you could buy local products, and there was no outlet for local producers to sell through.

- Farmer, Acres and Acres

(In comparison to the food hub) I don't think there's probably anywhere else that sells (as) many local suppliers...the accessibility (is an outcome) for producers...particularly small scale ones that, like they're not...even going to farmers markets...because they just don't have the staff.

- Organisation Leader, Common Ground Project Food Hub

The [supermarket], next door like...they only have like two real suppliers...we have 30 different suppliers.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Acres and Acres

We don't have a local food system. Almost everything that's grown here is exported from the region. And it may come back and end up on the supermarket shelves...it's a broken system.

- Interest holder (local food leader), Nourish Sunraysia

Hubs could source from varied small businesses and sell diverse product lines . At least one hub was able to 'pay upfront' and another bought second grade products, increasing the financial security for those producers.

It's been...such an iterative process over the last few years...Not just fruit and vegetable, but also dairy, meat, eggs, honey...the fact that we're sort of charitable organisation. So we're not just an owner operator. It really has given, you know, 20 producers another sales channel, a relatively...low barrier to entry, because we often can pick up or they'll deliver... We pay them upfront at whatever their...cost price was.

- Organisation Leader, Common Ground Project Food Hub

There was an orchard, for example, that we bought quite a lot of their produce, their seconds and third grade organic apples, and other fruit and sold it through our market store. That was really helpful for them, because it's harder product to move. And it meant that we were able to sell it at a more affordable price.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Grow Cook Share Food Hub

Hubs were also limited by their setup costs, their level of experience, their farm objectives, and the stage of their project. These factors often reduced both the farm's and the food hub's economic performance and productivity. Some hubs had low-yield farms that were principally focussed on growing culturally relevant products, with less emphasis on yield or sales for the wider community. Interviewees described in various ways how 'the hub itself is not generating enough profit to make it sustainable' or the hub 'can't turn over enough product to make an income'.

(The food hub) farm was kind of established as almost like a training farm, if you like. And then the idea was that once farmers were at up a level where they were confident with growing and then also understood how to get their produce to market, that they would then be ready to move off onto another piece of land...they're not all entrepreneurs, so they don't all want to farm to make to make

money...for most of them the drive is to be able to grow food that they used to, that they can't buy from the shop here.

- *Interest holder (local food leader), Nourish Sunraysia*

I'd probably say our weakest link...is economic development and viability (in the local food system). If we're increasing the viability of local producers, that would be through being able buy a lot of their stock when they have a glut...or storing it for them... And that's the stuff that I thought we'd be able to do. And we really haven't been able to.

- *Food Hub Coordinator, Common Ground Project Food Hub*

We're trying to be farmers in a part-time capacity and with minimal inputs. So you know, we just don't have a budget to put into. So I actually spoke before to the person who owns the land, and he ran it...as a productive market garden for a few years as his own business. He said...are you happy with the outputs? Do you think you're being as productive as you can be? And we're probably not.

- *Food Hub Coordinator, Grow Cook Share Food Hub*

There were also constraints on the volume of products available from local suppliers to sell.

I was selling a little bit through there, although there wasn't a solid sort of a pickup. I was selling some stuff, but not a whole heap.

- *Supplier, Acres and Acres*

The reality from our perspective is not much (of a revenue benefit from the hub). So you know they ...might take 20 kilos out of 7 tonne of garlic from us a year, or something like that.

- *Supplier, Common Ground Project Food Hub*

We didn't do as many sales as we would have liked. Just because that supply hasn't been there. But we do have some local honey and things that's been jarred by a local multicultural community. So we sell that sort of stuff and lentils and things. But...the fresh food has been a bit sporadic.

- *Food Hub Coordinator and Organisation Manager, Nourish Sunraysia*

One hub didn't source produce locally – or not beyond their own farm – so there were no direct relationships with, or benefits for, producers in their region. Another hub indirectly sought out local suppliers via purchasing from a wholesale setting. This constrained wider economic outcomes in their regions.

