



## The Birchwood Junk Food Cafe, Skelmersdale

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# THE BIRCHWOOD



## SKELMERSDALE

A report by The University of Manchester



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We thank our partners at The University of Manchester, the Birchwood Centre, and the University of Liverpool.

Contributors include:

**The University of Manchester**

Greg Williams  
Dr Christine Greenhalgh  
Alison Fletcher  
Steph Mitchell  
Dr Omer Ali  
Catherine Wasiuk  
Professor Arpana Verma

**The Birchwood Centre**

Stella Connell  
David Scott  
Grace Vella

**The University of Liverpool**

Professor Daniel Pope



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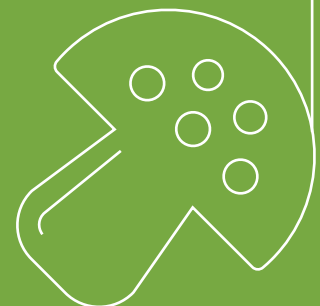
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**In response to the large amount of household waste, a variety of charitable organisations have been set up to redistribute surplus food to those in need.**

# FOOD WASTE

Food waste is an issue of global concern requiring worldwide action. It is estimated that one third of all food for human consumption is wasted every year – this equates to 1.3 billion tonnes. In high income countries more food is wasted each year than the entire amount of food produced in sub-Saharan Africa. In low- and middle-income countries, most food is wasted in the earlier stages of the supply chain due to poor practises and inefficient processes (food loss). In high income countries it is at the latter parts, with retailers and consumers (food waste). The financial impact of this is large – estimated at \$750 billion worldwide, with £12 billion wasted in the UK every year.

In response to the large amount of household waste, a variety of charitable organisations have been set up to redistribute surplus food to those in need. The Real Junk Food project is one of those overarching groups, with a network of over 120 Junk Food cafés. These cafés make meals out of food donated by supermarkets and local people. They are staffed by trained volunteers and run on a “pay as you feel” basis. This allows those who are less able to pay to contribute less or nothing, and those on higher incomes can pay more.

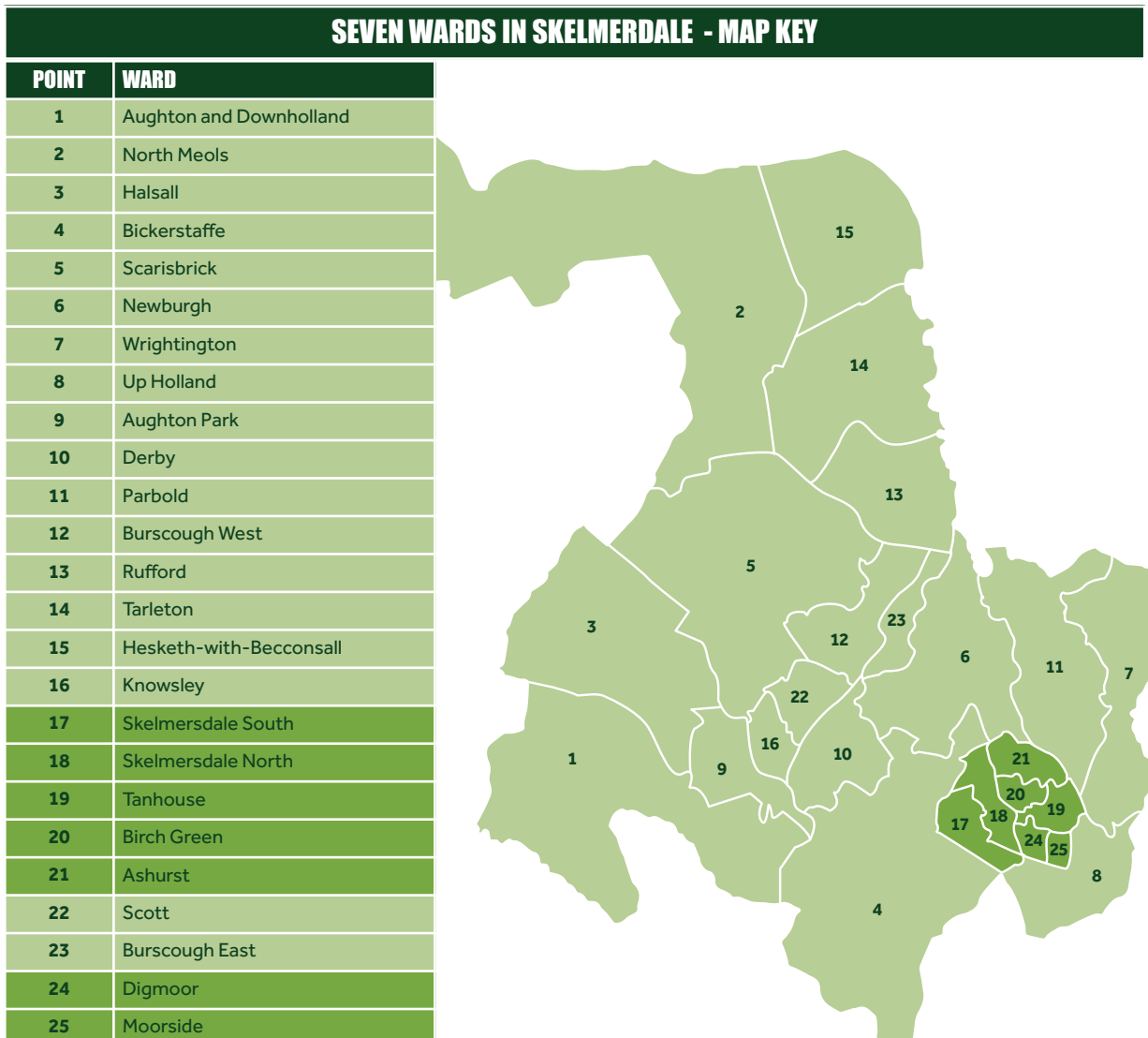
**The financial impact of food waste is large – estimated at \$750 billion worldwide, with £12 billion wasted in the UK every year.**



