



Economic  
and Social  
Research Council



UNIVERSITY  
*of York*

---

# How can Supermarkets help end food insecurity?

---

Kelli Kennedy and Carolyn Snell

Department of Social Policy & Social Work

University of York



# Executive Summary

**Supermarkets'** involvement in food insecurity reduction schemes has been a growing trend, particularly over the pandemic. Notably, relationships between food charities and supermarkets have become commonplace in the UK, offering scope for investigation.

Based on knowledge exchange with the supermarket sector, a workshop with food charity practitioners, literature review, and a [webinar](#), the research team, consisting of Kelli Kennedy and Carolyn Snell identified multiple challenges within the partnerships between supermarkets and food charities.

An underlying challenge that consistently appeared through the research was that food redistribution - particularly unsold or unsellable food - cannot solve the root causes of food insecurity. As supermarkets look to how they can best support the goal of eliminating food insecurity, redistributing their excess food and food waste (in the sense any food that goes beyond the needs of the supermarket and their sector) is not a sustainable or dignified way to approach the problem. Specifically, three core, interrelated themes were identified:

## Theme 1: Values and approaches towards food charity partnerships

***The Issue:** There is a mismatch between the values and goals of supermarkets and charities involved in food security work.*

Often there were attempts to solve one issue with another or combine initiatives, such as environmental programmes combating food waste with initiatives to tackle food insecurity. Combining the two can lead to insufficient and potentially damaging results for both issues. For partnerships to work successfully, all parties must have a commonly aligned goal of reducing food insecurity.

***Recommendation:** Ensure that partnerships have an aligned common goal reflecting the values and ideals of ethical and sustainable food insecurity reduction.*

## Theme 2: Improving working relationships with the charitable food sector

***The issue:** In many instances food charities reported a one-sided relationship that did not align with their capabilities or meet the needs of their clients.*

Supermarkets should ensure that they create partnerships which emphasise a two-way relationship with food charities. This includes communication regarding what is donated, how it is donated, delivered, received and distributed.

Communication channels should be consistent and clear to ensure all partnerships are supported. While some flexibility based on local knowledge and experience should be valued, there must be an established baseline.

***Recommendation:** Create strong, consistent working relationships between appropriate food charities and supermarkets.*

## Theme 3: Wider Action

***The issue:** Often supermarkets' own policies, structures, and practices can contribute to food insecurity within their own businesses and supply chains.*

Supermarkets can design their services and initiatives to support poverty alleviation, such as generous top-up vouchers for benefits like Healthy Start and Universal Credit, allowing free delivery for those shielding due to COVID or with low-incomes, and utilising their power to drive government action on reducing poverty and inequality.

Supermarkets can also ensure those in their own businesses and supply chains are not food insecure. Supermarkets can increase pay to the Living Wage Foundation rate and create work allocation practices so employees can receive the amount of work needed to meet their needs.

***Recommendation:** Apply the supermarkets' shared values and goals to their own businesses and supply chains, limiting their chances of contributing to the problem.*



Economic and Social Research Council



# Introduction

This report summarises the findings of a project, conducted by Kelli Kennedy and Carolyn Snell of the University of York. The research was conducted as a part of the Social Science Enterprise Scheme (SSES), funded as part of the Economic and Social Research Council’s National Productivity Investment Fund Accelerating Business Collaboration (ESRC NPIF ABC) project. The focus of the research was to investigate how supermarkets can help reduce food insecurity in an ethical and sustainable way. Here ‘ethical’ is defined as meaning the relationships are built to best serve those who use food charities, not just the interests of the supermarkets or food charities; ‘sustainable’ is defined as meaningful relationships and partnerships that create long-lasting impacts towards eliminating food insecurity, not just temporary relief.

## What is food insecurity anyway and why is it an issue in the UK?

The FAO [1] describes food insecurity as, “A person is food insecure when they lack regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life. This may be due to unavailability of food and/or lack of resources to obtain food. Food insecurity can be experienced at different levels of severity. FAO measures food insecurity using the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES)” as illustrated below:



While food insecurity may be discussed as a standalone issue, it is important to understand food insecurity as a symptom of poverty more generally. Food insecurity, as a symptom of poverty, is often transient in nature and of varying levels, so many people may fall along this scale at one point or another for some time, rather than constantly.

