



Food Relief in Focus

A Snapshot of Food Relief in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven – 2025

RESILIENT & SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS RESEARCH GROUP | UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

August 2025 | Prepared by Dr Katherine Kent and Professor Karen Charlton in collaboration with Kelly Andrews and Grace Potter from Healthy Cities Australia



OVERVIEW

The 2025 Food Relief and Rescue Survey collected responses from 15 organisations delivering food relief across the Illawarra–Shoalhaven. These organisations perform two critical functions: providing food to individuals and families in need and recovering surplus food that would otherwise be wasted. This combination of social and environmental benefit means food relief providers are an important part of the local community support network and the regional food system.

Collectively, the organisations reported an estimated weekly impact of:

- **1,540** meals served
- **652** hampers and food parcels delivered
- **1,723** individuals and **495** families supported

DISTRIBUTION APPROACHES

The frequency of distribution varies considerably across the 15 organisations. Some operate only on weekdays, offering consistent weekday access to food for their clients (Figure 1). Others run weekly or twice-weekly distribution schedules, which may be tailored to their capacity or to targeted community demand. Only a small number of organisations provide food daily, reflecting the resource-intensive nature of such operations, particularly in staffing, storage, and logistics. This variation in delivery models suggests that food relief in the region is not uniform but rather adapted to the specific capacity and purpose of each provider.

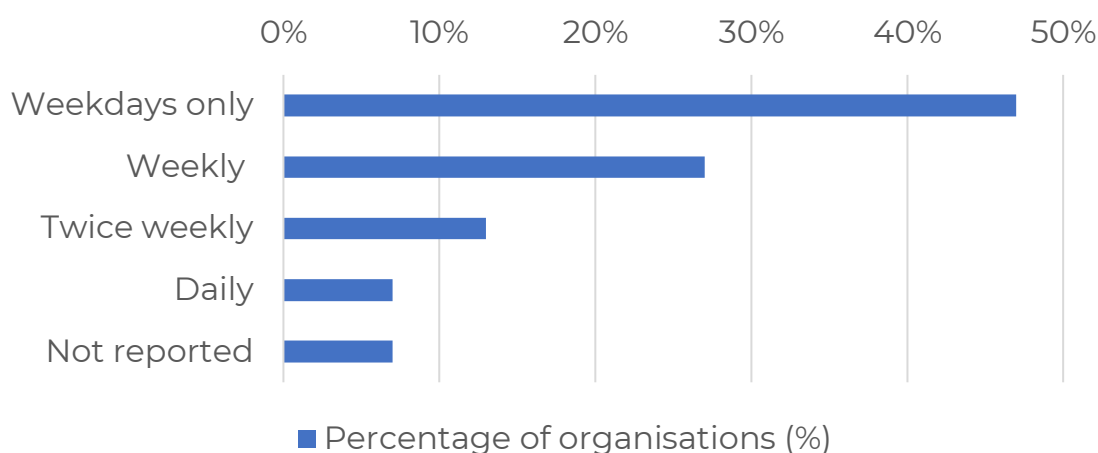


Figure 1 Frequency and distribution patterns of food relief services across 15 organisations in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven.

TYPES OF FOOD RESCUED

The most frequently rescued food types were pantry staples such as rice, pasta, and canned goods and fruit and vegetables (Figure 2). Other common categories included bread and baked goods, meat, dairy, and snack foods. Less frequently rescued items included ready-made meals, beverages, and other miscellaneous items. This distribution suggests that while core fresh and staple food groups are well represented in rescue activities, there may be opportunities to increase the diversity of proteins and culturally appropriate options.



Figure 2 Percentage of surveyed food relief organisations (n = 15) that provide various food categories through food rescue and distribution activities.

CHALLENGES IN FOOD RESCUE AND DISTRIBUTION

Storage limitations directly affect the volume and type of perishable foods that can be accepted and redistributed. Storage capacity varied (Figure 3), where 40% reported excellent storage infrastructure, 33% described it as good, and 20% indicated challenging capacity constraints.

