

## **S2 Food Poverty Network- Newsletter No 7, May 2024**



Welcome to the seventh 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](mailto:jtrhull@outlook.com)

This plea has already solicited supportive, interesting replies. Several long-standing donors have taken up my invitation to visit Food Bank and Community Shop to see them 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-May. I'd like to update you on discussions in our meeting.

### **1. A magic moment**

Debbie Mathews is a current trustee and acts as secretary in our Trustee/Managers' meetings. She was a key mover in the original foundation of the S2 Food Poverty Network in 2014. In this most recent meeting, she expressed a deep satisfaction.

The tabled data on the numbers of people fed showed that, so far this year, Food Bank had given 905 weekly provisions. In the same four months, Food Shop had provided 2186 weekly provisions.

Now, with the Community Shop well established, Debbie was hailing a change that she had always wished to see, and worked so hard to achieve. Twice as many people now are receiving food, plus effective support in the Shop, as are receiving emergency food bank provision. We are working hard to address, so far as we can, the underlying issues.

### **2. Reviewing numbers and reasons for referral**

We looked closely at the data for January to April 2024. We noted that self-referrals (106) significantly exceeding referrals by a professional or third party (70).

We noted the reasons for referral: 72 in debt, 75 with money issues, 6 affected by domestic violence, 6 homeless, 5 recently unemployed, 4 facing delay in benefits, 3 seeking asylum.

We noted clients' ethnicity data. 114 are White British, 11 Black British, 5 Russian, 4 Polish.

We asked about health. 74 declared a mental health issue and 61 declared a physical health issue.

### **3. Monitoring our attempts to address causes of food poverty**

We reviewed our developed strategies. A condition of Community Shop membership is that each client explains clearly his/her reasons for food poverty and then agrees, if appropriate, to work with our debt mentors and/or with our benefit worker.

#### **a. Debt advice:**

We are working with 54 clients using the Community Money Advice systems. Four Debt Relief Orders are now completed. Six further orders are in process of preparation.

A Debt Relief Order (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, he or she no longer has 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 data in-putter. CMA's experts oversee and direct our actions.

The 54 live cases show, collectively, a staggering £240,458 of debt. Of that figure we classify £85,844 as "priority debts". These are debts (gas, electric, rent) which, if left unpaid, carry risk of eviction or disconnection. These must be addressed first.

#### **b. Benefit worker:**

So far this year, he has pursued the cases of 89 clients. He is looking into their eligibility for Discretionary Housing Payments, Personal Independence Payments, Disability Living Allowance, and Housing Support Fund.

So far (January-April) he has secured £17,079 in additional benefits.

### **c. Winter fuel top-ups:**

Fuel top-ups will resume in October 2024.

### **4. Community shop update**

The Shop is open two days per week. Currently it caters for 68 households. 7 clients have ceased to use the Community Shop for good reasons. 4 have managed to find additional working hours. 1 is now too ill. 1 has, thanks to our benefit worker, increased his benefit access and has a wider repayment plan. 1 now has, thanks to benefit worker, accessed Disability Living Allowance and begun part-time work.

### **5. Finances in 2024**

#### **5a. Introduction**

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

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

#### **5b. Moral dilemma**

We coped well with the increased demand which accompanied the cost-of-living crisis of 2022-23. We were, as the COVID crisis passed, aware of a moral dilemma. We realised during these crises 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 good people of S2.

#### **5c. 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. These initiatives and enhancement duly reduced our reserves in 2023. We plan, similarly, in 2024 to utilize and so deplete our reserves.

Our main initiative in this matter to the “extend our reach”. That is to help across S2, S1 and S12 others who are active in addressing food poverty matters.

#### **5d. Extending our reach**

S2 covers a large area. There are several charities, which are smaller than S2 Food Poverty Network, seeking to relieve food poverty. We think we can make best use of our reserves by supporting other smaller and local charities. We can lend our expertise in debt mentoring and benefit advice. We can offer economy of scale by helping their purchasing programmes. Any charity receiving our support simply needs a team of volunteer providers and access to suitable premises (for service and storage).

We discussed in our meeting the first success in this area. We have signed a Grant Funding Agreement with **Park Community Action** which is based at the Park and Library Centre. For 12 months, we shall give this group a monthly allowance. Quarterly they will submit a progress report to our Trustees. That report will show progress against three success criteria, (a) increasing the range of items available to clients from 10 to 25, (b) providing a wider range of fresh produce, more fruit, more dairy, (c) increasing the number of clients to c.50.

We remain in contact with **Hope Church (Woodhouse)** and **S12 Pantry**. We are hoping to make offers to them, similar to that agreed with Park Community Action.

Jim Steinke, one of our Trustees, is in touch with **Tinsley Forum**. Whilst Tinsley is not in our S1/S2/S12 immediate neighbourhood, it is an area of marked need and with less provision. We shall, citing the precedent of our now formalized collaboration with Park Community Action, explore ways to help in Tinsley.

JTRH, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2024