I can only speak from my perspective. I haven't seen any impact in terms of strengthening our local food system. None of the farmers who (are connected to my local co-op) were supplying that food hub. So economically, it wasn't having an impact for those farmers.

- *Interest holder (local food leader), Nourish Sunraysia*

We go to a wholesale market in Melbourne... we get most (of the food for the hub) up from there, and (at the wholesaler)... we try and locate as many local traders as possible.

- *Food Hub Coordinator, Whittlesea Food Collective Food Hub*

Survey results indicated that many people who participated in food hub activities did so to support local food growers, producers, and retailers (n=91):

- 87% agreed/strongly agreed I attend/shop at the food hub because I want to support local food growers/producers
- 79% agreed/strongly agreed I attend/shop at the food hub because I want to support local retailers

4.3 What would it take to enhance the societal impacts of food hubs?

Box 6. Key lessons from interviews: constraints

Interest holder interviewees were explicitly prompted for their perspectives on what constrains impact, what's needed now and in the future for local and broader action and lessons learned. A synthesis of their perspectives is outlined below. Food hubs faced major financial viability challenges, as revenue from food sales could not cover wages, operations, and supplier costs. Healthy, fresh food operations in community settings and small-scale lacks profit margins, requiring ongoing subsidies, grants, and partnerships. Balancing fair prices for farmers with affordability for communities created tensions within hubs. The expectation of self-sufficiency within three years of the Future Healthy funding was unrealistic; hubs need longer-term startup funding to avoid losing trust, momentum, staff losses, capacity and outcomes. Systemic barriers include competition with major retailers, fast-food dominance, consumer habits, and industrial farming efficiencies. Without structural change and consistent investment, hubs risk closure before reaching full potential.

4.3.1 What constrains outcomes and impacts of food hubs

Some of the barriers described by interviewees in achieving their core outcomes and threats to the operational and financial viability of hubs included: inadequate financial and funding systems fit for the work; broad systemic factors that perpetuate the status quo, and logistical challenges for community, suppliers and partners.

Inadequate financial and funding systems

Whilst all hubs sold food, the revenue raised was not enough to cover the cost of goods, wages and operations. Hubs therefore need longer term startup support and more modest core funding thereafter.

We're in so deeply in the red with the wages....like all of the things we need to do to operate veg boxes and markets...and the cost of the suppliers' goods... There's not a big enough margin, like we're not making money on them. We're not doing them enough. The scale for us to break even on that stuff....I feel pretty depleted by like the concept that this isn't a viable thing to do, and I know that there's different potentially different ways to model.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Economically sustainable and resilient? Yeah hilarious. Uh, we're not even close.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Acres and Acres

You've got to understand that there's no profit in healthy, fresh food, so someone has to prop it up. It's not going to make its own money. It's not going to make its ends meet. So it's someone has to pay for people's time, wages...and that that could be another place where Council could step up and could support looking at partnerships with Council to help with wages and also venue space.

- Community Partner, Whittlesea Food Collective Food Hub

Farming is a really hard industry...it's a really difficult business model to run successfully. And so...there's no other way to support it without the funding of grants and through community initiatives and community funding.

- Organisation Farmer, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Balancing fair labour, fair prices for farmers, affordability for priority communities and inclusion, was a source of financial tension.

You can't pay that fair price to those small-scale producers and give a fair price to the customer.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Food hubs were still in the start-up phase however funding beyond the initial three years was not secured by all Hubs. The expectation that hubs would be self-sufficient by year 3 (per the grant guidelines) was unrealistic. Funding systems and/or hub leaders, therefore, ideally need to plan for longer runways to consolidate and strengthen models. Without this, there is the immediate loss of food hub outcomes and further, the trust, know-how and momentum they have generated gets lost.

