

# **Insights from the Wellington City Mission's first year of Social Supermarket: March 2021 – March 2022**

**By Kore Hiakai Zero Hunger Collective**  
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This report was put together by Kore Hiakai Zero Hunger Collective to explore the first year of the Wellington City Mission (WCM) operating their Social Supermarket and to help share the insights they have gained with the wider Community Food Sector.

Kore Hiakai Zero Hunger Collective supports the work of community food organisations across New Zealand, while also undertaking the slower, deeper work of addressing food related poverty's root causes. We bring together community, producers, retailers, philanthropy and government to build Te Tiriti grounded, long term, sustainable solutions to create a food secure Aotearoa.

Kore Hiakai was founded in 2018 by a collective of social service agencies who recognised that the increasing distribution of food parcels was a sign that the food system was broken and poverty was increasing. They longed to address the root cause of that food related poverty and knew that needed to happen by collective action. The Wellington City Mission was one of the founding Social Service agencies of Kore Hiakai Zero Hunger Collective.

**kore hiakai**

Zero Hunger Collective

[www.zerohunger.org.nz](http://www.zerohunger.org.nz)

### **Ngā mihi/Acknowledgments:**

Kore Hiakai wish to thank the Wellington City Mission for allowing us to do a deep dive into their first year of operating their Social Supermarket. They were very generous with their time but also happy to be vulnerable about their learning's as well as their successes. Thank you to Olivia Lange, General Manager Community Programmes and Jeremy Neeve, General Manager Social Enterprise, for the time and patience you extended. Kore Hiakai also acknowledge the significant role Foodstuffs have had in the development of this Social Supermarket.

***Nga mihi maioha, Tric Malcolm and Sophie McMarthy  
Kore Hiakai Zero Hunger Collective, November 2022.***

# “People and communities empowered, transformed, experiencing fullness of life.”

Wellington City Mission Vision

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## Wellington City Mission

Wellington City Mission (WCM) is a faith based social service who has served across the Wellington region in various ways since 1904. As Wellington society has changed, so has the work of WCM. WCM evolution over this time has been greatly influenced by the changing needs of the less fortunate citizens of the Wellington area. Resources have always been limited but the needs of the day have directed the work. Trustees, Missioners, staff, volunteers, donors and sponsors have all made great contributions to the lives of people needing help.

Compassion and relationship have always shaped the work of the WCM as they have listened to the needs of those across the Wellington region, invited others to contribute through the generosity of donations and volunteering to shape responses and services to meet the needs of their fellow citizens.

The organisational values of WCM are

- Aroha (compassion)
- Tūmanako (hope)
- Whakawhangaungatanga (relationship)
- Manaakitanga (hospitality and generosity)



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# *Every single person deserves to be treated with dignity and respect with no judgement.*

## **Introduction**

Imagine an Aotearoa where all people are able to be to be their best selves. Where all people have access to enough good food, all of the time. Food that meets their dietary needs and preferences as well as fosters connection and celebration.

Manaakitanga and hospitality are a central part of our culture in Aotearoa New Zealand. The ability to offer food and sustenance connects us to others and helps to maintain our relationships. It is a way of honouring each other.

The offering of food through food parcels, no or low-cost meals provided by mārae, community groups, social services and other charities are an extension of this manaakitanga as ways of responding to food insecurity present in our communities and valuing those people experiencing it. Due to the increasing cost of living and inadequate income, an increasing number of people in Aotearoa are in situations where being food insecure is a long-term problem, where they must seek ongoing financial and practical support in order to access enough good food.

Over recent years, as more people have struggled to feed their whānau, our nation's social service agencies, and social enterprises have responded to meet this increasing need. Accessing food through foodbanks and other food assistance models requires bravery, as the act of asking others for help can be distressing, creating embarrassment or whakamā and a sense of powerlessness. As more people require this level of support many services are looking at how they can improve their processes to give people the kai they need, whilst upholding their dignity, their mana.

