

# USED BY

How businesses dump their waste on food charities

**FEED  
BACK**

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# FOREWORD

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On the surface, the redistribution of surplus food to community groups seems like an obvious good – a solution that both reduces food waste and feeds those in need. Supermarkets, manufacturers, and other food businesses highlight their food donations as evidence of their commitment to social responsibility. But as this report shows, the reality is more complicated.

Too often, food aid organisations find themselves not just distributing food but managing waste - waste that food businesses should have taken responsibility for in the first place. Damaged, expired, or nutritionally inadequate food is passed onto food banks and community groups, leaving volunteers to bear the burden of sorting, repackaging, and disposing of what cannot be used. The costs, both financial and emotional, fall not on those creating the waste but on those already struggling to support people in food poverty.

Redistributing food is not a solution to food insecurity – it is a symptom of a broken food system.

This report sheds light on the lived experiences of food aid workers, revealing the frustration, anger, and exhaustion of those working at the sharp end of our food system. Their voices make one thing clear: we need systemic change. Businesses must be held accountable for their waste, policymakers must ensure fair wages and social protections, and we must move beyond the short-term fix of redistribution to build a food system that works for everyone

Sheila Dillon  
BBC Food Programme Presenter.



# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- Over 3 million people used food aid organisations in the last year to access a variety of food redistributed by retailers and other food businesses.
- Yet new research shows 91% of food aid workers surveyed said they have had to discard food donations from businesses, usually for being damaged, inedible or unsuitable.
- 85% of food aid workers surveyed reported feeling frustrated, angry or sad when they receive donated food items that they can't use or redistribute.
- 98% of food aid workers said the government should do more to prevent food waste from arising in the first place, and 84% said it was essential that larger businesses should be legally required report their food waste.

The redistribution of surplus food to charities and other food aid organisations has been an increasingly popular business response to pressure to address food waste. In theory, redistribution provides a low-cost way for retailers and other food businesses to dispose of food surplus, while supply food aid organisations with food that is vitally needed to meet basic needs amid low pay, poverty and the cost of living crisis.

However, this report finds that – while redistribution of businesses' surplus food does provide those using food aid organisations with vital access to food – there is evidence that businesses often use redistribution to 'dump' food that is inedible, damaged or unsuitable for consumption. By 'passing the buck' of unsuitable food surplus onto food aid organisations, food businesses avoid taking responsibility for their waste, and the costs of disposing of it.



*Sorting crates of produce containing edible and inedible food can take significant time for volunteers and staff at community food organisations. London. 16th November 2017. Credit: Kateryna Vasylenko*

Redistributed food is also not counted in food businesses' waste reporting, even if food aid organisations have to dispose of it directly after receiving it.

As food aid organisations generally rely on volunteers for their operations and to keep costs down, food businesses' disposal of surplus is being subsidised by the UK's network of dedicated food aid workers.

91% of food aid workers and volunteers who responded to the survey said they have had to dispose of donated unsuitable food after receiving it, most commonly because it was damaged or inedible in some way. 85% reported feeling frustrated, angry or sad when they receive donated food that they cannot use. In many cases, organisations felt like they were being treated like a "waste collector" or a "disposal channel to avoid charges for waste collection from their store".

### BOX 1: FOOD AID WORKERS DEMORALISED BY DISPOSING OF FOOD DONATED BY BUSINESSES

Feedback's survey found:

- 91% of respondents said they have had to discard donated food. The most common reason was due to food being damaged or inedible in some way.
- 85% of respondents reported feeling frustrated, angry or sad when they receive donated food items that they can't use or redistribute.
- 98% said the government needs to do more to prevent food waste from arising in the first place.
- 84% said it was essential that larger businesses should be legally required to report their food waste.
- 71% said it was essential that the government should introduce legally binding targets to reduce food waste.
- 98% said the government should be doing more to prevent the need for food aid in the first place.

Among many examples, one organisation reported receiving 10kg of creme fraiche for redistribution, while another recounted being given a huge number of tiny sachets of miso. Others reported fruit and vegetables arriving mushy or rotten, incurring significant clean-up costs as well as the cost of disposal.

While food aid workers often work very hard to ensure food can be used, this relies on their efforts and time as volunteers and on charitable funding. By passing on their waste without due care that it is suitable for consumption, food businesses are leveraging charitable resources, while evading responsibility and costs. In one case, a medium-sized independent food bank reported a retailer insisting that they accept all surplus food on offer, resulting in them having to accept food they knew they could not use because of a lack of refrigeration capacity.