# BIRCHWOOD JUNK FOOD CAFÉ

## SKELMERSDALE

Skelmersdale is a 'new town' that sits in the borough of West Lancashire, around six miles west of Wigan. It consists of seven wards: Skelmersdale South, Skelmersdale North, Tanhouse, Birch Green, Ashurst, Digmoor, and Moorside. It has higher levels of deprivation at all stages of life than elsewhere in West Lancashire. The seven wards of Skelmersdale are the most deprived wards in the whole of Lancashire and, nationally, 6 of them are amongst the top 20% most deprived wards, with 4 of those being in the top 5% most deprived.



The Birchwood Centre, also known as the West Lancashire Crisis and Information Centre, is an independent charity that supports 13 to 25-year olds, providing a range of services aimed at helping young people achieve their full potential. Birchwood's services range from supported accommodation, to intervention activities, mediation, counselling, training and development. In 2017, as a community initiative, Birchwood joined The Real Junk Food Project, aiming to provide healthy, cooked meals for the community.

As with other similar models, the Birchwood Junk Food Café intercepts food that is close to its expiry date and produces healthy meals with the help of volunteers including chefs, members of the public and young people who use the services of the Birchwood Centre. For the volunteers who are also at the Birchwood Centre, this model provides them with the opportunity for further education and training to help enhance their employability, and enables them to interact with the community outside of the centre, enhancing their life skills.

The café runs in two locations on two days of the week: The Tanhouse Community Centre on Wednesday lunchtimes and the Skelmersdale Ecumenical Centre on Thursday lunchtimes.

Both centres are located in areas identified as being in the most deprived group in England (out of 10 groups of deprivation). By locating the café in these areas, the centre helps to tackle food poverty by increasing access to affordable healthy food, it provides access to fresh foods (which often have limited availability in food banks), and it helps supply hot meals to those with limited cooking facilities and those who are experiencing food poverty.