The Wellington City Mission (WCM) has been on a journey of caring for those who have very little. From the running clubs for children in the early twentieth century, to soup kitchens during the depression in early 1930s, to the men's room in the 1970s. After the income reforms of the 1980s and 1990s the WCM foodbank supported many across the city.

In early 2021 the Wellington City Mission (WCM) shifted its response from its traditional foodbank and launched a Social Supermarket, the first model of this particular kind. The WCM created a supermarket style experience for those receiving food assistance, as well as offering comprehensive wrap around social services to those who need additional supports. WCM launched this venture with support from Foodstuffs, one of the two main supermarket chains in Aotearoa. From this positive first venture Foodstuffs has partnered with others to launch similar Social Supermarkets across the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand.

After over a year of operating the Social Supermarket, WCM has learnt a lot, changed a few things and shared their model with many. In order to distil and share some of those learnings Kore Hiakai worked with the WCM senior leadership to gather their insights. Kore Hiakai kaimahi conducted a series of interviews with WCM's Social Enterprise General Manager and General Manager Community Services to gain these insights.

# The journey that led Wellington City Mission to choose a Social Supermarket

The Wellington City Mission (WCM) is currently located in Newtown, an eclectic suburb with a significant number of social housing. There are a range of social service agencies accessible, two supermarkets, a Saturday fresh fruit and veggie market, a wide range of ethnic food shops as well as fast food outlets. Newtown also hosts the main area hospital and mental health ward.

WCM had been thinking about changing their foodbank model for some time, as they knew their foodbank model had limitations. “Essentially, we made all the decisions for what people received in a food parcel and how much, it was just based on what we had always done.” “For example, some tinned tomatoes, large bag of pasta or rice, and the standard staples. There was no analysis of what should be in a food parcel, it was based on what donations were on the foodbank shelves, and what we had the ability to buy in.”

WCM felt it was obvious they had to do better. “People would look through their parcels and say, ‘I won’t use that’ and would sometimes give items back, or swap them with other people, because they didn’t know how to use it or didn’t eat that food.” Our vision was “we want to do better!” “We want to create a model with dignity respect and without judgement.”

WCM serves a local community which is home to a broad ethnic mix, meaning the food offered wasn’t appropriate for many people’s cultures. They didn’t eat foods like canned spaghetti as they had never encountered that in their lives. Being able to eat according to their cultural and religious traditions meant they may have needed foods like halal meat or no meat at all.

There had been a frame that suggested ‘beggars can’t be choosers’ or people should ‘be grateful for what they’ve got.’ As if fault was on the individual person. But there are many things that contribute to poverty, many of which are not driven by individual actions, such as the struggle between the cost of living and low incomes. People get embarrassed coming and asking for food, WCM felt the weight of their shame and felt they had a responsibility to lift that.

The Social Supermarket model provided a way which WCM could honour their values of upholding people’s dignity, building relationships, and giving people the ability to make their own choices. WCM researched the different models being used internationally and across Aotearoa. Of all the models they looked at, the ones that best suited their ideas was a mix of the different international Social Supermarket models.

With no real process to follow the model was created through trial and evaluation, keeping community at the heart of all decisions. This culture of reflection and adaption has been crucial to the success of the Social Supermarket.

***“Having an interactive and flexible process is key.”***

*Olivia Lange – WCM Community Services General Manager*

## What is a Social Supermarket?

Currently there is no internationally recognised definition of a Social Supermarket. It has been defined as either a social enterprise, social service or community facility which seeks to replicate the experience of a retail supermarket but offers food at reduced or no cost, it may also offer additional social supports to those who access it. These facilities might be stocked by donations, reduced to clear stock, or stock purchased for this intention<sup>2</sup>.

