**A Brief Insight into Fir Vale Food Bank**

St Cuthbert's Church, Fir Vale, has a food bank with a difference. It brings together members of the community to interact, share and grow in confidence in a friendly, open and non-judgmental environment.

 It is not just a building to come to and 'get some food', but somewhere to sit down and enjoy a community meal and socialise.

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Unlike other food banks who ask for referrals, anyone is welcome and will receive a bag of food with an option of English lessons and advice from the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Average numbers of users are up on an annual basis. There is a difference between summer and winter. Currently summer is 50 and the winter 65.

There are regular users and some that come when they are feeling the pressure. There is also a steady throughput of refugees and asylum seekers.

As Fir Vale will accept anyone who walks in they are the only food bank on Sheffield's Emergency Leaflet.

Those seeking aid only need to tell the food bank organisers their christian name. No referrals or pieces of paper are needed.

People queuing up for a small plastic bag holding five spoonfuls of instant coffee sums up the dire need that people are in.

Fir Vale offer Citizens Advice services every week - alternately one week by phone contact and the next by face to face support.

The stories are heart rending and growing in frequency, mental health issues are increasing and there is a growing number of young men. Men generally find it hard to ask for help from anybody.

The mistakes and penalties of the benefit system are harsh and unpredictable. Also, the casual employment system can quickly throw a person on the street with nothing.

Large numbers of people are squatting where they can get space on a floor for the night.

Fir Vale offer a meal (hot in winter) with additional toast (as much as the person wants). Carefully balanced bags of food with choices of fish or meat (vegetarians choose fish) are given to those seeking help. The food bank is given enough bread by the Infirmary Road Tesco's store to give to everyone.

Clothes and other personal items donated are distributed. Clothes for men are a priority. Free haircuts are available - courtesy of an Iranian Asylum seeker. During the summer the food bank ran a children's activity table. Some of the volunteers act as befrienders.

The food bank is central to various council initiatives. Two projects have made Fir Vale one of their bases for meeting and organising local people. There is a plan to book rooms in the church for example in order to train local people in mediation.

There is a real concern about conflicts between local groups. The secondary school is part of this project. It is important that a local building can be identified as a safe place for people to meet.

The food bank has helped the two projects come together. The Housing Department plan to place a worker with the food bank when Universal Credit is introduced.

The Fir Vale neighbourhood is very poor and so is the church. Food bank organisers and church members are concerned about the heating costs for this winter.

The organisers of the food bank thank SAPLC very much for our interest and support in collecting food and making donations.

Volunteers are needed for sorting of food donations, food preparation, welcoming, tidying, administration and development. Please consider helping in any way you can.

*The above text has been taken from information given to me by Robert and Susan Daines of St Cuthbert’s Church.*

*Joe Dey*

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