



**The Food
Foundation**

POLICY BRIEFING

Community Restaurants

A cost of living intervention

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What is a community restaurant?

A community restaurant (or community kitchen) is a space for people to come together to eat cheaply and nutritiously.

At their peak, there were about 2500 community restaurants ('British Restaurants') during the 1940s (twice the current number of McDonald's restaurants currently and roughly the current number of food banks in the UK) and they operated both during and after wartime emergency conditions.

Why does it make sense to invest in community restaurants now?

- Although wartime emergency conditions don't prevail, emergency conditions do and will worsen as the winter Cost of Living crisis approaches. Creative emergency measures are needed that do more than the basic food bank.
- Community restaurants can help revive the high street. The plan to allow for compulsory rental auctions on the high street, included within the Levelling up Bill, could potentially help facilitate access to high foot-fall premises for community restaurants.
- Nutritious food can be produced more cheaply than cooking from scratch at home. Community restaurants help with the cost of living crisis through economies of scale in food purchasing and consumption and cost of fuel, offering the benefits of cooking in bulk to drive down the cost of food
- The model tackles not just long-term health issues linked to ultra-processed diets and obesity, but more immediate health and wellbeing problems: loneliness, social isolation and poor mental health.
- Community restaurants could contribute significantly to the levelling-up agenda – building resilience and cohesion in local communities, and creating jobs.

How have they worked in the past?

- The Treasury and Ministry of Food announced capital grants which local authorities or businesses could apply for to run an operation within a certain price point and nutritional criteria (broadly corresponding to the current 'Eatwell Plate'). A quarter of the capital grant could be used for start-up costs. In order to qualify for any future capital grants the venues had to break even or turn over a profit.
- 'British Restaurants' employed a paid staff including manager and serving staff, as well as welcoming volunteers.
- There was proper investment in the marketing and resources to make these attractive places to eat: well decorated, clean, 'centres of civilisation'. This often involved the goodwill input of the commercial food sector in the design and outfitting of these spaces so that they were seen as attractive high street venues rather than state institutions.
- Local authorities used their powers to secure empty premises on high streets (large venues such as empty bath houses, department stores) to ensure that venue costs would be low.
- The system rested on the bulk savings made via the central procurement of food from farmers, reducing the cost.

What lessons can we take from past experience into future investment?

- As long as venues adhere to a) menus based around the 'Eatwell Plate' and b) a menu price cap, private commercial providers should be welcomed and encouraged (it was historically) as a means of ensuring these are attractive retail venues
- These must be established as venues for people of all backgrounds, and not seen to be targeted at the very poorest (like food banks); there should be a national roll-out on a 'food for all' basis (similar to 'Eat Out to Help Out')
- There should be good communication and dialogue with food producers and the food retail trade to ensure that such an intervention is seen as mutually beneficial to high street revival, trade, and consumption patterns, rather than a state-imposed competitor to private enterprise.
- 'British Restaurants' relied on celebrity patronage and a slick marketing campaign to ensure popularity

How much would it cost ?

If this were an approach which the government wanted to develop further, a fully costed proposal would need to be developed which could draw on the real costs incurred by existing models operating in the UK. Taking the past model and applying it today, would suggest that Local Authorities could potentially support with a reduction in capital costs by making venues freely available or with discounted rent. The proposal for compulsory rental auctions included within the Levelling Up Bill could support this. Existing public sites could also be used such as school canteens in the evening or weekends. Other cost reductions could be achieved by involving farmers and wholesalers (through centralised, lower cost bulk purchasing of ingredients) and the channelling of food surplus from a range of businesses from farm to retail into the community restaurant supply chain.

Who should be involved from the start?

- Local food security groups - from community kitchens to food banks (these should be seen as a welcome evolution of the food bank into something more sustainable, rather than a competitor)
- Local politicians, business leaders, and high street 'gurus'
- British farmers
- Supermarkets and other large food retailers
- DEFRA and DHSC

What would be the benefits and returns?

- Nutritional long-term benefits to public health
- Mental health long-term benefits to public health
- Revival of high street
- Brexit-friendly measure addressing Cost of Living Crisis, building national pride

Why might this be politically attractive now?

- If revived as 'British Restaurants' it would address the need for Brexit dividends and address the national levelling up agenda: a catchy and patriotic project
- Need for fresh thinking about more sustainable approaches to food and fuel security as the winter Cost of Living crisis looms
- Heritage justification in appealing to older demographic: there was a lot of historical weight behind these schemes - backed by Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher's father - not an exercise in state socialism, but rather a 'one nation' measure with more support historically from the political right than the political left.