Over the last two decades Social Supermarkets have emerged across Europe, the UK, Canada and the USA. There are many variations, most focused on repurposing or redistributing food that would otherwise go to land fill. Most of these models operate within a low-cost food framework and have a layout to replicate a supermarket experience. In Aotearoa there have been similar models to this, including several free stores, more choice foodbanks, and Pātaka kai with few restrictions on who can access that food, only a few have intended to operate closer to a supermarket retail model.

<sup>2</sup> Knežević, B., Škrobot, P., & Žmuk, B. (2021, May 1). Position and Role of Social Supermarkets in Food Supply Chains. *Business Systems Research Journal*, 12(1), 179–196. <https://doi.org/10.2478/bsrj-2021-0012>

## The Wellington City Mission Social Supermarket model

The Social Supermarket is accessible to anyone in need of kai support with no membership fee or koha asked of them. Accessibility is key. "People are already making hard decisions, adding a koha makes it another decision for them to make." There is no set limit to the number of times one shopper can access the Social Supermarket however, after several visits, shoppers are invited to have some engagement with the other support services.

Giving shoppers access to other services at Wellington City Mission (WCM) is also important. Food is often the first thing people seem to need but there are often other services that can uplift a family and assist them to navigate their difficulties. This speaks to the fact that the things that prevent people from affording food are often based around, inadequate income, high housing costs, debt and other difficulties. Building a relationship through food is key to addressing those other needs and seeing the whole person. The shopper and their wider story are at the centre of the process.

The supermarket sits within the wider WCM services. Its building is adjacent to the other services so people can easily access other services, or just use the Social Supermarket.

It attempts to mimic a supermarket or mini mart experience. It is not too large, so it is easy to navigate and not overwhelming. It uses a point and colour coding system to indicate items values. Each shopper is allocated points according to the size of the whānau.

Each shopper is booked in for a half an hour slot for their shop. During that half hour slot, the Social Supermarket staff and volunteers guide and support the shoppers where needed.

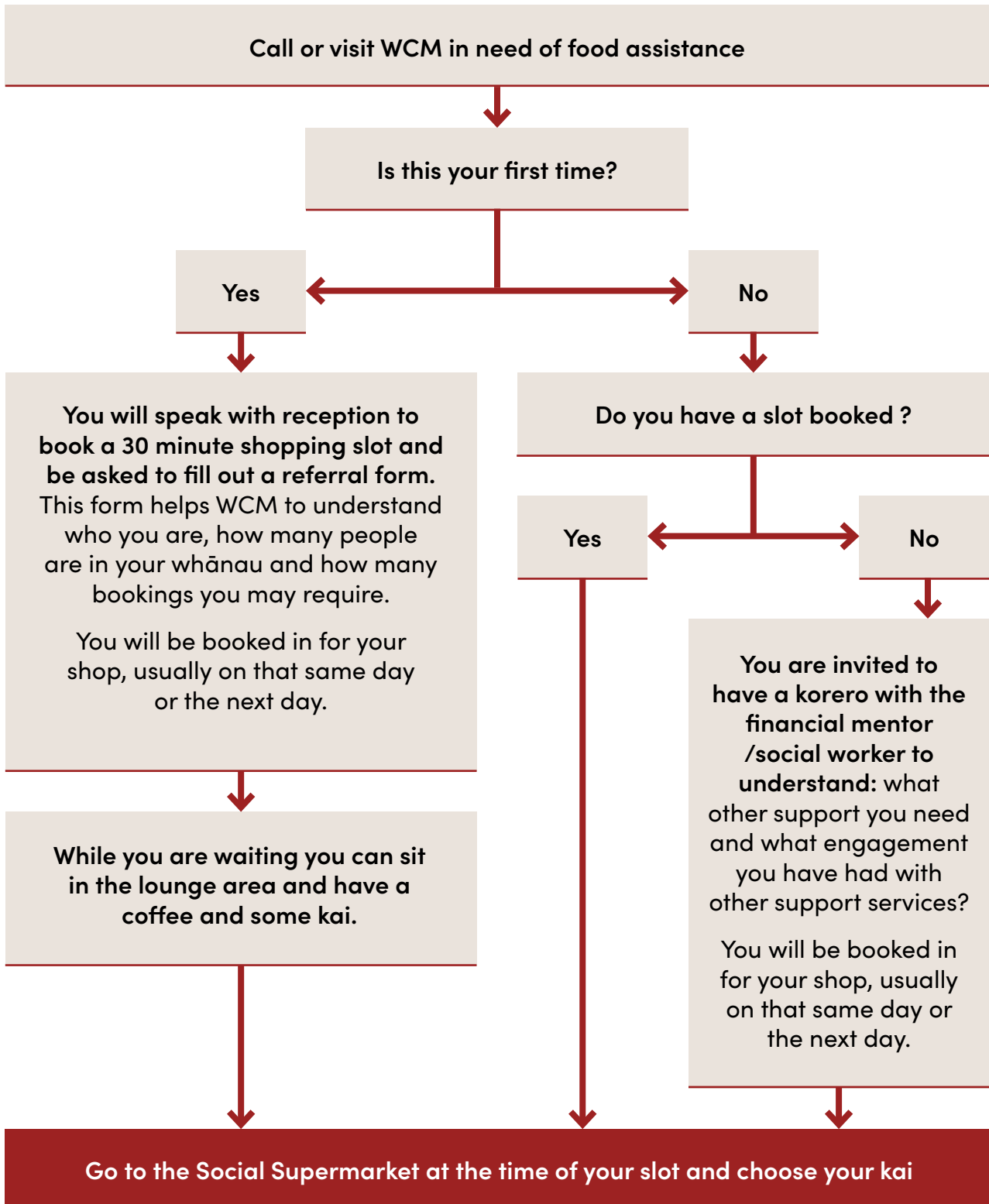
***"In all our mahi we strive to keep whānau at the centre. We have worked hard to build a model that works for our people, and their specific needs."***

