

Dover Foodbank Meets Challenge of 2020 Coronavirus Emergency

—Peter W Sherred—

The vision for the Dover Outreach Centre was the subject of an article in issue 96 of the Society's Newsletter dated November 2019 at page 41. The initiative for the Centre came from Christians Together in Dover (CTID) and was first mentioned in 2010, along with several other outward facing Christian initiatives. CTID set up a forward-looking group to consider avenues of Christian service in the community beyond the walls of church buildings and produced a bullet-point list of projects which included the provision of a foodbank, an Outreach Centre, a winter night shelter and a money course.

Focus was placed initially on the establishment of a foodbank, to be in operation before larger projects were embarked upon. The foodbank was opened in October 2013, utilising a store at Whitfield and another at a redundant building provided by Dover Harbour Board in the Eastern Docks. It has operated successfully since it started, but was confronted by arguably its biggest challenge in 2020 following the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on so many individuals and families. Current head and project co-ordinator is Jonathan Wheeler, who is aided by his wife, Janet, and a small Management Team of half a dozen people.



Jonathan and Janet Wheeler at Whitfield Warehouse

Jonathan, a former teacher in Folkestone for 35 years, was born in Temple Ewell and lives in Dover. He succeeded Noel Beamish as lead person after three years of operation, as Noel focused his efforts on the Outreach Centre.

The Dover Foodbank opened on 1st October 2013 with the initial 3 tonnes of donated food it felt it needed to operate in stock. Overwhelming support came from every area of the local community, enabling it to commence helping those in Dover who experience food poverty. Sadly, many people in Dover were struggling to feed their families and themselves. To meet this need the foodbank aimed to provide three days of emergency food as a bridge to cover the period before other support programmes could be accessed. Foodbank support required a voucher, issued by several local agencies, as proof of entitlement. Voucher claimants were advised of the opening hours of the distribution centres, the originals of which were at 'Footprints', The Beacon Church in London Road, and the Old Park Community Centre in Gordon Road. An additional distribution centre was established at The Ark (now One Church) in Tower Hamlets. Those with a foodbank voucher collected food help from the distribution centres.

Mindful of the stress imposed on people who had to admit they needed help with basic necessities, had to ask for a voucher in the first instance and then had to attend at the distribution centre to claim their entitlement, from the outset volunteers operating the foodbank gave voucher holders a warm reception, offering a hot drink and a biscuit. Once a voucher was

handed over, a trained volunteer put together enough food for three days for each person listed on the voucher while another trained volunteer helped the claimant(s) identify other agencies for support. To maintain self-respect, groceries were given to the claimant(s) in normal shopping bags so they could leave with dignity, carrying provisions sufficient to provide a balanced diet for three days.

The Dover Foodbank is one of many that operate across the country supported by the Trussell Trust. From this Trust a network of foodbanks sprung, all of which provide emergency food to people in crisis with additional support to help tackle the root causes that drive people into poverty. The Trust brings together the experiences of foodbanks in its network and their communities, to challenge the structural economic issues that lock people in poverty. The Trust's laudable aim is the raising of awareness of the existence of food poverty, coupled with a campaign for change to end UK hunger and poverty and thus the need for foodbanks in the UK. This is a huge challenge because in 2019 foodbanks supplied 1,808,949 emergency food supplies in the UK, representing a 20% increase on the previous year.

At the end of its first year of operation not only had the Dover Foodbank been visited by the Archbishop of Canterbury but it had collected and sorted around 25 tonnes of food, given three days of emergency food to nearly 1,800 local people, distributed a total of 17 tonnes to those in need and had received £8,000 worth of financial donations. The foodbank had spent some £6,000 on running expenses and had been supported by some 70 volunteers who provided 5,000 hours to collect, sort and distribute the donated food. By the second anniversary of opening the foodbank had provided food help to just under 3,500

people. The vision of Dover Foodbank, to enable all people in Dover to have the opportunity to live life to the full with hope for the future has, as a key ingredient, the provision of food in a crisis situation to facilitate the realisation of the vision. By March 2016, some 4475 people had received food aid since the inception of the bank, with 200 people being fed in that month alone. The figure of those being aided passed the 5000 mark later that year and in 2017 the foodbank reported that a total of 8,551 people had been helped. The figure topped 10,000 by the autumn of 2018. Over 3,000 people received help in the 12 months up to July 2018, a 54% increase on the previous year. By March 2019, the number of people assisted with three days of emergency food supplies had exceeded 12,000.

The pandemic of 2020 had a profound impact on the foodbank. It experienced its busiest six months ever, with a 57% increase in demand. The chart shows the number of people fed via the Dover Foodbank since October 2013, with the April 2020 spike graphically showing the impact of the pandemic crisis.



