

It's reckoned that UK residents throw away around seven million tonnes of food and drink each year, half of which could have been consumed. With councils picking up the tab for disposal, and supermarkets in the firing line, you'd think they'd be talking to each other about a solution, writes Elizabeth Thompson.

# Fighting food waste

**B**ut councils and supermarkets don't seem to be talking, as Bristol City councillor Anthony Negus discovered when he opened up the debate to the big food retailers operating in his area. "We asked them when was the last time you had a conversation with Bristol City Council," he said "and the answer was never!"

Anthony Negus chairs the city's neighbourhood scrutiny commission, whose remit includes food waste, but the project began as a personal initiative. "My ward covered one of the major shopping streets in Bristol. There was an awful lot of food waste that we, like most cities, were struggling to get rid of. At the same time we had potential receivers of food, shelters sustaining people in need, that weren't getting the opportunity to make use of perfectly good remaindered food."

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The issue wasn't so much about disposing of surplus food from supermarkets; they have their own mechanisms and waste contracts for this. It was as much about the marketing, packaging and distribution policies that create waste further down the supply chain - waste that was ending up in residents' bins.

"The source of that problem was the way supermarkets manage their buying, selling and disposal and I wanted a better conversation about some rules that all the supermarkets could work to."

There were issues around distribution too - how the supermarkets' lorries and trucks were navigating Bristol's medieval and Victorian streets to supply their stores and carry out home deliveries.

And there was packaging, because particular types were creating issues - black plastic trays, which aren't easy to recycle

being a particular example. In Bristol, where material is sorted on the street and non-recyclables rejected at the doorstep, items like these were damaging public confidence in the service.

"I wrote a letter to the eight main players in Britain," says Anthony. "When we started getting responses back it was very clear there was quite a piece of work here." The scale of the issue meant it seemed to deserve the attention of the scrutiny commission. "We had a full agenda but we pushed that aside as this was so important."

The council's select committee on supermarkets took place on 22 February 2016. Cross-party consultation resulted in 25 questions, which were sent to all eight supermarkets. Two of them (Waitrose and the Co-op) came along, "but the most important thing was that all eight answered the questions in detail."

The questioning was extremely thorough, covering everything from the supermarkets' national policy on food waste to distribution mechanisms and from multi-buy offers to whether they donate to food banks and their attitude to misshapen fruit and veg.


"The responses showed that pretty well all of them were aware of our concerns. But they all addressed them in quite different ways. There didn't seem much synergy, or awareness that they could help each other or make



use of their local authorities."

The commission resolved to organise follow up meetings - something they're currently putting in place. Meanwhile the project's reach is extending. A Bristol City Council officer presented the commission's report to a meeting of the Core Cities (the influential group of ten key UK cities outside London). As a result a Core Cities group decided it would meet with the eight supermarkets at a national level.

According to Anthony: "All the replies we got from supermarkets showed that, if not keen exactly, they were not averse to being as helpful as they could be. They just didn't necessarily know the best way to do it.

"But I think there's a following wind. If only we can get together and make it work I think we could drive some really good results out of this." 

Elizabeth Thompson is a freelance journalist

