

Helping the hungry

Shanelle Manderson finds out why demand for food banks is on the rise

FOOD insecurity is significant and growing rapidly in the UK.

According to the Trussell Trust, the country's biggest food bank network, 1.6 million packs of food supplies have been given out in the past year, a 19 per cent increase on the year before. Many Salvation Army food banks across the territory – some partners of the Trussell Trust, but independently run – are helping people in need, providing non-perishable food, toiletries, nappies and even pet food.

Distributing food parcels is not a new phenomenon for The Salvation Army.

'We've always given out food,' says Preston Community Centre Co-ordinator Claire Bowerman. 'But in 2010 we officially opened the food bank after noticing a growing need. Back then it was 30 bags a month, now it's up to 1,000 bags with enough items to last between five and seven days.'

The summer months can be especially hard for families who usually benefit from free school lunches and do not have the income to cover additional meals. The food bank at Preston ran out of food over the summer holidays, says Claire.

There is a similar trend at Edinburgh Gorgie and New Addington food banks, which distribute up to 1,000 parcels and see between 60 and 200 families and individuals every month. Each parcel is packed by volunteers and contains three days' worth of items; where possible, diets are taken into consideration.

Most Salvation Army food banks require people to get a referral from agencies and organisations within the area, such as GPs, schools, children's services or Citizens Advice. This allows for a mini-assessment of a person's situation and avoids misuse of the service. However, people without one aren't turned away.

'At New Addington, we give out an emergency 24-hour food parcel to anyone without a voucher,' says Community Service Co-ordinator Lesley Holland. This includes food for three meals.

'We also give them a leaflet signposting them to where they can get a referral,' adds Lesley.

The process is slightly different at Edinburgh Gorgie, which is part of the Trussell Trust network.

'We pay a membership fee and follow their basic model of serving clients,' explains corps officer Major Mark Gilden. 'However, while the guidelines state everyone needs a referral and is allowed a three-time maximum usage of the service in a six-month period, we have the flexibility to offer help ourselves and can give more frequently if we feel that can make a difference. The whole idea is no one comes into our building hungry and goes away empty-handed.'

The reasons for people being in need can vary, from sickness, redundancy or debt to low wages, unexpected costs or rent arrears. However, more than half of Salvation Army food bank users need help because of issues with the benefits system, including universal credit. Introduced at the end of 2018, universal credit was designed to make claiming benefits simpler by merging six benefits, including Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance, into one payment.

Claire says its rollout in Preston has had a huge impact: 'It's just been horrendous. The number of people in need has doubled and we've seen more working families than ever before. It's a real shame.'

Preston food bank also works closely with probation hostels in the area, providing food parcels for individuals released from prison while waiting for their universal credit to be processed.

'Anyone who moves over to the new system – for a new claim or because of a change in circumstances – has to wait for their first payment, often for longer than five weeks,' explains Policy Analyst Annie Dell (THQ). 'There is also the second wave of people coming in after their claims are complete who are struggling to pay back the advance loan they received to help pay bills and cover other costs during that wait.'



Lesley Holland



New Addington food bank

The stigma attached to using food banks can prevent people from seeking help. Some clients have postponed visiting food banks until the last minute, often skipping meals to feed their children or living without heating and electricity before they are willing to resort to requesting emergency food vouchers.

'A lot of these people are embarrassed and ashamed when they walk into the centre,' says Claire.

'They can be emotional,' Lesley adds, 'but our team are well-trained in dealing with people in these situations and the overwhelming response from clients is how they were made to feel at ease and not judged.'

Born out of a desire to connect with the community, Edinburgh Gorgie food bank's café-style approach aims to alleviate any anxiety service users may be feeling. Major Mark and his wife, Major Vicki, previously served in the USA Western Territory and had

