

READY HEALTHY EAT

A partnership
working to develop
great ready meals
for people that
need them



Surplus food and community food projects

Half a million ready meals

During 2020-2023, Ready Healthy Eat provided over half a million ready meals intended to improve nutrition in people experiencing food poverty. Along the way, we researched and reflected on food sourcing and have some lessons to share with others setting out how to address food poverty in community settings.

Many people in the UK are now nutritionally dependent on surplus food. The situation is new, changing and underexamined; it needs attention and there is potential for improvement. Food banks used to mainly deal with one-off referrals but some now address the diet of people in long term need. It seems likely that food need is here to stay for the foreseeable future and therefore that investigation, planning and development is worthwhile. There are few people in roles with a strategic interest in waste food supplies and supply chains.

The use of surplus food to serve people who cannot otherwise afford to eat is a 'sticking plaster'. People should not be too poor to eat and the food industry should not generate quantities of waste. Both of these problems are beyond our control and need policy intervention, so we do the best we can in the meantime.

Observations

- Demand is going up. There are more people needing food support.
- Anecdotally, in some areas, the number of projects has also gone up, especially during Covid. These are not always strategically planned.
- Much surplus food is not entering the food poverty supply chain. The best projects seek it out by being well networked, identifying delivery nodes, collaborating and approaching suppliers.
- FareShare and similar organisations are well placed to distribute certain kinds of food surplus but not other kinds of food eg from local suppliers, farmers' markets.
- Food banks and FareShare measure outputs by weight. They might not be receiving a good balance of nutrients. Many are offered more white bread and pastries than protein. They should consider thinking of themselves as 'nutrition banks' and monitor and try to address quantity of nutrition issued rather than tons of food. Food projects including food banks monitor outputs in kg units, not in nutritional units. The Very Well Fit tool that we used for monitoring meal quality would work for this purpose.
- Food poverty networks tend not to meet food producers and processors and therefore struggle to identify some surplus food. Eg they are often not talking to abattoirs, packhouses etc. There is work to do to introduce these networks to each other. Some of this work needs to happen at a small grassroots level.
- Kitchens need good cooks who can devise tasty healthy food at scale immediately from random ingredients. This might require training.

Observations

- The best systems have good communication and physical infrastructure. Poor people will be better nourished where there are WhatsApp groups, warehouses, vans, freezers and forklifts.
- Storage is a problem. Many of the smaller satellite groups of the partners use temporary and pop-up spaces with insufficient storage. This affects diets.
- Food projects buy in ingredients at short notice to match the day's random surplus delivery. This means that they pop next door to the supermarket and therefore do not get a good deal either environmentally or financially. Buying in to ensure that the delivery is nutritionally balanced, accessing wholesale prices and making longer term deals with environmentally good farmers could be better handled higher up in the waste food supply chain, ideally in a way that is owned and controlled by the projects needing to supplement supplies. The end users could aggregate their existing food budgets to do this.
- Some surplus food supply chains could be effectively used to distribute bought in food, chosen according to dietary and cultural need.
- The best projects are providing a unique role in supply chains. They can source and quickly use or distribute short date and random food because they know who can use what, at what scale on what day of the week. They have flexible and diverse outlets to meet every supply eventuality eg they make ready meals, drive vans, run pop-up stalls, dehydrate, make kimchi, make ingenious recipe bags (eg using short date pineapple, eggs and cream cheese in the same recipe!), provide pop-up snack tables. No other player in the food chain is doing anything like this. They are reducing food waste.
- Much of the food waste in the UK can and should be prevented eg by improving supermarket contracting arrangements. Some food waste is inevitable because production and demand are unpredictable.
- Food companies that give their waste food to food poverty projects and then claim to have 'helped the community' are not always well regarded. It is perceived that they sometimes use the food projects as cheap dustbins and the projects sometimes dislike enabling what they consider to be unethical business practices. This is particularly the case when food companies claim to be 'helping the needy' in their marketing but deliver food that has already gone off, which the food projects have to pay to dispose of. In order to address poverty, the food projects would rather that the food companies paid their junior staff better and provided the food projects with fresh food that they chose to meet community need.
- Food supplies to projects that depend on them are insecure. If surplus food supplies dry up or fluctuate then people literally do not eat that day. Surplus food supplies are volatile.



"There is a lot of food that people do not want – having a community kitchen on site enables us to process the foods and do something with them. Ready Healthy Eat helped us to learn to become creative with this."