***Olivia Lange***

## Understand what the people you serve can give

WCM considered using a koha model where people in need of assistance would be asked to provide a koha (donation) to access the Social Supermarket. WCM knew that those in need had nothing extra to give and were determined not to require a koha.

## The process for accessing the Social Supermarket:





## The process of supporting Social Supermarket shoppers:

The first time someone visits or reaches out to use the Social Supermarket whether this be by phone or in person, there is guaranteed access. They are invited to make an appointment via our reception. If an appointment isn't immediately available, they will be given a small bag of kai or meal and an appointment will be made, either later that day or the next day.

As part of the first time through the Social Supermarket you are asked to fill in a short referral form. This form helps WCM to understand how many are in the whānau and how many shops you might need at this stage.

Shoppers often turn up early to do their shop. They are invited to wait in Tā Te Manawa (the community lounge) to rest, have a hot drink and some kai. This often means they are more relaxed during their shop, as they can socialise and eat.

The shoppers are invited to the supermarket where a staff member or volunteer guides them through, showing them how the supermarket's point system works and having a chat to build relationship with them as they go.

## Social Supermarket paid staff:

There are two full time paid staff members. Both staff members have lived experience with food insecurity so are understanding and easily able to form trusting relationships with shoppers.

**Floor Manager.** Their role is to manage the physical space of the supermarket in its day to day running, keeping shelves stocked, supervising volunteers, and supporting shoppers.

**Procurement and External Relationship Manager.** Their role is about forming and maintaining relationships with donors and other agencies, managing when stock is coming in and where it is going, organising for surplus stock to be given to other agencies and managing referrals from other agencies.

WCM have recently added a part time administrative assistance. This staff member also helps to cover on the floor where necessary, allowing the Social Supermarket to continue to function without having to pull staff from other services.

WCM staff are provided with training in conjunct with the training that all WCM staff and volunteers are offered. This ensures they can provide good support to the shoppers, while keeping themselves and others safe. These trainings include de-escalation, mental health, and ethics.