You can't fund something for 2 to 3 years and then it can stand on its own feet after that...I don't think anyone (at any of the 7 hubs) conclusively would say like that: It's now viable, we've grown, we're at the scale where it's now viable for us to have a coordinator full time.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Common Ground Project Food Hub

(If the hub were to close) I think it'd be very sad, because I feel like there's a level of... feeling of potential...It's not like it's this super established, you know, amazing, productive farm. Yet it's got elements of that. But it's still a work in progress... discontinued before it's really hit its full potential.

- Farm consultant, Ubuntu Food Hub

So much work goes into building (hubs) like this and as soon as we cut the funding, then it just disappears. And so you've lost not just, you know, a program or something like that, but it's it's more than that. We stand on the shoulders of the people before us. You also lose trust... People just get sick of programs coming and going all the time. So we've got to have consistency.

- Community partner, Common Ground Project Food Hub

The funding conclusion in mid-2025 had a range of impacts, including human resources.

My big concern for next year is that we're losing 3 full time food hub members and we don't have any as of yet have specific funding for sort of a food systems role. Meaning it'll fall back to me, which is fine...I won't be able to do as much.

- Organisational Leader, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Systemic factors that maintain the status quo

Food hubs were swimming upstream, against the status quo. They were in competition with major retailers and fast-food who have greater presence, marketing and power.

You know, there's multi-million-dollar companies like Woolworths and all that which have, you know, huge marketing teams that are able to push a push a different message.

- Organisation Farmer, Common Ground Project Food Hub

The prevalence of fast food in our society at the moment means people like, you know, we've sort of got people that are just not cooking at all anymore...people (are) wanting to be able to support small local farms, but there's lots of barriers. I think it's that cost thing. That logistics thing like...you've either go to a market or go to a food hub... And then you've got to cook it. You've got to know how to cook it...I think there's just ..time poor families.

- Organisation leader, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Almost everything that's grown here is exported from the region. And it may come back and end up on the supermarket shelves. Yeah, it's a broken system.

- Interest holder (local food leader), Nourish Sunraysia

You know the food chain has come really, really narrow nowadays, you know, I know ...the garlic supply channels. There's only 2 suppliers that really supply garlic to the major (supermarkets), and you know....if when one of them topples over like it did a couple of years ago, you know, the (supermarkets) are forced to import, which doesn't help anybody.

- Supplier, Common Ground Project Food Hub

Industrial and large scale farming can offer efficiencies and supply in volumes, that local food systems cannot. These established systems allow scale, efficiency, market share and many benefits, that startup hubs do not have.

Right now we're in the middle of a really tight season in terms of growing anything in the Upper Murray, where we're still in a terrible drought. And so if we're only reliant on local stuff, we'd all be very hungry right now. Really, that's the reality of it...the industrial food systems have been able to feed a lot more people quite efficiently. There's lots of contradictions there, and I'm acutely aware of them. And that sort of needs that critical thinking doesn't it across the whole. There's no easy answer.

- Customer, Acres and Acres

Consumers were seen as perpetuating the status quo by engaging in mainstream food retail, even when hubs provide an alternative.

I would say most people would rather go into a supermarket probably, myself included, than sort of go into this niche shop (i.e. the food hub). So I don't quite understand who their market is outside of the multicultural community.

- Interest holder, Nourish Sunraysia

A resilient local food system, well, you know, it's only going to be resilient if people are buying from it.... The 7 food hubs were funded really generously....And it's still really hard. And that's probably just like a real litmus test of where we're at, because we don't really have a local food systems culture.

- Organisational Leader, Common Ground Project Food Hub

How do you get the community to want to participate? To not go to and get their vegetables from Coles and want to maybe shop at a food hub, because that's the demand side of the food hubs that often can be a little bit tricky.

- Interest holder (local food leader), Nourish Sunraysia

And you just you're competing against the convenience of ...pick up your kids from school, stop by the shops and then go home. So that's the hard part, too.

