

Plymouth Foodbank

We provide emergency food for people in short-term crisis who have fallen through the safety net of public provision or for various reasons are struggling. Reasons for referral include benefit cuts, benefit delay, refused crisis loan, sickness, low income, debt, domestic violence. We shouldn't be needed in this day and age and we have no intention of turning into a massive food distribution centre – as in the American model.

However our safety net is being stretched because of need.

Last year Plymouth Foodbank provided food for 3451 adults and 1425 children.

Nutritionally balanced parcels of food as per list provided by Trussell Trust – national network to which we belong.

133 referring agencies 78 are statutory agencies incl PCC offices – housing education social services Max 4 vouchers pa and we notify referrers if a person is getting vouchers from several agencies. Occasionally refuse if we have cause to be suspicious – different names same address etc. We also give out toiletries, crockery, pet food if we have it and if in conversation it is clear people need it. We refer about 15% to other organisations or to groups that happen at the Crown centre – Job club, literacy, healthy cooking, puzzling questions. If appropriate we offer to pray with people. We often spend a lot of time listening to people either then or they return at a later date for help from the centre generally. We help with forms and chasing up benefit problems.

31,500kgs of food donated by
 49 churches,
 48 education centres – nurseries – university
 10 businesses
 32 staff groups
 42 community groups
 Dcfa and 100s of individuals

60 volunteers help in all sorts of ways including 12 collections a year outside supermarkets asking customers for donations

It cost £33,000 to run the foodbank last year. The majority of our money comes from donations from individuals and groups and from fundraising events etc. Grants of £5000 from Drake Foundation and £7000 from Lloyds TSB, £2000 from Virginia House Settlement. This includes several thousands of pounds spent on keeping a balanced stock

We are Sainsbury's Charity of the Year. The Zone have adopted foodbank as the project for two citizenship groups.

We are well supported by the community and do not want to lose that support by being seen to be "doing the state's" job.

We want to work in partnership with the council and other agencies so that people receive the help they need – financial or otherwise. We value our independence to point out when things are going wrong. – when forms make no sense, when people are left without support.

Our concerns

Welfare benefit change will cause hardship. People will not/cannot plan for changes. Many people come to us now because of delays and errors and client lack of understanding/confidence when moved from one benefit to another and changing over from the current system to universal credit is bound to lead to delays – when presumably they will be turning to the social fund. We need to be campaigning for a smooth handover. Also that working people on a low income have access to the fund too.

We are a small community project led by the Methodist Church and I feel that the value of our centre is that we provide more than the foodbank but also the foodbank is a benefit to the centre providing volunteer work and enabling us to identify people who need our other services. It is a two-way street. We have reservations about foodbank getting so big it overwhelms everything else. Unless the council help us with storage space I doubt we could help more than 30 extra food parcels a week and given other activities in the centre, the need for volunteer etc 60 extra food parcels a week is realistic at this stage.

The community aspect - There is a real danger that some of our current donors will cease to support us if they thought the Government were using their donations as an excuse for cutting back on a decent welfare system.

As the trussell trust – our national body says our priority is to remain committed to feeding the hungry. If Local Authorities want to work with us and support us in our work that is good. We have to find ways to do that which do not compromise our core values or cause us to become a contractual arm of the welfare state.

In the last year 156 vouchers have refused crisis loan as reason for referral. 80 of these from Job centre. We presume that whoever is going to administer this system will hold our vouchers to refer some of those refused a crisis loan.

The more tricky situation is this- if the council do not want to give out cash but want to give vouchers (we can see some advantage to this system) and those vouchers include food vouchers should they be supermarket vouchers or our vouchers or vouchers for any other agency that wants to set up a foodbank.

If people are referred to us for food under the new social fund system the things we do not wish to compromise on are these (whether or not we get any funding from the Council for Foodbank activity):-

- The food - everyone who comes gets the same varied list of food – not bigger or smaller list for social fund people or IF funded by council two separate lots of food – we don't have storage space for council's funded tinned fruit and donated tinned fruit
- The admin - We enter on a national server details of referrals and can identify food recipients by referrer, wards etc However we do not identify the specific cost per food parcel per individual.
- The ability to stick to the 4 voucher rule irrespective of where they have been referred from. We not be expected to make an exception for people referred under social fund who had had 4 from elsewhere. - (we do allow some leeway in discussion with referrers but on a case by case basis and in exceptional circumstances).

- The ability to say no if we believe the system is being abused or people are using the food to free up money or sell the food to feed a drug/alcohol habit.
- The ability to pray with people if asked or if it seems appropriate to offer. The ability to support people within our capabilities.
- In order to maintain other donations we would need to handle the publicity regarding the social fund.

Issues

At the moment if people are refused a crisis loan and go to job centre they are sometimes referred to us by the job centre on their own forms which in theory leave us with the discretion of what to do. In practice we treat that as a referral like any other. Would whoever administers the Social Fund take the same approach?? This could lead to possibility of food parcel if you get crisis loan and food parcel if you don't.

If we get funding to provide some food parcels we could be seen as an organ of the state. If we don't get some help from the Council we could be overrun and not be able to keep up with demand.

If the Council are minded to administer (or commission an organisation to administer) the social fund in such a way that involves referring to a foodbank as opposed to cash/supermarket vouchers and another agency sets up a foodbank then there will be real confusion in the minds of donors as to which is Plymouth Foodbank. Given the work we have done to establish community involvement the city would lose out if we couldn't maintain the Foodbank