How London's communities are tackling food poverty

Report, October 2018

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TSIP | The Social Innovation Partnership

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Executive summary

Between 1 in 3 and 1 in 4 Londoners are living below the poverty line, with a sharp 50% increase in recent years in the number of working families that fall within this category. Rising housing costs and an inconsistent use of London Living Wage mean that despite increases in employment levels, London remains behind other parts of the UK in terms of poverty.

Food poverty is the household food insecurity that can occur as part of poverty, or when faced with a financial crisis[1]. In such circumstances, families are forced to make difficult decisions about how to allocate their financial resources, which can result in skipped meals. In particular, food poverty is associated with low nutritional content, which has a negative impact on health and development, particularly for children who lack free school meals during the holidays.

> *"Above all, food poverty is about less or no consumption of fruit and vegetables" – Professor Tim Lang*

Food, meanwhile, is in plentiful supply. The volume of food that is produced is currently more than enough to feed everyone, but through inefficiencies, a huge amount of edible food is lost to food waste.

Innovative and energetic organisations across London (and reaching into the rest of the UK) have set out to resolve these two issues, through an emergency redistribution of surplus food to those living in food poverty. Local, community-oriented organisations flourish with surplus food supply – not only in lowering their food budget costs, but in allowing them to host hot nutritious meals for locals to enjoy. Ultimately, communities and vulnerable people benefit together through shared activities and purpose in preparing and serving surplus food, and the social ties and support networks that come hand in hand.

The challenge such organisations face tend to be around the *access* to surplus food: having a transport system or redistribution connection that can bring reasonable portions of perishable food to them for fast turnaround into meals. These frontline organisations also operate on low budgets, and can use financial help covering staffing costs, and funds for kitchen storage and items – they rely on grants to cover their operating costs, or to kickstart ambitious new initiatives to reach their communities.

TSIP conducted 20 interviews with a selection of organisations and experts and analysed a set of impact data collected from 29 community groups with an aim to map their reach and multi-faceted approaches; understand the diverse ways in which they impact food poverty; and gather perspectives on how key funders and supporters in the sector can help shape the future of food surplus and food poverty.

[1] Sustain, What is food poverty? https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpoverty/whatisfoodpoverty/

About this report

About LCF

The London Community Foundation (LCF) is a grantmaking charity with a focus on grassroots organisations throughout London who are making an impact on disadvantaged people and communities. Since their inception in 1995, LCF has invested over £70 million into more than 13,000 charitable projects across London.

About the Food for London fund

Food for London is a funding programme run by The London Community Foundation in partnership with the Evening Standard. Over the last year, the fund allocated £678,000 to 30 charities and community groups around London, revealing a growing social movement around innovative management of food surplus and food waste. This report was written by The Social Innovation Partnership, commissioned by LCF, within the context of this fund.

About TSIP

The Social Innovation Partnership (TSIP) is a socially-focused consultancy. We work across sectors and combine capabilities in strategy consulting, service design, and evaluation. We support clients at every stage of the journey towards delivering social impact – from understanding what is needed, to designing, piloting and scaling up solutions, through to evaluating the results and using lessons learnt to improve future work. Our strategic theme for 2018-2021 is the future of work, so we are passionate about increasing meaningful high-quality employment opportunities and keen to work with others who share this commitment.

Who we spoke to

People and organisations in the food surplus sector can be divided into three main categories: redistribution/ linking networks; community kitchens/ charities; and advocates/ campaigners. This report is shaped by interviews held with people from each category.

Redistribution/ linking networks

Organisations have been set up to help move surplus food from one place to another: whether by transporting food from the retailers to community organisations that need them, or by providing a digital resource to help others discover those that could be providing or receiving surplus; a couple sell surplus food products for profit.

FareShare – UK food redistribution network
Karma – London app connecting people to discounted surplus meals from restaurants
Neighbourly – online platform connecting food surplus with those who need it
Oddbox – Small business selling 'wonky' produce otherwise destined for landfill
Olio – community app connecting people to neighbours with surplus food
Plan Zheroes – Redistributors collecting surplus food from markets
Snact – small business using fruit pulp surplus to create fruit leather snacks

The Felix Foundation – Redistributors transporting surplus food from retail to charities

The Trussell Trust – UK network of food banks

Community kitchens/ educators

Some London charities host meals for their beneficiaries, to provide a social experience, nourishing meals, and an introduction to their other services. Others use surplus food to teach skills in cooking, and efficient food use.

Antwerp Arms Association – Tottenham pub serving surplus food to the vulnerable
Barons Court Project – Charity providing support for the vulnerable, including cooking skills and communal meals
Eat Club – London charity teaching food skills to young people and parents
Equal People Mencap – Disability charity using surplus food to teach cooking skills
FEAST! – Use surplus food to feed vulnerable adults in North London
FoodCycle – UK community meal providers
Loughborough Junction Action Group – Community café using surplus food
May Project Gardens – London social enterprise supporting sustainable living
Notre Dame Refugee Centre – London centre providing support and surplus food meals to refugees
St Michael and All Angels – West London church providing surplus food meals
Sufra – NW London – Poverty charity with a community kitchen providing meals
The Real Junk Food Project – UK network of pay as you feel community cafes
Weavers Adventure Playground – Bethnal Green children's community centre serving surplus food community feasts

Advocates/ campaigners

An increasing number of people are involved in campaigning around food surplus – advocating for change around how food is used, and leading the wider movement, rather than using it directly themselves.

Hubbub – Environmental campaign charity, providing tips for food habits
Feedback – Global food waste campaigners
The Food Foundation – London-based independent think tank for food
The London Food Board – Board advising the Mayor on food issues for Londoners
This is Rubbish CIC – UK campaign organisation tackling food waste

Among these interviewees, some were supported by the Food for London fund; these and a further 21 of the grantee organisations were also analysed for their impact data.