Foodbank Chart

Such a leap in demand was unprecedented, with the financial impact of the lockdown on families being a chief element as many people were furloughed and some made redundant. Additionally, many vulnerable

people were required to self-isolate for many months. Inevitably, with the restrictions imposed on the country to limit the spread of the virus, the foodbank had dramatically to change the way it operated. Due to self-isolating measures and other aspects of the impact of the virus, many volunteers upon whom the foodbank is dependent were unable to help.

Jonathan Wheeler explained that the method of operation in place since the start of the foodbank had to end. Instead, it operated entirely on a delivery basis, so when people seeking food aid contacted one of the local agencies an email was generated by the agency concerned direct to the foodbank. Once the email had been received, a volunteer from the foodbank telephoned the person seeking help and arranged for delivery of a food and provisions supply direct to the person's home on the next Tuesday, Thursday or Friday morning. The delivery is sometimes in the foodbank's own van, but more often than not, in volunteers' own vehicles, none of which have any foodbank markings on them so the delivery is anonymous. This very much accords with the original reception process where claimants were provided sensitively with normal shopping bags for provisions to avoid any sense of stigmatisation and to maintain human dignity. This was a seismic change in operation of the service because the initial reception procedures were no longer possible.

People who had never availed themselves of the use of the foodbank before now presented themselves because the effects of the lockdown had seriously impacted on all walks of life. The fact the demand increased so dramatically meant the foodbank has prepared itself for some challenging times ahead, planning for a difficult six months at least. The uncertainty caused by the possibility of a second wave of the virus

adds to the challenge for the immediate future, while announcements by P & O Ferries and DFDS regarding local redundancies could mean that there will be more calls on the foodbank resources.

The success of the Dover Foodbank is dependent upon several factors. Fundamentally, the willingness of people to act as volunteers to support the operation by donating their time to all aspects of the operation, including the warehouse, distribution centres, supermarket collections, the communications team and more, is crucial to the success of the operation.



JW with some Volunteers at Whitfield foodbank

The oldest of the volunteers was nonagenarian Revd Dr Michael Hinton, former Headmaster of Dover Grammar School for Boys and former priest of Shepherdswell, who volunteered from the opening of the foodbank until he moved away in recent years to a clergy retirement home.

The generosity of people to donate financially to assist the operation is another important element of support. Over the years there have been numerous examples of local initiatives by individuals, communities and organisations raising funds for the foodbank.

The support of supermarkets and other outlets in supplying quantities of food and other items removed from sale provides the foodbank with a considerable amount of stock. All such donations are thoroughly checked by volunteers and, with almost military precision, are sorted by date. This is labour-intensive work because all items delivered in crates are handpicked and examined, then are allocated to shelving which is itself dated. By this means all food deliveries to claimants are in good order. The system of shelving reflects the courses of meals, so all items of food normally forming part of a main course are placed on one set of shelving, while all ingredients for desserts are together on another set, and other provisions including dry items such as pasta, flour and toilet rolls are grouped on yet more shelves. Cereal packets are stored above the top level of the shelving.



Shelving Stocked with Supplies at Whitfield

Whilst the activity of the foodbank is directed at individuals and families, there is limited help offered, on an ad hoc basis, to the Outreach Centre in Snargate Street. Nothing, or extraordinarily little, is wasted in any form.

The generosity of the public in donating food and other goods to the foodbank at collection points, including local supermarkets aided by Supermarket Collection Days, all help supply the provisions the foodbank requires to assist

people in need. Schools across the town have helped the foodbank in several ways by collecting food and donating it to the bank.

Thanksgiving Services for the existence and work of the foodbank are held annually. The first of these took place in April 2015 at St Peter & St Paul Church, River, where the Revd Andy Bawtree, former Chairman of CTID, officiated and in April 2016, Dover Baptist Church hosted the second Thanksgiving Service. On Sunday 1st October 2017, the third Thanksgiving Service was held at The Beacon Church, while St Paul's RC Church in Maison Dieu Road hosted the Service in 2018. The Thanksgiving Service in 2019 took place at The Ark (One Church) in Tower Hamlets. The different venues underline the fact Dover Foodbank is run in partnership with local churches led by CTID. No one denomination claims the foodbank for its own.

In an ideal world there should be no need for foodbanks. However while there continues to be people in need in Dover, the town is fortunate the foodbank exists and will continue to support them by providing food, thanks entirely to the superb support of all its volunteers, fundraisers and donors, guided by the leadership of Jonathan Wheeler together with the other members of the Management Team. The establishment and operation of the foodbank is a remarkable feature of Dover's life in which all its inhabitants should take great pride. Jonathan Wheeler has a realistic approach to the operation and is preparing for more challenges rather than fewer in the immediate and foreseeable future. He views the foodbank as the bridge which connects those who have and give, to those who have not and receive. Should anyone wish to help Dover Foodbank it can be contacted by email at info@dovertfoodbank.org.uk or by phone on 07870 361180.