

How to: Run a Food Surplus Café

In this guide by Food Surplus Café we mean an event that uses surplus food that is destined for waste and instead is cooked up to create a meal. These sort of events are taking place around the country and each have their own personality and individual objectives. In some places people have set up daily food surplus cafes, in others they are monthly, or pop-up events.

Before you run your event, whatever it may be, it's important to think about your objectives, aims and how you can reach them. Is it to host a community meal to connect people? Is it to reach communities in food poverty with an affordable meal? Is it to educate people about how to reduce food waste in their own homes?

This guide goes through the various things to bear in mind when organising a food surplus event.

Case Study: Oxford Food Surplus Café - How the event works

The day before each event the Sourcing Team collect unwanted but perfectly edible food from the Oxford Food Bank then hand it over to the Cooking Team who work out how to use it all up. They create a menu the night before and schedule for the kitchen. During the café, the Front of House Team create an accessible and welcoming space, with information on other local groups and services. The Volunteer Team ensures that all those who have come to help out are fully supported throughout the day.

Customers are invited to make a donation for their meal, giving those who can't pay a judgement-free experience and those who can an opportunity to consider what they think the food is worth. All money goes into event expenses and providing free accredited training for volunteers.



Advance planning

Food

You need to plan where the food is going to come from. Will it be from just one source or involve multiple sources? How often will it become available? For example, is there enough available for a daily, weekly or monthly event?

Resource

Organising an event can take a lot of time and resource and so you need to ensure that there is enough to take care of the planning and as well as during the event.

Meaty, vegetarian or vegan?

Are you going to use surplus meat as well as vegetables? Serving a vegetarian menu does reduce the risk of cross-contamination and is lower risk than meat in terms of storage and prep. But meat is also wasted!

See the 'Key Role' document for details of the coordinator roles recommended for running an event.

Transport

Will the food be delivered or picked up? Where to/from? And at what time? If the food has to be collected, make sure you have access to a vehicle and driver. It can often be easier to arrange for the food to be delivered by your supplier.

Food storage

If food is being delivered before the event, then you'll need somewhere food hygiene safe to store it overnight. Can it be stored at the venue?

Venue

Getting the right venue can be a daunting prospect but it will largely depend on what you have available in your area. Potential venues can include: community centres, village halls, church halls, an existing café/restaurant space.

Things to consider about the event include: Is there a charge for renting the space? If so, how will this be paid? When can you have access to the venue on the day, i.e. early enough for the cooking teams to set up? How many people can the venue hold? This will influence whether you serve food at a designated time or make it available over a couple of hours to fit the maximum number of people in. Is it accessible? Does it have the necessary equipment or do you need to source from elsewhere?

The event

Next you need to consider how the event will run and what exactly will be involved. You can guess how many people you can expect to serve based on the venue size and location, e.g. is it on a busy street or a bit more out of the way. Although the first one you run will always be trial and error!

Things to consider: How long will you serve food for? Are you also serving drinks? Will you serve from a hatch or will people help themselves? This makes a difference to how many volunteers you may need.

Cooking

Making sure that you have cooking teams in place to make the meals is, of course, a crucial part of the day. Do you have people experienced in cooking large amounts of food ready to volunteer? Or people comfortable creating menus from what may be quite random ingredients? See the 'Key Role' document for information on the cooking coordinator role.

Food hygiene

Not everyone who volunteers in the kitchen *needs* a food hygiene certificate but those who are *coordinating* the kitchen do. Then it is the coordinators' responsibility to inform the volunteer teams about basic food hygiene rules and behaviour, e.g. hair tied back, no jewellery, hand wash sinks etc. You can read more about food hygiene on the [Food Standards Agency website](#).

Tip

If you decide to serve meat or dairy at the event, then you'll need to carefully consider how you will store these items. Use [this guide](#) to help you plan food hygiene in the kitchen.

Tip

You don't have to do all of the washing up! Depending on the facilities at the venue, you could put out bowls of warm soapy water and ask people to wash their own dishes.

Tip

As a group, you may be able to get a discount off food hygiene training courses.

Insurance

If you are a Community Action Group, then you are probably covered under the CAG insurance. [Read the CAG guidelines](#) on running events and Health and Safety considerations. However, if not, then you need to consider how you will get the right insurance for the event.

Payment & Donations

Running a food surplus event with donated food and ran by volunteers, you shouldn't have many overheads to cover except if you need to pay for the venue. However, you need to decide if you are charging people for the event. Are they going to pay what they can for the food, or will you provide a suggested donation? What will be the mechanism for people paying? Putting donations into jars at the table or when they pick up food?



Promotion and publicity

You'll want as many people as possible to come along to your event and so you may need to cast your net quite wide. This will often mean doing a mix of traditional activity e.g. producing leaflets as well as newer forms of promotion e.g. building a social media presence.

Promotional activities can include: designing and distributing a poster/leaflet, putting details on your own website or partner websites, including details in an email newsletter, posting on social media (your own as well as key community pages), setting up a Facebook event, and sending out a press release. You can also add the details of the event to the bottom of your email signature, ask for the event to be posted on a staff noticeboard (electronic or real), and contact key organisations and businesses (Food Surplus lunches can be perfect for a staff lunch). Also, encourage your volunteers to spread the word!