It is important to note that any food 'redistributed' to food banks or food aid organisations does not count as waste in retailers' public reporting, whatever ends up happening to it in reality. At the same time, retailers can leave this kind of waste off the books.

**“ I think it is wrong that supermarkets can record '0' waste when actually we, as a food bank are having to dispose of their waste. ”**

Food aid worker

Food aid workers reported their frustration that businesses can claim the moral benefits of donating food. One said they felt "we are there for companies to feel good they have not thrown anything anyway".

Food aid is a vital response to the high levels of poverty and food insecurity in the UK, which have only intensified since the cost of living crisis, and food aid workers work hard to do essential work, often for little or no pay.

Yet the evidence is strong that the food redistribution model, while offering much-needed relief to people facing food insecurity, is at best a sticking plaster for the deeper challenges of poverty and food waste. Retailers and other big food businesses need to take real responsibility for the consequences of their waste, and policy-makers need to ensure that not only is food waste reduction properly regulated, but the causes of poverty and food injustice are addressed at source.

The rich responses in this survey shine a light on how hard food aid employees and volunteers work to make surplus food appropriate for consumption and distribution, but they also assert that redistributing surplus food is not a long-term solution to either poverty or food waste and call for meaningful change.

## 2. FOOD REDISTRIBUTION IN THE UK

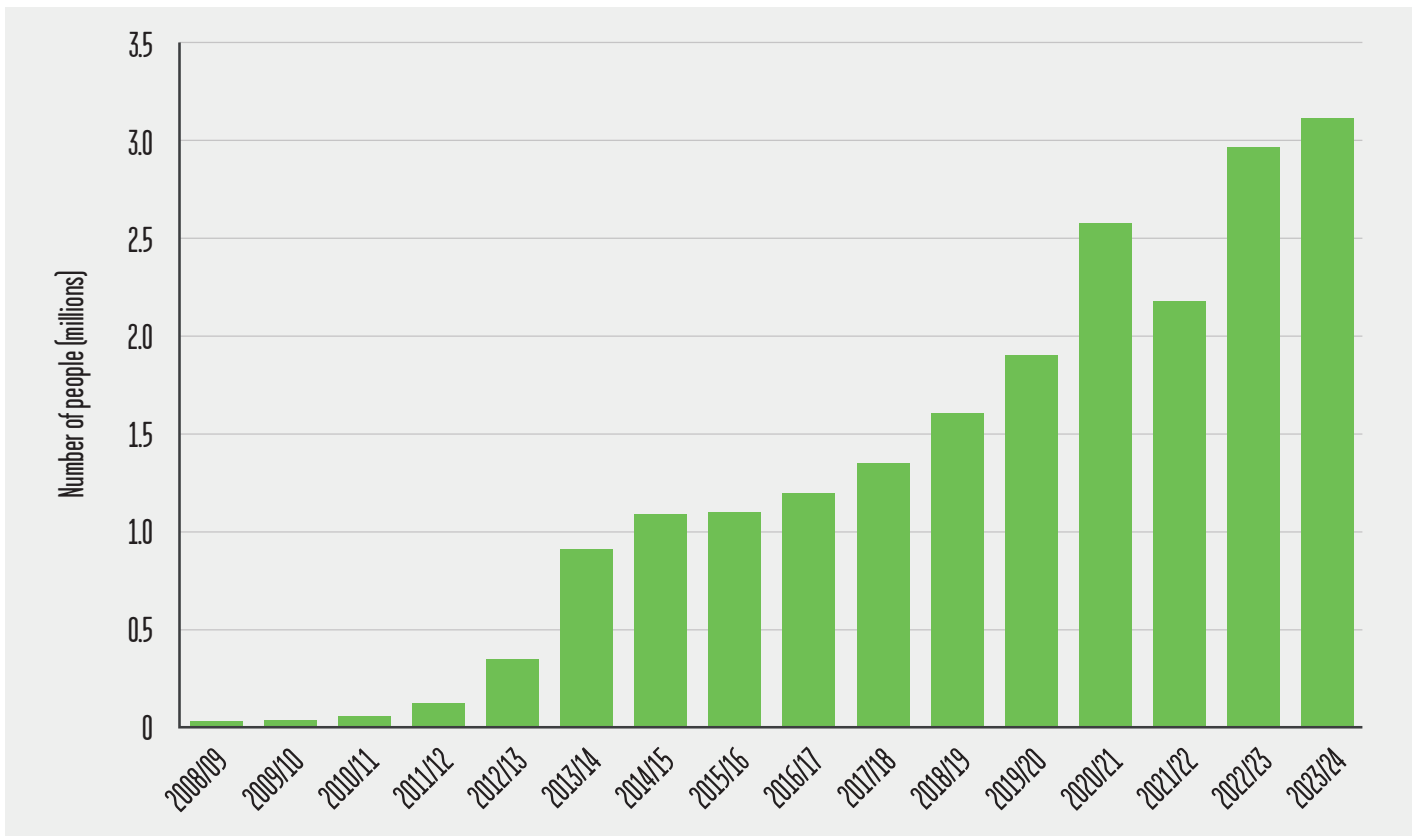
In the UK, an estimated 10.7 million tonnes of food is wasted every year, totalling about a quarter of all food produced.<sup>1</sup>