Food poverty and food surplus in London

Food waste happens throughout the food production cycle, an inevitable by-product of food harvesting, transport, and preparation. In an ideal world, the food cycle is as efficient as possible: from processing through to usage, surplus food is minimised or passed along to the next stage.

In practice however, there are inefficiencies and waste at all stages of food processing. In the context of this report, ***food surplus*** refers to edible food that is left over or rejected; ***food waste*** is spoiled or otherwise inedible food, or food surplus that has been discarded and passed beyond humans to compost, recycling, or animals. With creativity and enterprise, this surplus food can be saved from food waste, and redistributed. Figure 1 below showcases the production cycle, the resulting waste and a range of innovative solutions to address it.

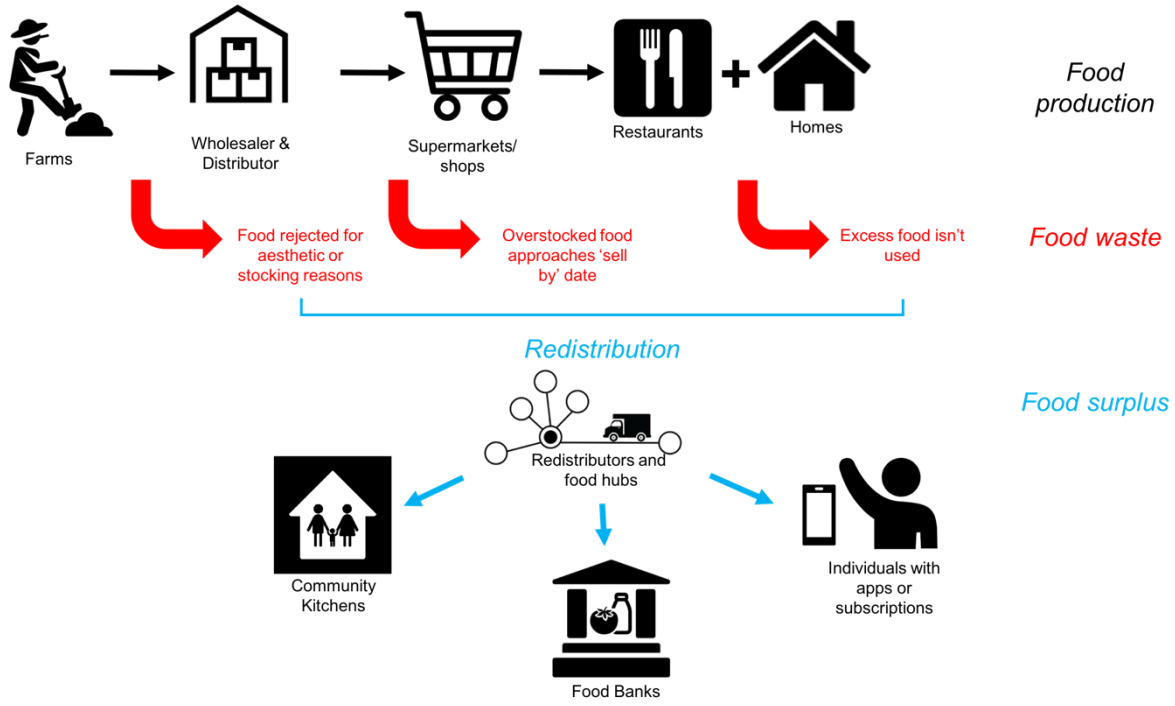

Figure 1: Food waste is generated from each stage of food production, but can be redistributed as food surplus to those needing nutritious food.

Food surplus in London

London is a particularly important site in which to address food surplus. It is a significant hub of food distribution: representing a large-scale network of supermarkets, restaurants and other retailers who process food; as well as the homes that buy, eat, and discard it. London has a reported 24,360 restaurants[2] and has seen dramatic increases in chain supermarket stores in the last 20 years.[3]

[2] www.worldcitiesforum.com/data/number-of-restaurants
[3] www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12007835

As such, it is also responsible for a great deal of food surplus and food waste, and remains the centre of the conversation when addressing how to better reduce waste and redistribute food.

> *"London has been really critical in kicking off what has become a global movement, that was really first sparked [here]. From every corner of London I received incredible offers of support and enthusiastic participation… it was the hospitable environment in London that really made it possible." – Tristram Stuart, Feedback*

Research highlights that households are the biggest producers of waste. WRAP, a significant think-tank and consultant in and around food waste, recently published data estimates that in 2015, Household Food Waste (HHFW) in the UK totalled 7.1 million tonnes. Of this, 5 million tonnes was classified as 'avoidable/edible, representing a £15 billion cost of wasted food.[4]The most common reasons for avoidable food waste included: personal preference (28%); not used in time (41%), and; cooked, prepared or served in too large quantities (25%).

Manufacturing also plays a significant part in waste and surplus; it is accountable for 1.85 million tonnes of food waste, 1 million tonnes from hospitality and food service, and 260,000 tonnes from retail/supermarkets. Yet in 2015, only an estimated 0.7 million tonnes of food surplus was redistributed to people, or repurposed for animal feed.[5] In addition, FareShare, a major surplus food redistributor, estimates that they only access around 1% of UK surplus food.[6]

An enormous amount of food that could be usefully redistributed, currently isn't – for London in particular, where food poverty levels are so high, this is a key gap to target.

