



Two Loaves of Bread

The Botley Community Fridge is one of half a dozen projects that's run by Food for Charities, which I started up about seven years ago. The main aim was to reduce food waste, and give it to people who need it, as the Oxford Food Bank was doing at the time. However, what the Oxford Food Bank was not doing was giving directly to individuals. And it wasn't picking up from anywhere other than big supermarkets. I figured, there's kind of a hole there, where we can pick up from smaller supermarkets, and hand food out directly to individuals. We started doing that in Banbury.

Then, about five years ago, we added the Botley Community Fridge. At the time, there was only one community fridge in the country, in Frome. They were picking up food from supermarkets and putting it into a fridge and anyone could take food. I thought, 'Wow, what a brilliant idea. I want one of those for my neighbourhood.' The next day, I was walking my dogs and I saw the Reverend who runs a local church, walking her dogs too. I said, 'How about a refrigerator in your church?' It took six months to go through all the Church Committees to clear it, for health and safety, for insurance, and so on. And then they said 'Yes.' We were the first community fridge in a church.

I needed to talk to Environmental Health. The Frome fridge was selling its documentation. I sent that off to my Environmental Health Officer with 'Botley' instead of 'Frome', and she flagged things like protecting people with allergies, needing to be registered as a food business, a bunch of other things. It felt like she was really taking it seriously. She wasn't putting hurdles in our way, she was saying, 'These are the things that you need to do to have a fridge that meets all the legal safeguards and is going to be fine for people to use'. And I took this information and made it available for free to any other community fridge. My philosophy all the way through has been, let's make this available to everyone. So I put everything on PDF on the website, all the paperwork, examples of Risk Assessments, examples of the volunteer manual, and so on.

I figured that this was going to be a big experiment. I didn't have any funding at the time. I bought a fridge for £30 off Gumtree. I had to laminate some copies of the fridge rules. And then there was a Grand Opening and there were, like, two loaves of bread in it. We started off extremely small, extremely cheap, with the idea that it would grow. I needed a rota of volunteers, to check the fridge every day for cleanliness and temperature, and to pick up food and deliver it to the fridge. We realised early on that in theory, anyone can put food in, but in practice, almost all the food comes surplus from supermarkets. The way that the supermarket stuff works is that there's two big cloud organisers, FareShare and Neighbourly. Each of them has a couple of the supermarket chains associated. The supermarket chains will put on the cloud how much food is available. So you need to



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get on these lists, grab various slots, and then somebody needs to pick it up. So there's a bit of a ritual around all that.

In the end, we were the fourth community fridge to set up in the country. We were kind of experimental and in part because of that, about six or twelve months into it, I organised the first National Community Fridges meeting. There's different ways of running community fridges. A lot of people don't have the luxury of a venue that's open a lot of hours per day. Our church is open six hours a day, every day, which I'm just so grateful for. Other places may only be open for a couple of hours in the evening. What this allows us to do is to be unmanned. So we put the food in and it disappears, we put more food in, it disappears. The whole idea was one of generosity, reducing food waste and providing for our neighbours who need it. Of course, there is the possibility of people taking too much food. But having done this for more than four years now, I have this really strong philosophy that the point of the fridge is to reduce food waste. And we don't know what goes on with the people who take food, one person may be picking up for an entire neighbourhood, or whatever. So let's be as non-judgmental as possible. But at the same time, I wanted to make sure that people who need the food can have it. Part of the idea of the fridge was to have food there for homeless people. Especially at the time, I saw this as being a real food provision for local homeless people. Before Covid, homelessness was much worse here, we had a lot of people in tents and stuff. So we've got some shelving next to the fridge that we put tins into. It has a sign that says 'For people in need only'. And that seems to be pretty well abided by. There's not an awful lot of incentive for people to get wealthy selling tins of baked beans.

Over time, it's grown. Before Covid we were going through half a tonne of food per month, about three refrigerators-full per week. And now we're at about a tonne a month. The church shut when Covid hit, and I thought, 'I'm going to have a break. I've been running this fridge for three years, and it's time for a little holiday.' And then I put something up on Facebook and within two hours, people came to me and said, 'Is there not some other way that we keep the fridge open?' The Parish Council stepped in, offering us a venue from which we could deliver food parcels. We ended up providing, over last summer, food to three hundred and fifty families, twelve thousand parcels in total, seventy volunteers, two days of packing and driving per week. The District Council provided money for milk, nappies, and incontinence pads and pants. And that was in addition to food from an organisation called SOFEA, who pick up surplus food on a regional basis and distribute it. So, we would get a basic box from SOFEA, and supplement that with surplus food from supermarkets. Plus flowers, or the odd thing of women's products, or people would drop off leaflets and we would put them in the parcels. It was a major operation. I think we all learned a lot last year. Oxford City Council were really good, making available facilities, food, staff, drivers. Last year, we went through £40,000, and we got that funding mostly from the City Council and the District Council. They just made it available very quickly, very easily, to allow it all to happen.

Then it turned out that SOFEA was going to stop giving us parcels at the end of August, and the parish hall was going to be in use again, and we'd have to move out. So, we set up a community larder, which is like a food club, as well as re-opening the original fridge. The fridge has now been moved, very happily, to the lobby of the church. We're much more visible, we've got more space, to the point where we're now doing twice as much food as before. We've also been distributing food to homeless people by bicycle three times a week. And the Council has given us money to continue to provide food parcels on an emergency basis, for instance if they've got victims of domestic violence being put up at a hotel.



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I come from the environmental field, I'm an environmental consultant. So, it's all very theoretical stuff that I do for work, policies and writing reports. It's wonderful to do something of direct benefit. Environmentally, that food would otherwise go to an anaerobic digester, which isn't bad, it's still being used for energy, but what we do is provide it to people. When there's stuff left over, the bread goes to a chicken farm, and the veg goes to two big, beautiful pigs called Hamish and George. At one point last summer they said that we had to cut down because Hamish and George were getting too big.

I like experimenting. I like the win-win of reducing food waste and providing food to people. The project has kind of brought Botley onto the map. Because we were the first one in Oxfordshire, we've been a model for the other community fridges. And especially over Covid our food parcel delivery service became a really big thing. For a while we had seventy volunteers from the neighbourhood. I'm not a terribly sociable person, but it has allowed me to influence the neighbourhood. Let's be generous, let's assume the best from people. If somebody says they need stuff, even if you don't think they do, who are we to judge? It's been really nice to introduce people to others who have been experiencing homelessness, a kind of meeting of two different communities, in a way that's generous and funny and kind. And actually, it's been working. I think people are really proud of it. It's fun to see one's baby doing so well.



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