Wasting food contributes significantly to greenhouse gas emissions, while the land required to produce food that is wasted on farms alone is 9,600 square kilometres, equal to half the size of Wales.<sup>2</sup> The waste of land is unconscionable when habitat loss has contributed to the rapid decline of nature in the UK.<sup>3,4</sup>

Despite the size of the problem, businesses are not legally required to measure and report their waste. A poll in 2023 showed that 72% of UK adults wanted to see supermarkets doing more to reduce food waste.<sup>5</sup> While there have been attempts to hold businesses to account for their food waste, including through legally mandated food waste reporting, these kinds of policies have so far failed to materialise.<sup>6</sup> In 2018, the government Waste and Resources Strategy announced a plan for mandatory food waste reporting, which was supported by 99% of respondents, including businesses, in a 2022 DEFRA consultation. Yet, its implementation has been stalled by U-turns and delays, and it remains in doubt at the time of writing.

Redistribution of surplus food is often touted as a solution to both food waste and food poverty. Over 3 million people used food banks in the UK in 2023/2024, up from 26,000 in 2008/2009. Food aid and redistribution organisations are a critical lifeline for many people that alleviate immediate needs, and they play a vital role in the support systems of communities.

**Figure 1:** Number of people using food banks in the UK 2008-2024<sup>7</sup>



Source: Statista.



*Surplus food shared in a timely fashion can support community food organisations to increase access to good food, as is the case with this freshly gleaned produce being delivered to Sussex Community Development Association in Newhaven by the Sussex Surplus team. 14th July 2023. Credit: Phil Holtam*

Some level of food surplus and redistribution would be necessary even within a sustainable food system, to prevent shortages. However, diverting large volumes of food that food businesses have not been able to sell to food aid organisations does not solve poverty nor the root causes of food waste. It also acts as a panacea to food waste, obscuring the fact that many business models are highly wasteful. As argued in the British Medical Journal, “leftover” food for “left behind” people will neither address the underlying cause of a person’s need for charitable food aid nor reduce levels of surplus food’.<sup>8</sup>

As this briefing shows, despite the heroic efforts of food aid employees and volunteers, donated food often has to be thrown away. This can be due to arriving in poor condition, having little or no time left until the expiry date, and requiring excessive labour and resource demands to make it appropriate for consumption or redistribution.