Food poverty in London

London has higher rates of poverty than other parts of the UK, largely driven by higher housing costs. In 2017, 2.3 million Londoners were living below the poverty line, of which 700,000 were children.[7] Over time, approaches emerged to address this; one of the go-to models has been and remains food banks. Traditionally, food banks have provided emergency rations of food to those demonstrating need; for example, between April and September 2017 the Trussell Trust, a network of food banks, gave out an estimated 58,785 emergency food packages.[8]

However, while traditional food banks address an immediate need, they often only deal in non-perishable in-date food such as cans and dry foods. This limits the range of nutritious and healthy foods that their customers can access (i.e., fruits and vegetables, amongst others) – and fails to fully address the challenge of food poverty.

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[4] Household food waste: restated data for 2007-2015 http://www.wrap.org.uk/sites/files/wrap/Household%20food%20waste%20restated%20data%202007-2015.pdf

[5] http://www.wrap.org.uk/content/quantification-food-surplus-waste-and-related-materials-supply-chain

[6] http://www.fstjournal.org/features/28-3/surplus-food

[7] London's Poverty Profile 2017, https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/publications/londons-poverty-profile-2017/

[8] https://www.trusselltrust.org/2017/11/07/foodbank-demand-soars-across-uk

Food poverty has a profound effect on a family's ability to afford fresh produce, with consequences for their health and wellbeing. This can result in a negative spiral - long-term malnutrition and poverty has been consistently shown to negatively impact on children's cognitive development,[9,10,11] and cognitive function in the elderly,[12] while for adolescents and adults, dietary content can have a profound effect on mood.[13] With an estimated 8.4 million people in the UK experiencing food insecurity, this represents an urgent and widespread problem.

This is particularly the case for the children experiencing 'holiday hunger' over the summer, when they do not receive free school meals. With additional strain put on families to provide extra meals over holidays, other finances are put under pressure; food insecurity and overall poverty are therefore intrinsically and mutually linked. This urgency has led the Mayor's Fund for London to launch Kitchen Social, which aims to feed a minimum of 50,000 children over the holidays by 2020.[14] And, as this reports highlights, they are not alone - communities around London have also developed their unique approaches to addressing this and the entrenched issue of food poverty, and are seeing incredible results.

Food poverty and food surplus: the role of redistribution

Although many would stress the importance of *reducing* food surplus, and preventing such inefficiencies in the first place, the current reality of large-scale surplus food and systemic food poverty has led to an urgent focus on redistributing food towards those living in food poverty, and the communities that support them.

For these community organisations, receiving this redistributed food can save them upwards of £13,000 per year of their budget; this enables them to both feed and provide holistic and essential support to those living in poverty (e.g. training; budgeting, cooking or nutrition skills; confidence, etc.).[15]

[9] Brown, J. L., & Pollitt, E. (1996). Malnutrition, poverty and intellectual development. *Scientific American*, *274*(2), 38-43.
[10] Brooks-Gunn, J., & Duncan, G. J. (1997). The effects of poverty on children. *The future of children*, 55-71.
[11] Alaimo, K., Olson, C. M., & Frongillo, E. A. (2001). Food insufficiency and American school-aged children's cognitive, academic, and psychosocial development. *Pediatrics*, *108*(1), 44-53.
[12] Goodwin, J. S., Goodwin, J. M., & Garry, P. J. (1983). Association between nutritional status and cognitive functioning in a healthy elderly population. *Jama*, *249*(21), 2917-2921.
[13] Young, S. N., Smith, S. E., Pihl, R. O., & Ervin, F. R. (1985). Tryptophan depletion causes a rapid lowering of mood in normal males. *Psychopharmacology*, *87*(2), 173-177.

[14] https://www.mayorsfundforlondon.org.uk/programme/kitchen-social/
[15] http://www.fstjournal.org/features/28-3/surplus-food

Mapping existing initiatives across London

Groups all over London are organising to serve their communities and address this growing need. Figure 2 below builds on a review of Food for London applicants and grantees, as well as a wider review of the sector, to provide a picture of food surplus and waste initiatives across the city. Although these numbers are non-exhaustive, they highlight key trends in food poverty and its resulting interventions. The focus is mainly occurring in central London, and the larger numbers reside in high-poverty areas[16] like Lambeth, Southwark, Hackney, Tower Hamlets, and Camden. This poses questions about the need and availability of support in the outer boroughs.

Figure 2: Distribution of surplus food organisations across London boroughs.

[16] https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/data/poverty-borough/

There are five main categories defining how organisations can use, or work relating to, surplus food:

1. **Advocacy/campaigning**: organisations which promote the redistribution of surplus food, or ways to reduce food waste;
2. **Education**: teaching children or local families how to cook using surplus food; often coinciding with tips on nutrition, and efficient and creative meal planning;
3. **Surplus collection/ distribution**: organisations which coordinate with retail, restaurants or farmers in order to collect surplus food, and transport it to community organisations who request it;
4. **Community kitchens**: Charities and community enterprises who use surplus food to cook and serve food, provided on-site;
5. **Food banks**: emergency food provision is given to registered users who are referred by their GP or other community organisation, and can demonstrate financial need. The food was typically either donated by individuals or by retailers, and consists of tinned or dried goods that are sent home with the person or family.

The impact of communities on food poverty

Organisations that we studied were characterised by being London-based, community-supporting, and mostly small and grassroots groups. Though they served a range of functions in handling surplus food (as discussed in Section 4), all aimed to directly or indirectly have a positive impact on those living in food poverty.

The main areas of impact, as discussed below, highlight the multi-faceted ways in which these groups impact people and communities: ranging from directly addressing food poverty through to impacting health, social and other wellbeing outcomes.

As a whole, the most significant impact is the scale of beneficiaries eating meals prepared with surplus food (mostly driven by redistribution initiatives). However, there are many other ways in which the provision of surplus food also affects people, including but not limited to: improved community cohesion and connection; increased support networks; increased sense of wellbeing; decreased isolation; and upskilling.