- Interest Holder (council), Whittlesea Food Collective Food Hub

Logistical and access challenges

Hubs aimed to include community members in activities and as customers, but some sites were in locations, or set within broader organisational contexts, that constrained people's access to them. For example, multicultural organisations may have less reach with Anglo or First Nations community members, or organisations focused on youth may reach fewer older people. Hubs that were out of town, or not serviced by public transport, may have less community interacting with them and benefiting from outcomes.

(The hub is) probably a little bit off the beaten track, which makes it a little bit more unseen, or you know, so it makes the message a bit harder to get out in the sense of passing community or passing traffic.

- Supplier, Common Ground Project Food Hub

And access to transport from town would be difficult. So I think (a food hub) it needs to be in town somewhere. (But then) again...those people...out on farms. You know, don't always have the transport in. But I think you get your majority of your low-socioeconomic people from town centre.

- Interest holder (local leader), Nourish Sunraysia

People don't often know these places exist... and there's no marketing budget often for hubs. I think (the hub) could do more around promoting it more widely to the wider community. Absolutely. And I think that's something that we can take a support role in as well as we have socials and amplify things and talk to community quite a lot. So there's a role for us...and there's a role for LGAs in supporting that as well. I think, in getting the message out about where it is, what it offers, when you can go to the market, the dates and times, those types of things.

- Community partner, Whittlesea Food Collective Food Hub

The location of the food hub right now behind the gates of (the organisation) it just makes it a little bit less welcoming...actually that is probably not the right word, but definitely, it doesn't feel as accessible to people that aren't already engaged with (the organisation).

- Interest holder, Nourish Sunraysia

Securing sufficient affordable local food was a logistical barrier for some.

So freight for us is a killer...especially in regional (settings), we don't have one central access point to fruit and vegetables. Like if we're looking at farms. That farm might be an hour away from our

food hub, and they might be selling broccoli. And we're at the point where we could buy, say, one box of broccoli. But then you gotta try and justify driving an hour to pick up that one box and an hour back...the majority are spread out ...

- Food Hub Coordinator and Organisation Manager, Nourish Sunraysia

The seven hubs did work together where possible, however distances prevented closer logistical efficiencies between hubs.

Yeah, I think we all probably heard this multiple times. We all struggled with logistics. Working together as the 7 food hubs...moving food around between each other.

- Food Hub Coordinator and Organisation Manager, Nourish Sunraysia

But (as) you've heard from the hubs, you'll know that the one number one problem is transport for everyone.

- Food Hub Coordinator, Acres and Acres

4.3.2 Opportunities to strengthen food hubs and enhance impacts

Box 7. Key lessons from interviews: opportunities

A way to strengthen hubs and therefore enhance impacts, is to address (where possible) the constraints described in section 4.3.1. In addition to this, a synthesis of additional ideas described by interviewees⁴ are outlined below, which are a mix of insights for the short and longer term and for both within and beyond the hub/organisation. In summary, key actions from interviewees include creating regional hub networks for collaboration, developing learning resources and feasibility studies. Long-term financial support in startup years (5–7 years) is essential, alongside core ongoing funding/diversifying income streams and defining hub models. Broader measures involve government subsidies for small-scale farmers, regional wholesale infrastructure, and food policy leadership recognising food as a human right. Community-driven funding, partnerships with institutions, and programs for diverse groups can enhance sustainability. Investing beyond food relief and fostering reciprocity between hubs and suppliers will build resilient, equitable local food systems.