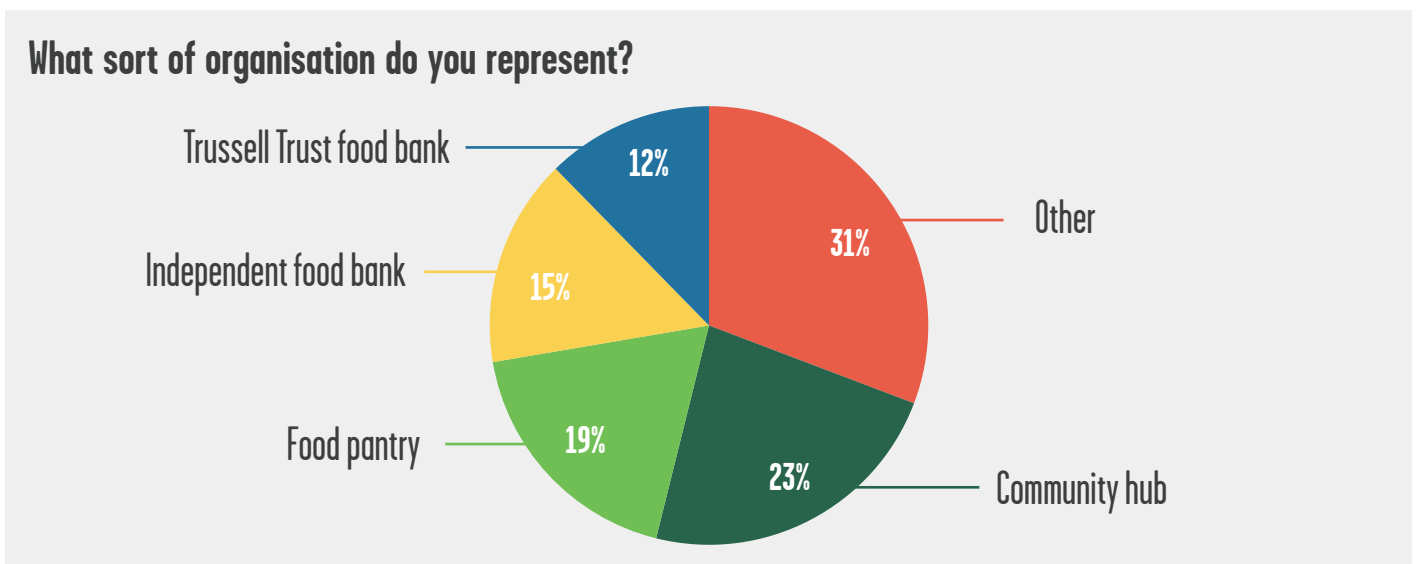
# 3. THE SURVEY

To understand the experience around receiving food surplus and the labour and resources needed for food redistribution, Feedback conducted a survey in early autumn of 2024. It aimed to gather insights into the experience of food aid workers and the quality of food they receive, what problems organisations face when managing food donations, and how much work is required to make the food appropriate for their service users.

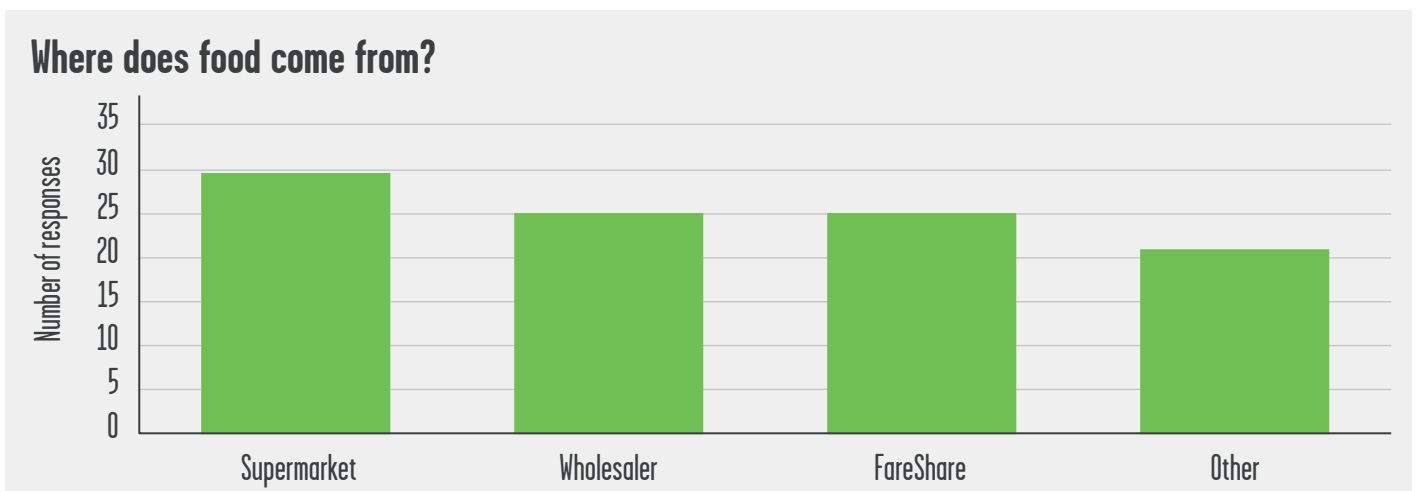
The survey was sent out via food aid networks, email lists and shared on social media and received 53 responses. Around 30% of respondents were from food banks (including Trussell Trust food banks), 19% from food pantries, 23% from community hubs and 31% were from other types of organisations providing food aid.

Respondents' organisations received food donations from a variety of sources, but those that reported throwing away more than 10% of food mainly received surplus food from supermarkets, wholesalers and other redistribution bodies.