## How do supermarkets fit into this? Do our relationships with food charities such as food banks help?

**4.7 million adults & 2.3 million children** lived in a food-insecure household in the first 6 months of the pandemic

**12% of all households with children** classified as food insecure households

Gouldie, S. & McIntyre, Z., 2021 [2]

Existing academic work revolves around reliance on food banks as part of the food insecurity relief model in the UK [3,4]. While food banks and food charities can act as a stop-gap, it is argued by many that it is not a sustainable and ethical model for long-term support. Academics such as Lambie-Mumford [3,4,5,6], Loopstra [7,8] and Riches [9,10] and third sector practitioners argue that the increased dependence on food banks as a social policy solution does not address the root causes of food insecurity. In fact, current debate indicates that food bank reliance makes it so ethical and sustainable social policy is not created, as the third sector has ‘filled the gap’ sufficiently, allowing governments and other institutions to avoid responsibility for policy creation.

The Trussell Trust, the most prominent food bank network in the UK, has even moved away from its original approach of growing its network to now looking to deescalate its role in addressing food insecurity in the UK. Essentially, academics and the food charity sector advocate moving away from a charity model towards sustainable community and government action addressing what is at the heart of food insecurity.

Over the last decade in particular, there has been an increasing focus on food insecurity research in the UK and particular concern about the entrenchment of food banks in the welfare system [4,12].

Part of evaluating the entrenchment of food banks and food insecurity support in the UK involves looking at supermarkets and their influence on food insecurity. Prior to the pandemic, there were already concerns around the large partnerships formed between supermarkets and food redistribution organisations, such as FareShare. However, these partnerships actually solidified during the wake of the pandemic with supermarkets making large donations to food charities to address the growing need for support. Examples include Co-op's £1.5 million food donation to FareShare and Morrison's £10 million in food contributions to food banks in the initial wake of COVID-19. As these relationships continue to grow, the partnerships require further investigation. Evaluating where supermarkets can help eliminate food insecurity in the long-term is even more important given this rapidly evolving UK societal landscape.

Given these issues, this project explored how the relationships between food charities and supermarkets work, and whether these relationships support an ethical and sustainable way of addressing food insecurity.

### **What is the focus of the project?**

This research intended to further the conversation about the entrenchment of food banks, and the role of supermarkets' food insecurity schemes within this [13], and to identify alternative, more ethical and sustainable arrangements.

To investigate these issues, the University of York research team worked with a supermarket partner to exchange knowledge about supermarket food insecurity programmes, goals, and overall approach. The University of York team facilitated two events as part of the research to help gain knowledge on the topic, including an online workshop with 20+ food charity practitioners from across the UK and a webinar featuring speakers from a variety of organisations such as The Food Ethics Council and the Independent Food Aid Network. Findings from these events, as well as desk research, literature review, and knowledge exchange with the supermarket sector inform this report.



**5.9 million adults** in the UK  
experienced food insecurity in the  
6 months prior to Feb 2021

with **1.7 million children** in  
food insecure households

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  
Committee [11]

The infographic features a wire basket containing a green cactus, a red box, and a yellow bottle. The text is presented in a clean, sans-serif font with key figures in bold and color-coded (orange for 5.9 million, red for 1.7 million).

# The Challenge

Part of the challenge for supermarkets engaging with food insecurity initiatives is due to the nature of their business. As a food retailer, the most 'logical' way to contribute is with food donations. However, as discussed below, this is not necessarily the most ethical or sustainable approach to the issue. Much of the food donations offered by supermarkets come from food redistribution, meaning food that was unsold or unsellable. This comes with specific problems for both the supermarkets and the food charity partners. Indeed, at its core, food redistribution does not solve the problem of people being unable to afford or acquire their own food.

While most major UK supermarkets have made commitments to reduce food waste in some capacity, the notion that there is enough food waste to build large networks for consistent food redistribution is cause for concern. Donating excess foods that would otherwise be discarded by the supermarket calls into question whether the donated goods should be classified as food surplus or considered food waste. In a strict sense of the term, food is wasted in the supply chain as there is an overproduction. The verbiage around food waste being referred to as food surplus can disguise the underlying notion that there is a problem with oversupply.

In the workshop with food practitioners there were some practical issues behind food redistribution and on some occasions these undermined the actions of the food charities, costing time and money to resolve (for example, having to pay to dispose inedible food).