## Consider how people can get to and from the Social Supermarket

Carrying bags of food from the supermarket can be a huge burden to people. A WCM volunteer noticed some people were struggling to get their kai home. They designed an uber-like service to help shoppers get their kai home.

## Have flexible and approachable staff

The staff help shoppers during their shop, they may need help knowing how many points they have left or have patai along the way. This creates a time where staff can korero and form trusting relationships.

### **Some people will require long term food assistance**

WCM understand that some people live in a situation where no amount of budgeting advice will help them. This is why they do not limit access to the Social Supermarket as they want to enable people to always provide healthy kai for their whānau.

### **Gather feedback from users**

At key times WCM have asked for feedback from shoppers, helping them to understand what's good, what's not and what they could do differently. This has also provided lived experience on the impact the Social Supermarket has made on the lives of the shoppers.

### **Volunteers:**

The Social Supermarket relies on their team of volunteers to keep the Social Supermarket running. The volunteer roles vary and are tailored to each volunteer's skillset and interests, this may be stocking shelves, being a checkout operator, or guiding shoppers through the supermarket. The WCM has a volunteer coordinator who manages all the volunteers across the WCM's services including the Social Supermarket. Volunteers can attend staff trainings.

### **Wrap around services to complement the shopping experience:**

The ongoing relationship people have with the Social Supermarket enables WCM staff to invite them to access other services, such as financial mentoring or counselling. Because these are all within WCM there is an easy transition to these services, enabling a deeper transformation in the lives of those accessing the Social Supermarket.

After a shopper's third or fourth visit there is an invitation for further conversation about the other services offered by WCM. Building a trusting relationship remains central to this process. Those guiding in the supermarket have non-confrontational shoulder to shoulder conversations, rather than a face-to-face formal conversation. This is key to building trust so shoppers can seek the supports that are best for them.

By the fifth or sixth visit, there is an expectation that shoppers would likely need ongoing support. There is an invitation to have a more in-depth conversation about their situation, so it can be assessed what kind of additional support they might need, including checking they have access to all the MSD entitlements etc. If shoppers are unwilling to have further conversation, they may be restricted from further accessing the Social Supermarket.

### **Information and note taking:**

WCM uses a client management system. All staff record keep in the same system. The information kept on shoppers is very basic at first, such as their name, address, gender, ethnicity, and number of people in their whānau. This information is anonymised and used in statistics for funding purposes. As a shopper continues to visit and use other social services, ongoing client notes are established in line with WCM policy. These client notes help to build a picture of that person so they can be provided with the support they need and can be referred to other services without having to repeat their story multiple times. The social workers explain what information they are gathering and why this information is recorded within the initial conversation.

***“We ask gentle questions, such as ‘tell me more about that,’ or ‘are you aware can we connect you with ...,’ ‘is this your first time accessing social services?’ This is about relationship building, we don’t want to scare or make them feel whakamā.”***

### **Health and safety:**

WCM recognises that when people come to the WCM for assistance they can be embarrassed, stressed or even unwell. This can affect their behaviour and their ability to regulate their behaviour in the presence of others. It is important for WCM that they give people who may find it difficult to navigate social situations access to the Social Supermarket. Relationship plays an important role in navigating this.

Social workers have an initial conversation with shoppers prior to their first shop. This provides them a way to discretely assess whether the shopper might be anxious or elevated requiring extra assistance, or whether it might not be a good day for them to shop. They may either record this in the client management system to alert the Social Supermarket staff to take precautions or guide the shopper through their experience themselves. If the social worker feels that the Social Supermarket is not appropriate for someone because they are a high risk, they will instead be offered a kai box to take home and additional support.

Some shoppers may become agitated during their shopping experience. To manage this situation well and keep all parties safe when an incident occurs there is a traffic light system for staff to communicate how urgent a situation is and whether back up is required.