**Figure 2:** How respondents identified their food aid organisation



**Figure 3:** Source of surplus food from organisations which reported 10% or more discarded food (multiple choice)







*Rotten tomato paste in broken glass jars on asphalt, discarded food. June 05, 2023, Spain, Sagunto • Credit: Maksim Safaniuk / Shutterstock*

There is scant literature on what kind of condition food is in when donated to food aid organisations. A study in 2008 found that around 20% of food donated from a retailer to FareShare had to be discarded, as it was considered unfit for consumption.<sup>9</sup> From Feedback's survey, 91% of respondents said they have had to discard donated food, but the majority of organisations did not have the resources to measure and record the volume of food they were forced to throw away. However, respondents gave a wealth of insight into the day-to-day challenges of managing surplus food.

## 4. FOOD AID WORKERS, OR FOOD WASTE COLLECTORS?

**“ It’s really distressing that there’s too much waste. ”**

Food aid worker at a medium-sized food pantry

85% of respondents said they feel frustrated, angry or sad when they receive donated food items that they are unable to use or redistribute, and 98% said the government needs to do more to prevent food waste from arising in the first place.

**“ [I’m] cross that the supermarket has not already checked this [food] – leaving it for us to dispose of it. ”**

Food aid worker at a small, independent food bank

**“ I think it is wrong that supermarkets can record ‘0’ waste when actually we, as a food bank are having to dispose of their waste. ”**

Food aid worker at a medium-sized food bank

The most common reason for throwing items away was identified as food being damaged or inedible in some way. For this reason, food aid workers felt like they were being treated like a “waste collector” or a “disposal channel to avoid charges for waste collection from their store”. One respondent reported feeling resentful that “the burden of guilt of throwing it away is passed on from the companies with wasteful policies”. There was a sense that food businesses have waste built-in, and their systems actively encourage the occurrence of waste.

Respondents gave a variety of examples. A number of organisations described scenarios where fruit and vegetables arrived on site already mouldy and rotting, or large quantities of bread that could not be stored and had to be thrown away.

There were several accounts of “weird random items” being donated, including a “massive quantity of tiny sachets of miso”, “a load of brandy-flavoured cream in the summer”, “thousands of packet sauces from HelloFresh”, “product experiments (new flavours of mayo, things that supermarkets and companies realise won’t sell)” and “6 frozen turkeys stuck together”. These examples reinforced the feeling of having items passed onto them without much thought given as to whether they are appropriate for redistribution.

Some found businesses inflexible to their needs, which led to unnecessary food waste. One respondent revealed:

“As a food bank we can only distribute ambient foods. We are forced to throw away or give away chilled or fresh food because we cannot transport it and maintain the chill chain. Supermarkets insist we take everything in one go. We cannot take just the bread so we are forced to take food we cannot use.”

This respondent estimated having to discard 50% of the food the organisation receives, despite informing the retailer that it could not accept foods that need refrigeration. They felt there was injustice in this scenario where the retailer may appear to be fulfilling corporate social responsibility objectives but continued to hand off food that was inappropriate and was ultimately wasted. This sentiment was echoed by others. One said they were “frustrated that we are there for companies to feel good they have not thrown anything anyway”.

As well as passing the buck of food waste onto food aid organisations, some respondents pointed out that dealing with the damaged and unusable food this came with its own financial penalties. A respondent from a small food pantry said that they were “angry that we now need to pay for disposal, yet the shops can still claim to have donated such a large amount to charity”. Another from a medium-sized community hub said that “A banana delivery turned out to be rotten and ruined the carpet, costing £375 to clean”. Not only was waste being passed on, but the penalties that come with disposing of it.

## 5. TIME, EFFORT AND RESOURCES TO MAKE FOOD USABLE

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It was clear that food aid employees and volunteers work hard to prepare, cook, preserve or otherwise handle donated food in order to make it appropriate for their users to consume. This can be “a challenging task” and “time consuming” according to respondents.

An example of how careless packaging can increase food waste was given by a respondent from a medium-sized community hub who said that:

“We receive surplus bread and cakes from local bakers and everything is jumbled into a bag, including iced cakes, making everything really messy and sticky, sometimes resulting in having to throw away bread/cakes that would have been okay to redistribute otherwise.”

Other respondents gave examples of 5kg bags of pasta, 3kg crates of salad, 10kg of crème fraiche, 12kg bags of flour, 15kg bags of rice, and 25kg sacks of vegetables which have to be prepared or repackaged. This can especially be troubling for smaller organisations which do not have the facilities for repackaging large quantities of food. The current legal framework requires food aid organisations to label repackaged food in detail, including ingredients, allergens, and use-by dates. Whilst this is important to maintain food safety standards, this regulatory burden falls on time and resource poor organisations, rather than being handled upstream with retailers, inevitably causing further waste.