*The Tanhouse Community Centre*

**By locating the café in these areas, the centre helps to tackle food poverty by increasing access to affordable healthy food**



*Skelmersdale Ecumenical Centre*

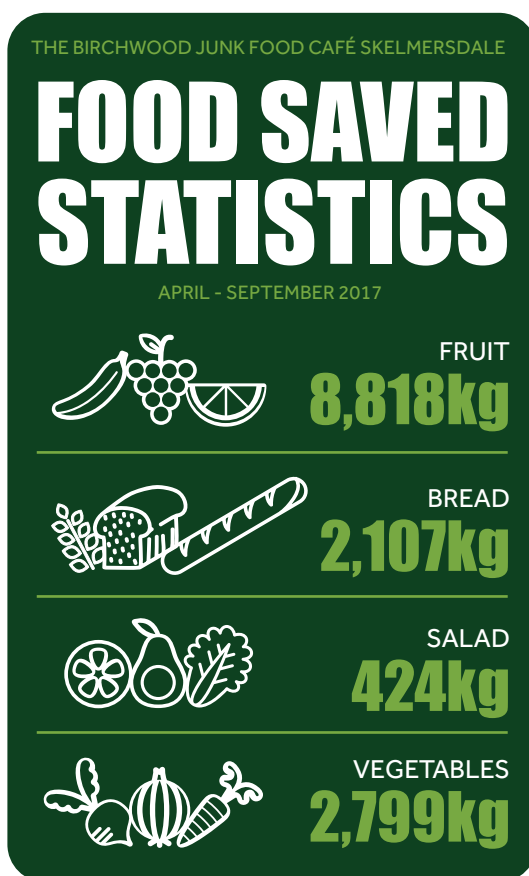


As well as providing healthy meals, the café also works with other charities and runs charitable events such as Macmillan Coffee mornings and a Mental Health Awareness Week. Members of the community help out and make use of the café, which is accessible to all. It has a wide range of customers including the elderly, professionals, asylum seekers, refugees and the homeless.

The café is an asset within the community that can be drawn upon when required. Through a common activity of eating together, it provides a safe space for interaction, where members of the community can build friendship and networks, get to know their neighbours, and feel safe. The café allows for customers to learn more about food access, use and waste, and it allows interaction with some of the more vulnerable people in the community with signposting to local services.

In one 6 month period between April and September 2017, the Birchwood Junk Food Café intercepted 14,148kg of fruit, salad, vegetables and bread that would otherwise have gone to waste. In a one and a half year period, the café served over 1,500 people, with 3,500 covers, 60 different dishes and 1,200 volunteer hours contributed.

The service runs to a strict schedule, with processes designed to ensure that health and safety standards are upheld. A coordinator organises the volunteers, with the service running from 12pm until 2pm. During these times, all areas of the café are staffed, with a maximum of four members of staff being allowed in the kitchen at any one time.



Between January 2017 and January 2018, donations totalled £4,820.69. This ranged from £12.35 to £224.24 (although the highest amount coincided with a visit of a large group from a pan-northern project). On average, the Birchwood Junk Food Café took in £51.18 each day it ran, with a monthly average of £400.89.

**...it provides a safe space for interaction, where members of the community can build friendship and networks...**



## **PAY AS YOU FEEL**

**As with other Junk Food Cafés, the café does not have a set price for the meals it serves but instead operates the 'pay as you feel' system where customers decide how much they would like to pay for their food. If customers do not have any money to pay with they may offer their services as a volunteer instead. The system allows for inclusivity so that everybody can access the café. Where food is not used in the café, it gets put out as part of a 'pay as you feel' shop where customers can take goods home. In order to represent the diverse community, the 'pay as you feel' instructions are provided in four languages – English, Arabic, French and Persian.**

# MAKING A DIFFERENCE

"The big difference is, that the Real Junk Project focus is food waste, but [the Junk Food Café] Skelmersdale's focus is about community and social outcomes. Bringing people together and providing something that is needed in the community..."



As part of the survey, customers were asked for further comments about the café. These comments were split into two main categories – the café and the customers.

## THE CAFÉ

### Quality

*'Excellent food', 'great food', 'wonderful soup', 'I like the lovely fresh food'.*

### Service/people/staff

*'we love this café lovely volunteers', 'The staff are superb', 'The staff are all lovely and its really nice place to be. Thank you :)'*

### Venue

*'It has a lovely atmosphere', 'Homely feeling always made welcome', 'nice community feel'.*

### Financial Support

*'living below the line this week - £1 a day for food and drink so it really help!!', 'For someone with limited means it is a very nice place to go', 'Big treat, as I can't afford cafés', 'the groceries we get are so helpful', 'I am disabled and under pressure from DWP so the cafe is a welcome respite!', 'I am struggling to cope at the minute so coming here with access to a healthy meal and food to take away is amazing'.*

