

'If I shop here I've got money for gas': inside the UK's first social supermarket

Community Shop, which has opened in Yorkshire, sells goods discarded as unfit for sale by the big supermarkets at huge discounts. But, while most locals see it as a godsend, others are less convinced ...



Goldthorpe's community supermarket, selling good that would have been thrown away.
Photograph: Christopher Thomond

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Carry on down the main road of [Goldthorpe](#), South Yorkshire, past all the shops with the windows boarded up, eyeless faces of retail, past Hollywood Nails and the Horse & Groom

pub, and you come to [Community Shop](#). It's [the UK's first social supermarket](#). Food and household products are on sale here for up to 70% less than the usual retail price. It opened on Monday. From outside, it looks part shop, part community centre. Its windows are frosted, albeit with loaves of bread etched on them. The paintwork feels slightly corporate: EasyJet orange. You need a swipe card to enter. The manager of Fulton's Foods, the discount shop down the road, rumoured not to be amused by this new venture, says he dropped by but couldn't get in.

Only members can shop here, and at the moment there are around 500 of those. At launch, the net was drawn tight, a small grid on the map of Goldthorpe, a former mining town. To be a member you have to be receiving benefits and living on one of the 50 eligible roads. Leaflets were posted through doors. If you lived on one side of Straight Lane, you could join, if you lived on the other, you couldn't, says Richard Benson, 26, who lives on the lucky side with his girlfriend and their two children, aged nine months and two. But the map is already enlarging, more shoppers invited in. If this pilot project works, there will be 20 Community Shops nationwide by the end of next year. A London launch is already planned for Easter.

Benson is filling his basket with disposable nappies, paracetamol and cereal. "If I come in here and buy a loaf for 20p, I've got money for gas," he says. The formula milk is half the usual price. He says he is looking for work, having left his job as a driver with the Royal Logistic Corps six years ago and since then gone through jobs in a number of factories. "Chicken factory. Tayto factory. [Yorkshire](#) pud factory." He says that the first time he came to Community Shop he didn't want a basket, he was just checking it out. "But I got to the till and my arms were like this." He looks as if he is trying to hug an elephant. Kay, the shop manager, has seen this scenario play out many times. When she tells customers the total, they often ask if they can go back round and shop some more.



The outside of Community Shop. Photograph: Christopher Thomond

"It's the best thing to happen in Goldthorpe for a long time," says Patricia Wardle, who is nearing the till with two packs of lemon-and-lime flavoured Jaffa Cakes in her basket. She doesn't have a job, and at home she says she wears her coat, gloves, thermal socks and boots for most of most days. Today in Community Shop, biscuits and chocolate items outnumber healthier products, but because of how the shop works the stock will change from day to day.

"The one thing I'm really keen to help the general public understand is that this isn't waste food," says [Sarah Dunwell](#), a director of the shop's parent company. All the food is within its expiry date, consumable – but deemed unfit for sale by a supermarket. The Jaffa Cakes in Patricia Wardle's basket will be either a little under or over their advertised weight. The Muller yogurts that another customer is looking at have their labels poorly aligned, but the yoghurt inside is fine. The shop's only teabags are Rwandan teabags; their packaging is old. Instead of paying the landfill tax necessary to dispose of these items, retailers and manufacturers have agreed to donate them to Community Shop in return for a nominal payment. Morrisons, Marks & Spencer, Ocado, Tesco, Asda and The Co-Op are already on board. Negotiations with Waitrose and Sainsbury's are ongoing.



Community Shop.

Photograph: Christopher Thomond

Dunwell describes that process as her greatest challenge. She had to persuade not only manufacturers to sign up but retailers, too. "The question they all wanted to ask was, 'Whose market share are you going to cannibalise?'" Dunwell says: "It took a lot of explaining to help them understand that the people Community Shop serves don't regularly shop at Asda or Morrison's let alone Marks & Spencer." She sees the shop as bridging the gap between "the crisis intervention of a foodbank" and mainstream retail. If all goes well, Community Shop's customers may "become new shoppers for people like Tesco and Asda and Morrisons".

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Community Shop may be a new idea in the UK, but elsewhere in Europe "social supermarkets" have long been thriving. There are 800 in France, where the first one opened in the late 1980s; they are known as "[épiceries sociales](#)". Austria has 80, Belgium about 70, Switzerland 23, says Christina Holweg, deputy head of the Institute for Retailing and Marketing at Vienna University. She has collected data on the shops from all across the EU.

Dunwell, who gives her occupation as "social entrepreneur", came up with the idea of a UK social supermarket together with John Marren, who founded Community Shop's parent business, [Company Shop](#) – a chain of 39 discounted factory shops. But all profits will flow back into Community Shop, Dunwell says. None will go to Company Shop, even though its infrastructure and transportation system make the new Community chain feasible. A cafe will open on the first floor here in the new year, and a full-time chef will teach customers how to turn fresh produce into healthy meals. (It would be interesting to see what he would do with

the slightly challenging artichoke, spring onions, cherry tomato and spring greens that comprise today's fresh vegetable selection.)

And while all the staff here wear the same fleeces, de rigueur uniform of the discount shop, half of them are not retail staff but health and social care professionals. "Their job is to come up alongside somebody and start that conversation going," says Dunwell. "They'll have a cup of coffee with you in the cafe, have a chat about what life's like at home." They might, she says, approach a shopper with a bag of ingredients for a fresh lasagne as an alternative to the lasagne ready meal they have put in their basket.

The sun is shining. Christmas trees stick out above the shops at a jaunty angle, enormous satin bows on their branches. Pedestrians meander. There is lively chatter in the library. A queue is snaking out of the bakers.

But not everyone in the town welcomes the inaugural Community Shop. At the Union Jack Memorial Club, Alan behind the bar likes the idea that "it's giving people on low incomes cheaper food". But he has reservations too. "It's the first one," he says. "Don't look good on area. Area bad enough as it is."

Goldthorpe was chosen for the project's launch partly because the founder of Company Shop, John Marren, is from Barnsley, and partly because this former mining village is deemed [an area of high social deprivation](#). The Dearne Area Council puts the child poverty figures at 36% and 27% respectively for the two Dearne wards of North and South, compared with a national average of 17%.

None the less, it seems strange that a "social supermarket" might reflect ill on Goldthorpe, which last made news when [an effigy of Margaret Thatcher was burned on the day of her funeral](#) – outside Alan's club. That was a real community effort, Richard Benson says. The funeral director gave a coffin, the butcher gave a pig's head to go inside it.



Community Shop.

Photograph: Christopher Thomond

The only two people drinking in the club this lunchtime though are young workers from the Portwest workwear factory. They don't want to give their names but they think it's unfair that people out of work get to enjoy discounts that are not available to those in employment. "It

should be open to everyone," one of them says. So he would like to shop there? "No," he says, sounding offended. "Would you?"

Back at the shop, some of the customers have sensed opposition to the new project. "Them that's working, they think it's disgusting that you've got a card," says Kerry Wassell. "A lot of people who are working are thinking, 'What help do I get?' I do agree." But Amy Brannan, shopping with her seven-year-old daughter, is untroubled by the sniping. "Some kids called it a scrubber shop," she says. Like many of the customers here today she has used the Salvation Army food bank down the road; she says there is less stigma with the shop. She considers herself a stay-at-home parent by choice. "I don't care," she says. "Stigma or not. I'd walk down the road naked to feed my children." She is buying gingerbread men mixture, two packets, 69p a go. Must be planning to make a lot of biscuits? "No," she says. "I'm going to roll it out flat and make a whole house."