It was usually medium and large-sized organisations that had the resources and people power to be able to use food that would otherwise be unsuitable for sharing. For instance, a respondent from a large organisation said that having a community fridge makes items they receive on their use-by date easier to preserve and redistribute.

One community hub said that their kitchen team is excellent but even they struggle sometimes: “We sometimes get food approaching perishability so have to turn it around asap – sometimes we manage it”.

Considering that many respondents were often given items that were either very close to, on, or past the expiry date, having resources to manage this food waste is critical. Food businesses passing on their surplus do not pay for these resources, but they nonetheless rely on them to enable their redistribution model to function.

Items being past their use-by date was the second biggest reason for throwing food away because organisations are unable to use or redistribute it in time and have to dispose of it instead.

Of those organisations which had to discard 10% or more of their donated food a week, the majority were small organisations, and it appeared that small organisations had the most burden of disposal due to lack of resources to manage inappropriate levels or quality of food.

**“ Veg comes to us mouldy and we have to sort/clean before we start ”**

Worker at a small food pantry

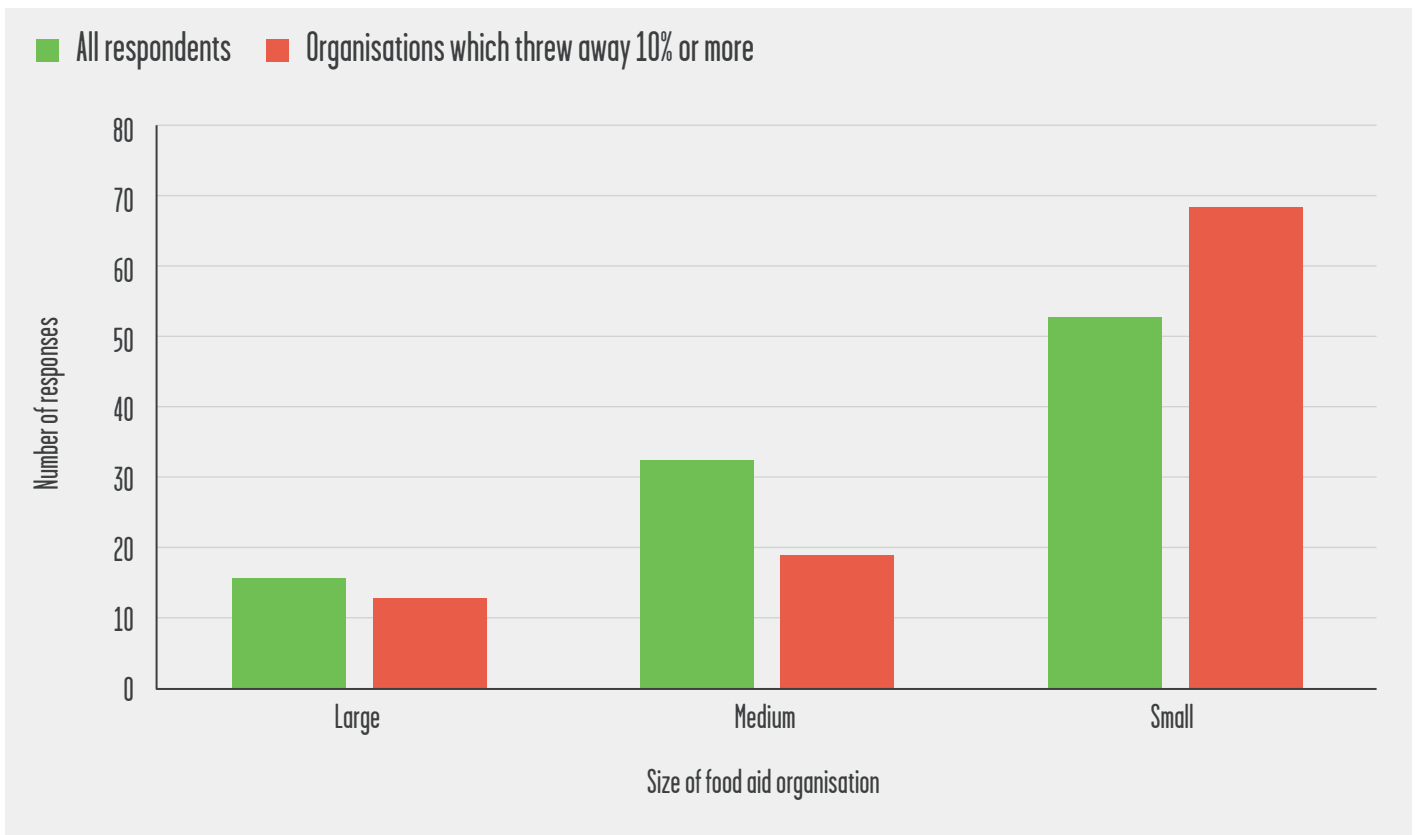
**“ We are lucky in that we have facilities to deal with bigger packs for portioning and cooking ”**

