

COMMENT & OPINION

# Food banks are just a sticking plaster on poverty

By Jessica Sinclair Taylor and Sabine Goodwin | 2 April 2025 | 4 min read



A row has erupted over Feedback's new report claiming food businesses 'dump' food waste on charities. But discussion on whether supermarkets are the good guys or the bad guys misses the point: redistributing food waste through the charitable food aid sector cannot prevent poverty or stop hunger from happening in the first place.

Even though millions upon millions of emergency food parcels have been distributed over the last decade and a half, UK food insecurity levels have remained stubbornly high. And food waste is at record levels too – while many businesses have made great strides in reducing how much food they throw away, mainly by giving more away to charity, we still waste over 10 million tonnes a year overall.

Food insecurity impacted 7.5 million people in 2023-24, according to the latest data from the DWP, published just last week. What's more, 84% of households reporting severe food insecurity did not access a food bank. So even if redistributed food waste was consistently of the highest quality, food bank teams could not possibly put a dent in food insecurity figures – despite the Herculean efforts of volunteers and staff.



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## Redistributing rotten food

At the same time, the quality of the surplus redistributed to food aid charities has long been in question. Stories of rotting [fruit](#), mouldy potatoes, and nutritionally deficient foods have become par for the course on the food aid frontline. Plus, since the heady days of the pandemic, surplus supplies have dwindled. Food banks have been put on waiting lists to join membership schemes to counteract an erratic supply of food.

Feedback's controversial new report – 'Used by: how businesses dump their waste on food charities' – has focused much-needed attention on how food aid teams are having to contend with unusable food waste that cannot be distributed. Food bank volunteers and staff reported feeling "frustrated, angry or sad" when they received donated food items that they couldn't use or redistribute. The burden of having to pick up, sort, and dispose of supermarkets and other businesses' waste is falling on already overstretched and overwhelmed food bank teams.

Feedback's research also highlights the uncomfortable reality that, far from solving the [food poverty](#) and food waste dilemmas, channelling 'leftover food' to people struggling to afford the essentials actually entrenches both these social ills. No one should be left hungry, but too many governments have been able to watch poverty figures climb ever higher while implicitly relying on a charitable [safety](#) net that is stretched to the point of collapse.

In response to Feedback's report, Mark Game of The Bread and Butter Thing told The Grocer he has "yet to find a policy or solution suggested that acknowledges and addresses the issues of access and affordability of food". Yet, from the perspective of food bank workers and volunteers, that policy or solution is clearer than ever.

## Getting rid of food banks

Food banks across the UK want the need for their services to come to an end, on the basis that a 'cash first' or income-focused approach to food insecurity is exactly the solution to "the issues of access and affordability of food". In other words, tackling the root causes of poverty, by making sure people have enough money to afford essentials such as food, would take food banks out of the equation.

Inadequate social security payments and wages, the two-child limit and the benefit cap, sanctions, the five-week wait for Universal Credit, no recourse to public funds status, and insufficient local crisis support are why people are skipping meals, going hungry and having to resort to food banks.

Calls to 'fight hunger' or 'end hunger' are often used to justify redistributing food surplus to people struggling to afford food. Emotive language can draw in donations, but it can also cover up the real solutions to poverty. Surely the collective priority must be to point out the inadequacy of social security payments, low wages, and insecure work.

Meanwhile the solution to the environmental catastrophe of food waste is to tackle this problem at its source, preventing overproduction and overselling in the first place. Feedback's new report

centres on the voices of staff and volunteers working at food aid organisations. 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, unsustainable and ineffective fix of redistribution to build a food system that works for everyone.

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