Specific examples included:

- Donations of unusable or damaged food products - the most extreme example was a bag of mixed items including flowers, bread, and cakes in a bag alongside a piece of broken glass;
- Donations of excessive amounts of particular food items;
- Donations of large quantities of fresh food with very short use by dates - for example, large bags full of bread.

Practitioners at the workshop suggested that there was a distinct power imbalance between supermarkets and food charities, and this was exacerbated by **a lack of shared values**. Often the relationships were formed and implemented based on the supermarkets' needs, rather than being mutually agreed. Charities were required to collect donations at a time and place convenient to the supermarket often with little notice. In the context of this **uneven power dynamic** charities described a situation where they did not feel they could reject donations as this might jeopardise what they received in the future - one practitioner described the pressure to collect a donation with the threat of it being given to another charity or thrown away. Moreover, they expressed frustration with existing methods of communication, describing a situation where there was often no point of contact with the supermarket, or even when there was, it could be very difficult and time consuming to speak to this person.

More broadly, as described above, there is a looming **concern for the food charity and food redistribution process overall**. The US, for example, has entrenched food charity usage into its model of addressing food insecurity, far beyond the original intention of emergency food aid. The UK runs the risk of facing a similar entrenchment of food charity as a 'solution' to food insecurity, alleviating the actors that can actually do the most to combat this, such as the government, of responsibility.

Three themes related to this challenge are presented below, with linked recommendations:

- **Theme 1:** Values and approaches towards food charity partnerships
- **Theme 2:** Improving working relationships with the charitable food sector
- **Theme 3:** Wider actions that supermarkets can take

# Theme 1: Values and approaches towards food charity partnerships

**The Issue:** *There is a mismatch between the values and goals of supermarkets and charities involved in food security work.*

**Recommendation:** *Ensure that partnerships have an aligned common goal reflecting the values and ideals of ethical and sustainable food insecurity reduction.*

Part of the feedback received from food charity practitioners was that there is often a mismatch of the values and goals of supermarkets and food charities and that this was reflected in working practices and relationships. While the goal of almost all the food charities is reducing food insecurity, many suggested that the supermarkets that they worked with did not have the same goal. Rather, the supermarkets had a goal of food redistribution: offloading unwanted or surplus food rather than making a sustainable difference in the lives of those accessing food charity resources. For supermarkets' food charity partnerships to thrive in an ethical and sustainable way, there must be a common goal. While this goal may vary from partnership-to-partnership, clarity and reasonable agreement is key. It is therefore important to consider which partnerships and relationships are suitable for particular goals and policies (see Theme 2 for more detail) and to build these appropriately and strategically.

## Values and approach towards food charity partnerships

It is critical for supermarkets to have strong, defined policy as to what they desire to do with food charities. This may entail asking the following questions: What is the primary goal in entering food charity partnerships? Why run these initiatives at all? Without decisive answers before going into partnerships, rifts may occur based on a lack of shared values and goals. Furthermore, these values and goals must be shared and lived throughout the business, rather than just amongst the community-facing areas.

A key need from supermarkets is consideration as to what are ethical and sustainable ways to embed values in food insecurity initiatives. This may mean a reconfiguration of the strategies currently in place. Within some initiatives, such as partnerships with companies like Uber Eats and Deliveroo for food redistribution, there is often a mismatch in goals that in practice are not always compatible. This research as well as the wider

academic literature demonstrates that the idea of tying sustainability and environmental projects to anti-poverty initiatives (including food insecurity) can be counterproductive.

If supermarkets were to solely form relationships based on the goal of reducing food insecurity, diverting food that would otherwise be discarded would not be the best avenue to reduce food insecurity in a long-term, ethical way. Similarly, if the sole goal was around environmental concerns, eliminating waste throughout the supply chain would be the first port of call rather than devising systems to redirect it. Creating large, often complex programmes to support the overstocking and overproduction of food is not a sustainable, long-term solution.

Supermarkets need to move food insecurity and poverty initiatives away from food waste, as it eliminates the temptation to tackle the issue of food surplus and food waste by attaching it to a separate issue of food insecurity. Conflating the two via charitable partnerships does not honour either goal.

