

Feeding the Hungry in Borehamwood



*I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty
and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you
welcomed me ... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one
of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'*

All 10 local authorities in Hertfordshire contain within their boundaries pockets of considerable deprivation, such as child poverty, overcrowding and welfare benefit dependence. The 2010 Index of Multiple Deprivation showed three of Borehamwood's four electoral wards as having areas of significant deprivation, including one ward ranked in the top 25% of the most deprived in the country. Since opening its doors five years ago, Borehamwood Foodbank has helped over 10,700 households.

Feeding the Hungry in Borehamwood: A Story

No-one should have to go hungry. Unfortunately, however, every day individuals and families up and down the country are forced to go without essential nutrition. Among the most common reasons, cited by individuals, are being on a low income, debt, homelessness, and unexpected ill health or sickness.

Fortunately, a simple package of emergency food can make a big difference to people's lives, helping to prevent housing loss, family breakdown and mental health problems. Indeed, helping people in need has always been central to Christian vocation, for as Christ tells us, in serving those in need we serve Christ himself:

'I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me ... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' (Mt 25: 35-40)

Inspired by Christ's message the Elstree and Borehamwood Christian Council (EBCC) identified in 2012 the need for a foodbank in the local community. Thus was conceived the idea of what is now Borehamwood Foodbank, a registered charity, with its simple, all-encompassing objective: to ensure that no-one in the community is forced to go hungry.



Feeding the Hungry in Borehamwood: A Journey

Having identified the need, attention turned to assembling the resources necessary. First, premises belonging to the Catholic parishes of Borehamwood were offered to the foodbank as a permanent location. Second, two containers, in which supplies could be stored, were donated by a benefactor who also arranged and paid for electricity and plumbing to be installed. Third, funding and assistance were provided by Caritas Westminster, which gave a grant to help with set-up costs. Fourth, the local Tesco store was approached and agreed to provide a box where shoppers were encouraged to place donated food items. Last, but not least, volunteers came forward from the Catholic parishes and schools, other local Christian groups, the Jewish community and other faith groups, as well as individuals of no religious belief.

14 number of project grants made to parishes and local organisations by St John Southworth Caritas Fund (14 in 2016) to provide seed funding or develop social action initiatives (such as foodbanks, breakfast clubs, apprenticeship programmes).

Expert advice and guidance were sought from the Trussell Trust, a charity that works to combat poverty and hunger right across the UK, and, upon its launch in April 2013, Borehamwood Foodbank joined a nationwide network of over 400 foodbanks supported by the trust.

As the foodbank became established in the community, a part-time employee was needed, and Caritas Westminster stepped in to provide an annual grant to help cover the cost. Steady growth in client numbers led to an increased demand for storage space, which was provided by converting the wooden structure adjacent to the church hall and by acquiring a third storage container. It became apparent that a steady source of donations, both in cash and in kind, would also be required. This demand was met through regular food collection drives at Tesco and by seeking (and being kindly granted) permission to hold a monthly collection at King's Cross station.



37 parishes (14 in 2016) ran or supported foodbanks in partnership with other organisations.

What began as a small project rooted in core Christian principles has, with the perseverance of the Catholic parishes of Borehamwood and the EBCC, flowered into a community-wide project involving the coordinated efforts of a diverse cross-section of the Borehamwood community. The local youth in particular have taken the foodbank's aims to heart: local Catholic schools regularly collect donations, competing against each other to see who can donate the most, and young people from the local Jewish community now set aside a percentage of the gift money they receive at their Bar and Bat mitzvahs towards combatting food poverty.

Currently the foodbank is open two sessions each week, with an average of 12 to 15 households helped in each session, supported by up to 15 volunteers. Not only do the volunteers assemble the food parcels, but they also offer clients a friendly face, a listening ear and a chance to chat over a cup of tea and a light meal while their food is collated and bagged up.

Crisis can strike anyone at any time, and it can be very difficult to consider going to a foodbank. That's why the foodbank's volunteers welcome clients with compassion and kindness, and are specially trained to signpost clients to local services that can provide the right support, helping them to break out of crisis.

As the need in the community continues to grow, so too does the provision and range of activities offered: for example, on Wednesdays during school holidays, the parish hosts lunch with a hot meal, crafts for children and, for parents, lessons in preparing simple, nutritious meals. These sessions ensure those who might go without food have something to eat and help build community cohesion.

Feeding the Hungry in Borehamwood: Testimony

Over the last five years, Borehamwood Foodbank has become much more than just a place that hands out food parcels: for example, when clients requested food that did not need cooking they were given a grant towards their fuel costs, a scheme that is now extended during the coldest months of the winter. The foodbank also helped to arrange the funeral of one of its clients who died without relatives, thanks also to a funeral grant from the Caritas St John Southworth Fund.

A young single mother and her child were given a home at St John Fisher & St Thomas More parish for six months while the mother got back on her feet, with rent and food being paid for by Caritas Westminster and the Catholic Children's Society. And another former client of the foodbank has subsequently become one of its trustees. His experience allows him to give the charity a unique insight into the circumstances that lead people to its doors, the best ways to engage with clients and the kind of additional support they often need.

Feeding the Hungry in Borehamwood: A Mosaic

Individuals or families in need of a food parcel are referred by a number of different agencies, such as the local council, community groups, churches, GP surgeries and children's centres. Each food voucher issued can be exchanged for three days of nutritionally balanced emergency food (nine meals in total). It is vital that clients are given the right food for their needs, and volunteers are able to cater for any special dietary requirements, such as gluten-free, halal or vegetarian.

Donations of non-perishable, in-date food from churches, synagogues, schools, individuals and businesses are often encouraged as part of seasonal religious celebrations, such as during the Harvest Festival and in the run-up to Christmas.

Gifts of food, toiletries, money, time, energy and skills are the lifeblood of the foodbank and in constant need of replenishment, as is the support of the volunteers to sort, check, label and pack items into bags ready to be given to clients, as is the help provided through partnerships with local groups and businesses.

Coordinating all these elements to keep the foodbank stocked and staffed is a complex logistical challenge, as is the operation of the charity itself, which requires trustees to oversee the day-to-day management and maintenance of the foodbank, monitor the data collection, processing and analysis, and ensure everything is properly recorded and accounted for. Without this network of dedicated, loyal and hardworking supporters, Borehamwood Foodbank would simply not be able to continue its essential work of helping its often vulnerable clients.

