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A look inside the Witney and West Oxfordshire Food Bank

Witney and West Oxfordshire Food Bank launched in November 2016. The Food Bank is open from 10am to 1pm five days a week, and is based at Cottsway Housing Association in Witney, who give them access to premises at no cost, enabling the charity to operate. The foodbank is an independent charity and part of the Trussell Trust network. The Trussell Trust advocates for policy changes that will reduce the need for foodbanks.

Erik Nielsen, Chair of the charity, explains how the Witney Food Bank works. Approximately 90% of food is donated by the public, such as community collection points, individual donations, and corporate donations. Every foodbank recipient is referred by a frontline professional, such as an advice centre, GP, or school.

Last year, the food bank helped 909 adults and 697 children by providing food. In July 2019 alone, they have provided 92 parcels – three times the number given out in July of 2018 as demand grows.

The food bank's 35 volunteers work with stock and make up food parcels, but the role goes beyond this, as Erik explains.

"There are often multiple reasons driving someone to a food bank and being able to identify these through a brief conversation is important, so that we can **provide** signpost to local organisations that might help."

The food bank often needs extra assistance during holidays, half-terms, and one-off projects such as annual stock-taking.

The food bank relies on donations of non-perishable food items. "We have public collection points inside Sainsburys and Waitrose in Witney centre, Asda in Carterton, Witney Town Hall, the Co-ops in Madley Park, Long Hanborough, and Witney High Street, and in the Cottsway Housing Association building, our headquarters."

"Items most of use are meats like corned beef, tinned ham, stews, and curries; pasta sauces and other cooking sauces; UHT or powdered milk; tinned vegetables. We also collect toiletries like toilet roll, toothpaste, and washing powder."

Public support is crucial, but Erik also highlights the bigger picture. "Poverty and hunger are above party politics and we want to share our experience with all policy-makers to address the underlying causes. We need every politician and citizen to listen to the voices of people in poverty and act to stop hunger."

-“It’s not right that anyone needs a food bank. We’re working with other food banks nationally to campaign for a future where no one needs us. Meanwhile, we’ll do all we can to support local people at risk of hunger.”

Erik thanks the people of West Oxfordshire. “We’re extremely lucky that local people are so generous. With demand increasing monthly, we need donations now more than ever.”

To find out more or donate, visit witney.foodbank.org.uk. Weekly updates of shortages are posted on Facebook and Twitter: @WitneyFoodBank.

This article was developed in partnership with the Volunteer Centre at OCVA. If you would like a feature about your **community group, charity or social enterprise** in the Voluntary Voice section of the Oxford Times please email: vol@ocva.org.uk