

Improving food shopping for older people

The **role** of **supermarkets**
in **protecting** and **enhancing**
older people's **food security** and **wellbeing**



Overview

University of Hertfordshire research has shown that older people are likely to have a wide range of factors working against them when sourcing and purchasing food.

Staying in control of their own food shopping is considered key by older people determined to retain their independence and sense of community belonging. With one in 10 people aged over 65 in England and Wales suffering from, or at risk of, malnutrition, regular trips to the supermarket can ensure older people continue to have access to the food they want to eat.

Crucially, food shopping provides older people with opportunities for social interaction as the risk of loneliness increases. Supermarkets that introduce creative, practical measures to improve the shopping experience for older customers can play a leading role in protecting older people's food security, and appeal to an increasingly important target market.

Key findings & recommendations

For some older people living alone, a trip to the supermarket may be the only opportunity for community interaction each week.

- Introduce 'slow' or 'relaxed' checkout lanes at set times, and support initiatives such as Slow Shopping®.

Use tailored offers and incentives that encourage older people to shop during quieter periods to make the supermarket a less stressful and more sociable, enjoyable environment.

Adopt measures that create a more pleasurable, sociable and enabling shopping environment.

- Provide more extensive seating areas or rest points;
- Arrange at-table lunch events aimed at older people in in-store cafés;
- Provide a selection of popular products near the front of stores to keep shopping time more manageable.

Many older people choose supermarkets according to their perception of 'helpful' staff.

- Consider setting up 'shopping buddy' schemes with volunteers to assist people who need support.
- Increase staff training on meeting the needs of older and more vulnerable customers.
- Older people can feel alienated by the lack of alternative discounts to family-focused 'BOGOF' deals. Target some in-store marketing campaigns and offers at older people to complement bulk purchase deals.
- Provide an accumulative discount scheme so lower-spend customers can access discounts once a certain spend is achieved over a number of weeks.

Minimising food waste was a key concern among study participants. Consider providing more foods in smaller pack sizes without financial penalty.

Many study participants considered online shopping a last resort. But supermarkets could look at how best to support online shopping for those who struggle to leave the house.

Some older people were forced to change supermarkets due to declining public transport links. Supermarkets could improve accessibility to food stores by supporting, or even sponsoring, better community transport links.

Supermarkets need to consider adopting a specific charter that sets out how they will ensure they meet the needs of older customers.

Study background

The University of Hertfordshire's Food and Public Health Research team led the *Food Provision in Later Life* study. It was funded by the Food Standards Agency and the Economic and Social Research Council to explore the resilience of older people within the UK food system, as part of a wider research programme: [Understanding the challenges of the food system](#).

The study captured older people's experiences of everyday decision-making about food to develop a better understanding of how older people buy and consume food, how food comes into the home, is prepared and eaten, shared and talked about, to better understand how to support the older generation to stay food secure. Over nine months researchers spent time with men and women aged between 60 and 93 from 25 households.

Researchers interviewed members of each household, explored their kitchen cupboards, fridges and freezers, accompanied them on trips to the supermarket, lunch club and/or their allotments and gardens, and observed meals-on-wheels deliveries. Participants also recorded their own food purchasing/preparation. Researchers collected over 1,000 photographs and 40 hours of video footage as well as audio recorded interviews.

During the study, researchers chaired focus groups with food industry representatives, the charity sector and local and national policymakers to explore further how to translate the research findings into practical recommendations for retailers.

Research findings

The shopping experience

Interviews with study participants highlighted the importance of the social and pleasurable aspects of shopping in supermarkets. For some older people the weekly trip to the supermarket represented the only opportunity for social interaction within the local community.

Food shopping is something which most of us take for granted. There was a strong sense that supermarkets could do more to make the 'weekly shop' a more inclusive, enjoyable, sociable and less stressful experience for older people. Findings from focus groups involving industry, policymakers and the not-for-profit sector supported this approach.

One suggested intervention that is already gaining momentum is the introduction of 'slow' or 'relaxed' checkout lanes for those that prefer to shop at their own pace and not feel hurried (see opposite). While open to all, this proposed initiative is aimed at accommodating the needs of people who find shopping challenging. Older people said they valued the chance to interact with staff or other shoppers.

The research revealed declining attendance at community lunch clubs, with some groups struggling to attract new members. The community lunch club model is a positive one and should be supported, as organisations like [Hertfordshire Independent Living Service](#) do. But for supermarkets there is a real opportunity to add to this model through the introduction of a similar initiative in their in-store cafés and to be seen as playing a leading role in the community in bringing older people together. This could involve promoting hot lunches for groups of older people through an at-table service and through including offers, discounts, food tastings and guest talks from local organisations and experts.

The case for slower shopping

This study highlights the importance of a trip to the supermarket as an opportunity for community interaction for older people. By increasing the sociability of the in-store environment, and ensuring, as far as possible, it meets the needs of older and vulnerable people, supermarkets can make a real difference.

