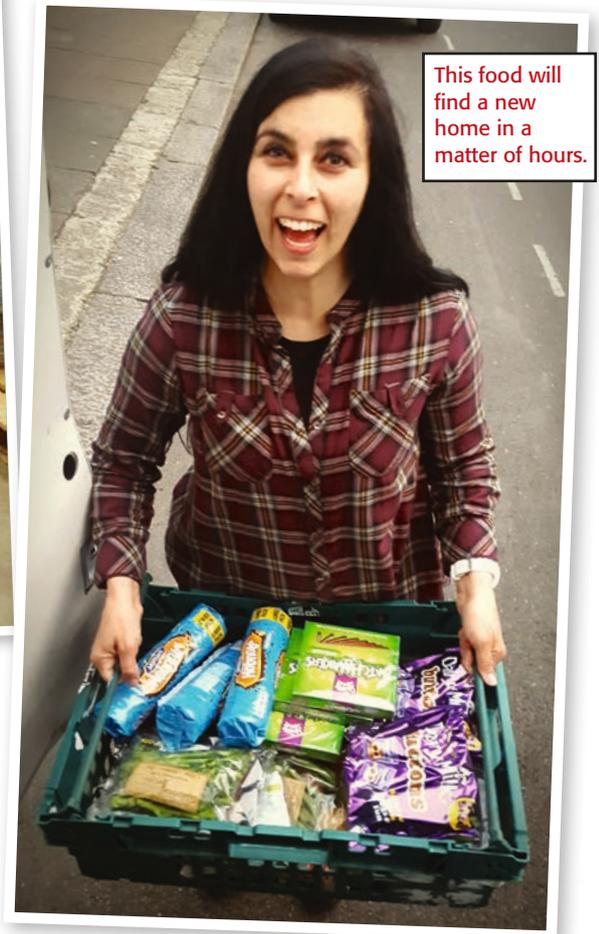




Picking up a donation at Marigold Health Foods.



This food will find a new home in a matter of hours.

City Harvest

Discover the charity taking London's surplus food to those in need.

FOOD waste has become a hot topic over recent years. We're all guilty of having an unused carrot at the back of the fridge or a potato that's growing shoots in the cupboard, but for the supermarkets and grocers trying to keep up with our demand, there's an awful lot of surplus food that they just can't sell quickly enough.

This is especially true around Christmas, when the shops are full to the brim with seasonal produce.

The colder weather also means that many families on low incomes have to choose between food or

heating, and for those without any home at all, it can be really hard to stay fed and healthy through the winter.

Ian Breen is Director of Acton Homeless Concern, a drop-in centre for the homeless to which charity City Harvest delivers food.

"As the weather gets colder our numbers steadily go up," he says. "We have a special Christmas lunch on the twenty-third of December and during this month we see an increase of about fifteen to twenty per cent."

London-based City Harvest is only two years old, but it's already making a big impact. The charity works with retailers and manufacturers such as Marks & Spencer and Morrisons to deliver tons of food per week to those who

feed London's hungry.

Since it started, it has redistributed more than 230 tons of edible surplus food to community programmes feeding those in need.

Chefs at the recipient charities prepared more than 550,000 meals with the food City Harvest delivered, which means a lot of people are going to be able to eat this Christmas thanks to their work.

The idea started in New York in 1982. Although London's City Harvest isn't legally related, it follows the same model, and is looking to go down much the same route as its American counterpart.

CEO of City Harvest Laura Winningham explains how the London operation was born.

"My husband and I were involved in the New York one. He was on the board and I helped do some fund-raising, so we wanted to start it in London.

"It's the same business model. New York has now grown to redistributing fifty tons a day, which is massive, and we see no reason why we shouldn't

grow and make as big an impact in London. There are the same issues – a surplus of food and a growing need."

The London operation started from humble beginnings.

"Two of our founders were working at a charity in west London where they were getting food from neighbourhood stores to feed the people at a soup kitchen, so they already understood that there was food and how to get it.

"So we came together at the same time and borrowed a van. One of the members on the team who used to be homeless did it on a volunteer basis for six months just to get it off the ground and improve the model.

"It seems like a simple solution, but the actual complexity of getting the food out to the right people is enormous. We're the only fleet of refrigerated vans in London with the know-how to pick up perishable foods, so we have to understand food safety and hygiene and handling.

