

Helping out by handing out

Anna Glayzer visits a project which redistributes surplus food to homeless people.

When I told a friend I was visiting a food redistribution project in Edinburgh, she recounted a time when, as a single mother on a low income in a London housing co-op in the 1980s, her and her young son used to take regular deliveries of surplus supermarket food. "It was mainly junk, cream pies and cakes and some unhealthy sandwiches. Of course he used to love it, but I didn't think it was very nutritious."

Twenty years later, global price rises and food riots in the poorest parts of the world show us that the poor are still with us, and they are still hungry. Yet, in a system more dominated by supermarkets than ever, most of us select our weekly purchases from brightly lit shelves that are never empty. And, most of us are buying more than we need.

The Government's Waste & Resources Action Programme (WRAP) reported this month that 6.7 million tonnes of food is thrown away by consumers every year, around a third of all the food we buy. Keeping in mind, however, that the consumer represents the end point of the journey food makes from 'farm to fork' (or to the kitchen bin), it is worth taking a step back to consider that the whole food system is geared towards creating surplus. WRAP verifies that 1.6 million tonnes of food waste is generated by retailers; 3.3 million tonnes by hotels, restaurants and bars; and 4.1 million tonnes by food manufacturers. Along with post-consumer waste, this adds up to 15.7 million tonnes of food, a lot of which is still fit for consumption. Surplus food redistribution programmes aim to divert some of this food to people who need it. An admirable goal, but do programmes like this go any way toward addressing food waste and health inequality?

At the Jane Street depot, of the Edinburgh Cyrenians' FareShare project, called 'Good Food in Tackling Homelessness', I was shown round by Dave Berry, project distribution manager. Founded as a year round alternative to the Christmas drop in centre,

the national charity Fareshare distributes surplus from food and drink businesses through partner organisations around the UK.

In Edinburgh, 300 square feet of depot space, and two refrigerated vans are used to move 7-8 tonnes of surplus food per week. The food is collected from shops and retail distribution centres, sorted, and then distributed to 40 homeless shelters and projects around the city. Deliveries are more varied here than in my friend's recollection.

I set off with volunteers to make the afternoon collections. The problem with back door collecting, one of them explained, is that, "The negotiations take place with the Head Offices of companies. It's not always appreciated at store level. Where one store can't do enough to help, another uses us as a skip." We made four stops, collecting fruit and vegetables, deli leftovers, cheeses and cold meats, some slightly shrivelled looking basil plants, and six crates of crisps. Back at the depot we unloaded our cargo. Some products had to go straight in the bin, including a large edible looking ham, and anything else that was past its sell-by date.

There undoubtedly is a danger that retailers can use schemes like this a free refuse disposal service. As Bill Gray, National Officer for Community Food and Health Scotland, put it, "Food schemes can be win-win for the retailers in terms of waste disposal and PR." Gray argues however, that the Cyrenians' approach, with its heavy emphasis on volunteers, effectively counters the risks, "Potentially, surplus

These sandwiches are still fresh, so can be distributed, but as with retail sales, any product that is past its sell-by date must be thrown away. Fruit and vegetables constitute an exception, as they can be unwrapped and re-packed for distribution. This makes them ideal for handling.



At the Edinburgh FareShare project, a collection target of 40-50% fresh fruit and vegetables is generally met. In the depot there were piles of perfectly good potatoes, carrots and turnips that had been rejected at the packing house because of size or appearance.

food distribution is a negative approach, both in terms of waste, and in terms of increasing dependency on food banks. The Cyrenians have developed in such a way as to be aware of major flaws, whilst using food as a means of socialising and empowering. The emphasis is on sustainable resettlement for homeless people." The Cyrenians provide job skills training and help with permanent rehousing. Indeed, when I asked one of the volunteers about this, he said, "I'd work here every day if I could."

I left the Jane Street depot feeling impressed at the level of dedication shown by Dave Berry and his staff, and by the demonstrably beneficial effect of the project on the volunteers I had met. There is no doubt, however, that no matter how well handled, surplus food redistribution does nothing to counter wasteful retailing practices. Last year, nationally, FareShare programmes redistributed 2,000 tonnes of food, or 0.125% of the 1.6 million tonnes of food waste generated by retailers. There is also the danger that food donations can act as a sop to vital services which should be properly funded by the state. Itself underfunded to the tune of £60,000 per year, the 'Good Food in Tackling Homelessness' programme has to work hard just to keep going, despite aiding in the rehabilitation of some of society's most vulnerable people.

As debates over food waste and food insecurity continue, one cannot help asking whether rising global food prices will affect the amount wasted in Britain each year and subsequently impact on surplus food redistribution? Maria Kortbech Olesen, marketing and communications manager at Fareshare head office, does not think so, "The volume of food wasted is driven by many factors not just price. While we as consumers want ever more choice, and while the food industry remains a hugely competitive market place, then waste will occur. Major drivers for change include legislation, economic pressures such as landfill tax and increasing energy costs, more than rising food prices and stakeholder and media pressure. The ones truly losing out because of the rising food prices are over four million people in the UK who cannot afford a healthy diet. These people would still suffer if food surplus was to decrease or even disappear."