

Zero Waste Shop (a social and eco-focused food store)

Aberdeen University Students' Union

Summary

We set up a weekly Zero Waste Shop at the Students' Union, the aims were to make sustainable shopping more affordable, and our food access services work more equitable. The basic idea is to sell discounted food items affordably that we receive as a surplus food donation, while using the proceeds to subsidize sustainable produce.

Context

We have for many years now run a FoodShare scheme which redistributes end of day surplus food from supermarkets. But with the cost-of-living crisis, what was



set up as primarily a project to reduce food waste was increasingly being relied on as a food access point. Demand far outstretched supply, and the FoodShare hub would typically empty within 20-30 minutes of being restocked. In the first instance we wanted to solve this by bringing in more food. So we applied to become a Fareshare community food partner. For a small annual fee we now receive a weekly pallet sized donation of supply chain surplus food. Much of what we receive is not expired, but donated as there is too much stock or outdated branding etc. Much of it is long life items such as cereal, pasta, tins, confectionary, etc.

This didn't solve the problem of providing access to more students and ensuring the hub remained stocked for longer. As with end of day surplus (typically fruit, veg and bakery) there is a limit to how much someone can take based on perishability. However this is not true with tins of tomatoes or muesli bars, but we also didn't want to have a member of staff policing the FoodShare.

At the same time there was a desire to bring a Zero Waste shop to the Students' Union however we were observing how these were both unaffordable to most students and going down all over the country after the pandemic.

The solution we developed was to combine the two ideas donated food items would now be sold at a weekly pop-up shop for a token price. (e.g. Tin of beans 25p, Box of cereal 50p, Chocolate egg £1, all with 50% student discount) this would ensure that people only took what they needed and more would be able to access the food reliably. Meanwhile we would use any proceeds to buy in bulk zero waste refill items such as rice, coffee, lentils, nuts,... and sustainable (Fairtrade, organic,...) produce from GreenCity Cooperative, these would then be sold at a price lower than cost, which aligns with the rest of the items in the shop. This way we would be subsidizing support for sustainable food choices, while also shifting the experience of food access away from that using a foodbank to that of using a local refill shop.

Achievements

- The shop is very popular often with long queues at opening, but some produce lasts through to the last hour of opening enabling everyone to get something, we typically have about 40-50 transactions each week, with the average total spend per shop being under just under £2.
- We were shortlisted for an NUS Scotland award.
- The project was largely seen as successful, and has been featured many of our reports. It is well received with students who use it and members of the public alike.

Challenges and Opportunities

One challenge is pricing we wanted to keep pricing as low as possible, but also bring in enough money to be able to buy in a significant amount of sustainable products. A solution to this was to raise the prices significantly and allowing staff and members of the community to use the shop too, but to offer a 50% student discount.

Another challenge was staffing as it was hard to get student volunteers to be available to cover all shifts. However, this was solved by moving the reception to the same location as the shop, so the receptionist on shift could also process the sales and oversee the shop.

Value-added benefits

The project has been good for engagement, users will come chat to us and give us feedback and engage, this is not something they would do when using to FoodShare hub.

The project has been particularly popular with international postgraduate and mature students who we would otherwise be worse at engaging.

Legacy

We plan to keep running the shop as is for now.

Resourcing

The shop is designed to be self-sustaining, however an initial start up fund of £2000 was required to purchase equipment and initial stock. We received some external funding from Vattenfall who operate a windfarm in the area to kickstart this. We needed a space, fridge, freezer, gravity dispensers, a card reader...