A small food aid organisation

**“ Both staff and volunteers do their best to make sure food doesn't get wasted, but we are often given this at the [end of the] use by dates ”**

Worker at a small food aid organisation

**Figure 4:** Food aid organisations having to discard more than 10% of donations, by size



It was acknowledged that the levels of unpredictability meant that sometimes very high-quality food arrived, sometimes very low, and organisations have to deal with whatever comes in. Significant resources are needed to make donated food appropriate for consumption and redistribution, especially if deliveries are unpredictable, and if a large supply of one vegetable arrives. As one respondent said, “there are only so many courgettes we can make use of in a week”. The burden of this labour is passed on to food aid organisations along with the surplus food.

The responses of this survey demonstrate that more food waste would occur without the hard work of food aid workers, but their comments reinforced a sense of being treated like a waste conduit rather than recipients of thoughtful donations. One respondent said that dealing with food past its expiry date “sometimes feels like it is added work when our services are already under immense pressure.”

## 6. APPETITE FOR CHANGE

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Respondents emphasised strongly that food waste was a systemic issue which needed government intervention. 84% said it was essential that larger businesses should be legally required report their food waste and 71% said it was essential that the government should introduce legally binding targets to reduce food waste.

A significant number of comments highlighted overproduction in the supply chain, with one large redistribution organisation saying they were “frustrated and angry that [the] food system creates waste by design”.

Waste on farms was highlighted several times, with respondents troubled that retailer practices were a main driver of farm-level waste. Calls for action included contracts which protected farmers from poor pay and working conditions, and to ensure farmers are not forced to overproduce. There was an explicit call for “mandatory waste reporting at each stage of farm to fork”, and that supermarkets should have more mindful stocking practices to avoid waste on their premises.

Beyond food waste, respondents emphasised that secure housing, free school meals, higher wages, higher universal credit payments, speeding up benefit payments, and support for mental health and addiction were urgent long-term solutions to food poverty.

Many comments stressed the desire to end the need for food aid. 98% said the government should be doing more to prevent the need for food aid in the first place. 90% said it was essential for government to remove the five-week wait for Universal Credit payments and 79% said it was essential to introduce universal free school meals. More appreciation for food aid workers, including paying them more, was highlighted. One worker said that the “reliance on food banks run on goodwill by volunteers is shameful”. Another respondent from a medium-sized independent food bank wondered “Will we see food banks end in our lifetime?”

“ Will we see food banks end in our lifetime? ”

A food aid worker

## BOX 2: FEEDBACK'S PLACE-BASED APPROACHES TO TACKLING FOOD INJUSTICE

As well as advocating for systemic solutions for food waste, Feedback works collaboratively with local communities across Liverpool City Region, Sussex, and Buckinghamshire to tackle food insecurity.

### **Liverpool**

Feedback's Alchemic Kitchen creates and advocates for healthier, more sustainable neighbourhoods across Liverpool City Region, focusing on food access, education, and advocacy. Most of Alchemic Kitchen's projects are based in Knowsley, a large peri-urban area with poor transport links, high levels of poverty, and 95.7% of which is classified as a 'priority place' where people have difficulties accessing healthy, affordable, and sustainable food.<sup>10</sup> The Alchemic Kitchen collaborates with Feeding Liverpool and a local greengrocer to deliver the Queen of Greens mobile greengrocer, which delivers affordable fruit and vegetables to 31 locations across Liverpool City Region each week.

### **Sussex**

Sussex Surplus is a Brighton-based project that sources surplus fruit and vegetables from local farms, wholesalers and partner charities across Sussex to create tasty, long-life products that are distributed across Brighton and served in a weekly community cafe. The community cafe aims to ensure that everyone, regardless of income or background, can access nutritious food without fear of judgement or stigma. The project employs neurodivergent young people, and welcomes a wide range of volunteers to contribute to the project, including recent arrivals to the UK, those in recovery from addiction, and people in long-term unemployment.