Opportunities to strengthen community food hubs according to interviewees

- **Create a network of hubs and more hubs bespoke to the region:** *It does take quite a bit of time to properly set these programs up...having food hubs that are in closer proximity to each other...would mean one can focus on growing a few types of produce really well, another food hub can grow other produce...then we can trade between each other. There's such a place for food hubs...but contextualised to the needs and assets of that region and community.*
- **Develop materials for others to learn from and evidence to optimise hubs:** *Feasibility studies are vital. E.g. what it costs to do a low-cost regenerative market in a low SES community, to see what your gap is, to be able to apply for funding and say: look at all these impacts and really map out what it costs to put the food hub operations in place.*

⁴ These quotes have been edited and anonymised to streamline this section

A book of 'how-to' and a mentor for your co-op. We need more research talking to small local farmers about what they make, sell, to whom and do they need other avenues. Engage community, find out what they want to buy and eat.

- **Fund for the long term:** *It needs to be more thought through the funding and stages, that it might be that you come in, you know to a certain level, then you test. Then you get to the next stage, and then you get another bit of money to continue doing something. I think there was a lot of wasted opportunity on the start, and but it takes time as well. So 2 or 3 years doesn't cut it. You probably need 5 to 7 years of funding. Hubs can't just have a 12 month contract and then everything is solved. Hubs need state or federal long term support.*
- **Reciprocity:** *The hub is growing collaborations and the longer the project goes on the more ways hubs can support suppliers, and vice versa.*
- **Hubs should deliver wide and targeted programs:** *Sometimes I think we focus on what we perceive as being the groups that are most in need and it misses a whole cohort in our community.*
- **Hubs as the preferred provider in public procurement:** *There's a hospital right there, they're both local and community providers, it's an obvious collaboration and would fuel awareness and engagement; There's schools, sports clubs, lifestyle villages, so collaborating more around food so everyone is thriving.*
- **Food hub leaders need a mix of operational and aspirational capability:** *Hubs start off with a strong personality, with big picture thinkers and vision. They also need to be sufficiently resourced and organised to have people managing staff, the day to day.*
- **Activation of consumers around hubs:** *people in very close proximity, the hub needs to be a part of their daily or twice weekly routine. It needs to be the first point of call before the supermarket.*
- **Define what a food hub model is and what it isn't:** *For me a food hub is an aggregation place for local produce to be then sold and distributed to the community. Ethically. So growers are paid for their work. People pay a fair price for the produce. It might include some elements of food security that support, e.g. for people to volunteer if they're not able to afford it. That is not what the 'food hub' does that operates in my region.*
- **Diversify income streams for hubs and strengthen their economic performance:** *The hub could diversify with event hire, that kind of business model to help it be sustainable without it being onerous as well. We need someone to come in and design that kind of a framework that allows it to be more financially independent.*

Opportunities to create broader conditions to help hubs and others, according to interviewees

- **Government subsidies for small scale farmers:** *Fossil fuels get subsidised like small scale farming should get subsidised. If we want to see it in Victoria.*
- **Regional settings need wholesale:** *We did look at sourcing from Melbourne wholesale markets, for instance. But then to me it sort of defeats the purpose of what we're trying to achieve here. If we were just going to go buy pallets of produce from Melbourne, we're just basically another supermarket local greengrocer as well. Our producers in the region are at a huge scale so to divert local produce into a local market, there needs to be serious infrastructure.*

- **Food policy leadership and food as a human right for all:** *Food is a human right. There needs to be some ways of making sure that everybody can access really good quality food, that we're not at the whim of big supermarkets. There's no food system policy, there's nothing that's around the affordability or availability food; All the inquiries have showed we need an actual Food Minister, Department of Food, we're not really dealing with food systems as a policy priority.*
- **Funding for the community not imposing it on the community:** *it's great strategically to do large-scale funding of programs statewide. And we definitely need that strategic insight. But for a community to thrive and be empowered, it needs to be from the community, not imposing it on the community. The local hub was a new program but it did a pretty good job of engaging with, and built on current networks and activities, and hence, it strengthened the region and even after it concludes. Funding comes and goes. Needs do not; I have seen investment in food hub concepts here, that have not included people involved in the local food system. They haven't been listened to or consulted. That [type of food hub] investment, therefore, has not really resulted in a stronger local food system.*
- **Investing in more than just food relief:** *Investing in hubs helps change the conversation from redistributing food waste and the end of the supply chain. It is not the way that we get an equitable, sustainable and resilient food system. And we need to fund more than just food relief. If we continue to fund the food relief model, there's less funding available for this alternative model.*