Because the current social supermarket is separate from the main WCM building, at times, there is need to communicate between the buildings. All Social Supermarket staff carry a walkie-talkie. This allows them to communicate between each other and with other WCM staff outside of the Social Supermarket. WCM tried other forms of remote communication including cell phones and Safelets (security bracelet) but the Walkie Talkie’s worked best.

### **Have protocol in place to support staff**

WCM have had their fair share of challenges working with people in the last year, some people choose not to engage further or with other services. To help staff respond well to shoppers and potential shoppers who do not want to recognise the parameters set by WCM. They have created a guideline. This gives a clear outline of why staff may not be able to give people access to the Social Supermarket at this time.

### **Have a good security system that suits staff, facilities and shoppers who access your service**

It’s important to have a good security system that is specific to your site so that all staff are aware of anything going on, and the staff feel safe.

One that also keeps the safety of shoppers at the centre so they feel safe at all times, even when they are having a bad day.

## It is important to record what items are going out

Keeping track of what items are popular enables you to get in stock that people like. During the first stages WCM stocked around 3000 different items as they thought having more was better. Overtime they noticed they didn't need as many brands, as people generally went for brands they were familiar with. They have now reduced the number of items by noting what people like and only restocking those items.

## Listening to shoppers so items provided reflect their needs

After hearing that people were having trouble cooking meals, they created simple meal kits to make planning and cooking meals easier.

They also heard that people were struggling to feed their pets, so they provided pet food that wouldn't use points.

# Resourcing this Social Supermarket model

## Role of Foodstuffs:

Foodstuffs played a pivotal role in the set up of the Social Supermarket. Wellington City Mission (WCM) had discussions very early on with Foodstuffs. The WCM Missioner and Foodstuffs North Island CEO, talked about the concept. Foodstuffs liked the sound of a Social Supermarket and so committed to be involved from the start.

***“It has been a great opportunity for Foodstuffs to be involved in a community project and give back.”***

Foodstuffs provided shelving, their senior management came in and helped with the layout, they installed the computer system, donated trolleys, checkouts, and freezers. Foodstuffs had expertise with flow and set up. This understanding was invaluable. WCM estimate that the initial donation from Foodstuffs of shelving, tech, equipment, time and knowledge was worth about \$100,000.

Currently WCM and Foodstuffs have no written agreement about the relationship or expectations, but it has developed into a long term, ongoing relationship between the wider teams of both organisations.

Foodstuffs are one of the key partners, continuing to donate kai, as well as providing access to kai at wholesale rates, and ongoing logistical support such as upgrading infrastructure.

***“Foodstuffs saved a lot of heartache starting up.”***

## Role of other suppliers:

WCM already had established relationships with many other food suppliers. Whilst Foodstuffs gives WCM access to purchase wholesale stock at cost and have it delivered locally (across the road from WCM at the New World) this did not interrupt the access WCM had to other food suppliers and donors.

There are also many other direct donors or suppliers who WCM procure their items from. This enables shoppers to have access to a variety of items and helps with the WCM funding model for the Social Supermarket. Without these addition suppliers and donors, along with financial donors, it would be hard to sustain the model.

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***“One important supplier has been our fruit and vege supplier. This relationship was established during the first lockdown when the Wellington Waitangi markets were unable to happen, and the growers had nowhere to supply their stock. Wellington City Council asked WCM to assist with the redistribution and a relationship was established. All fresh fruit and veg in the Social Supermarket is purchased from these local (in the greater Wellington Region) suppliers. It is a win, win.”***

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## Funding to make it happen:

WCM were fortunate that when they decided to go ahead with their Social Supermarket they had space within their facilities to house it. This meant they did not need to look at additional hireage of a venue. In addition to that they redeployed their foodbank procurement manager and their foodbank manager to the Social Supermarket. This meant there was no additional staff cost.

Shelving and physical layout of the store would have been a significant expense. Foodstuffs met this expense and in addition donated items to stock the shelves, which supplemented what was already in stock from the WCM's foodbank.

Additional set up costs were met with fundraising within the WCM's fundraising campaign programme.