## With our clear goal of helping end food insecurity - what now?

Some supermarkets already offer a number of initiatives to target food insecurity in a sustainable and ethical manner, such as the top-ups to Healthy Start vouchers. While this report suggests ambitious long-term goals for how they think about food insecurity support, it also acknowledges that many of the current food charity partnerships are serving communities in desperate need of support. It is not suggested here that all partnerships are ended immediately and a completely new system be put in place, but rather transitioning into ethical and sustainable relationships in the long term.

A review of shared goals and values here offers an opportunity for consideration of innovation. The following sections will highlight how supermarket values and goals can be operationalised.

# Theme 2: Improving working relationships with the charitable food sector

***The issue:** In many instances food charities reported a one-sided relationship that did not align with their capabilities or meet the needs of their clients.*

***Recommendation:** Create strong, consistent working relationships between appropriate food charities and supermarkets.*

Whether desirable or not, food charity *does* currently play a substantial part in addressing food insecurity in the UK, and supermarkets have actively sought out relationships with charitable food organisations. However, it is essential to ensure that actions taken by supermarkets do not add to the problem. At the heart of this lies communication and the quality of the supermarket-food charity relationship, alongside a shared understanding of the food charity's capability and its requirements (including practical arrangements such as collection, storage, and distribution). There needs to be trust that an expression of these needs will not jeopardise this relationship as well as the creation of strong, reliable communication channels with their food charities. Critically, relationship and capacity building from the outset is central to establishing a meaningful working relationship. Several practical steps can be taken to foster meaningful, sustainable relationships:

## **Finding the right partners**

As discussed earlier in this report, food insecurity is a symptom of poverty. In future partnerships, there should be policies and screening in place to ensure poverty alleviation and prevention is at the heart of potential food charity partners' work; this may or may not include the donation of food resources. For supermarkets to work towards building ethical and sustainable partnerships, ensuring the structure of the food charity's model supports a person and community more holistically is key, e.g. supporting services that advise on benefits or non-poverty specific community efforts such as life-skills workshops. Entering partnerships with food redistribution-only organisations can potentially make it more difficult for UK society to move away from a food charity support model. In the workshop, many food charity practitioners commented that food alone will not solve the problem at hand, demonstrating there is an interest from both sides for a holistic, cooperative approach. By selecting partners that adhere to a holistic model, supermarkets can work towards

community resilience and food insecurity reduction sustainably and ethically.

## **An emphasis on capacity building and maintaining relationships**

We recommend that time is taken for relationship and capacity building at the outset of a new partnership even if this means that an emphasis is placed on quality rather than quantity of relationships.

Time and effort should also be dedicated to maintaining these relationships. From a food charity point of view, having a named contact within the supermarket is essential, and it is recommended that this contact should play an 'active' role in developing and maintaining the relationship with the charity. In practical terms, expectations around this relationship should be laid out, with pragmatic matters such as contact details being available. Furthermore, this individual should have sufficient authority and flexibility to make decisions about donations, and should be given sufficient time to fulfil the role.

The contact person is likely to vary at each supermarket chain. Community outreach roles could be pivotal in capacity building and maintaining relationships. For the relationships that utilise these types of positions, such as Tesco's community champions or Co-op's member pioneers, providing training and communication protocol on how to collaborate and work in partnership with food charity groups is important. The success, or otherwise, of partnerships can often come down to the community team member or local store manager, so supporting these colleagues is critical. This includes providing enough training, hours, and pay to actively develop meaningful partnerships.

Whilst some positive experiences of exceptional supermarket managers were identified by the charities in this research, a more systematic approach to establishing and managing these relationships will enable them to be more consistent and sustainable.

### **Two-way communication**

We recommend there should be ongoing communication with food charities about what they want, need, and have the capacity to manage, and most importantly, what will be of most benefit to their clients. This can be enhanced by visits to food charity venues so that supermarket staff and the supermarket community leaders have a better understanding of these issues, or by inviting charity staff to come and meet and speak with store staff. Having staff members visit the food charities to see the operational processes was regarded by food charity practitioners as an important way to establish a mutual understanding and shared enthusiasm. Furthermore, where such arrangements have been established these should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that the partnership arrangements can be modified as the need arises.

### **Flexibility whilst maintaining standards**

The flexibility that local level relationships can offer was regarded as vital by those in the charitable sector, as this allows an organisation's capacity and its clients' needs to be accounted for. However, we recommend that clear, minimum standards are laid out across the supermarket chain in order to reduce some of the negative experiences highlighted above. This could effectively act as a service level agreement. It is also important to recognise that the charitable food sector is limited in capacity. Excessive forms of bureaucracy can hamper the development or success of a relationship.