### Ethos

*'I think the concept is excellent', 'better to eat food before its thrown', 'It's a fantastic idea. To think that all this food would go to waste otherwise!', 'A very worthwhile project that seems to improve each visit.'*

“  
The staff are all  
lovely and its really  
nice place to be.  
Thank you!  
”



## THE CUSTOMERS

### **Social benefits**

*'Very nice people good place to come and socialise', 'Wonderful experience every week bringing the community together', 'It lovely to meet up once a week with friend I'd lost contact with', 'Because I need to communicate and meet with anybody', 'To get out the house', 'helps with my depression'.*

### **Community spirit**

*'fantastic community spirit', 'it really brings the community together', 'love being with the community'.*

### **Supporting a cause**

*'The café is a good way to ... support the community', 'support a brilliant initiative', 'We need to learn how to support anyone', 'good cause', 'want to support it'.*





## KEY THEMES

The University of Manchester conducted interviews with the café organisers and volunteers, and identified a number of key themes.

### **The potential of the café to expand and thrive**

It was highlighted by one participant that the café is not marketed at all and how if they were to advertise it could be much bigger. It was mentioned that they had worked hard to make sure that the café was not viewed as a 'soup kitchen for poor people' and that one of their ambitions was to have a food van that could travel and take the offer to community events, and other communities. Other potential ideas for expansion were to hold a junk food festival, having the café run five days a week, going to schools, finding local areas to start growing produce, getting more local supermarkets on board, getting more support from local councillors and more volunteers. There is the desire to have a base that the café could be run out of permanently, while at the same time, they acknowledged that one of the main benefits of the café was that it was operating within different communities and was accessible to people who could not travel. All the interviewees were keen to see the café expand and to eventually operate full time, evenings and weekends.



### **Benefit to volunteers**

The organisers and volunteers stressed the benefits they have seen to volunteers that give their time to the café. They mentioned how the numbers of people volunteering their time has increased, mainly from word-of-mouth and social media. The main benefits highlighted included instilling a work ethic, letting people get a flavour of what life beyond their own restricted environment is like, letting them see that they are not the only people with issues and facing difficulties. They expressed the belief that volunteering helped to build confidence and self-belief, and helped them to be more resilient and improve on their skill base.

They felt it was important that the volunteers learned from their experience at the café, whether that be about food waste, cooking, healthy eating, other cultures or just life in general. The café is seen as a safe, protective space where volunteers could feel supported. Specific support is also offered to volunteers if needed, such as, help with applications, references, and interview techniques.

The café is seen as somewhere that helps to raise the expectations of the volunteers and inspire them to believe that they have opportunities and possibilities that they may otherwise have felt did not apply to them and that they can have fun while working hard.

Volunteer success stories have included people that have gone on to gain employment, and people have begun to reconnect with estranged family members. The café and its volunteers are also seen as a 'shop front' to highlight the work of the Birchwood Centre and inform local people about the work that is done there.

### **Food waste**

Food waste and the ethos of the café was a key aspect raised by the organisers and volunteers. The fact that the café contributes to diverting food that would otherwise be discarded is an important and rewarding part of the work of the café. The fact that the food used to create healthy meals was essentially free, and that the organisers and volunteers are unsure from one day to the next what will be delivered is an exciting challenge. There is a sense of pride that the organisers and volunteers have been able to educate the customers of the café in the issue of food waste and that many people would now be more prepared to cook and eat food they may previously have rejected.

### **Healthy eating and hot meals**

Many of the customers had indicated to the organisers and volunteers that they did not really eat vegetables before attending the café and that the meals they have had there have made them realise how nice vegetables can be. As the café is provided with more fruit and vegetables than meat or fish, the customers are naturally exposed to eating them regularly. Some customers also attend the café because it is pay-as-you-feel and they are not able to afford to pay much. For these people, it is believed that the café acts as an important lifeline, providing customers with a hot meal and groceries from the shop.

**...volunteering helped to build confidence and self-belief, and helped them to be more resilient and improve on their skill base.**

**The café is seen as a safe, protective space where volunteers could feel supported.**





**The organisers have the opportunity to support them in other ways - to discover what else they may need to help them and to signpost them to other services.**



## Social benefits

The organisers and volunteers recognise and are keen to highlight how people that come to the café, either volunteers or customers, enjoy the opportunity to make new friends. The café has been viewed as the bait on the hook to get people to come along so that they can interact and feel part of the community. The impact that this can have on people's lives is important and each volunteer and organiser has a story to share that illustrates what they have seen as a success in bringing people out of their shell and helping them to make friends. While people may initially come to the café to meet people and for friendship, the organisers have the opportunity to support them in other ways - to discover what else they may need to help them and to signpost them to other services.