WCM has estimated the set-up cost, to start from scratch, would be around \$350,000. The ongoing annual cost of the Social Supermarket is estimated to be a similar amount. This amount is integrated into the WCM's standard operating costs and yearly fundraising campaigns.

## Role of donors to fund the ongoing operation:

WCM highly values their relationship with their donors. The donors play a key role in keeping the supermarket afloat. Having strong relationships creates a steady supply of stock. Donations include donation of supply of food stocks; and donation of funds to purchase stock and pay for the wrap around services.

In addition to direct donations, Foodstuffs helps coordinate their partners to donate to the Social Supermarket. This becomes part of the donors partnership with Foodstuffs and is integrated into their costs. This helps to stagger what brands are donating to the Social Supermarket, for example one month will be one brand of chickens and the next month is a different brand. This shares the load and helps to create a steady supply of kai.

***“We recommend inviting suppliers to donate stock directly to your Social Supermarket.”***

WCM is an established, well-known charity. This is an advantage when looking for donations, especially enough to stock the Social Supermarket for the whole year.

## Placement of a Social Supermarket

The majority of shoppers live close by.

If you are looking to open a Social Supermarket, consider how physically accessible the placement of your Social Supermarket is to the community it will serve.

A shop doesn't finish until the food is put away in the cupboards.

Transport and physical accessibility are as key as affordability.

## Regularly showing gratitude

Procurement takes time and focus which is why WCM have staff dedicated to this aspect of the Social Supermarket. A key part of this role is taking time to thank people for their generosity.

## The Resources that were already in place for WCM:

There were components of the Social Supermarkets wrap around services that were already in place at WCM. These services are funded both within the wider services of WCM. The components are:

- Having a phonenumber and reception that can answer calls consistently and help shoppers in the initial stages.
- Having an on call social worker for whom this is one of a range of the tasks in their day.
- Having Tā Te Manawa (the community lounge) for people to wait in, have some kai to settle them, that is in close proximity to the Social Supermarket.
- Having a private space to do the interviews in.
- Having a floor manager and procurement and external relationship manager with lived experience, to walk alongside people as they journey through the supermarket.
- Warehouse space.

## Conclusion

WCM looks forward to being able to expand their scope of operations within the Social Supermarket model, continuing to improve people's experience with getting food assistance and helping alleviate people's food insecurity. When they move to their new premises in 2024 some potential expansions include tastings - encouraging people to try new products as they know that people usually choose what they are familiar with, as well as cooking and education sessions to help to increase people's skillsets and knowledge around food and nutrition.

WCM wishes to always provide services that are fit for their community and hopes to continue to adapt and change according to the times.

# What would people need to know in order to implement a similar model to the WCM model of a Social Supermarket?

We have compiled a list of key aspects and questions to consider when looking at a Social Supermarket or more-choice model.

- **Relationship with a provider of stock or expert in the food retail business**

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- **Costs involved in set up**
  - Cost of building
  - Cost of shelving and other supermarket kit
  - Initial cost of stock (food etc)
  - Cost of staffing and support services
  - Cost of transport.

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- **Ongoing costs** – ongoing stock costs each year

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- **Role of partnerships with donors of food and funding including thank you's**

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- **Funding streams**

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- **How big is your space for the people you support?** Do something that is right for your community and facilities. (Perhaps once a week in a community hall or use a garage space.)

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- **How will your model reflect the people in your community?**

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- **If you can't do a full Social Supermarket, can you use the current facilities available to you to adopt some aspect of a more-choice model that Social Supermarket champions?**

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- **What training and support can you offer your staff and volunteers?**

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- **Implement a health and safety plan so that staff, volunteers and shoppers are safe**

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- **How does this model fit into your broader plan for your community to become food secure** (Social Supermarkets are still food assistance and only serve to alleviate food insecurity rather than enabling people to become food secure.)

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- **How might you embed your obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi into your Social Supermarket?**



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