



Need never goes away for food bank families

By David Gritten

For eight years now, St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church on East Finchley High Road has been a beacon for local residents without sufficient funds to buy enough food for themselves and their families.

Finchley Foodbank, run from and located within the grounds of the church, is a volunteer-led organisation, boosted by donations, that gives out food every week to people and families in need. On Saturday mornings they form a long queue outside and wait, sometimes for two hours, to collect their food bags.

This weekly operation was proceeding smoothly until the advent of Covid-19, which has created ups and downs for the food bank. Its vice-chair Anna Maughan recalls: "At the beginning of the pandemic, our donations were enormous, huge. And now things have changed: not so huge."

Rise and fall of donations

Then, *The Archer* reported that individuals and dozens of local groups brought bags full of essential food and toiletries every week, with many local residents co-ordinating collections from neighbours all along their roads.

Anna recalls that the amounts being donated each week reached their peak in January and February this year. "We were helping 450 people a week. Now that's gone down, stabilising at around 330-340 people a week. We know our donors have busy lives again."

Food and toiletries preferred to money

Anna concedes that this is worrying: "We're a volunteer-led organisation. None of us is paid. We rely on our volunteers who give their valuable time, energy and expertise for nothing – simply to help."

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"We're giving out donated food but without those donations we don't have enough to give. We have funds and a Just Giving page which gives us a running total. But we've had to withdraw a lot of that money. Because of that Just Giving page we've been able to buy items in. But it's a lot easier for us if food is donated rather than money."

A helping hand

Before the pandemic, some of Finchley Foodbank's clients in need of food would also be served with hot drinks and cake, and receive sympathetic advice from volunteers: "We'd provide them with three days' worth of food and try to signpost them on to various organisations so they could move away from using food banks in the future. That's the whole plan."

Anna views the current situation optimistically: "We need to remember what we as a society have learned from the pandemic. In my estimation there are many more good people in the world than bad, otherwise a place like the Foodbank wouldn't exist. We wouldn't have the volunteers. But the requirement people here have for food support is still strong."

Finchley Foodbank accepts donations from the public on Wednesdays from 10am to 1pm and on Fridays from 12 noon to 3pm in the parish centre behind St. Mary's RC church, 279 High Road, N2 8HG. For more information and the latest list of most-needed items, visit www.finchleyfoodbank.org.uk/give-support

Finchley Foodbank: How it works week in, week out

By Lizzie Tomlin

The dedicated team of volunteers at Finchley Foodbank run a smooth operation turning donations of food and toiletries from the community into vital packages to support people in need. Here are the seven steps donations make on their journey from drop-off to pick-up. Photos by Mike Coles.

Deliveries are made to the food bank throughout the week. They go through a brief quarantine of no more than a few days before being sorted. On Wednesdays, fresh eggs are delivered, and food like fruit, vegetables, cheese and bread are delivered on Fridays.

On Wednesdays and Fridays donations from the public are sorted. The sorting team check every item's date to ensure out-of-date food is not accidentally given out. If the food is in-date, the team put it into a crate with others of its kind. There are crates of pasta, pulses, tinned tomatoes, baked beans, tinned fruit, tinned soups, tuna and sardines... basically anything with a long shelf-life. Toiletries and other miscellaneous items get the same treatment. The fresh stuff arrives only a day before the clients receive their food, so it gets sorted into bags immediately, ready for collection day on Saturday.

The sorting team also deals with any returned donations from the previous Saturday session. These have already been quarantined for a few days by Wednesday,



In: A supermarket delivery arrives

Saturday team to give out.

Saturday is when the clients collect their bags. While they are queuing, a member of the team asks each person what extras they would like that week, such as coffee, jam, honey, toothpaste, sanitary towels, and more. When a client first registers at the food bank, their dietary requirements and household size are



In: Volunteers sort donations into bags

so each item is checked again and re-sorted into its respective crate.

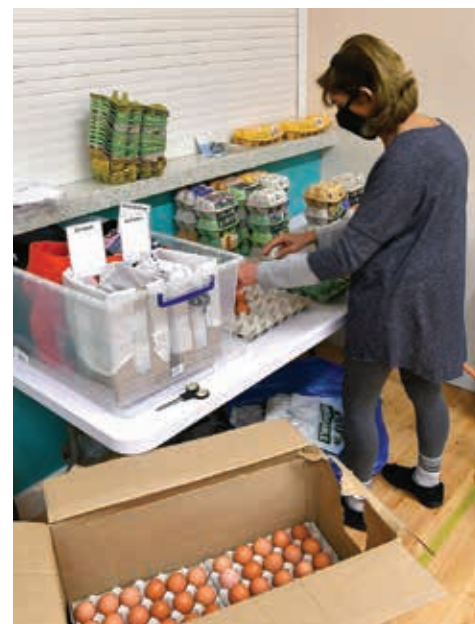
One of each of these crates is placed in the hall, on two rows of tables set up lengthways down the hall. This means the packing team can easily access each item as they pack. Extra crates wait in the pantry, ready to replace the ones in the hall.

Packing sessions take place on Tuesday and Thursday. The packing team estimates how many bags need to be packed depending on the number of clients from the previous week. Then, team members walk along the hall using food from the crates to pack bags. Not every bag is the same, however! The size of and amount



Out: Bags ready to be collected by clients

in a bag depends on household size and any dietary requirements, for example halal, non-halal meat, vegetarian and pescatarian, and households without cooking facilities. Each packed bag is placed in its designated section of the hall, ready for the



In: Eggs are divided into boxes

recorded on a card. So, when the client reaches the front desk, both this card and their extras list are passed to the team inside the hall.

Once these cards are passed on, the inside team get to work. One person collects the client's pre-packed bags, and another 'shops' for their extras. These bags, along with the pre-packed fresh food, are given to another team member who passes them on to the client when their name is called.



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