

Evaluation of the Food Secure Communities Programme

What is Food Secure Communities?

Food Secure Communities (FSC) was established by MSD in 2020 to strengthen New Zealand's food security infrastructure and support households experiencing food insecurity. The programme operates through three-tiered infrastructure:

National partners strengthen food distribution at scale and build sector capability

NZ Food Network rescues surplus food and provides bulk purchasing services; Aotearoa Food Rescue Alliance builds capability; Kore Hiakai fosters collaboration and develops practice frameworks



Regional food hubs source, rescue, and distribute food to communities or local providers



Local food providers deliver food support directly to households through food parcels, social supermarkets, and wraparound services.

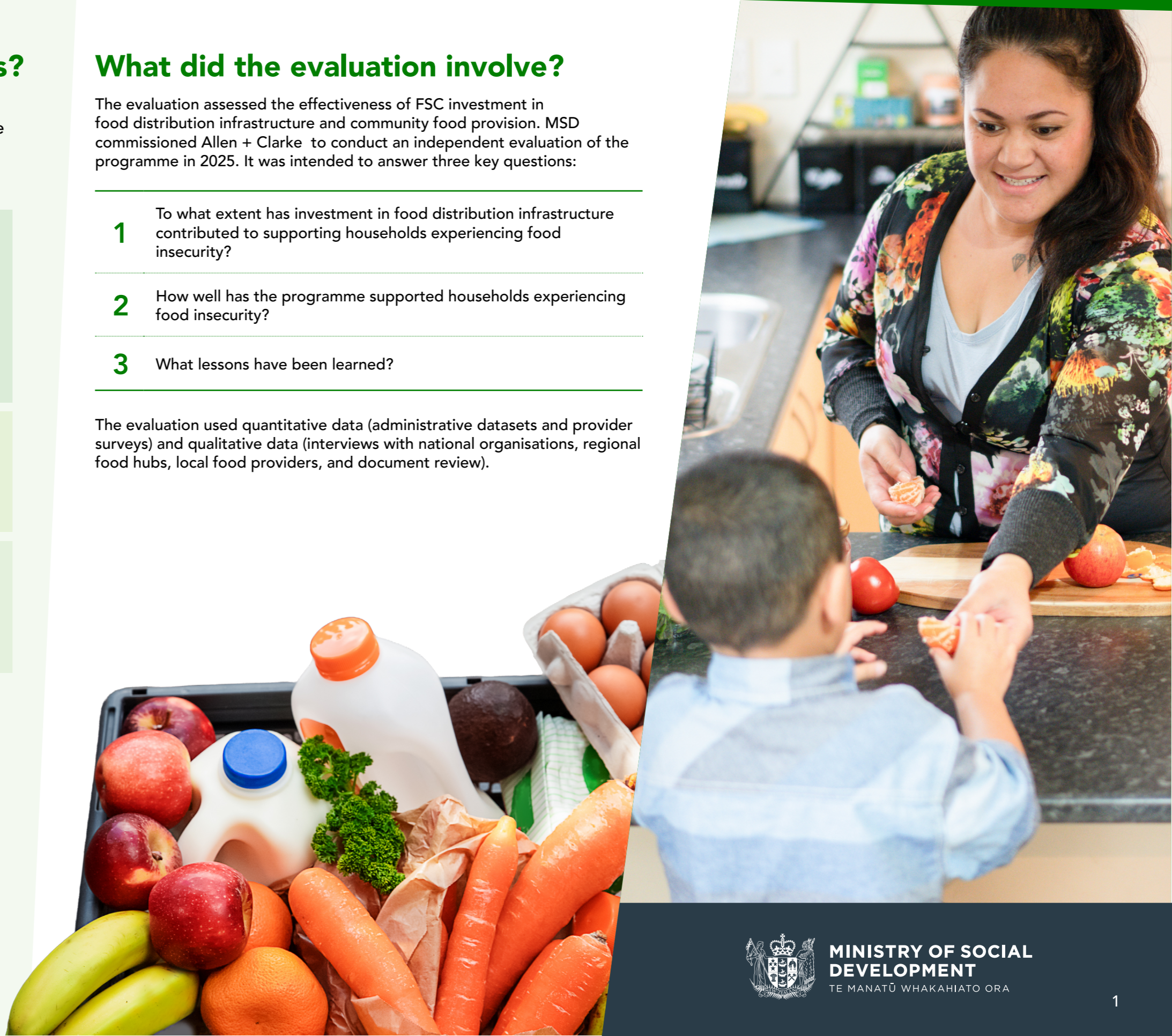


What did the evaluation involve?

The evaluation assessed the effectiveness of FSC investment in food distribution infrastructure and community food provision. MSD commissioned Allen + Clarke to conduct an independent evaluation of the programme in 2025. It was intended to answer three key questions:

- 1 To what extent has investment in food distribution infrastructure contributed to supporting households experiencing food insecurity?
- 2 How well has the programme supported households experiencing food insecurity?
- 3 What lessons have been learned?

The evaluation used quantitative data (administrative datasets and provider surveys) and qualitative data (interviews with national organisations, regional food hubs, local food providers, and document review).



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What were the key findings?

KEQ1: Investment in food distribution infrastructure

The FSC investment has enhanced the efficiency of food distribution at scale.

- The programme contributed to substantial increases in food volumes, with rescued food growing from 7.4 million kilograms in 2023/24 to 10.4 million kilograms in 2024/25.
- Nearly all providers (94% of those surveyed) reported increased capacity to provide food supplies to their community. Providers reported improved speed, reliability, and consistency of delivery during both business-as-usual and emergency contexts.
- Food wastage reduced through better coordination. The three-tiered infrastructure enables food to flow both downward (national to local) and upward (local surpluses redistributed regionally or nationally), preventing waste when local supply exceeds demand.