Hornbeam

Observations

- The community food projects have shown themselves to be very resourceful, adaptable, kind, cost effective and resilient in meeting sometimes overwhelming need in their communities. We recommend directing funding and development opportunities to them so that skills development, social capital and funding remains embedded where it is needed.



"Our supplier told us that surplus food has plateaued and there is not much more available." Hornbeam

- It is a skilled job to take care of food safety of short date products. Some projects do not handle fresh food because they are not equipped to address food safety requirements. That affects people's diets.
- Network and collaborate. The more communication and cooperation the better. At worst, food poverty projects compete with each other for insufficient supplies of surplus food. Their need is desperate: without the food, their friends and neighbours may go hungry. Tensions are likely and need managing.
- "As a 'vegan' space, we get a lot of interesting vegan surplus products like oatly yoghurts, kimchi, even vegan sushi." In Hornbeam's networks, some suppliers do understand and address their needs.
- Scale matters. Some projects can handle a consignment of 5 tons of cauliflowers, some can handle a tray of sandwiches left over from a wedding. This needs to be understood and signposted in networks.
- Some activities work best at different places in the supply chain. This needs to be understood and planned for eg dehydration might work best at the top of the supply chain so that we are only dehydrating food that could not be used anywhere else.
- In a collaborative network, specialism is helpful eg one organisation can make and distribute ready meals (which might enable community cafés elsewhere), one can do gleaning and share bulk gleanings, one can run a warehouse, etc. Food suppliers need a single point of contact in the sector, not multiple calls from different volunteers. Some food surplus arrives in catering size packs and needs to find its way to projects serving large households or running kitchens.
- Framing matters. When we talk to people in need, who are often feeling ashamed and with low self esteem, it is both accurate and supportive to say that they are helping the environment by using surplus food.
- Good supply chains are more important than proximity to farm land. Rural food poverty is very poorly supported. Households looking out over farmland may be among the hardest hit by food poverty. Most surplus food networks are urban.

Observations

- Power is held in the wrong place. What people eat is largely determined by what supermarkets want to throw away. Ideally, supply chains will be owned and controlled by community nutritionists and community food projects. There are cases where the bigger waste food distributors are deciding which projects get which food. Where this is happening, their intent and knowledge of the sector matters; are they fostering collaboration? Do they know where Halal/vegan/baby food is needed? Are they enabling new food banks to set up right next to existing ones or are they using their influence wisely in who they choose to supply? Choices about which projects to supply made by distributors may have significant influence as demand exceeds supply of food.
- Surplus food (even 'junk' food) can be used as a means of delivering valuable social benefit; people arrive for free food and then engage in community activity.
- There are instances of food redistribution groups competing with each other for relationships with surplus food producers.
- Packing disposal and disposal of inedible food that has been delivered can become the problem of the food project not the company that caused the problem.
- The location of different activities matters: they need to be accessible to people in need but they also need to be near sources of food. For example, if ready meal production is undertaken at the top level surplus food distribution hub, it can be done at scale using the gluts, accessing a good balance of ingredients, efficiently making a choice of meals and can be distributed through the surplus food supply chain.

"Our delivery this week was a palette of energy drinks. How am I supposed to make meals from that?"



- There is work to do to map and understand supply chains to see where investment, communication or change is needed. Surplus food supply chains are largely ad hoc and neither food industry, farming nor food projects know the route of food in and out of their organisation beyond their immediate contacts. There are probably easy wins to improve quantity and quality of food if we had a strategic view – for example if most community food projects had a cheap second hand freezer, would the supply chain be able to handle much larger volumes of fresh veg? If the main distribution centres were making and freezing ready meals would we be able to address nutrition and waste more efficiently than moving ingredients to projects (that often serve people who do not cook)? If nutrition were monitored instead of weights, would we be able to develop relationships with key waste producers (eg abbatoirs, oily fish processors) to meet identified gaps?
- The partners did not provide data about the impact of apps like Too Good to Go or Olio but this might require attention in some areas.



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Ready Healthy Eat was a National Lottery Community Funded partnership project to provide ready meals for people experiencing food insecurity. The Real Farming Trust worked with four very capable delivery partners from 2020-2023: Brighton & Hove Food Partnership, The Hornbeam Centre in London, Cyrenians in Edinburgh and NOW in Belfast. Coventry University researched the impact of the work, including nutritional impact.

