

Briefing: Supporting Surplus Food Redistribution

Summary

In the UK, over 3 million tonnes of good-to-eat food are wasted annually in our supply chain, while 13 million people face hunger.

FareShare, which includes The Felix Project in London, is the UK's largest food redistribution charity and operates in every Parliamentary constituency. FareShare redirects quality surplus food from farms and companies to over 8,500 front-line charities, delivering 130 million meals last year alone.

Despite past Conservative government support, funding and legislative challenges persist. We must catch up with countries like the USA, France, and Spain in surplus food redistribution.

The government's Food Waste Hierarchy prioritises feeding people, but subsidies heavily favour the Anaerobic Digestion (AD) sector over surplus food redistribution.

Our proposed solution involves investing £25 million annually to cover farmers' labour, packaging, and transport costs. This would facilitate the delivery of 42,500 tonnes of surplus food, equivalent to 100 million meals, to those affected by the rising cost of living.

Our Surplus with Purpose scheme, which has been proven to be environmentally and economically beneficial to the UK, presents a model for investment and social impact. The benefits extend beyond addressing food insecurity, encompassing environmental sustainability, cost savings for public services, and alignment with key government policy agendas.

With widespread political and public support, including backing from 130 MPs, the NFU, and a petition signed by over 114,000 people, the government can show leadership by transforming an environmental challenge into a social good.

Background

The amount of good-to-eat food wasted in the UK food industry every year (over 3 million tonnes) is equivalent to 7 billion meals, enough to feed every single person in the UK 3 meals a day for over a month. At the same time, 13 million people in the UK are going hungry.

FareShare is the UK's largest food redistribution charity, operating in every Parliamentary constituency. FareShare comprises 18 independent organisations, such as The Felix Project in London. They take good quality surplus food from farms and food companies and deliver it to more than 8,500 front-line charities and community groups via 34 warehouses across the UK. Last financial year, FareShare redistributed 130 million meals, or four meals every second, across the UK.

The UK is lagging behind other countries in redistributing our surplus food. The United States redistributes three times more of its surplus than we do, and France and Spain redistribute twice as much. All three governments provide financial support for surplus food redistribution organisations in their respective countries.

Policy Background and 2018 Trial

Conservative governments have previously financially supported our work with farmers, and FareShare proposes reintroducing this support.

The Government's '[Our Waste, Our Resources](#)' strategy (2018) was introduced by then Secretary of State Michael Gove and promised to reduce food waste through a £15 million pilot fund, of which £1.9 million went to FareShare.

We used the funding to deliver 4,447 tonnes of food, enough to create 10.5 million meals. The cost per tonne to the taxpayer was [3.4 times cheaper](#) than any other organisation that took part in the trial, and the scheme was approximately five times cheaper than bulk buying from industry.

Despite the promised £15 million budget, the third round of funding never materialised, and DEFRA axed funding for surplus food redistribution from primary production and has not recommitted to it. This is despite the [25 Year Environment Plan](#) stating that the government would provide "funding for charities who redistribute surplus food from food businesses to those in need".

Current Situation

The Government's [Food Waste Hierarchy](#) states that surplus food should be used to feed people first before it is sent to animal feed or energy. Yet the Anaerobic Digestion (AD) sector receives £750 million in government subsidies every year, as opposed to the surplus food redistribution sector, which receives nothing.

Fifteen per cent of AD food waste deals involve the AD operator paying to take away the waste, a practice known as 'negative gate fees'. This has placed redistributors like us in direct competition with AD companies in accessing surplus food from farmers. It also means land is taken and out of use for food production and using it for biogas crops, which works against our environmental targets, not towards them.

The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) which manages the subsidy (Green Gas Support Scheme), recently told FareShare: 'In line with scheme guidance, AD site operators should ensure that the waste hierarchy has been applied and alternative markets have been considered before using any waste feedstocks for AD.' Yet in practice, the subsidy mechanism the government has in place distorts the hierarchy.

Long-term and Short-term Proposals

By investing £25 million a year, the government could facilitate the delivery of 42,500 tonnes of surplus food, the equivalent of 100 million meals, to people worst hit by the rising cost of living.

Under the leadership of His Majesty The King, FareShare and The Felix Project recently launched [The Coronation Food Project \(CFP\)](#), where manufacturers and retailers are working together to effectively and efficiently redistribute as much surplus from those sectors as possible.

However, while outside the scope of the CFP, the majority of supply chain surplus arises at a farm level. This is where the government can help, by covering the labour, packaging and transport costs for farmers to get their surplus to charities via FareShare.

Through £25 million a year, the government could provide people worst hit by the rising cost of living with up to 100 million meals, in good nutritious surplus food from British farms. This represents just 3.3% of the subsidies received by the AD industry.

Since the 2018 trial ended, we have been running Surplus with Purpose through our own charitably raised funds. The scheme is well developed, in operation and fully auditable as an effective model for investment and social impact and delivery.

We have been able to afford £3 million per annum, and the proposed £25 million per annum of funding would allow us to significantly expand the scheme. We could do this at pace given our existing relationships with farmers and charities across the country. We would ensure that the resulting food would reach all surplus food redistribution organisations who want it, as we did with support during the Covid-19 response.

This funding would stay in place until there is an economic and regulatory environment in the UK that is beneficial to surplus food redistribution, which could be achieved through various incentives, subsidies and mandatory measures as proven in other countries. We will soon publish a manifesto that outlines our long-term proposals on how best to achieve this.

Scheme Benefits

The number of people experiencing food insecurity has increased significantly in the intervening period (13 million people in June 2023; twice as many than in 2020). This scheme will get more food to people who need it.

This scheme would generate £143 million in social benefit to the UK, as [independently verified](#) by the University of Hertfordshire.

It would prevent the wasteful emissions of nearly 70,000 tonnes of CO₂e, as established by the [Carbon Trust](#).

Our work results in well-evidenced improvements to diets and health. The ability to provide fruit and vegetables is of particular importance, given the relative rarity of these items in traditional food support and their documented importance to health. The majority of our charities are in areas of high deprivation, with the proportion being greater in many of the areas with the highest food insecurity. More than a third of food we currently redistribute is fruit and veg, and government support would allow us to deliver far more.

The ability to get fresh, healthy food where it is needed most leads to savings of over £50 million in costs avoided specifically to the NHS and other key services, as demonstrated by the University of Hertfordshire.

Increasing food redistribution contributes to key government policy agendas, including the environmental strategy, net zero, levelling up, resilience building, and would help achieve multiple Sustainable Development Goals.

This is the first step in a plan that will create an economic and regulatory environment in the UK that is beneficial to surplus food redistribution, as found in other countries.

Political and Public Support

[Over 114,000 people have signed a petition](#) calling for funding; 88 per cent of the public believe surplus food should be donated; and 78 per cent think the government should do more to help charities access food, including 58% of 2019 Conservative voters.

Our campaign also recently made the [front cover of the Evening Standard](#).

130 MPs, including 36 Conservatives, have publicly backed the government supporting FareShare. The Efra Committee has twice recommended that the government provide funding for FareShare, and funding for the surplus food redistribution sector has been a policy recommendation included in various policy papers.

[The NFU has publicly backed FareShare's campaign.](#)

By adopting this proposal, the Government has an opportunity to demonstrate continued leadership by turning an environmental problem into a social good.

To discuss this proposal, please get in touch with:
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