5.0 Implications for policy and practice

In 2022, with a vision to increase access to locally produced healthy foods in regional and urban fringe communities, VicHealth invested in seven community food hubs. Here we discuss and propose the implications for policy and practice of our mixed-methods evaluation and main report findings.

5.1 Major implications

1. Community food hubs offer substantial cross-cutting food systems outcomes to their communities, such as increased social inclusion, access to healthy local food and food security for priority populations. However, they struggle to be financially and operationally viable and sufficiently scalable to have a substantial population-level impact without a coordinated suite of supports, including funding in the start-up phase and core funding thereafter. The creation of an annual community food hub fund to a comparable scale to food relief funding (which can be >\$16.5 million p.a by state government alone⁵) could accelerate societal impacts substantially and signal value in the social good and outcomes hubs create. In a national food hub report from the USA (Barry et al., 2025), 21% were 'somewhat dependent' and 51% were 'highly dependent' on grant funding, underscoring that even in more mature food hub contexts, a large role for government, philanthropy and other granting/subsidy is required.

⁵ Since 2020, Victorian government has funded over \$66 million in food relief and Foodbank. Dated July 30, 2024. <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/new-grant-program-support-community-food-relief>

2. Areas to investigate further that merit research and practice leadership, include financial and impact modelling for different food hub operational approaches. This will build the evidence about the mechanisms for viability and scalability in the Victorian context, informed by local experience from existing food hubs here and internationally.
3. The Future Healthy investment and dedicated work of food hubs has supported innovative and promising local food systems models that are healthier, fairer and more environmentally sustainable. Acceleration requires large-scale investment, policy support and continued community-led mobilisation.

5.2 Local food system leadership – where to next?

- **Next steps for food hubs:**
 - We found consistent evidence of positive social and health-related outcomes from food hubs, especially directly to community members. This was likely attributable to various success factors present at each hub including the growing/selling of cultural, local and nutritious affordable fresh food; place-based and grass roots partnerships reaching priority communities/agencies, and the value-add experiential activities that invited community to grow, taste, buy, cook, enjoy and share food.
 - To enhance agency, environmental and economic outcomes, hubs may design and implement (or augment) activities that align with these domains, such as influencing government for agency outcomes, creating ‘closed loop systems’ for environmental outcomes; and sourcing in greater volume and from more local suppliers, for economic outcomes that benefit suppliers/producers/businesses.
 - At the time of preparing this report, the 3-year *Future Healthy* funding period had recently concluded and each of the hubs (and where relevant, their community organisations) were making strategic decisions about the future. Whittlesea Food Collective, for example, decided to focus on wholesale of produce to community organisations rather than continuing to sell food to individuals. Others concluded, pivoted or continued their food hubs. Food hubs likely take more than 3 years to establish and hence, longer runways should ideally be planned.
- **Next steps for VicHealth:**
 - Outcomes were deeply valued for those community members connected and regularly engaged. Questions remain on scaling up and out – e.g. how might hubs and similar reach thousands or tens of thousands of people? How could hubs procure more and offer commercial small and medium enterprises a viable supply chain partner? What models are most effective and impactful? These areas merit further research, evaluation and practice leadership that VicHealth is well placed to facilitate.
 - VicHealth may also be able to play an important role in highlighting the importance of community food hubs across multiple social, health and community dimensions across local government, Victoria and Australia. Considering its global preeminence as the world’s first health promotion foundation, and decades of community food systems leadership, international guidance on food hubs is highly possible.