### **Tell staff and customers**

It is vital that there is consistency in terms of policy and its communication across all levels of the business, and that sufficient infrastructure is put in place to support this. Strengthening internal messaging and communication throughout the organisation is important here, but so too is having a strategy that is clear and understood throughout the organisation. There are clear commercial benefits in terms of publicising work that is linked to the charitable food sector. However, explaining this work to both staff and customers may also encourage better practices. For example, if an

employee is aware of a scheme and why food is being collected in a particular way, they might be more likely to treat donations carefully, rather than as waste. Similarly, if customers are aware of particular schemes they may be able to contribute in a more discerning, helpful way.

### **Positive Example of Food-based Support**

Some food charity groups expressed that food donations, when thoughtful and appropriate, can be helpful.

One model cited repeatedly was Morrison's 'Pick Up Packs' as they allowed customers to engage with supporting food charities while ensuring the food charity only receives helpful donations.

Likewise, there should be clear goals behind any publishing of statistics behind supermarkets' food insecurity programs or partnerships. For example, a chain should be cautious of positively publishing statistics around the quantity of food donations, e.g. X kg, as it can give the impression that the more food donated, the more successful the initiative. Testimonials and stories from those who have benefited from ethical and sustainable food charity services or from programmes by the chain or individual stores themselves may potentially offer a more honest, person-focused vision for all involved.



# Theme 3: Wider action

**The issue:** Often supermarkets' own policies, structures, and practices can contribute to food insecurity within their own businesses and supply chains.

**Recommendation:** Apply the supermarkets' shared values and goals to their own businesses and supply chains, limiting their chances of contributing to the problem.

Supermarkets' support for helping end food insecurity is not fully limited to food charity partnerships. In fact, the most ethical and sustainable contributions that supermarkets can create and implement come from internal practices and policies. Policies, practices, and internal structures can greatly influence food insecurity throughout their organisation and supply chain.

**14% of food sector workers**  
faced food insecurity  
in the first 6 months  
of the pandemic,  
**5% higher than the general**  
population

The Food Foundation [14]

## Looking at...employees and their food security status

In the food sector, including supermarket employees, there is a marked need to review pay and employment practices. The IFS [15] found that 71 per cent of food workers earn £10ph or less. As key workers during the pandemic, there is a renewed urgency to both compensate and support workers in their efforts to lead lives without fear of poverty or food insecurity. Unfortunately, within the food and retail sector food insecurity is too common.

London workers  
require **£10.85ph**  
and non-London  
workers need  
**£9.50ph** to meet  
everyday needs

Living Wage Foundation [16]

With the pandemic, the responsibility of being a values-driven or community-driven employer, as many supermarkets strive for, has become even more critical. There are many initiatives that may support employees during this time. While first and foremost supermarkets should consult directly with their employees as to what they need to assist with the pandemic, there are company-led initiatives that could be a good start. Ideas such as a generous COVID emergency fund without conditions, store vouchers for a week's shopping with the amount dictated by the applicant, more paid leave including leave schemes for domestic violence survivors, and COVID front-line monthly bonuses for the duration of the pandemic could be beneficial.

It should also be noted that within any partnerships supermarkets participate in with other companies, they should ensure the partner's employees are also sufficiently paid and allocated work; this may include a review of the ethics of working with certain partners such as Uber Eats, Just Eat and Deliveroo.

**16% of households referred**  
to Trussell Trust food banks  
in mid-2020 had  
**someone in employment**

The Trussell Trust [17]

## Looking at...how people have acquired food in the pandemic

COVID-19 has greatly disrupted how individuals and families have been able to access and afford food. Panic-buying in the initial stages of the pandemic, the inability for those shielding to shop in-person, and the restrictions on seeing family and friends all affected the ability for people to become or remain food secure. Former strategies people may have used to acquire food cheaply, such as shopping at multiple stores to find low prices, may have been limited by the pandemic causing further stresses with food.