Beneficiaries of surplus food

All the organisations we spoke to work towards providing surplus food to those who would eat it. Their feedback was often that there is a surprising level of demand for surplus food in London, with for example a total of 47,857 people fed with surplus food using Food for London funds – it should be noted that the vast majority of this number were from the Community Food Enterprise, who had wide-scale impact through redistributing to charities that use surplus food, and scaling up their reach.

> *"One very positive outcome is that **the cafe has been much more successful than we anticipated or imagined** and has by and large reached the groups we were aiming to reach, as well as bringing together the wider local community. What we offer has been eagerly embraced and on Friday we are almost always full, **sometimes there have been queues out the door and it was hard to meet the demand**. We did a crude feasibility study so knew that there was demand in the area for a cafe like this, but had no idea how well attended it would be, and by such a diverse community" - Loughborough Junction Action Group*

For many, in fact, there was clear impact not only through the sheer numbers of people fed, but also through the personal impact that they had on people for whom a hot nutritious meal may be a rare occurrence:

> *"Several times when people come to the lunch they have said to us that they haven't eaten for days" – St Michael and All Angels*

> *"For people who are homeless, this might be the only hot meal they can get and ensures they are fed well" – Barons Court Project*

Food waste reduction

For many charities and organisations using food surplus, the primary drive is to address food poverty, rather than an environmental concern. However, diverting surplus food to people and communities is an indicator of a reduction in waste, and measuring the volume of food saved provides a compelling picture of the scale of surplus food that has the potential to be used.

From the three organisations who were able to provide data on this outcome, an approximate 34 tonnes of waste was diverted from landfill – almost double the amount to what they had initially predicted.

Plan Zheroes are a food surplus collection and distribution service operating out of Borough Market. The funding they received from the London Community Foundation allowed them to expand their FoodSave project from once to twice per week, and also to initiate a cargo bike delivery service for charities who are unable to come to the market to collect food. Thanks to their increased presence at Borough Market, they were able to attract even more traders, to a total of 41, to join their food waste reduction programme.

> *"We ran a total of 50 [FoodSave] sessions on Wednesdays saving an additional 8,843 kg of food. Combined with the Saturday collection, we ran a total of 102 sessions over 52 weeks and saved 19,651 kg of good quality fruit, veg, bread, meat, fish and dairy from waste. This is equivalent to 39,302 meals for people in need. […]* ***The quantity of surplus food available on Wednesday (average of 177 kg per collection) far exceeded our expectations (50-100kg per collection****). Without this project, an additional 9 tonnes of food that provided the equivalent of 18,000 meals would have gone to waste" - Plan Zheroes*

Indirect positive effects on beneficiaries

Food provision is the key element of many of these community group – but it also provides an opportunity to reach people and impact them beyond their immediate nutritional needs. For example, many beneficiaries highlight increases in their wellbeing through mental, physical or emotional health. In addition, a common trend sees beneficiaries and volunteers alike benefit from surplus food activities with improved wellbeing, mental health, and confidence:

> *"People are saying they feel more connected to their community and are happy to be making a contribution. This in turn will increase their self-esteem and possibly set them on a more positive pathway" – Antwerp Arms Association*

An additional benefit of these local projects is in the referrals to advice and guidance services. This increases the likelihood of individuals accessing much needed support services.

> *"… **it brings people in**, and once they're here, we've got our other services, including health, art club, sewing club, drama … the provision of food goes along with it" – Sarah Hughes, Notre Dame RC*

"Mind are specialists in dealing with people with mental health [problems] – we're specialists in providing people with a fantastic meal. It's a brilliant partnership, the Wednesday meal in Islington, because ***we bring in people who might not access mental health services*** *because of the stigma associated with it"- Mary McGrath, FoodCycle*

"The lunches act as an informal gateway to other services" – Antwerp Arms Association

Social effects on communities

From a wider lens, food surplus organisations can have an even broader effect within communities themselves, who benefit from increased cohesion thanks to surplus food initiatives.

Food has a unique role in communities and human socialisation, and has deep anthropological roots in bringing groups of people together. Unlike food banks, where parcels of dry goods are sent home with the recipient, surplus food and initiatives revolve around *meals*.

Most organisations that set up their ventures as social gathering places experienced larger than expected numbers of people attending regular social activities, and/or were more engaged with social networks and support. Moreover, food surplus initiatives have a downstream effect in strengthening beneficiaries' community networks, noting increased participation in community activities, including for those who had never done so before.

Food or cooking education groups also see significant impact resulting from their activities. Their work provides a valuable opportunity for people to gather, to socialise and network, and to share their interests, skills and talents.

"A surprising outcome we experienced was in the way certain parents sought the ***sociability and interactivity of the sessions*** *for their kids; more so than cooking education. Due to time constraints resulting from balancing work and family, some haven't yet been able to cook all meals at home. But they have attended many of the sessions simply because* ***they get to spend time with their children*** *and at the same time learn useful tips and recipes that they prepare at home if they have time." – Eat Club*

"[We're] providing a ***community setting, a means to be social and interact with the community****. A lot of the guys want to share their poetry, they want to perform, one guy got on the guitar, one guy donated a piece of art…" – Hannah Style, FEAST!*

This is particularly relevant for those who are vulnerable and isolated, such as the homeless, the elderly, and/or the disabled.

