

Church Action on Poverty Sunday

Many of you will know that Droitwich Spa foodbank has been open for over 7 years, started as a joint project by Droitwich Churches Together and for the last 5 years run as an independent charity, seeded and supported by the Trussell Trust.

During this time the vulnerable in our community have encountered many changes to the financial aspect of their day to day living. Each year we see an increase in the number of people visiting us and in the last 5 months the number of clients has risen significantly. Instead of talking numbers of clients and volumes of food, I would like to take this opportunity to talk about the issues that our clients face; the reasons that they come to the foodbank.

We have all heard about the 5 week delays in payments to clients on Universal Credit, the fact that they can get an advance payment to help them over the 5 weeks but the repayment of which will be taken out of their Universal Credit income over the coming months. Before Covid the main reason that people used the foodbank was because of the 5 weeks wait time involved every time their circumstances changed. During the first 12 months of Covid, the financial pressure eased thanks to the £20 per week uplift in Universal Credit and the furlough scheme, also there was protection for tenants in social and private rented housing regarding the amount of notice needed for eviction. All these safeguards ended in September 2021.

The vulnerable within our community now face increased pressure with the rise in the cost of living. We are all aware of the increase in the price of food, petrol, gas and electric. In April there will be an increase in National Insurance and rises in local authority rents, as well as an increase in council tax. Also in April the price cap on energy bills will rise and those on pre-payment meters will see the biggest increase. Most of our clients are on pre-payment meters. How do you cook food if there is no money on your electric meter? How do you charge your mobile phone with no electric, without your phone you can't contact the job centre at the pre-arranged time and so you will get sanctioned. You can't look for work or fill in application forms without access to the internet. You can't access the internet without electricity.

Here's an example from our foodbank

A care worker who is working 14 hours a day on minimum wage still couldn't manage. They looked exhausted and distraught even though they are working hard there is still not enough money to pay the bills and feed the family.

We have seen an increase in clients who have issues with low income, debt and sickness. These are all linked together. If you are on low income then you may have to borrow money for an unexpected expense. Many people on low income only receive statutory sick pay when they are ill of £96.35 a

week. You must be classed as an employee and be earning over £120 per week to receive this payment.

Here's another example:-

A client who lost his mother 2 years ago, became homeless, as he lived with her in the family home. This was social housing that was in her name and so he had to move out. He has been rehomed but is still paying for his mother's funeral. His mental health is deteriorating, and he is not really coping.

When someone is homeless they can be re-homed in the local bed and breakfast as a temporary stop gap, with very little support. We have people coming to us who have been placed there from Worcester, Kidderminster and even as far as Cheltenham while the housing officers try and find them a place to live. We have families coming to us who find themselves living with lots of other strangers in the bed and breakfast. They move in with very few possessions and very little money, in a town where they know no-one.

Most of the local agencies such as the job centre and the housing officers no longer have offices in Droitwich, that means clients must make contact by phone. Most only have use of mobile phones and so the long wait times to speak to someone means they often give up before they get through.

When asked about how clients were coping, one of our centre managers said, 'Most of our clients have debts, many long standing that have spiraled out of control over months or even years.'

Many of our clients are in difficult situations resulting in poor mental health and there are many instances where people can't see their way out of a situation. They feel depressed, overwhelmed and lacking in energy.'

So yes, at the foodbank we provide 3 days of emergency food. We also take time and listen and try to find a local agency who can help our clients. This year we are working with the Trussell Trust to try and put in place a way of clients being able to make face to face contact with an agency such as Citizens Advice or a debt agency such as Christians Against Poverty in our foodbank centre when we are open. The Trussell Trust will fund this project for 3 years.

Some of our volunteers are taking part in the Trussell Trusts Race against Hunger on the 2nd April. This will start in the town center and end at Churchfields where all our volunteers will have the opportunity to meet up and have a chat over tea and cake. We have over 70 volunteers who have signed up to help us out either at our centre or warehouse on either a Tuesday or Friday. We have been working in bubbles and wearing face coverings for over 18 months so it will be great to see everyone.

We will also be remembering 3 dear colleagues who gave so much time and energy to running the foodbank but who have sadly passed away during the last 2 years. They are Jacquie and Barry Jones and Dave Adams.

How can you help?

Donate food – our lists are on the website and updated on social media nearly every week. The collection points are located around the town in Waitrose, Morrisons, Specsavers and some of the banks.

Sponsor someone who is taking part in our Race Against Hunger or sign up yourself and take part.

Talk to others about the work of our foodbank, look on our website and follow us on social media. There are still many people who don't know that Droitwich has a foodbank and don't understand why people need to use a foodbank.

Pray – that things get easier for those who are vulnerable. That the world looks more kindly on those who are in need.

Debbie Ash

Project Leader

Droitwich Spa Foodbank