Food retailers have a unique position to influence who has access to what foods and at what prices. A notable positive initiative by some supermarkets, such as Co-op and Sainsbury's, have been the top-up to Healthy Start vouchers, a direct way to ensure those with the benefit can afford more or better foods; with this stated, there is room for improvement the generosity of the top-up amounts varies. Other similar initiatives could be provided to offer a wider range of support, such as extending top-ups or easily accessible discounts to those on Universal Credit. Programmes that extend the buying power of those in or potentially facing food insecurity is a dignified way to reasonably tackle the issue without a major overhaul of supermarkets' pricing. Increasing generosity and expansion of purchase-power programming is a great opportunity for chains to lead by example in the supermarket sector.

Supermarkets' online shopping services could help support those affected by COVID-19; as the pandemic proceeds, providing quality assistance to those most vulnerable to the virus is a strong mechanism to reduce food insecurity. From a cost perspective, reducing or waiving delivery fees for those on benefits or shielding could be influential towards serving this community. In terms of access, offering priority slots to these groups to ensure the service is truly accessible will remain important for many who continually need support as restrictions fluctuate.

#### **Looking at...why we have food to redistribute in the first place**

When considering ideas such as 'zero waste stores' or food redistribution community schemes, as many supermarkets do, there needs to be an understanding that once the unsold food has departed from the supermarkets it is food waste. Food waste should be defined as all foods that cannot be sold and must be either redistributed or binned – this includes food resulting from any form of overproduction or surplus. Ownership of this supply system fault, and separating it from the idea that the food will be passed along to another organisation or person, will be necessary to move into ethical relationships both with food charities and for food waste initiatives. Should overproduced food be viewed as food waste by the supermarket, there becomes an issue about whether the goods should be redistributed as a food insecurity measure - if it is not suitable to sell, why is it suitable for those facing food insecurity? Grappling with this idea of dignity within the food redistribution process means separating out any environmental

initiatives, such as community fridges, with that of food charity. While food redistribution may work as an environmental initiative, in the long-term it is not a sustainable and ethical way to approach food insecurity. With that, there are ethical considerations for environmental redistribution of food waste that must be considered, e.g. is it best for the environment to invest in elaborate systems that keep the waste fresher longer or to simply eliminate the waste? These environmental, community initiatives are not within the scope of this research but must be additionally considered.

Moreover, there is a looming concern for the food charity and food redistribution process overall. Part of the strategy to reduce the potential entrenchment of food charity in the UK comes from deescalating the scale of food charity in society and avoiding expansion. Supermarket groups are in a position to steer the future of food partnerships, avoiding creating entrenched wider-reaching networks that are difficult to remove, e.g. expanding volunteer bases. All food charity and food insecurity initiatives must dutifully check that their initiatives and policies do not perpetuate a system which avoids addressing the root causes of food insecurity and instead formalises a 'sticking plaster' response.

"...food businesses should rethink their role as an emergency partner that provides only short-term charitable help. Make relationships between food companies and food charities dynamic and open, so they challenge and support each other. Companies often focus on how to redistribute food to charities and food banks more efficiently. Surely a model of surplus food redistribution legitimises a system where overproduction goes hand in hand with hunger?"

Dan Crossley, executive director of the Food Ethics Council [18]

Should the approach of this report be adopted, it may feel daunting to reverse out of the wide networks created and utilised by supermarkets at the moment. Part of the fear may be that the charities and their clients may be negatively affected by the shift in strategy. A clear, iterative approach away from food redistribution should be

taken in partnership with the food charities and revised collaboration may be possible. For example, a charity that formerly accepted unsold or unsellable food may be fully willing, and perhaps keen, to change their partnership model to something more sustainable, such as funding from the supermarket or substantial discount vouchers or gift cards for their clients on any of the chain's own brand goods. Innovation and collaboration can mean that supermarkets can maintain meaningful partnerships while moving away from the current model.

#### Looking at...how we wield our influence

Many supermarkets have helped found and supported the #endchildfoodpoverty campaign. This shows that there is a strong interest by supermarkets to influence how children can avoid or be lifted from food insecurity, which is a positive step forward in community activism. Wielding their influence, chains should look to more boldly campaign towards initiatives that put more money in people's pockets, such as a permanent uplift in Universal Credit and universal free school meals. Campaigns such as #endchildfoodpoverty acts as a positive step forward, but still supermarket partners can push campaigns like this further or build upon them to expand their reach.