Our research findings have informed our recommendation for supermarkets to introduce 'slow' or 'relaxed' checkout lanes at set times. This idea attracted widespread media coverage late in 2016, prompting several polls that showed support from the majority of the public.

Our findings support the key principles that underpin the **Slow Shopping** initiative, which is designed to give shoppers space and time to shop, and additional support at dedicated times each week. Sainsbury's, Marks & Spencer, Tesco and Morrisons are all trialling this scheme in the North East of England.

Meanwhile a Tesco store in Scotland has introduced a 'relaxed' checkout lane on Tuesday and Wednesday mornings in a scheme supported by Alzheimer's Scotland.

Slow Checkout Lane



The in-store environment

Some older people found the supermarket environment daunting mainly due to limited mobility and weakening eyesight. There was consensus that more seating areas would be welcomed by those needing to rest partway around the store. In the longer term supermarkets could consider innovative new store layouts that uphold the principles of [universal design](#) and take a lead from some European supermarkets (e.g. Dutch chain Albert Heijn XL) that have seating areas in the middle of the store.

Researchers accompanied study participants on trips to the supermarket. Many older people found the distance they had to walk around the store very challenging. One possible solution to make shopping a little easier is to group a selection of popular items, for example milk and bread, near the front of the store, alongside other convenience items such as prepared sandwiches.

Many supermarkets have set up initiatives to offer shopping support to older people who need it. However these schemes are often not advertised prominently and older people can be unaware of their existence. Another obstacle was the fact that support with shopping may have to be arranged in advance when older people would prefer not to be bound by a set time nor the need to ask for help.

The introduction of 'shopping buddy' schemes at set times of the week, perhaps involving volunteers, could address this issue. This could entail assisting shoppers to reach items on the shelves and carrying bags to the shopper's car, taxi or bus. Some older people interviewed said they regularly shopped at a particular supermarket because they knew assistance with carrying bags outside the store was always available.

Many study participants found it difficult to read the food information and messaging written in small font on packaging. They struggled to locate items they were looking for and reported difficulties in reaching items that had been pushed to the back of shelves or those that were higher up. Simple measures like magnifying glasses attached to some shopping trolleys could help (a measure pioneered by German supermarket chain Kaiser's).

Dedicated training for all supermarket staff would help them understand the issues older people experience. For example, experiential training provided by the Co-op in the East of England provides staff with a powerful understanding of what it is like to shop as an older person or as someone with dementia.

The international perspective

German supermarket chain Kaiser's has attached magnifying glasses to some of its trolleys and shelves to make reading food labels easier, introduced 'relaxation zones' and made lightweight trolleys more widely available.

Japanese supermarket Aeon Kasai has installed resting areas throughout its stores and made staff available to help customers to carry their shopping to the car.

Dutch store Albert Heijn XL has communal seating areas at the centre of some of its stores, where it offers free coffee.

Promotions and portion sizes

Many study participants felt disenfranchised from supermarkets' in-store offers that tend to target families (e.g. BOGOF deals). Older people described themselves as 'canny shoppers' who enjoy comparing prices and 'finding bargains', but find that money-off coupons are often aimed at people who spend a minimum amount in one shop.

In-store marketing campaigns targeted specifically at older people – not in place of, but in addition to, existing multi-buy promotions – are likely to be well received and attract older people to shop regularly in stores that offer them. B&Q's Club Diamond membership is open to customers aged 60 and over and offers additional discounts for those shopping on Wednesdays. A similar loyalty scheme in supermarkets that offers discounts to those shopping at quieter times of the week could prove popular.

Many older people tend to limit how much they spend and how much food they buy, preferring to shop more frequently so they can carry it home easily and minimise waste. They are likely to respond well to any efforts by supermarkets to provide a wider range of food in smaller pack sizes, especially perishable goods, without charging more proportionally. This would also help cut the amount of food thrown away each year.





Online shopping is not really for me because I like to see what I'm buying. I don't like other people picking my food out - I like to see what's going on.

Josephine, aged 80



Online shopping and isolation

Policymakers and the food industry have long considered new ways to encourage wider take up of online shopping among the over 60s. No one in the study shopped online for food even though some households regularly accessed the Internet through tablets, smartphones and computers.

Some were open to the idea of online food shopping if their future circumstances changed (e.g. if they became less mobile or unable to carry heavy shopping). However they tended to view it as a last resort.

Those interviewed repeatedly stressed how much they valued the opportunity for social interaction and exercise that comes with a trip to the supermarket or to local shops. Replacing in-store food purchasing with shopping online could contribute to a greater feeling of isolation and older people becoming less involved in food provisioning.

While it is important to guard against the risk of isolation and loneliness, a focus on making online shopping more accessible would however be appropriate for the most frail who struggle to leave

the house. Staying mobile should be encouraged but it is also important to inspire older people to maintain a positive relationship with food and lower barriers to accessing a healthy, safe and nutritious diet that they find tasty to eat.

