

S2 Food Poverty Network- Newsletter No 6, March 2024



Welcome to the sixth newsletter. I make updates every couple of months following our Trustees'/ Managers' meeting.

I begin by repeating a plea made in each newsletter:-

- If you are a standing order donor, please send your contact email address to me. Please also indicate whether you would like a personal invitation to see Food Bank at work. My email address is: jtrhull@outlook.com

This plea has already solicited supportive, interesting replies. Several long-standing donors have taken up my invitation to visit Food Bank to see it in operation. I now send a personal e-copy of this Newsletter to some 25 donors who have made contact.

The Trustees/Managers met in mid-March. I'd like to update you on discussions in our meeting.

1. Reviewing numbers and reasons for referral

We looked closely at the data for January and February 2024. New referrals were 95. Of these 56 were self-referrals. These showed 38 clients in debt and 36 simply short of money. 5 were homeless, 4 faced benefit delays, 6 were escaping domestic violence, 2 were asylum seekers, 1 had lost his/her bank card.

We noted changing ethnicity/heritage data. We now have 5 Russian clients, 3 Polish, 1 Iranian, 1 Albanian. These people are unable to claim benefits.

The Food Bank and Food Shop provided weekly food parcels on 113 fewer occasions in January and February 2024 than in the same months in 2023. This is explained partly, we think, by Trussell Trust opening another Food Bank nearby.

2. Monitoring our attempts to address causes of food poverty

We reviewed our two recent strategies; debt advice; and the appointment of a Benefit Worker) and our established practice of winter fuel top-ups.

a. Debt Advice:

We are working with 42 clients using the Community Money Advice systems. Two Debt Relief Orders (DRO) are now completed and six are in process.

A DRO is a government approved method to deal with personal debts and helps the debtor make, with some restrictions, a fresh start. It normally lasts 12 months. If approved, the debtor stops making payments towards the debts (and interest) listed in the DRO during that time. After the 12 months, they no longer have to pay off the debts. However, for the next 6 years the person's credit record will show the DRO so taking out future debts is very difficult.

The CMA model is working well. We have volunteers now trained by CMA as debt mentors. Their findings in each case are uploaded to CMA's website by our specialist in-putter. CMA's debt advisers oversee and direct our actions.

b. Benefit Worker:

To date he has pursued the cases of 38 clients. He is looking into their eligibility for Discretionary Housing Payments, Personal Independence Payments, Disability Living Allowance, and Housing Support Fund. In the first four months of his work (September-December 2023)' activity, he secured an additional £7,626 in benefits and allowances. In January and February 2024, he secured a further £9,896.

Our Benefit Worker is busy and effective. Currently he is applying for 10 new PIP payments and one Discretionary Housing payment. He has won four Council Tax support cases and one Disability Living Allowance case.

c. Winter Fuel top-ups:

In the November, first round of top-ups, we distributed £1,700 in £50 top-ups to 34 households. In our second (November-December) round we gave £100 to the households. Round 3 (January-February) similarly gave £100 to 34 households. There will be one more round in March.

3. Community Shop update

We are proud of the way the Shop is working. The number of weekly shop clients has risen to around 60. We have increased the price of a weekly shop to £4.00. Clients continue to appreciate the choice available and the value.

We now have a special shelf with additional items for 50p or £1. This also helps make a more real shopping experience.

4. Finances in 2024

4a. Introduction

Regular readers of these Newsletters may wish to skip the next two paragraphs. They introduce new readers to our healthy financial position and moral dilemma.

We emerged from the COVID pandemic in a financially strong position, during which we had distributed less food than normal. Those facing food poverty had alternatives to access to Food Banks. During the crisis, we became aware of numerous opportunities to apply for grant fundings to meet any pandemic-related costs. We were adept at making applications, and therefore income exceeded expenditure.

4b. Moral dilemma

We coped well with the increased demand which accompanied the cost-of-living crisis of 2022-23. We were, as the pandemic passed, aware of a moral dilemma. We realised during the cost of living crisis that we needed a financial “cushion” should economic circumstances again suddenly increase demand. On the other hand, we should not “sit on assets” donated in order to help the people of S2.

4b. Deficit Budget 2023

For 2023 we therefore set a deficit budget which reduced our reserves by £20,000. We spent additionally on equipping and opening the Community Shop, developing (CMA) the debt relief strategy, employing the Benefit worker, increasing the amount and extent of fuel top-ups and upgrading the quality of food distributed. It is these five initiatives that explain the £20,000 reduction in reserves.

4c. Extending our reach

A sixth initiative to make best use of our reserves has made less impact so far. S2 covers a large area. There are many charities, which are smaller than S2 Food Poverty Network, seeking to relieve food poverty.

Our sixth initiative in 2023 was to reach out to these other S2 providers with an offer of advice and support, provided they have suitable plans to heighten their impact.

To date, only one of these outreach initiatives is close to bearing fruit. The Park Pantry at the Park Library is exactly the sort of partner we would like to support. It serves a locality distinct from ours. We are now agreeing monthly grants to the Park Pantry. We shall, over a year, evaluate this promising project.

Two other outreach initiatives are making progress. St. Mary's Church is closing its community shop. We are offering our help to ex-customers whose contact details we have been given. Hope Church in Woodhouse runs a food support service. Its leaders are considering our offer of help.

4d. Developing our Staffing structure

We have around 25 regular and talented volunteers. They are the backbone of our work. We are now a comparatively large charity. Most charities of our size have a blend of numerous volunteers with a smaller number of part-time paid staff. The part-time paid staff bring specialist expertise (e.g. our benefits worker) and ensure that administrative tasks are promptly completed (e.g. our in-putter of data to CMA's website).

The Trustees/Managers, in their March meeting, reviewed our Staffing Structure.

- i. We now have six part-time paid staff: the Food Bank Coordinator, the S2 Administrator, the Community Shop Manager, the Community Admin assistant, the Facilities and Stock manager, the Benefits worker.
- ii. The Trustees/Managers are happy with this blend and balance.
- iii. The Trustees/Managers are beginning succession planning to meet future demands, develop initiatives and replace any departing staff.

JTRH, 20th March 2024