Upon initial review, supermarkets may first feel large-scale social issues are out of their remit, but as the businesses engage in community outreach, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and contribute themselves greatly to the UK culture and economy, supermarkets must acknowledge how far their impact and duty towards community stretches. Without forward-thinking goals that aim for wider society to progress towards food security and poverty eradication, supermarkets risk just speaking to issues in a piecemeal fashion, or contributing to narrow solutions which may not solve the root causes of problems like food insecurity. Put plainly, only opting-in to 'sticking plaster' level solutions to societal problem skirts the responsibility supermarkets hold as a large employer and community leader; ambitious social

policy and programme reform should be at the heart of supermarkets' CSR and overall initiatives.

Proactive campaigning at the local, regional, and national levels for a stronger social security system, influencing the direction of the #endchildfoodpoverty campaign positively if a supermarket is a member, and moving towards large-scale societal change is critical. Supermarkets hold a key position in the economy and can lead initiatives that give the community more buying power at supermarkets, and lead the charge for best workplace practices including pay, working hours, and benefits.



"We have to find better ways of supporting one another as a society than leaving people to rely on food charity... It's not just about ending food banks, it's about finding an alternative to the need for mass distribution of charity food in the fifth wealthiest country in the world."

- Emma Revie, Trussell Trust [19]

# Recommendations

The following recommendations are designed as a resource for supermarkets to use as they consider how to apply the findings of this report. These recommendations may also prove useful to food charities and food justice advocates as they navigate partnerships with supermarkets, working towards transforming them into ethical and sustainable relationships.

Recommendation	Success features	How to achieve this
<p><b>Create strong, consistent working relationships with appropriate food charities</b></p>	<p>An understanding of the needs and capabilities of the food charity’s end users</p>	<p>Meet end users of food charities, use of user-informed impact statements, and case studies. Open to all throughout the supermarket chain</p>
	<p>An understanding of the food charity’s capacity (e.g. collection, storage, distribution)</p>	<p>Regular meetings between supermarket and food charity staff, site visits to food charities by employees at all levels</p>
	<p>Shared expectations as to how the relationship will work, and a clear understanding of what to do when things go wrong</p>	<p>Named supermarket/food charity contact with clear contact details, memorandum of understanding, potential for contractual documents reflecting commitments</p> <p>Regular feedback and monitoring system of the partnerships at local and top levels</p>
<p><b>Ensure that partnerships have aligned common goals integrating the supermarket’s specific renewed values and goals towards food insecurity</b></p>	<p>Action taken is appropriate and does not exacerbate the problem</p>	<p>Integrate values-driven decision making with the partners, sense-checking whether the actions proposed match the common goals and values.</p>
	<p>Partnerships are fit for purpose</p>	<p>Consider whether a partnership with the food charity can address food insecurity in a meaningful, long-term way for their end users</p>
<p><b>Apply the supermarket’s shared values and goals to their own businesses and supply chain, limiting their chances of contributing to the problem</b></p>	<p>Internal employment practices that reduce poverty</p>	<p>Strong, continuous implementation of true living wage for employees, review practices of zero hours contracts or contracts with insufficient hours for an employee’s needs, protections for lowest paid employees</p>
	<p>Practices that enable low income customers access to food</p>	<p>Benefits top ups, discount clubs, waived delivery costs</p>
	<p>Reduced waste generated</p>	<p>Commitments towards regular monitoring and public release of food waste statistics</p>

# Checklist of Actions

The following checklist is a tool for supermarkets to use as they look to adopt the recommendations from this report. Food charities and activists may also find this checklist helpful as they look to form ethical and sustainable relationships with supermarkets.

	Action	Check
<b>Short term/immediate</b>  <b>Create strong, consistent working relationships between appropriate food charities and supermarkets</b>	Designate a named point of contact within the supermarket with contact hours and details	
	Ensure the named point of contact has the authority and flexibility to make decisions	
	Meet with food charities to understand what they need, their capacity, and clients' needs	
	Develop an action plan based on a food charity's capacity, and clients' needs and revise and update on a regular basis based on feedback	
	Ensure messaging and buy-in is consistent across the organisation	
<b>Medium term</b>  <b>Ensure that partnerships have an aligned common goal integrating the supermarket's specific renewed values and goals towards food insecurity</b>	Clarify the supermarket's position on addressing food insecurity, and its values and goals surrounding this, including solidifying definitions of their programming from food insecurity/food poverty programmes to anti-poverty programmes/schemes	
	Align different policy goals (e.g. minimising food waste, reducing food insecurity) with appropriate partners	
	Create and implement a regular audit system of food partner relationships to ensure they are meeting the supermarket's values and goals	
<b>Strategic/long term</b>  <b>Apply the supermarket's shared values and goals to their own supply chain, limiting their chances of contributing to the problem</b>	Create a review process of the practices of zero-hours contracts, hours distribution, and protections for the lowest income quartile workers which includes autonomy and feedback from the employees  Apply for membership to the Living Wage Foundation	
	Solidify definitions around food waste and food surplus to account for why the food is there and claim ownership for any unsellable food regardless of redistribution	
	Count any donated unsellable food as food waste in the store's metrics	
	Separate all food insecurity initiatives from food waste initiatives in the long-term	
	Create a plan as to how the supermarket chain can reverse out of the networks of food redistribution and food charity to avoid entrenchment	