"There are hundreds

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For Paula, it's a very personal job, having once struggled to feed her own family.

assembled from people who are passionate about the cause, and often people who have first-hand experience of the sharp end of hunger.

One such person is Paula Merrony, who spent several desperate years homeless and hungry, not always able to provide adequate meals for her four children, despite the fact that she was working.

Paula had some experience of projects with transport logistics, and she was brought on board to do some voluntary work. She's now a full-time employee.

"Most of the places want to recycle their food because it costs them money to dispose of waste, so we save them money by collecting food.

"Unfortunately, we can't guarantee to the projects what we're going to turn up with each day, so some days you're giving people lots of stuff and other days you're turning up with bread and some tins."

The situation is improving as word of their work spreads, though Paula still has to keep an eye on the quality of the contributions.

"Part of City Harvest's intentions are to help provide nutritious food" – not just quick-fix pasta pots

and the like.

"We have to say to people, 'Would you eat this?' as a sort of benchmark. That's when people sometimes say, 'They're only homeless people, they can't afford to be fussy.'

"But hang on a minute – these are people with delicate immune systems, these are people who really need nurturing and caring for, and not given food that's going to give them an upset stomach."

After Paula's own experience, this is a very personal project for her, which keeps her motivated.

"I know what it's like not to have food to feed yourself or your children, so if there's a driver who goes off sick or on holiday I often jump in the van to go and do the rounds.

Christmas is an especially busy time for the team.

"All the supermarkets over-buy, knowing they might have to throw a lot of the food they stock away. We're trying to make plans, trying to get some more vans and drivers, and basically looking at operating nearly twenty-four hours a day in the lead-up to, and just after, Christmas." ■

Find out how you can help at www.cityharvest.org.uk or by emailing: info@cityharvest.org.uk

Shop Clever At Christmas

We're all guilty of buying a bit more than we need at Christmas, but the statistics can be shocking. As a nation, we throw out the equivalent of two million turkeys, five million Christmas puddings and an astonishing 74 million mince-pies.

The temptation is always to have plenty of food available, but City Harvest advises planning ahead to make sure that you've got what you need and no more.

Plan each meal, cook the right amount for the portions needed, and think ahead to how you might use your leftovers. Turkey carcasses make terrific soup stock, for example.

Shane Jordan, meat-free chef, author and educational practitioner, advises, "Be aware of the size of your plates and use smaller nine-inch ones. People often fill their plates with more food than they are going to consume."



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of organisations that serve meals to people and they each have different schedules and different dietary requirements for different ethnic groups, so we have to understand the needs of the organisations and balance it with the unknown.

"Since it's surplus we don't know what we're getting each day, so we literally have to get it, look at it, have in our minds the understanding of all the recipient organisations in London and get the right foods to the right people at the right time."

Donors have been generous with their contributions, but their time is a little harder to spare.

"Sometimes the problem is not that there's no surplus food but just that people don't put the food aside. Just a few pieces of fruit make a difference, but it's a question of their time.

"What we'd like to do is try to get some of the staff at supermarkets and restaurants out on the vans with us because we believe that if they actually see the impact their work makes they would get a morale boost. They're doing a good deed every single day."

Food distributors in the catering industry also provide food because of the

rigorous standards they operate under, but City Harvest can work with this.

"Say they distribute cans of tomato sauce to a pizza restaurant – a pack of twenty-four large tins of tomatoes.

"If one of the cans is damaged they can't take the other twenty-three in the pack – the whole thing gets thrown out. So we take the other twenty-three.

"Then there's the whole 'ugly vegetable' movement."

If fruit or veg has an odd or unattractive shape, it tends to get overlooked in the shops, but City Harvest will take them.

"Every week we deliver regularly to around sixty charities, but we have delivered food to over one hundred and thirty – soup kitchens, homeless hostels, day centres for the elderly.

"We spent two years getting up to speed and now it's like we've reached the tipping point. We have all the information, it's just getting the funding for vans and drivers."

Remarkably, though, for an occupation that usually has a high turnover of staff, City Harvest has never lost one of its drivers. Everyone's so engaged with the job.

What really makes City Harvest special is this passion in its team. It's