## Customer health and wellbeing questionnaire

Following the customer satisfaction survey, a number of key themes were identified that were of importance to the customers. A longer questionnaire was produced to look into these themes in more detail amongst the customers. A total of 35 customers completed the questionnaires. Of these, 71% were female, 53% gave their highest level of education as secondary compared to 47% university, 66% stated that their general health level was good, 70% felt they had enough money for daily expenses and 70% were not in employment.

In terms of social cohesion, 56% of respondents agreed that people were willing to help their neighbours, 45% disagreed that people do not share the same values, and 64% agreed that there is always someone to help you.

# FOOD CONSUMPTION

Of the customers who visited the junk food café



On average, the café's customers eat 3 items of fruit and 3 items of vegetables a day.

When asked to provide details regarding what they had eaten on two specific days in the previous week when the customers did not attend the café, a wide range of responses were provided with fruit, toast, porridge and biscuits featuring the most frequently. Although the customers generally demonstrate signs of a healthy diet, 78% of them still believe that they could eat healthier.

# SUMMARY

The Birchwood Junk Food Café in Skelmersdale provides an outlet for food that is no longer able to be sold in local supermarkets, contributing to the reduction of food waste. The Birchwood Junk Food Café goes beyond the main goal of the Real Junk Food Project, which is to “stop food waste”. The café being run by the Birchwood Centre offers a unique opportunity to impact on the wider community, promote the work of the centre, and provides additional support and structure for the young people in the centre.

The volunteers from the Birchwood Centre gain social skills, they learn more about how other people live within their community and feel a greater sense of belonging. One of the key benefits for the young people is the opportunity to learn new skills and gain experience in a working environment meaning that they are therefore better prepared for their future, independent living, and gaining employment.

The customers that took part in the evaluation clearly see the benefit of the café to themselves as individuals and also in promoting community cohesion. Customers use the café for a variety of reasons, but the increased feeling of community spirit and togetherness is a noticeable additional benefit. Customers state that the key reason they attend the café is the chance to meet

new people and make friends. Additionally, customers indicated reasons such as a reason to leave the house, the food, and the opportunity to get a hot and healthy meal when experiencing financial hardship. The customers overwhelmingly enjoy the presence of the café in their community.

Being run out of the Birchwood Centre ensures the sustainability of this particular approach to the junk food café model. The context of offering young people opportunities to gain skills at the café from within the Centre is a vital element of the café’s sustainable success. The setting of Skelmersdale poses particular challenges that this café is uniquely positioned to address, demonstrating the wider benefits to the community provided by this model.

**...offering young people opportunities to gain skills at the café from within the Centre is a vital element of the café’s sustainable success.**

## A BRIGHT FUTURE!

The café continues to go from strength to strength. Another café situated at The Zone (the Youth Centre, Skelmersdale) has opened. The Birchwood Centre now also runs a café for Syrian families, the 'Marhaba Café', which is run every 8 weeks and creates a hub for the local Syrian community. This is part of the wrap-around services provided by the Birchwood Centre, which also include a Syrian Refugee Resettlement Program, Community Mental Health accommodation, Birchwood Catering (helping the café to become more sustainable), and growing and garden projects.

Additionally, the Birchwood Centre now also run an evening café every Monday evening between 5 and 6pm at Tanhouse Community Centre. The evening café has also introduced a children's group called 'Lil Seeds'. The 'Lil Seeds' help prepare the café desserts, draw pictures, create using crafts and learn about food waste.

**If you would like to find out more about the Centre or the Café, or even get involved, please visit [www.birchwoodcentre.co.uk](http://www.birchwoodcentre.co.uk)**

For further information on this report,  
contact the Manchester Urban Collaboration on  
Heath (MUCH), The University of Manchester.

- ✉ [much@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:much@manchester.ac.uk)
- 🐦 [@manchesterMPH](https://twitter.com/manchesterMPH)
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For further information about the Birchwood Centre  
and the Birchwood Café visit:

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- ☎ 01695 728391
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