"We were really born out of food waste … but as the organisation has grown and developed, we recognise that ***the impact we really make is because it's a***

> ***community meal*** *where people gather every week at the same time in the same location, we really build community and this is hugely important for people who are experiencing hunger or who may be experiencing loneliness – something like 64% of our guests live alone,* ***this might be the only meal that they would have in a week with other people****" – Mary McGrath, FoodCycle*

> *"The Community Kitchen has helped to reduce food poverty in the community, whilst ensuring that food waste is reclaimed and used to alleviate hunger. But* ***more importantly, the service has provided a community space that overcomes social isolation amongst some of the marginalised*** *including the street homeless, elderly and disabled, without restricting ourselves to a particular social group.* ***We often receive guests who are not in financial difficulty, but who want to be part of the community****. As a result, new friendships have emerged that cut across cultural barriers in a way that respects people of different backgrounds and assures them that they do not need to compromise on any of their beliefs or values" – Sufra – NW London*

The simple act of sharing food – even if not the meal, together – promotes community cohesion and reciprocity. In Olio's model, an interpersonal food sharing app, food redistribution is unique in that it operates on a small scale within a community, with one person or family arranging to receive specific items of food, often from another individual or family that lives locally:

> *"… Then what happens is you meet the neighbour, and you realise that this person who you might not ever have crossed paths with in your community has a clean house, is friendly, cares about the same things that you do – and you have the joy of connecting with another human … so* ***you have that positive neighbour to neighbour experience*** *… If you've extracted value from the community as an ecosystem, after a while as a human you feel the need to reciprocate and give back" – Saasha Celestial-One, Olio co-founder*

Interestingly, experts point a specific social pull around food itself – that, beyond other shared spaces or activities, preparing and sharing food creates a meaningful and celebratory bond within communities.

> *"Food is so deeply rooted in all human societies, universally so … it speaks to humanity's use of food to build community, often between strangers…* ***our ability to bring people around food in a celebratory way is a huge tool for community building****" – Tristram Stuart*

> *"There's one thing that unites everyone, and that's food.* ***You put great food on the table, and it brings everyone together****. We've got a Jewish community there, Muslim community, LGBT – we have a complete mixed room of all sorts of people, and the common talking place is the food. It brings everyone together, and we all talk about and address our issues" – Mumtaz Ghaffar, The Real Junk Food Project*

Engaging volunteers and providing skills

Volunteers provide an essential resource to food surplus charities, whether helping with transport and food delivery, or assisting in the kitchen. This is a mutual benefit, providing volunteers with an opportunity to develop new skills and expertise….

> *"Volunteers themselves benefit from training and development" – Rachel Ledwith, FareShare*

> *"We manage a large number of volunteers ensuring they were learning, gaining valuable experience and skills" – Loughborough Junction Action Group*

… particularly for volunteers and workers who may face particular barriers into entering work:

> *"We're able to help people, including some ex-convicts, skill up and get into work … the impact is not just in terms of the food we're delivering, but giving people the chance to be involved with the Felix project, who have perhaps not been in work" – Mary Powys, The Felix Project*

Financial impact for beneficiaries: poverty

In providing surplus food, the main aim of food surplus organisations is to directly alleviate food poverty; in doing do, the hope is also that lightening a person or household's food burden would have a knock-on effect of improving other aspects of their poverty, since they could now potentially direct their resources more towards rent, bills, etc.

In practice, not many organisations we studied reported data for this, likely either because it was non-applicable (for redistribution or digital projects), or because it was difficult to establish these numbers from beneficiaries. Data provided indicate that a modest number of people had reduced debt (61), were able to remain in housing (74), or were newly able to live independently (336) as a result of their food surplus project – roughly 1% of the beneficiaries reported across organisations. This is a positive impact, but when contrasted with the numbers of people participating in community (6,207), social (3,738), or advice/support activities (4,683), is clearly much lower.

On the one hand, it is likely that surplus food meals are truly more likely to have an immediate impact on people's access to social, community and support resources than it is to improve their poverty levels – many organisations were only serving one meal per week, which can have a profound social value but limited financial impact. On the other hand, surplus food projects most likely *do* have a bigger impact on poverty levels than is reported in the data, since they would be difficult statistics for grantee organisations to collect. In particular, having said that one meal per week may not make a sizeable difference on poverty, access to support and services – introduced and encouraged by these surplus food opportunities – are likely to be the effective means of addressing poverty through surplus food. There is reason to be optimistic about the effect of food surplus initiatives on those living in food poverty, particularly indirectly through improvements to social connections, nutrition, and wellbeing.

Interim summary: impact

Organisations using food surplus provide essential services in addressing food poverty, whether through the direct provision of hot nutritious meals, or in making it possible through transportation or resource linking. It's important to bear in mind and value the effect that these initiatives have beyond alleviating food insecurity – gathering to prepare and/or eat meals provides rippling effects on skills for volunteers, social events and opportunities to gather in a positive environment, and strengthened community ties, with access to support services where needed. Food, and the rituals of mealtime, have a powerful positive effect for people - especially the vulnerable.

Key recommendations for the sector:

- Continue prioritising and funding:
  - Organisations using fresh, nutritious surplus (rather than non-perishable)
  - Organisations creating social/community environments through surplus food
- Reach out to and encourage organisations working with the elderly and/or isolated to host surplus food meals

Opportunities for improvement in this sector

Use of surplus food is burgeoning in London, with growing awareness and creativity around ways to redistribute nutritious, often much-needed food. There have, inevitably, been some teething problems for small organisations getting set up, which have led to organisations suggesting how they would like themselves and the sector to be improving, and relatedly, how funders and influencers can support the sector to move forwards effectively.

Areas for improvement

There are two areas in particular where improvements could increase the impact of the sector, explained in the section below.

1. Sourcing Surplus food in specific areas

Most charities have found that with creativity, energy and some door-knocking, they could source enough local suppliers for their surplus food needs. Supply of surplus food can largely meet demand – there is no shortage of food waste, especially with redistribution organisations providing an organised network of collection and delivery (portioned to a charity's needs). However for some parts of South London, an opportunity exists as reported by both redistributors and frontline organisations, to take a place-based focus, especially in outer London boroughs.