- **Next steps for local, state, and national government:**
 - Hubs highly valued local government as partners, funders, knowledge brokers, policy enablers, networks and promotions, providers of facilities/resources and more. Collaboration was made easier in councils where there were existing food policies, local leadership and ground swell, key staff internally as champions and local priorities that align with food hubs (e.g. health and wellbeing, community development, agritourism, sustainable food systems, social inclusion and more).
 - The evaluation found systemic factors that maintain the status quo of Australia's major supermarket duopoly constrained hubs, partners and the broader vision for localised food systems. Policy leadership is needed to enable smaller players to serve priority communities and build more resilient local food systems.
 - Governments in Australia and globally already heavily subsidise agriculture. However, these subsidies are often regressive for small holders, favouring large producer groups producing single commodities. Smallholders and community food hub farms face the inflated costs associated with accessing inputs and infrastructure necessary to production (with less efficiency), yet there are few (if any) government resources allocated to incentivising the production of food via community and smallholder groups. Smallholder and community farms are less likely to be accessing formal supply chains and struggle to find reliable market demand. Despite the enormous benefits associated with maintaining community food systems and structures, they struggle to grow and reach scale. The absence of policy that guides and incentivises nature-positive farming, regenerative farming and/or community food enterprises in Australia is a significant limitation. There is a need for governments to recognise the value of such initiatives and to offer incentives to support their growth and sustainability and impact on public health. This could include reducing policy barriers to participation, funding the institutionalisation of food collaboratives and small producer networks (ie Loaves and Fishes in Tasmania, USA food hubs), offering vocational pathways to regenerative farmers, offering non-commodity specific grants to small and community producers to support the purchase of land and infrastructure.
 - Governments (at every level) and public sector food procurement presents another opportunity to systematically strengthen food hubs. Procurement requirements could include minimum proportions of the food supply to be locally sourced via hubs and other models that support health, equity and environmental sustainability outcomes.

5.3 Insights for evaluators of food systems projects

- **WHAT?** A mix of methods can enable triangulation of findings and conclusions. Whilst community and interest holder perspectives were richly analysed to produce this evaluation, methods such as food environment audits including the hubs and surrounds, participant dietary and behavioral outcome measures, and/or environmental assessments of products (e.g. life cycle analysis) would add more objective data to consider within evaluations. Consultation with the hubs and VicHealth improved the design of the evaluation. A deep, place-based, co-design approach with hubs as partners would further enrich evaluation in this setting with lessons shared across the lifetime of the project.

- **WHEN?** Evaluation should be planned and implemented from the program start – much of the data collection in this program happened in the remaining 6-12 months of food hubs being funded by VicHealth and several described their genuine concerns that the hub was facing closure, constraining their ability to support participation in this evaluation (amongst other things). Ideally baseline measures and then follow up over time, or comparator communities, would increase confidence in attributing change to food hubs.
- **WHO?** As independent evaluators, we aimed to give a voice to food hub staff, partners and users in a way that allowed them to speak honestly and openly about the strengths and weaknesses of the hubs and their potential. VicHealth specified from the granting guidelines at the outset that evaluation would occur for grantees, which can help to set expectations from the beginning that evaluators will be involved. VicHealth and staff from the hubs were advisory throughout, however had no access to data, analysis or ethical review of the project.
- **HOW?** Evaluators can gain efficiency and improve the design and uptake of evaluation tools if they work closely with hubs (for example, customer surveys were translated into other languages at the request of one hub; preliminary results were shared early with one hub who requested it to support the hub in a public forum) however, where budget and timescales allow, some hubs may prefer evaluators to be on site and actively involved in data collection (for example, setting up a community event like a free lunch, with evaluators in attendance to support participation of community members in evaluation surveys). Operational reporting through the granting period mixed measures, timescales and appeared burdensome (which may have contributed to missing reports and data relevant to this evaluation). Streamlined, once per annum, repeated measures of mutually agreed priority data, would be ideal.

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