### **Buckinghamshire**

Feedback runs two projects in Buckinghamshire which strive to improve access to healthy, nutritious, and affordable food. The Plates Project provides people with a slow cooker or air fryer, a pantry bag (with spices and key ingredients), recipe cards, and cooking videos. In 2023, the project supported 372 individuals, most of whom were in receipt of food bank or temporary housing support. Only Me is a food-based social project for people who live alone and want to regain skills, confidence, and motivation to cook healthy meals, stay active, and meet new people. Most of the participants are elderly, who no longer have families or partners, and struggle to eat enough healthy food.

In all projects, Feedback maintains the values of place-based, co-creating, trust-building, empowering and anti-racist activities. This ensures the projects are appropriate for each place and community, are fostered by better understanding of barriers and solutions, are collaborative and inclusive, are built on strong relationships, follow a rights-based approach and embed community care and solidarity.



*Sol Betiku, Sussex Surplus Community Chef, prepares a community meal in East Brighton. 6th October 2024. Credit: Caleb Yule.*

# 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this survey paint an evocative picture of the failure of the redistribution model to properly take account of the burdens placed on food aid organisations. It is vital that big food businesses, and retailers and wholesalers in particular, take full responsibility for the costs of the food waste they generate. The ‘polluter pays’ principle stipulates that those that generate avoidable food waste and the associated negative environmental and social impacts, should take responsibility for its costs. This would also incentivise better practice to avoid waste arising in the first place and must run alongside

regulatory action to ensure all major food businesses are held to a proper reporting and target-setting standard.

It is clear that food waste and food insecurity cannot be solved by the redistribution of surplus food, and respondents were emphatic that systemic solutions are needed to tackle both. The recommendations below are based on the findings of this survey, alongside Feedback’s extensive experience researching and campaigning on food waste and working on place-based and long-term approaches to tackling poverty and food injustice.

To prevent food waste throughout the supply chain, the government must:

Policy	Rationale
<b><i>Introduce mandatory reporting of food waste for large and medium businesses throughout the supply chain.</i></b>	Food businesses must legally be required to measure and report how much they waste. This will enable greater data about where and why food is wasted in the supply chain, driving action and ensuring transparency.
<b><i>Commit to a national target to halve food waste by 2030 from farm to fork.</i></b>	Targets would enable businesses to set benchmarks for progress, spur innovation throughout the supply chain, reinforce transparency and encourage collaboration on best practice.
<b><i>Bring forward a levy which retailers must pay in relation to the food wasted in their supply chains.</i></b>	The levy could set fees depending on the size of the retailer and the amount of food that is wasted from farm to their retail premises. This would encourage joined-up collaboration between all actors in the supply chain to reduce food waste.
<b><i>Establish a whistle-blowing mechanism whereby food aid and redistribution organisations can report when bad quality food is repeatedly passed on to them.</i></b>	Being able to anonymously report when inedible, unsuitable or damaged food is being dumped onto food aid organisations is vital to hold food businesses to account for these bad practices and ensure better quality of food reaches the service users.

As advocated by the Independent Food Aid Network, to address poverty the government must:

Policy	Rationale
<b><i>Establish real living wage</i></b>	The Trussell Trust recently found one in five people who accessed their food banks were from working households, of which the majority of were on incomes low enough that they were also in receipt of Universal Credit. <sup>11</sup> A real living wage would ensure people have enough income to live on.
<b><i>Provide Universal free school meals</i></b>	No child should go hungry and universal free school meals for every child would mean no stigma for children who currently have to provide evidence of need.
<b><i>Remove the five-week wait for Universal Credit</i></b>	Every Universal Credit applicant must wait at least five weeks for a first payment. This leaves huge numbers of people without enough money to cover the basics and potentially needing to turn to food banks.
<b><i>Implement a cash-first policy</i></b>	While we work towards the goal of everyone being able to access a Living Income, it’s vital to take a cash first approach to support people who are facing financial hardship, instead of having to rely on food aid.

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*Feedback regenerates nature by transforming the food system. To do this we challenge power, catalyse action and empower people to achieve positive change.*

All reasonable attempts have been made to verify the nature and status of the primary and secondary sources collected here in good faith and in the public interest. Any opinions expressed are honestly held and based on facts true at the time of publication.

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Authors: Emma Atkins, University of Bristol. With support from Phil Holtam, Lucy Antal, Jessica Sinclair Taylor, and Martin Bowman, Feedback

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