

FOODBANK/SATELLITES AND CLOTHESBANK

Heating or Eating?

Most of us have heard that phrase, yet mercifully, few of us know the grim reality of having to make that choice. Unfortunately, a significant proportion of those who visit Sparkhill Foodbank know only too well about having to make that decision.

The effect of the lockdown continued to have far more impact than simply 'staying at home'. For many, the isolation meant that they lost the opportunity for connection, which has had a clear and lasting effect on mental health. The pandemic also led to many having to heat their home when they would normally not need to and provide extra meals for themselves and/or their families; an additional burden on parents whose children would get a free school meal every day.

As part of the Trussell Trust network of Foodbanks, we can attest to the figures shown in their

report, 'The State of Hunger' – "... *that almost one in five (18%) households referred to foodbanks during the pandemic being single parents - that's more than twice the rate in the general population (8%) ...*" or "... *95% of people referred to foodbanks in the Trussell Trust network were living in 'destitution' – this means people cannot afford to eat and stay warm and dry....*"

Salt and Light

It was hard to have enough of anything during the pandemic; stock, volunteers, donations... even hope seemed to be in short supply, and yet we were able to cope with our biggest ever year in terms of demand and to help and support those in need. There are times when as a team, we look back on the last year and wonder how we made it. It can be depressing to think that we are all that stands between people going hungry or

staying warm and sometimes not even being enough to stop them having to still make that choice.

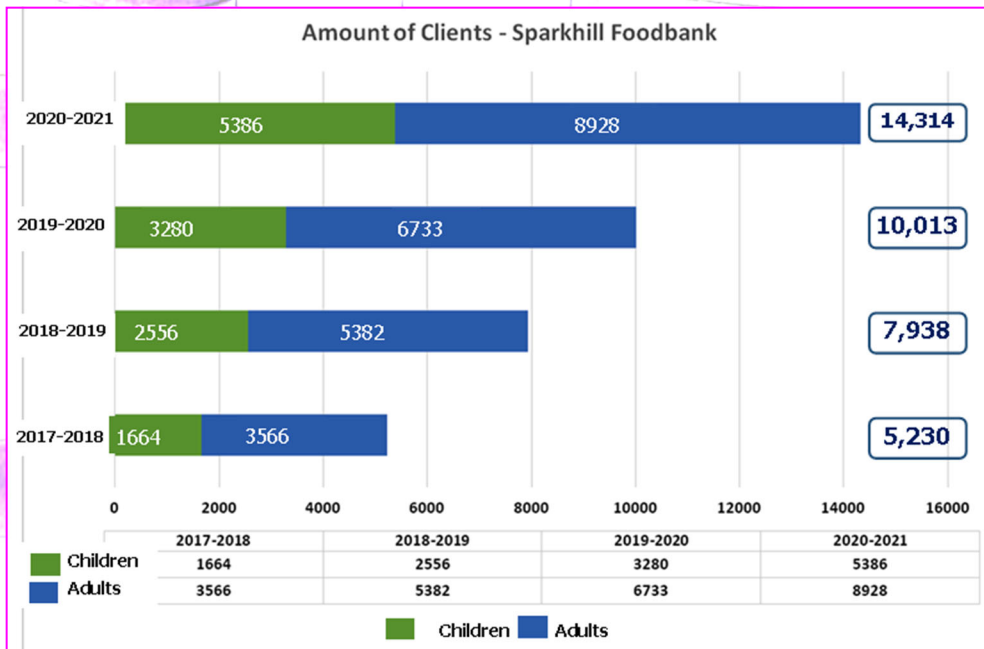
We also have seen moments of joy and signs that we are making a difference; 'regulars' who no longer need to come to the Foodbank because they have a new job; having a toy to give so a single parent can provide a birthday present for their child; those moments make us realise that we are doing what the Bible instructs us to do – be salt and light to the world.

Salt is useful and purposeful, and

light shines in the darkness; we want to help those who need us, and also be the voice for those who can't shout loud enough. It is hard to not be political, yet equally, it is hard to not say that having just a single foodbank in the UK is a national shame.

Growth in the Wrong Direction

We have seen a shameful 43% increase in the use of Sparkhill Foodbank and its satellites over the past year; while we have put in every possible measure to ensure



that those who are genuinely in need are able to use the Foodbank, we are still seeing its use go up instead of down. As part of Narthex, we are able to signpost foodbank users to our other services that will help them with financial advice and other support.

We are also part of the larger Trussell Trust network, and have regular interaction with the other foodbanks in the area; unfortunately, our experience is being replicated across Birmingham. The use of Foodbanks looks like it is going to simply increase over the next few years and we have to be ready for it, despite being in one of the world's leading economies.

Mandy's* Story

Mandy used to be an Administration Manager for a large local firm, until she was made redundant and then unfortunately experienced a separation, leaving her with sole responsibility for three teenage girls. Mandy had to start claiming Universal Credit, but

suffered with the five week wait for the benefit to start, leaving her with no income for over a month. The situation deeply affected her, as Mandy was used to providing for her and her family; coupled with the pandemic, it felt like a hopeless but continuing cycle of life that would be difficult to break.

Mandy started attending the Foodbank on a regular basis and enquired about volunteering. We were able to give her some volunteering hours and she has faithfully attended for a number of months. Volunteering has actually helped her feel productive and has given her social interaction; she is trying to find another job, though it does need to fit around school hours – a challenge for many of our Foodbank users.

In her own words, 'Volunteering has really helped bring me back to a level of confidence that I need to move on to the next stage of my life'.

*Name has been changed to protect identity.

Conclusion

We would be nothing, literally, without the help and support of so many people; from our donors to our volunteers to our supporters – thank you, thank you and thank you again. We know that it seems like a never-ending pattern of growth, but we do see glimmers of hope and reminders every day that what we do matters, makes a difference and must continue to be salt and light.

David Wiseman
Foodbank Manager



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