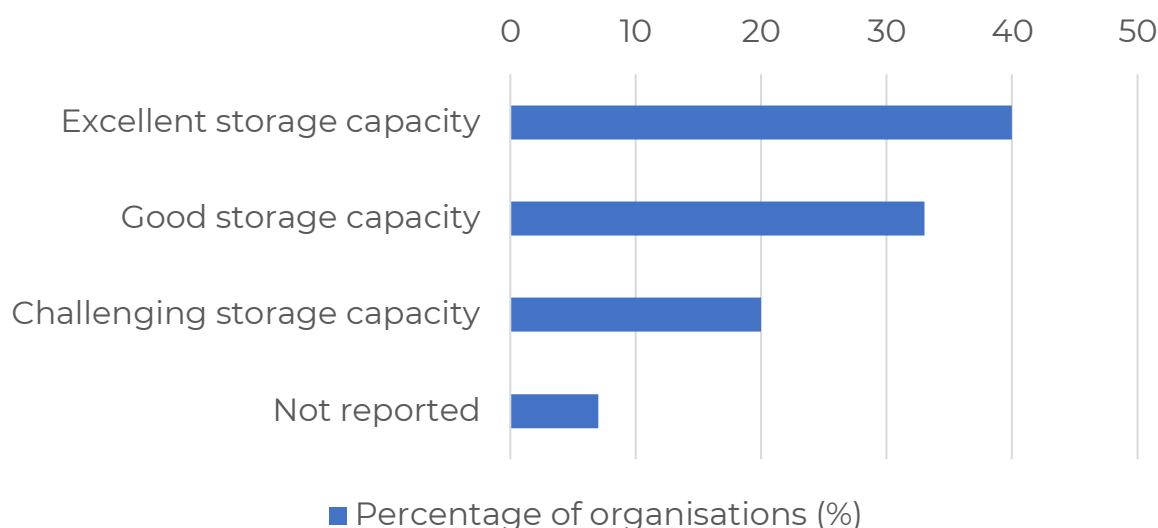


Figure 3 Reported storage capacity among surveyed food relief organisations (n = 15).

Organisations commonly faced challenges related to the quality and consistency of food donations (Figure 4). More than half reported that perishable items often had short shelf lives, creating logistical pressures to distribute them quickly. Other barriers for some organisations included limited funding for equipment, storage, and transport, as well as volunteer and staffing shortages. Some organisations also cited a lack of refrigerated transport, scheduling difficulties, challenges meeting specific dietary needs, and insufficient warehouse space. These issues underscore that reliable and predictable food supply is as critical as overall quantity.