The FSC investment has been effective in building system capacity and strengthening emergency response capability.

- Infrastructure investment in warehousing, chillers, freezers, and transport enabled organisations to receive and store larger volumes of food, particularly perishables.
- AFRA and Kore Hiakai lifted sector capability, with 56% of surveyed providers reporting capability increases. AFRA provided guidance on food safety and handling, while Kore Hiakai's Aotearoa Standard Food Parcel Measure improved nutritional awareness, leading to more balanced food parcels.
- Relationships strengthened at local and regional levels, enabling resource sharing, knowledge exchange, and collaborative initiatives.
- The system demonstrated improved emergency response capacity. FSC-funded infrastructure enabled rapid response during 2023 North Island floods and Cyclone Gabrielle. Nearly all involved organisations have built institutional knowledge and relationships with their local civil defence team.

The FSC investment supports filling gaps in reaching food insecure households

- Local food providers fill critical gaps, supporting households during school holidays when lunch programmes are unavailable, reaching those reluctant to access government services, and supporting households not eligible for other assistance.
- Outcomes-focused funding enabled local innovation. Local food providers responded to the unique needs of their community through social supermarkets, community cafés, produce markets, community gardens, and cooking classes.

The increased capacity and capability is only partially sustainable without continued funding

- Over 80% of providers indicated they would face significant reductions or closure without FSC funding. FSC grants provided between 41-50% of funding needed for food services. For most providers, FSC covers staff salaries, rent, and utilities that are difficult to fund from other sources.
- The investment has benefits beyond simply making organisations viable. It enhances capacity to innovate, build relationships with whānau, respond to emergencies, and deliver choice-based approaches. Loss of FSC funding would risk reducing these capabilities.
- The interdependent three-tiered infrastructure means capacity loss at any level creates system-wide impacts. NZFN's ability to rescue food depends on regional hubs having capacity to receive it, which depends on local providers having capacity to distribute it to households.



KEQ2: Supporting households experiencing food insecurity

The FSC programme has been effective in building provider capacity to meet diverse household needs

- Strategic network development improved reach to priority populations, with approximately 60% of providers reporting better reach to Māori, Pacific peoples, and ethnic communities due to the FSC investment.
- FSC investment enabled providers to build trusting relationships with households, create welcoming environments, and offer choice-based models. The survey found 72-79% of providers reported meeting cultural, religious, and dietary needs moderately or more of the time.

The FSC programme has demonstrated efficacy in achieving household food security outcomes

- Expanded food rescue substantially increased fresh produce, meat, and dairy volumes, improving household access to nutritious food. Kore Hiakai's Aotearoa Standard Food Parcel Measure improved nutritional awareness amongst providers.
- Food parcels reduce household food expenditure, enabling households to reallocate resources toward rent, utilities, and debt repayment. Nearly all providers either require or strongly encourage budget service engagement.
- Household experience decreased stress and anxiety. Survey results show 76% of providers reported recipients had shared that food support decreased stress levels and improved mental or physical health.
- Food support functions as a gateway to wraparound services. Administrative data shows nearly half of households received other support services beyond food within three months, indicating integrated responses to complex needs.

Lessons learned for future food security investment

The evaluation identified the following key lessons regarding how FSC achieved its outcomes and considerations for future investment:

- 1 System design and interdependencies matter.**
The three-tiered model's effectiveness derives from how the levels work together. Capacity at each level enables or constrains the effectiveness of the others, meaning investment decisions should not be made in isolation for individual tiers.
- 2 Contributory operational funding enables enhanced capability for regional and local providers.**
For regional hubs and local providers, FSC funding pays for operational costs that are hard to fund from other sources. This enables providers to do much more than just stay open. It creates capacity to innovate, build relationships, respond to emergencies, and deliver mana-enhancing support.
- 3 Primary funding sustains essential national-level operations.**
For national partners (NZFN, AFRA, Kore Hiakai), FSC funding sustains core functions that enable the entire system to operate. Without continued funding, these essential operations would cease, creating system-wide impacts.
- 4 Capability building alongside infrastructure investment amplifies effectiveness.**
AFRA's role in building food rescue capability and Kore Hiakai's research and practice frameworks created system-wide improvements in food safety, nutritional awareness, and culturally responsive practice that infrastructure alone would not achieve.
- 5 Outcomes-focused funding enables locally relevant innovation.**
Providers with strong community connections and adequate capacity developed diverse, locally-tailored solutions when given flexibility to test approaches, learn from results, and adapt models to suit specific contexts. This same flexibility proved critical during emergencies, allowing rapid pivoting without new approvals.
- 6 Food provision can create pathways to address underlying drivers.**
When providers treat food as an entry point, this creates opportunities to connect households with services addressing debt, income support, and housing. This approach has potential to address underlying drivers rather than simply providing relief.
- 7 Mana-enhancing delivery approaches affect household willingness to access support.**
How food support is delivered affects whether households seek assistance and engage with services that can address underlying issues. Choice-based models, culturally appropriate food, and welcoming environments reduce stigma.
- 8 Diverse provider networks improve reach to priority populations.**
Strategic partnerships with Māori, Pacific, and other specialist providers improved reach to diverse communities. Providers with strong cultural connections brought knowledge about dietary preferences, cultural practices, and effective engagement approaches.
- 9 Emergency response capability requires sustained baseline capacity.** Organisations' ability to provide rapid emergency response depended on maintaining baseline operational capacity during business-as-usual periods. The infrastructure, staffing, relationships, and institutional knowledge needed for emergency response must be sustained over time.