Supplementing shopping trips with online purchases of heavier items could ensure older people continue to benefit from the social interaction, while maintaining control of their food choices and prolonging their independence. Supermarkets could provide in-store assistance for older people wishing to order bulkier goods online for delivery at a later date.

Offering low cost delivery slots at quieter times to older people, as well as reducing the amount that older people need to spend in order to qualify for free delivery, are options that supermarkets could look at. And drivers could be given an extra few minutes to help customers carry food to the kitchen and put food into the freezer.

Supermarkets could also support, and benefit from, innovative schemes like [Food Train](#), a charity in Scotland that relies on volunteers to shop in store for groups of older people with very limited mobility and deliver the shopping to their homes.



Accessibility of stores

The accessibility of supermarkets (particularly out-of-town stores) was an issue for many older people. This became more of a problem if people had to stop driving because of dementia or failing eyesight, for example, or if the use of public transport turned into a struggle due to declining mobility.

Cuts to bus services have a significant impact, in some cases forcing older people to change the supermarket they shop at regularly despite preferring a competitor. Some supermarkets offered transport, but when available, it may not meet people's needs, as the time allowed for shopping – typically one hour – is insufficient for many older people to get around a large supermarket.

This suggests that, if financially viable, some form of sponsoring of key local bus services by supermarkets could have a positive impact on communities and represent an advantageous publicity and advertising opportunity for the retailer involved.

Ease of parking influenced where people shopped, as did the availability of clean toilets. Either of these factors could govern which supermarket an older person chose to frequent. Providing adequate spaces for those with limited mobility, as well as for Blue Badge holders, would be welcomed. And while supermarkets do have policies to ensure adequate and clean toilet provision, many study participants highlighted poor facilities as a recurring issue that would deter them from shopping at a particular supermarket.



Supermarkets have an excellent opportunity to introduce practical and cost-effective measures that support older people to enjoy an affordable diet and maintain a positive relationship with food.

Professor Wendy Wills.



Alfred, aged 87, and Renee, aged 82

Alfred and Renee have recently changed the supermarket they use due to the toilet being frequently out of action and unpleasant to use.

They have a car that Renee drives to the shop. Parking is difficult unless they park in a disabled spot as it is a long walk, a struggle with a trolley and requires use of a lift. They buy some goods at the local shop, as they like the people who run it, even though items are more expensive. As Alfred has become frailer (he has dementia and uses a walking aid with wheels) they no longer frequent markets as this requires too much walking. They have not tried online shopping as Renee likes to choose foods herself. She draws up a shopping list, with an additional list for Alfred, as she likes him to do as much as he can. Alfred asks for assistance from staff during the trip. They both have strong environmental beliefs that influence their shopping habits. They sometimes 'treat' themselves to punnets of soft fruit that they share with friends who live on their own - as the portions are bigger than they can eat, and they hate waste.

Dexter, aged 75

Dexter lives on his own in sheltered accommodation near a large supermarket, where he does a weekly shop.

He actually prefers to shop at a different supermarket a bus ride away, as he feels the staff are friendlier and that they don't move items around the shop as much (he finds this annoying). However he can no longer manage the bus ride. He is aware of a minibus, which transports people to another supermarket, but he feels the one hour this gives people to shop is not long enough. Dexter has a number of health issues that affect his shopping experience; he has poor mobility and is visually impaired. He shops on Wednesdays as it's less busy and because he gets "knocked about" less. He has a carer to help him with shopping, and uses a mobility aid with a built-in seat that he uses to have a rest as he moves around the store. He finds there become obstacles that obscure shelves and are trip hazards, such as the trolleys used for home delivery and trays for filling shelves. Dexter doesn't like to waste food and checks use-by dates carefully as he shops.

Professor Wendy Wills

Wendy Wills is Director of the Centre for Research in Primary and Community Care (CRIPACC) at University of Hertfordshire. She works at the interface of social science and public health in relation to food, eating, weight/obesity and health. She is a nutritionist and sociologist, and has directed several major research grants, including for the ESRC and Food Standards Agency.



Dr Angela Dickinson

Angela Dickinson is a Senior Research Fellow in CRIPACC; she undertakes research relating to older people's health and social care, well being, nutrition and food choice. She is a social scientist and gerontologist and has worked on a number of major research grants, funded by ESRC, FSA and NIHR.

Other University of Hertfordshire researchers involved in the study:

- Dr Sue Vaux Halliday, Professor of Marketing, Hertfordshire Business School. She publishes on entrepreneurial marketing, services marketing and service innovation.
- Dr Ariadne Kapetanaki, Senior Lecturer in Marketing, Hertfordshire Business School. Her research focuses on consumer behaviour, social marketing and food policy.
- Dr Faith Ikioda.
- Ms Amy Godfrey-Smythe.

Research communications consultant [Chris O'Brien](#) helped compile this research briefing.

To discuss the findings in this research report, please contact **Professor Wendy Wills** at w.j.wills@herts.ac.uk
www.herts.ac.uk/research/centres-and-groups/cripacc