Local press are often looking for interesting stories about what's happening in the community. And food waste is an issue often in the news so can grab people's attention. It is definitely worth writing a press release and inviting your local press to the event. **If you are a CAG and need help writing a press release, get in touch with Beth.**

Policies in place

When hosting a public event, it's possible you may run into some issues that you need to address. For example, what to do if someone comes to the event intoxicated? It is important to have a plan in place and make sure coordinators know what to do if something like this occurs.

Volunteers

The event may run entirely on volunteers and so you need to make sure there's enough for the day to run smoothly. If you could use a few extra hands then you can recruit for new volunteers through: your website, social media, other community groups, or word of mouth.

Burn out! Running a café can be a tiring business! And so it's important that all volunteers take breaks and do not get burnt out.

Volunteers can help with:

- Kitchen: prepping veg, cooking food, washing up/clearing during prep and service
- Front of house: setting up, decorating, writing menu boards, welcoming people, clearing dishes, counting number of attendees, answering questions
- Closing up: putting away tables, chairs, packing up decorations, cleaning
- Closing up kitchen: washing up, cleaning – the not very glamorous but crucial job!

Front of house

How will the café space look? What kind of signage will be in place so that people know what event is going on? Will you have a seasonal theme?

Messaging & Information

How will you message about what you're doing on the day? The chances are that not everyone who comes to the event will be familiar with how to tackle food waste and so it could be a good opportunity to influence some behaviour change.



One Day before the event

Weigh / estimate food

The food has arrived so now, weigh it! This is valuable for understanding how much food you've saved from waste – an inspiring and motivating story for volunteers and customers. It's also valuable information when applying for funding.

Menu planning

Once you have the food, then it's time to come up with a menu. This can be done as a skill sharing workshop to teach new volunteers how to plan a meal and cook for large numbers of people. Lots of cooking creativity can be used here! Of course, on the day you may realise you've massively underestimated how many potatoes there were and so you have to think on your feet to come up with an idea of what to do with them.

At the menu planning session, it can also be a good idea to create a rough timetable for the day so the Kitchen Coordinators can keep to a schedule. A simplified version of this might be:

8.30 – get the kitchen ready – welcome volunteers	11.15 – Start the first pudding
– run through health and safety	11.30 – Prep the stir fry ingredients
9.00 – Team 1 Chop veg for chilli	12.00 – Serve the chilli, curry, and rice
9.15 – Team 2 Chop veg for curry	12.15 – Get the stir fry on
10.00 – Get the Chilli on	Etc.
10.30 – Get the curry on	3.00 – Pack down
11.00 – Get the rice on	

Volunteers

Make sure the volunteers know where they're going and at what time. Provide a number they can contact if they have issues in getting to their shift.

Promotion: One the final day before the event be sure to post on Facebook, Twitter and remind your supporters of what you're doing.

During the event

Risk Assessment

On the day of the event, be sure to fill in a risk assessment. You can find templates and a health and safety guide [here](#). If you need help with template or filling one in, get in touch with [Alice](#).

Kitchen

The Cooking Team is generally the first to arrive and prep the kitchen, organize the volunteers and start getting the food on.

Organising the kitchen

It will help the day run smoothly if you have a plan of how the kitchen will run. The following can be a useful guideline:

1 or 2 Coordinators – role not to cook necessarily but to organise teams to make sure all tasks are done, keeping an eye on the clock ready for opening, offering advice and support, keeping momentum and enthusiasm going!

2 or 3 mini cooking teams covering the menu.



Allergens

It's important that all cooks keep a record of what goes in each dish. This is needed for the menu board so you can list any potential allergens. All teams need to be ready to point people to this information if asked for. Read more about allergen information on the [Food Standards Agency site](#).

Front of House

It's a good idea to make the serving/café space as welcoming as possible to encourage people through the door. Experiment with table layout to see what works best, think about how to decorate, table cloths can make a venue look more friendly as can flowers or table decorations.

Activity area for children

Do you want a dedicated area for children? A volunteer could run a craft/activity table.

'On the streets'

You have a sign outside telling people what's going on but another useful way of drumming up interest is to have a few volunteers outside to talk to people and encourage them in.

Volunteers to 'hover'

A nice idea to have volunteers on the day keep an eye out for those who look a bit unsure of the concept, or who are alone and who might need some support in getting their food and finding someone to sit with.

Communications

During the event, be sure to post on social media about what you're doing, opening hours and how people can find you. Take plenty of pictures for future use and if possible shoot some short videos.

COUNTING

Make sure that you've got a system in place for counting the number of people you serve. This is important in understanding how far the food went, how much people donated on average and for reporting purposes. Don't forget to add your data into the [ResourceCIT](#) online monitoring tool so you can create reports and chart to demonstrate your impact.

Feedback Forms: Put out feedback forms so you can collect data on what attendees thought and how you can improve in the future.