> *"In terms of distribution and using food waste we've struggled enormously in Croydon, where there's a high immigrant and refugee population - I think there's a huge call for redistribution of surplus in Croydon, and nothing really available" – Michelle Reedy, This Is Rubbish CIC*

2. Using and managing surplus food

A key support area for funders and supporters to consider when looking at this sector revolved around using and managing food surplus. These needs fall broadly into the three categories of distribution and transport; space, storage and kitchen supplies; and core costs and staffing.

Distribution and transport

Even with available surplus food, there is an unquestionable challenge around access, and ways of getting the (often perishable) food where there is demand; this is particularly the case for small, local organisations:

> *"One of the things we've always struggled with is transport - [supermarkets say] 'We have the food here but you have to come and get it'. That can be difficult!" – Nic Walsh, Equal People Mencap*

> *"As we are a small organisation with only one car and two potential drivers and the food needed collecting at various times and storing in appropriate conditions and supplies would change from week to week, it was hard to establish an effective system" – May Project Gardens*

This is, of course, well understood by organisations specifically set up to redistribute goods:

> *"We have enough food to feed the world right now, but it's a question of distribution"- Mary Powys, The Felix Project*

> *"For a small business, there's a not a lot to collect and it's not worth it, but with a delivery system/ bike then you can go around several businesses to pick up" – Laura Hopper, Plan Zheroes*

Space, storage and kitchen items

Having previously highlighted the benefits of cooking and serving nutritious community meals, this also comes with additional requirements around space and utensils. In London in particular, finding a venue with sufficient space is a challenge:

> *"There were no specific operational challenges other than limitations of our physical space, which is now making it difficult to expand the service"- Sufra - NW London*

> *"One of the main, very stressful challenges was the space itself. We struggled with the basics e.g. lack of cooking equipment, a constantly leaking roof, poor storage, rodents, lack of refrigeration. For a month we ran the cafe without hot water, the heating is inadequate for winter…" - Loughborough Junction Action Group*

Refrigeration and storage is also a particularly vital need for fresh surplus food, but carries space and cost issues:

> *"There can be an offer from Nando's etc. for loads of chicken, but we've got no storage for it!" – Nic Walsh, Equal People Mencap*

> *"Blockages come from lack of storage" – Emma Revie, Trussell Trust*

Areas for institutional input

1. The public

Throughout this research, awareness came up frequently when considering how the food surplus sector should be moving forwards. Whilst there is a notable increase in public awareness over food waste and the environment in recent years, further promotion of these causes and initiatives is crucial.

> *"When the issue first came to prominence there was a lot of publicity, it then kind of disappeared, and got taken by other issues – **there has been less visible promotion as an ongoing issue**" – Nic Walsh, Equal People Mencap*

> *"Tristram Stuart and Hugh Fearnleigh-Whittingstall were talking about it, but not much was happening other than short flashes of focus on these topics, with*

*nothing much happening … **Need a bit of research on what solutions are possible** that can be tested and proven." – Deepak Ravindran, Oddbox*

*"It's about behaviour change, and what's required - you've had Hugh Fearnleigh-Whittingstall and people … have they had any impact? Should we be trying to get [the issue] into things like Master Chef, or Great British Bakeoff, messaging there? - **where would public messaging really work**, to get people thinking about what they're throwing away?" – Claire Pritchard, London Food Board*

In particular, there is a need to inform and raise awareness of avoidable waste happening in people's own homes…

*"A lot of the fault of food waste is set at the door of retailers, where the vast majority of the waste is at home with the consumer, and **one of the cultural food waste issues is to make consumers aware that they're the ones chiefly responsible for waste of food** – it's the importance of transparency" – William Troughton, Neighbourly*

*"We know that half of all food waste takes place in the home, from WRAP data, but most people think they don't waste any food, and **most people underestimate how many other people would value the food that they do hav**e" – Saasha Celestial-One, Olio*

… and build skills to be enable surplus management. Access to saved or extra meals enabled by improved management of surplus would especially benefit those living in food poverty.

*"**Talking about the issues is a really powerful driving force** – it's happening, but needs to be continued to be pushed - On the consumer level, the more beneficial side of things is to couple it with healthy eating and teaching them how to cook again. **They need practical skills to use up food they have in the kitchen** – if they had access to fresh produce for cheap, they might still struggle to know how to use it" – Michael Minch Dixon, Snact*

2. Policy

When it comes to policy and shaping practice, there is a push for prominent grant-makers and/or influencers to lend weight to policy discussions, or support those who do. There is a particular need around issues of education curriculum; data and transparency; retail/ supermarkets; and sensitivities around food poverty.

Education curriculum

When It comes to education policies, there is a drive to ensure food education start earlier: school curricula should teach young people about food waste, including tips and skills for how to prevent it.

"Ensure that children are well-versed in understanding where food comes from … help educate the future to not disregard our food"- Mary McGrath, Food Cycle
"Put money into teaching cooking in schools" – Ruth Soroko, Eat Club

"Put food education in the curriculum … make their food go further, with freestyle meals" – Tessa Tricks, Hubbub

Data and transparency

Along a common theme with public awareness and food education, there is a need for more research to be done on food waste, and on food surplus initiatives and their impact. WRAP is currently conducting important work in these areas but there is an opportunity for more organisations to get involved in this discussion and especially promoting and disseminating data tracking progress against goals would increase awareness, and provide motivation through transparency and accountability.