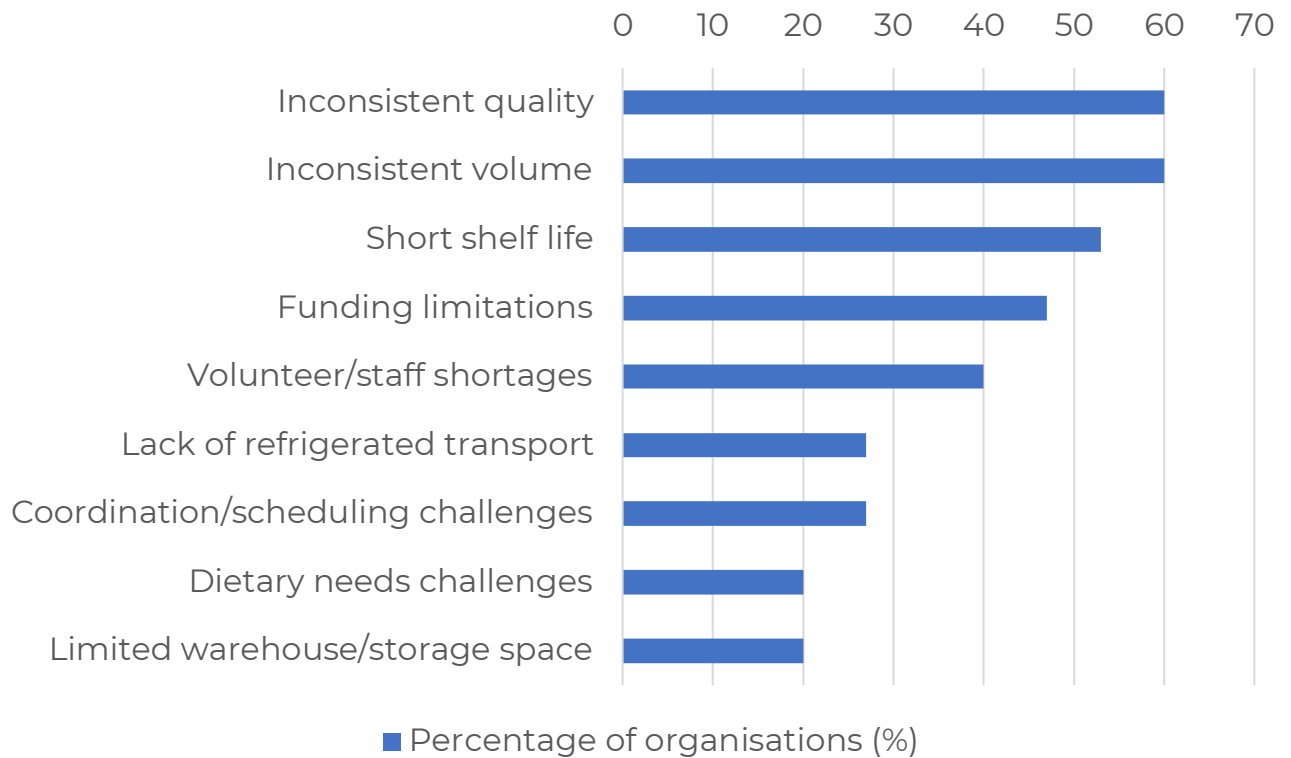


Figure 4 Key barriers to food rescue and distribution reported by surveyed organisations (n = 15).

Many organisations identified the need for greater volumes of rescued food (Figure 5), additional volunteers, and expanded cold storage to support their operations. Other priorities included reliable delivery vehicles, improved access to healthier food options, and stronger collaboration with other food relief providers. Addressing these needs would enhance both the reach and nutritional quality of food relief services.

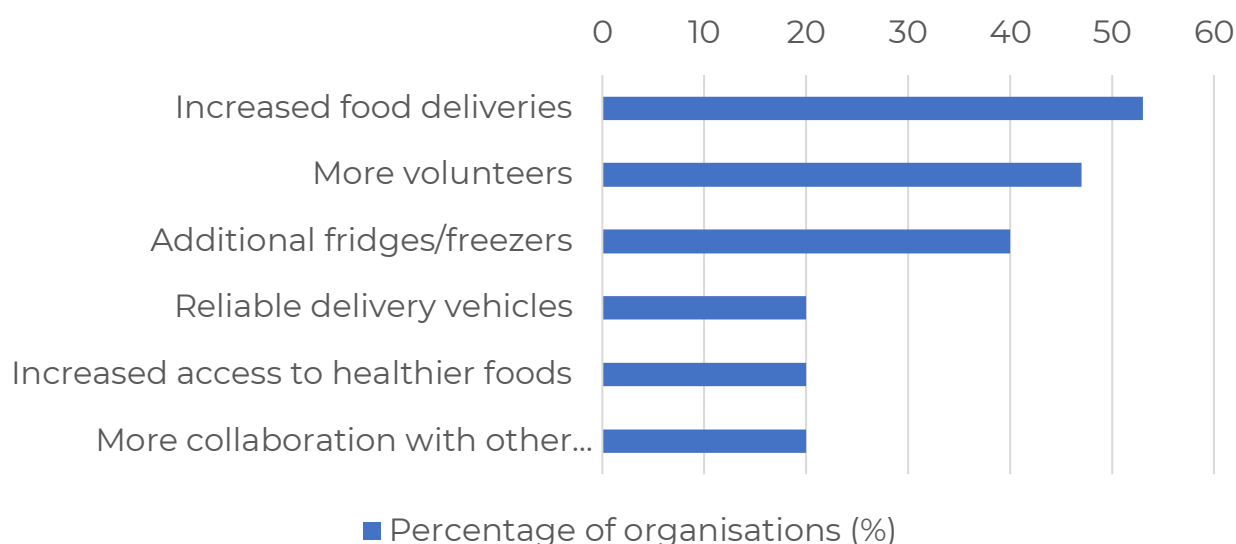


Figure 5 Priority support needs identified by surveyed food relief organisations (n = 15).

CONCLUSION

The results of this survey confirm that food relief providers in the Illawarra–Shoalhaven play a key role in supporting community food security and reducing food waste. Their work delivers tangible benefits every week to thousands of people across the region. However, the effectiveness and reach of these services are influenced by factors such as infrastructure, volunteer capacity, and the consistency of food supply.

Investments in cold storage, transport, staffing, and food diversity could substantially strengthen the local food relief system. Improved collaboration between providers, along with a more stable supply of rescued food, would further enhance the sector's capacity to meet the needs of the community now and in the future.