

Food banks – how they help families in difficult times

Chris Blockey, a volunteer and member of the CARBS Research & Campaigns team, finds out how food banks are coping with increased demand from local people and families at risk of going hungry.



The other day I happened to tell a friend I was researching food banks in our area. He raised his eyebrows: “What! You have food banks in Surrey?” he asked, genuinely shocked. He was from Fife, so I wasn't really surprised. Many of those who live outside the South East think this is a land of milk and honey: nothing bad happens and everyone is well-off. Surely no one is so poor they can't eat?

Maybe it *is* surprising. We live in a comparatively wealthy area. Our streets are clean, there are lots of nice houses, the shops are well-stocked. Dig below the surface though and you find single people and families who really struggle. There are so many reasons: they lose jobs or the jobs they have don't pay enough; they lose a partner through death or divorce; they become ill or disabled; they find it hard to cope because of mental illness.

Low or no income

At Citizens Advice we meet these people every day. People whose benefits have stopped or are delayed almost indefinitely; families who can't pay the rent and face eviction; couples with debts who fear the bailiffs visiting. Those on a low income still have to pay rent and council tax, utility and phone bills. It doesn't leave much for other life essentials including clothes and travel to work. And all this *before* buying food.

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A St Matthews volunteer makes up a food parcel for a client

Growing demand

Nationally all food banks report continually rising demand in recent years with no sign of a slow-down. Indeed the signs are the need will only grow with the roll-out of Universal Credit. Figures from Reigate & Banstead Citizens Advice show a similar picture. Demand has increased significantly.

“Where three or four years ago there were relatively few requests for food vouchers,” says Redhill supervisor Mandy Impey, “we now find lots of clients need help with food. Sometimes as many as a third of the day’s clients request food vouchers which is really shocking for such a basic requirement. In these cases,” she added, “food banks have become part of their daily lives and we are truly grateful they are here so we can be sure no one is going hungry.”

St Matthews Redhill

St Matthews Food Bank in Redhill has been running for six years and opens three days a week. Their records show demand almost doubling in the past year. It is run entirely by volunteers, overseen by three coordinators. Maureen, an enthusiastic and energetic volunteer, showed me round on a busy Friday. I was expecting a custom-made portakabin or similar; in fact, the food bank is the church itself, although the atmosphere more busy community centre than imposing place of worship.



True, it’s a fine example of Victorian church architecture – wooden pews, wide aisles, impressive stained glass window over the altar. But people are coming and going and on the shelves at the back alongside the hymn books and bibles are cans of soup and vegetables, boxes of cereal, packets of nappies and baby wipes. Alcoves that might once have been home to popular saints are now full of food and household stuff.

“It’s not easy finding a home for everything,” explained Maureen. “We are a working church, and as well as running the food bank three times a week, there are always other activities – services, choir practice, services, christenings and funerals, and from October the Charity Christmas card sale.”

There’s a tea and coffee counter for all who visit. It feels a very welcoming and comfortable space, with lots going on all the time.

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As Maureen talked to me about how it works, volunteers, unpacking deliveries or putting together food parcels for clients, rumbled up and down the aisles pushing shopping trolleys stacked with canned food, toilet paper and packets of cornflakes. “We have regular online orders from supermarkets to make sure we have the stuff people want,” Maureen explained. “Donors are amazingly generous and we use everything but it’s not always what we need at the time so we have to top-up. As things come in, we replenish our various stocks.”

Designated referrals

Social services, GP surgeries and housing associations can refer clients to food banks but the largest number come from Citizens Advice. Mandy Impey said, "However hard we try, we can rarely solve debt or benefit issues as quickly as we'd like. If people have no money, the food bank is the only

option, not just for food but other essentials too - shampoo, sanitary products, nappies and so on. We arrange an appointment by phone, then give the client a food voucher they present when they arrive. The truth is it's a lifeline for these clients and we would be lost without St Matthews."

The bottom line

Maureen and the volunteers have come to believe that clients' genuine needs must be met. "Some years ago there was a rule that people could only have three food parcels in a given period. Now we don't restrict it. If people need food, they need food." The idea, once put about by some media and politicians, that people exploit the system for free food, was quickly dismissed by Maureen. "Nobody comes in here if they don't have to. Anyone would much prefer to buy their food from the supermarket or store like everyone else. I'm well aware we are the end of the line. We absolutely do not judge, but this is not the destination of choice for anyone. The bottom line is: the food bank is the place you go to if you have run out of options."

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St Matthews now provides top-ups for gas and electricity. They can give £5 for single people and £10 for couples, the covered by donations. "Although it is an expense," she said, "for us it's essential. We couldn't bear the idea of children sitting in the dark."

The other bottom line

Donations for St Matthews come from a wide range of organisations and individuals. Local offices and schools have collection bins for groceries and other items all year round. The community also gives generously for harvest festival and other occasions. Out-of-date items are separated and people invited to help themselves with a clear 'buyer beware' proviso. "This is popular with people who come to Thursday concerts here," Maureen said. "They take the out-of-date stuff and put a donation in the box. We probably make £1000 a year from goods past their sell-by!"



Financial donations also come from other sources too, notably the Co-op which donated over £9800 last year through their Community Fund. When you add in community donations you can see how the food bank succeeds as a sustainable charitable project.

All foodstuffs are canned or in packets, the exception being long-life bread which is delivered weekly. "Bread is good 'fill-you-up' food so we're pleased to offer this and it's popular," explained Maureen. Other popular items are packet noodles. "Especially small, child-size ones," said Liz, another volunteer. Vegetarian meals are also snapped up and we're often short of small-sizes in other items such as sugar and washing up liquid which suggests they're popular too."

There's a wide choice of foodstuffs and household goods. St Matthews gives clients a list which lets them pick out what they need and acts as a reminder of things they may not have thought of – long-life milk perhaps, a toothbrush or can-opener. Even advent calendars, available throughout November.

The team



Volunteers at St Matthews

At present St Matthews has 38 volunteers. Most are church members but some are from other local churches or organisations. "We welcome anyone who would like to help including other denominations or religious organisations," Maureen said. "There's plenty to do: ordering and organising food, admin, dealing with clients, making teas and coffees. It's very relaxed and very friendly. We're lucky to have a very supportive vicar, Andrew Cunnington and our volunteers are fantastic – enthusiastic and supportive of clients, who they realise are experiencing difficult times."

Newly-appointed CEO of Reigate & Banstead Citizens Advice, Andrea Dunhill, added her appreciation of St Matthews and the other food banks. "We're grateful for the work they do. They've become an essential part of the help we can give clients and we're lucky to have great local providers. I'm struck

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by how much support the community gives. The food bank movement is a great example of voluntary groups working in partnership with local volunteer charities like ourselves to help those in need and vulnerable."

Asked about her long term view Maureen reflected that food banks were a worrying development. "I do feel rather saddened that they have become part of the status quo," she said. "It shouldn't be this way. We would like things in society to get sorted and food banks to be stop-gaps, not fixed parts of the social safety net." But while the need persists St Matthews and the other food banks seem here to stay.

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