"I would love to see more systematic, more closely watched analysis of both food poverty and food waste" – Mary Powys, Felix Foundation

Retail and supermarkets

There is a definite role for retail and supermarkets to play, although opinions differ on the best course of action around this. Policy change around supermarket food surplus, and the degree to which retail is responsible for food waste, is the biggest area of divergence for those we spoke to. Many are frustrated with the behaviour of supermarkets in procurement, selling, and waste; this had links with calls for more data and transparency:

"We'd love the government to be championing this even more, so that we have ***statistics about who is producing the most waste****, what are retailers etc. doing with their waste, and to* ***put incentives in place to reduce food waste*** *within the food industry to help improve how redistribution can happen" – Mary Powys, Felix Foundation*

"Good example of Tesco: ***go public with food waste figures****, it forces them to talk about what they'll do to solve it" – William Troughton, Neighbourly*

Behaviours around packaging and labelling foods was a contentious subject amongst the organisations interviewed:

"There's a lot to be done around date labels – a lot of retailers have best-before dates on fruit and vegetables which are beneficial to them, but it means that there is a huge amount of fruit and veg that are perfectly good to eat" – Tessa Tricks, Hubbub

"Within the London context, a huge amount is relating to how retailers are selling to consumers, so there's a big opportunity to have a broader engagement with retailers so that they're selling salads in bags that a two person household can actually use… a process helping consumers to waste less food at home" – Michael Minch-Dixon, Snact

As well as an interesting point around food pricing, and how it drives behaviour:

> *"This is more my own view than that of the London Food Board, but if food cost more and producers were paid more, the system could be improved … If more money went back to the producer, supermarkets might value [the food] more" – Claire Pritchard, London Food Board*

Many others advocated a more formal mandate for supermarkets to have to reduce their food waste, whether by positively incentivising redistribution or penalising waste:

> *"There are different policies around the world, France for example* ***forcing redistribution****, that kind of thing is useful because it starts to give retailers reason to think and act on this" – Michael Minch-Dixon, Snact*

> *"There is still just so much food being wasted totally unnecessarily, and* ***some visionary, hardline action from the mayor's office*** *and boroughs would I think be received very warmly in almost all quarters… I am now an official champion of the sustainable 12.3 target to halve food waste by 2030" – Tristram Stuart, Feedback*

> *"There need to be supermarket initiatives to minimise how much they order in, and let people know that there will not be enough of XYZ today … change policy to enable supermarkets to prevent waste. Things like the French bill that came in -* ***LCF could definitely support that policy change, or make suggestions of how that can tangibly happen****" – Hannah Style, FEAST!*

> *"On policy on a national level, there was a food waste reduction bill in parliament that stalled, and there's now a bill on measuring food poverty and I'm not sure where that stands, but* ***there are things LCF can do there to support changes at the national leve****l" – Laura Hopper, Plan Zheroes*

> *"We're looking for* ***mandatory reduction targets****, so binding policy where government have to incentivise to make them possible and achievable for big businesses" – Michelle Reedy, This Is Rubbish CIC*

There are also concerns about the behavioural effects of forcing food redistribution, and instituting hard targets; firstly, that the burden of food disposal may simply fall to charities:

> *"At a local level, stating to supermarkets that they have to donate all surplus food could mean that charities are unable to reject it if unsuitable –* ***it's important that we can reject it as much as accept it****, we have had instances where supermarkets have said 'if you don't take all of this surplus you're getting none of it, you can't pick and choose' and we don't really want to be taking mouldy stuff along with stuff that hasn't perished – the law could be interpreted incorrectly if we*

were forcing supermarkets down that avenue where they have to redistribute every single piece of surplus that they have" – Mary McGrath, Food Cycle

And secondly, that tax incentives for food redistribution may encourage supermarkets to err on the side of generating food surplus that they can then redistribute – and that they would be less concerned with overstocking:

"Tax relief for food surplus ***creates an incentive for [supermarkets] to have food surplus to begin with****… my gut instinct is that as soon as you create legislation around food surplus, you're validating it; I would rather we penalise supermarkets for the creation of food surplus in the first place, rather than penalise for failing to give it to the right people" – Anna Taylor, Food Foundation*

Both have commonality in wanting to shift the focus away from hard-line requirements on food redistribution, but coming from different perspectives.

Food poverty

Organisations often come up against food poverty in the work they do with food surplus; many have specifically set up their initiatives to help address it. Others are generally aware of food poverty as an intrinsic motivation behind food surplus and redistribution, and of the staggering levels found in London. As such issues tend to be raised on the particular value of surplus food in food poverty, as well as on the dangers of representing it as a solution to the fundamental problem.

On the topic of the important role of food surplus, organisations believe that feeding those in food poverty with surplus food, rather than donated dry goods at food banks, crucially carries more dignity and discretion:

"They tell us the reason they like Olio, is because they get access to free high quality food in an anonymous way – ***no stigma attached****, don't have to go to the GP and ask for referral to a food bank – for many people that's a prohibitive barrier to getting help when they need it" – Saasha Celestial-One, Olio*

"We are tackling food waste and being smart about it. ***We've tried to remove stigma****, provide the resource. People don't want handouts – you don't need to judge anyone, but you can see what kind of picture is happening here. We do not work in any sort of way as a food bank – there you've got to prove how poor you are, and your children are watching that, we don't want that. It's a more positive thing than a negative." – Mumtaz Ghaffar, The Real Junk Food Project*

On the other hand, while the point for many is that surplus food carries more dignity than food bank donations, most agree that the ultimate dignity is in being able to buy affordable, nourishing food for yourself. As such, many go out of their way to emphasise the care that needs to be taken when discussing surplus food in light of food poverty – the concern being that seeing surplus food as a 'solution' to food poverty undermines the focus that should be paid to tackling the underlying causes of poverty. In essence, food surplus *should* be used to

tackle existing food poverty, but dialogue around food poverty is needed to be very carefully framed so as not to relieve pressure on the government:

> *"We don't directly see surplus food as being the answer to food poverty, we would divide those two issues up separately" – Emma Revie, Trussell Trust*
>
> *"**Surplus isn't the answer to food poverty**… the problem for food poverty isn't expensive food, it's lack of money. [Surplus organisations] are very aware of the bigger issues, they're **just trying to tackle an emergency situation** – but they're aware that that isn't the answer" – Claire Pritchard, London Food Board*
>
> *"There's a big schism in the voluntary sector around whether or not it's right to talk about tackling food poverty with food surplus, and whether these two wrongs are dealt with by bringing the two together. I share the view that that's a problem, some of those voluntary organisations really go too far in linking them **… Talk about impact in waste reduction, not impact in food poverty**. If you start to suggest that food surplus can solve food poverty, we're going in a very strange direction in terms of what food poverty is about and what needs to be done to tackle it... Let's be creative with it, get it in the hands of the people who need it for sure, but **let's not get the government off the hook for profound social inequalities**" – Anna Taylor, The Food Foundation*

Interim summary: opportunities for improvement

A key theme for surplus food organisations is the need for dependable, sustainable resources. Many would be able to handle more surplus food if they had the storage or serving space, or had access to a redistribution transport system such as vans or bikes. Similarly, unpredictable grant bursts and changeable staffing problems are likely to be linked, and both would suffer less uncertainty if for example small drips of core funding could be provided to grantees to cover staff costs; although recommended by some grantees, this will not always be feasible.

Given the vast proportion of food waste that is generated in the home, rather than in retail, the most compelling arguments for impactful change at a policy level are those that address *awareness* and *food education*. Suggestions for supermarket behaviour change are valid, but difficult to practically target; in fact, supermarket behaviour is arguably best directed by the consumers themselves. As such, continued movements to increase awareness of food surplus, and to promote the valuable and innovative work that is being done by redistribution networks and digital platforms, are a powerful way to mobilise the behaviour of Londoners, their relationship with food, and their expectations of their food suppliers.

With food education programmes, community activities using surplus food, and awareness and skills from promotion on popular cooking shows, public demand for food may ideally shift to smaller portioning, nutritious content, and a tolerance for 'wonky' and/or seasonal produce. To supply this demand, supermarkets would need to adapt in order to attract their customer base; alternatively, customers would seek alternative food sources. While this may not happen on any large and immediate scale, it provides an argument to support start-up and local businesses providing nourishing and low-waste produce. The for-profit model may

not alleviate food poverty through the provision of free food, but *would* provide job and income opportunities for locals. Future grant opportunities should continue to encourage and consider businesses with a health, sustainability, and community focus.

There is a delicate balance for those seeking to address the symptoms of food poverty. Funders seeking to alleviate hunger through these initiatives cannot avoid discussing food poverty entirely, and need to be able to report on their successful impact. However, there remains an important message here to be careful with language – that important work *tackling the symptoms* of food poverty shouldn't be simplified to a message about *solving food poverty itself* – that even implicit interpretations that food poverty is being 'taken care of' must be avoided, and actively countered.

The strengths of the surplus food programmes are highlighted as being dignified, celebratory, and community-oriented: these are the conditions under which organisations have had fullest reach and impact. Other case studies indicated difficulty in engaging people when the association was with food poverty. Together, these indicate that the way in which surplus food dialogue is framed has an impact on its success: an emphasis on the social and community opportunities of food surplus is the best mechanism to alleviate food poverty, by maximising turnout, increasing dignity and empowerment, and encouraging social bonds and support networks.

Key recommendations for the sector:

- Consider ways to reframe public messaging around food surplus as community building, and waste saving, rather than solving food poverty
- Promote the London Living Wage
- Lobby and have conversations around public awareness, such as through shows featuring food surplus on e.g. *The Great British Bakeoff*
- Prioritise grants for transport, storage, and other space costs

Conclusion

Local community groups using surplus food are distinct from traditional food banks, and often more effective in that they:

- **Are more likely to provide nutritious food**: surplus food, by its nature, is often perishable – fresh food that is nearing the end of its usability, or that grew in a wonky shape. The fast redistribution and use of this surplus food provides nutritious fruit and vegetables that are almost never available at food banks.
- **Are more likely to save food from landfill**: perishable food is, by definition, more likely than long-life food items to be disposed of, since there is a narrower window for consumption (both in terms of food safety, and also judgements based on aesthetics).
- **Are a more dignified source for those in food poverty**: the necessity of 'saving' food, and presentation of surplus food initiatives as creative solutions to food waste, provide families in food poverty with more dignity in sourcing much-needed fresh food than food banks, and the stigma that can be attached to using them.
- **Provide social environments in the community:** handling fresh surplus food is an activity in itself, whether in the cooking or communal eating, and provides a meaningful social dynamic beyond being a recipient of charity, and walking away with a bag of dry goods.

As such, there is a distinct need for community-oriented surplus food initiatives, which serve an important role in not only providing food but increasing health and wellbeing in families and their communities. Their local knowledge, relationships with local retail and positions of trust within the community make them well placed to swiftly divert food to where it is needed; though not without its associated challenges.

Food poverty is a reality for a large number of Londoners, and represents a crisis in health and welfare that needs urgent attention. Food surplus is an important resource to fill this emergency gap, and to save food from being wasted in an inefficient system. In using surplus food, charities and other organisations have a unique opportunity to celebrate food within communities, in atmospheres that emphasise commonality, cohesion, and a shared purpose in 'rescuing' food. Ultimately, food poverty is best addressed through this positive lens: where meals are provided not through a focus on need and poverty, but on shared enthusiasm and community value.