

S2 Food Poverty Network.

1. The Story, 2013-25

S2 Food Poverty network was set up in 2013 in response to a growing need for access to food. The need was highlighted by a colleague from the S6 Food Bank which was receiving an increase in referrals for people experiencing a crisis and needing emergency food supplies from the S2 area. The demand was growing at such a rate that he believed there needed to be a local response.

The voluntary, community and faith sectors came together to discuss the issue and agreed that there was an immediate need to provide emergency food parcels to a growing number of people facing financial sanctions and being left without money for up to 6 weeks, people with unmanageable debt and delays in benefits being administered.

The S2 Food Poverty Network initially saw Food Banks as a necessary humanitarian response to a food poverty crisis. We soon became, however, resigned to the reality that the need for Food Banks was not going away in the foreseeable future.

Whilst, and proudly, we carry the name of S2 Food Poverty Network, we now also support residents in contiguous parts of S1 and S12 which lack an accessible local Food Bank.

Whilst collectively we wished to address the immediate and very real need, we were also uncomfortable with developing a Food Bank in the 21st century, in a country that was essentially wealthy. We had an ambition to wind up the Food Bank in 2020, an ambition articulated at the first AGM. Now, five years on, far from reducing local need is rising.

We registered as the S2 Food Poverty Network because we wanted to look beyond the immediate crises and address the underlying causes of food poverty. These causes remain: insufficiency of benefits, delay or withdrawal of benefit, issues around domestic violence, inability to cope with unforeseen crisis (medical and other). To these we now add the legacies of the fuel and cost of living crises of 2022, Covid recovery and the increasing number of young people and adults with mental health issues. Sadly, we also see need to help many who are employed but earn insufficiently.

Over the 12 years our practice has changed:-

- First, in 2017, we had developed the Food Club. We saw Food Bank as emergency provision and, typically, helped for 12 weeks.

Clients then passed to Food Club. They might visit Food Club weekly for 26 weeks. The Food Bank provided mainly tinned goods and preserves. The Food Club offered some fresh foods with guided choice of these. Access to Food Club was limited to 26 weeks. Food Club members were offered debt/financial advice plus occasional help with fuel bills.

- Second, in March 2023, we opened our Community Food Shop. We had survived Covid quite well, pursuing specific grants available in the epidemic with success. The creation of the Community Food Shop, however, had to wait. The availability of dilapidated shop premises, across the road from St Swithun's, offered an opportunity we seized.

Our practice changed and developed with the opening of the Community Food Shop. We reduced the number of weeks typically that a client might spend in Food Bank. Four weeks was usually sufficient to gather evidence on causes of food poverty. We are proud to claim that, constantly, we reflect, using strong data, on our effectiveness and we appropriately innovate.

2. Our current model: Food Bank

Weeks 1-4 or 5: Client receives mainly tinned foods selected from lists and aided by friendly volunteer interviewer.

Week 1: Client supplies evidence of address and postal code.

Week 2: Client has general chat on likely help/advice over coming weeks.

Week 3: Client made aware that next week might be last but is invited to a finance review to see if they fit criteria for Food Shop.

Week 4: If client is willing, an appointment for finance review is made.

Week 5: Initial finance review conducted focussed on client's income/expenditure. Client moves to Community Shop provision if s/he meets criteria.

Note: Some clients take longer to provide data and may have longer on Food Bank.

3. Our current model: Community Food Shop

Clients leaving Food Bank are assessed for suitability to join the Shop. They will have minimal savings, remediable underlying problems and be fully willing to share sensitive information and act on recommendations. This approach depends heavily upon our ethos and style, with which the client from first walking through St. Swithun's door: we are friendly, supportive, non-judgemental. We seek to inspire trust. The two main

issues are unmanageable debt and inability, currently, to claim full benefit entitlements. The client attends weekly with a half-hour appointment slot in the Shop. They pay £5 per week and make a guided choice of fresh foods, toiletries etc. Typically, a client leaves with food and items valuing around £45. They will also attend sessions with our debt mentors and benefits advisors, if appropriate.

Our team of debt mentors has agreed Debt Relief Orders to the value of £350,936. A DRO is a government sponsored plan to manage debt by writing off most that is simply unpayable. Our team working on Benefits access had secured £44,243 and access to Personal Independence Payment for 11 clients.

The scale of need is depressing. Our strong data record “people fed”. If a mum comes for a week and has two children, we count this as “three people fed”. In 2024, using these numbers, Food Bank fed 2548 and Food Shop fed 7080.

Currently, we are able to meet the increased costs of running the Community Shop. Over recent time, we, and other Food Banks, noted reductions in food donations. Compensating for this, we have long-standing generous donors and numerous one-off donors. Most importantly for 2025-27, we have secured major donations to support the Shop from Sheffield Town Trust, Sheffield Town Burgesses, Freshgate Trust, Graves Trust, Coop Local Community Fund and the National Lottery.

4. Important Caveat

Whilst we believe our work helps large numbers of our fellow citizens, we are deeply unhappy that these needs present themselves. None of our founders in 2013 would have expected the need for Food Banks to persist 12 years later. We are and should be actively involved in the public and political debate about Food Banks, ensuring that this is on the Sheffield City Council agenda and Local Area Committees’ agenda, and, through local MPs raised as an issue regularly in the House of Commons.

5. Where we stand now

We have recently conducted a Strategic Review. We have strong data, regular monitoring systems, dedicated staff and volunteers. We enjoy the respect of other local providers. One of the outcomes of the Review was the decision to contact influential groups and people. We seek your support and help.

6. Please will you help?

- Please use your influence to promote debate in the city and nationally about the extent of food poverty in this, the world's 6th richest country.
- Reply to me to let me know what you think about the work and development of the S2 Food Poverty Network.
- Help to raise awareness in Sheffield of food poverty in the hope of increasing donations in kind and of money.
- Email me if you would like to visit Food Bank and Community Food Shop.

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