# References

- [1] Food and Agriculture Organization., 2021. [Hunger and food insecurity](#).
- [2] Goudie, S. & McIntyre, Z., 2021. [A Crisis Within A Crisis: The Impact of COVID-19 on Household Food Security](#). The Food Foundation.
- [3] Lambie-Mumford, H., 2020. The rise of food charity in Europe: the role of advocacy planning. Policy Press.
- [4] Lambie-Mumford, H., 2013. 'Every Town Should Have One': Emergency Food Banking in the UK. *Journal of Social Policy*, 42(1), pp.73–89.
- [5] Lambie-Mumford, H., 2017. *Hungry Britain: The Rise of Food Charity*. Policy Press.
- [6] Lambie-Mumford, H., 2015. Britain's hunger crisis. In *Social policy review* 27. Policy Press, p. 13.
- [7] Loopstra, R. et al., Food bank operational characteristics and rates of food bank use across Britain. *BMC Public Health* 19, 561.
- [8] Loopstra, R., 2018. Rising food bank use in the UK: Sign of a new public health emergency? *Nutrition bulletin*, 43(1), pp.53–60.
- [9] Riches, G. & Silvasti, T., 2014, *First world hunger revisited: food charity or the right to food?*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [10] Riches, G., 2011. Thinking and acting outside the charitable food box: hunger and the right to food in rich societies, *Development in Practice*, 21:4-5, 768-775
- [11] House of Commons Environmental, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, 2021. [Covid-19 and the issues of security in food supply](#). House of Commons.
- [12] Goodwin, S., 2020. [Between the devil and the deep blue sea](#). Independent Food Aid Network.
- [13] Caplan, P., 2020. *Food Poverty and Charity in the UK: food banks, the food industry and the state*. Great Britain.
- [14] The Food Foundation, 2021. [The Broken Plate 2021: The State of the Nation's Food System](#).
- [15] Farquharson, C. et al., 2020. [Differences between key workers](#). The Institute for Fiscal Studies.
- [16] [The Living Wage Foundation](#), 2021.
- [17] Bramley, G. et al., 2021. [State of Hunger: Building the evidence on poverty, destitution, and food insecurity in the UK](#). The Trussell Trust.
- [18] Crossley, D., 2021. [Food businesses need to take a lead on addressing hunger – starting with their own employees](#). The Grocer.
- [19] Bulter, P. & Sherwood, H., 2020. Food banks a 'sticking plaster' as UK demand skyrockets, warns charity head. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/nov/12/food-banks-a-sticking-plaster-as-uk-demand-skyrockets-warns-charity-head>

---

This project was undertaken as part of the Social Science Enterprise Scheme at University of York as part of the Economic and Social Research Council National Productivity Investment Fund, Accelerating Business Collaboration. We thank all those who participated in the knowledge exchange and for sharing their insights with us. We're also thankful to the food practitioners that joined us at the online workshop, and Brindley Meredith for acting as a workshop facilitator and report editor. We extend our thanks to the speakers from our webinar event, as well as Josie Hanby of University of York who was assisted with the webinar and the project generally.

**Contact:**

Kelli Kennedy, University of York, [Kelli.kennedy@york.ac.uk](mailto:Kelli.kennedy@york.ac.uk)  
Carolyn Snell, University of York, [Carolyn.snell@york.ac.uk](mailto:Carolyn.snell@york.ac.uk)

**Original report release date:** July 2021

**Publication date:** December 2021

**DOI:** 10.15124/yaowc6w-n709



UNIVERSITY  
*of York*



Economic  
and Social  
Research Council