

TONNES OF THANKS AS FOODBANK RISES TO COVID-19 CHALLENGE

Mid Norfolk Foodbank today gave out tonnes and tonnes of thanks to the community-spirited people who are helping it to tackle the toughest challenge in its history.

The foodbank has been receiving an average of a tonne of supplies a week from donors across the district to feed people living alone, couples and families struggling to make ends meet during the coronavirus crisis.

Demand at its centres at Dereham, Fakenham and Swaffham has swelled by 68% compared with the same period in 2019. In April alone, 172 parcels have been given out, feeding a total of 465 adults and children.

To help those who cannot afford to buy food and reach a foodbank because they are self-isolating, the volunteer team has added a new doorstep drop-off home delivery service. This has proved particularly valuable for villagers left without transport during the lockdown because they cannot rely on family members or friends to take them to a foodbank.

“To everyone who has given to us, from supermarkets, churches, businesses and local councils to the little boy or girl dropping a tin of soup or beans into a donations box, we say: ‘Thank you.’ We are touched and amazed by your generosity,” said Mid Norfolk Foodbank chair of trustees Dave Pearson.

“Also, we've had donations from restaurants, cafes and tourism businesses forced to close because of the lockdown. They must be undergoing untold stress and uncertainty about their futures, yet they've still found time to think about others battling to feed themselves and their families and to ensure good food doesn't go to waste. They too have shown real community spirit.”

While numbers using Mid Norfolk Foodbank are expected to rise still further, the charity is still concerned that people are unaware they can access its service. “We're thinking about self-employed people or those on zero-hours contracts who have seen their work shifts or order books dry up completely in recent weeks, while the household bills have kept on coming and there are still mouths to feed,” said Dave.

“Maybe they think: ‘The foodbank is for other people, not us.’ But let me stress it is for them too. We're here to help – to get them back on their feet in times of crisis. You might only need to visit us for a week or two to tide you over after, say, a hefty repair bill turns up or you're waiting for your first Universal Credit payment to arrive, but that's what we're here for.”

With a much greater workload, the foodbank team has faced real challenges of its own since the lockdown began. Several of its regular army of over 50 volunteers who meet and greet clients, collect, weigh and sort donations and pack boxes of staple groceries to give out are staying at home because of their age, underlying health issues or for family reasons. Neither can it count on the enthusiastic help it normally receives from members of the Independence Matters hub in Dereham for adults with disabilities - that remains closed during the COVID-19 lockdown – although it is grateful that it can still access its warehouse facilities there.

To compensate, new volunteers are helping the remaining ones to staff extra sorting and packing sessions which are being run each week at the foodbank's Dereham warehouse, staffed overall by fewer volunteers at a time so as to maintain safe social distancing.

Meanwhile, the crisis has forced changes to the way in which people obtain the vouchers they need to claim their food boxes.

Those who cannot obtain the usual paper vouchers from councils or agencies such as Citizens Advice can call helplines there, or at Breckland (for Dereham and Swaffham areas) or North Norfolk (Fakenham area) District councils to receive a unique voucher code to take along to their local foodbank, along with some ID. The numbers to ring (and any other updates) can be found by visiting <https://midnorfolk.foodbank.org.uk/2020/03/29/obtaining-vouchers-remotely-update/>.

Mid Norfolk, part of the nationwide Trussell Trust network of foodbanks, was founded in 2012. Since then, it has received just over 200 tonnes of donations to distribute to clients ranging from young people to pensioners. Some 44 tonnes of that total has come in during the past year alone, with demand for its service rising even before the COVID-19 pandemic took a hold.

In the year to March 2020, Mid Norfolk Foodbank fed just over 4000 people, compared with 2959 people in 2018/19.

Its foodbanks are based at Wellspring Church, in Neatherd Road, Dereham; Swaffham Baptist Church, in Station Street; and Fakenham Salvation Army centre, in Oak Street; opening times differ and can be found at <https://midnorfolk.foodbank.org.uk/locations> .

If you would like to donate, visit <https://midnorfolk.foodbank.org.uk/give-help/donate-food/> to find out what kinds of goods are particularly needed at this time.

GETTING THINGS SORTED: Mid Norfolk Foodbank volunteers busy in the charity's Dereham warehouse sifting through some of the latest donations ready for packing into boxes of groceries for individuals, couples and families across the district.

