

# Bow Foodbank ...

## A Unique Approach



### **BOW FOODBANK**

St Mary and Holy Trinity Church

230 Bow Road

London E3 3AH

Tel: 07930 527 167

[www.bowfoodbank.org](http://www.bowfoodbank.org)

### **Opening Times:**

Mondays 9.30am-12.30pm

Registered Charity Number: 1162185.

The Bow Foodbank Ltd is a Charitable Company (Company Number 8852728) registered at:

6 Schoolbell Mews, London E3 5BZ

Bow Foodbank is an independent food bank in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, founded in 2014. In our first year we distributed 2,500 baskets of food to more than 800 people. Since first opening our doors, the demand for food has doubled and we now regularly serve between 70 and 80 clients and their families each week. We hope you may want to support the unique approach of Bow Foodbank and help us meet this growing demand.

**A unique food bank** Most food banks in the UK are provided by local churches. Located in the heart of Tower Hamlets, Bow Foodbank is supported by a unique coalition of different faith-based and local community groups, all working together to help people in need.

Bow Foodbank's Board of Trustees includes representatives from: St Mary and Holy Trinity Church (Church of England), Our Lady and St Catherine's (Roman Catholic) Church, Bow Methodist Church, Devon Street Mosque, Tower Hamlets Gurdwara, East London Synagogue, Poplar HARCA, the Bromley-by-Bow Centre, Bow Arts Trust, and Queen Mary University of London.

**Why do we need food banks?** Millions of UK households are caught in a cost of living crisis. Since 2007, average food prices in the UK have risen 11%. Coupled with increasingly insecure employment, stagnating wages, and rising rents and energy prices, many UK households have been left struggling to feed themselves.

For many of our poorest households, things have been made considerably worse by the Government's welfare reforms, and in particular changes to the housing benefits cap, the

### **BOW FOODBANK - KEY HIGHLIGHTS**

- Unique coalition of local faith-based and community organisations, working in one of the UK's most deprived boroughs
- Reaching those most in need, through direct access not referral
- Increasing choice, cutting waste, and challenging stigma with a 'free choice' model rather than pre-packaged food parcels
- More than 25,000 items of free food distributed to those in need
- 837 people served, including 177 children
- On-going support to more than 200 clients ineligible for support from other food banks
- On-site benefits advice from qualified advisors provided by the Bromley-by-Bow Centre
- Supported by 56 volunteers and £20,000 of financial donations

introduction of the 'bedroom tax', and the growing use of benefit sanctions.

Since their introduction in 2012, over 1.8 million people have had their benefits cut following sanctions. Although almost half (49.5%) of these cases have subsequently been overturned on appeal, millions of people have faced and continue to face temporary reductions or a complete loss of their benefits. In response to this crisis, the number of food banks in the UK has grown dramatically over the past five years, from just 70 in 2010 to more than 700 across the UK in 2015.

*Knowing someone is there to give a helping hand boosts your morale when so much is being taken away. I lived through times of austerity in the war and thought those days were behind me. It shouldn't be like this now.*  
Bow Foodbank client, Grace

### **Why do we need food banks in Tower Hamlets**

Tower Hamlets is one of the most diverse, but also one of the most deprived, boroughs in the UK. Almost half (44%) of our residents live in poverty. The borough has the second highest level of unemployment in London, with a further 6% of residents claiming long term sick or disablement benefits. Though a fifth (19%) of residents are in low-paid work, Tower Hamlets also has some of the highest rents in London, leaving thousands struggling to make ends meet.



### **A unique approach – direct, long term help to anyone in need**

Bow Foodbank is unique in its approach to these problems. Most food banks operate a 'referral' system. People who need food must first apply for a voucher from a local referral agency. At Bow, we believe this puts unnecessary barriers in the way of people in need. Applying for a voucher can be stressful, and many of those most in need may not approach a referral agency. At Bow, people can come to the food bank direct themselves, and do not need vouchers.

Most food banks also limit the number of times a person may receive food. Typically, people may only visit a food bank three times in any six month period. This system seems based on the belief that people using food banks are typically facing only some kind of temporary crisis (the loss of benefits or of work, for example) and that once this crisis is resolved they will no longer need support.

Though some of those using Bow Foodbank are facing similar crises, and only visit the food bank on a few occasions, for many the struggle to feed themselves and their families is an on-going problem. At Bow we offer support over the longer term, with people able to visit us up to 10 times (every fortnight) whilst we find other ways to support them.

Almost half (46%) of those using Bow Foodbank are ineligible for help from other food banks because they need food on at least four (and often more) occasions.

### **Providing choice, cutting waste, and challenging stigma**

Most food banks provide ready-made food parcels containing a range of items chosen by the food bank. At Bow, we believe it is important that people have the opportunity to choose their own food. Whilst our system reduces waste (standard food parcels often contain items people already have at home), we believe it is also more dignified: reducing the stigma that queuing for a food parcel can engender. Rather than pre-packaged parcels,

visitors to Bow choose up to 10 free items from a range of food stuffs and other goods in our shop that we know people often struggle to afford (for example, nappies). We believe that the more familiar shopping experience makes a visit to Bow Foodbank a much less daunting experience.



**More than food – a welcome, and further support** Whatever the difficulties they may be facing, many people find it very difficult to first come to a food bank. At Bow, we try to make people feel as welcome as possible, and to make the experience of using our food bank as far removed from a feeling of ‘charity’ as possible. The vast majority of our volunteers are local people, some of whom have used the food bank themselves, and before using the shop visitors can sit and talk with our volunteers over a cup of tea or coffee.

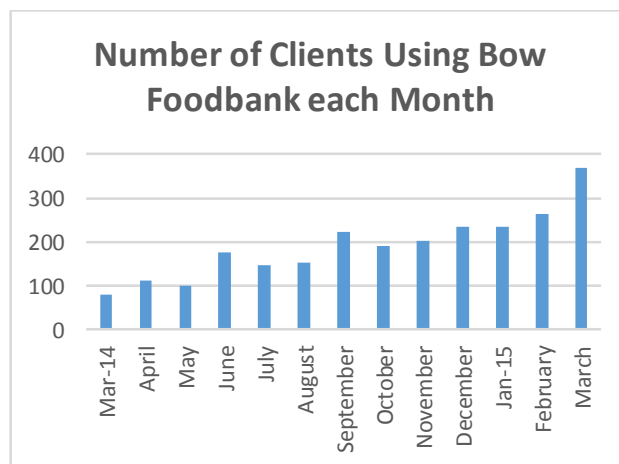
*I found it hard to coming here for the first time but everyone was so friendly it made it feel OK.*  
Bow Foodbank client, Peter

Paperwork is kept to a minimum, but people are encouraged to share with us why they have come to Bow. Because we recognise that the last thing people needing help want is to be passed from pillar to post, anyone needing advice can meet one-to-one with our on-site qualified welfare advisor provided by the Bromley-by-Bow Centre. Our advisor can offer our clients guidance on whether they are receiving the right benefits,

practical help in completing forms, and advice on how recent changes to benefits may affect them.

*Bow Foodbank really helped me out, especially when I was under suspension.* Bow Foodbank client, David

**Number of people served** In our first year, Bow Foodbank worked with 468 clients. Though many of our clients are single people, just under half have families, and including family members Bow provided food to 837 people (including 177 children). As the food bank has established itself in the local community, demand has grown, from just 81 clients in our first month of operation, to more than 300 currently. We are now regularly providing food to between 70 and 80 clients and their families each week.



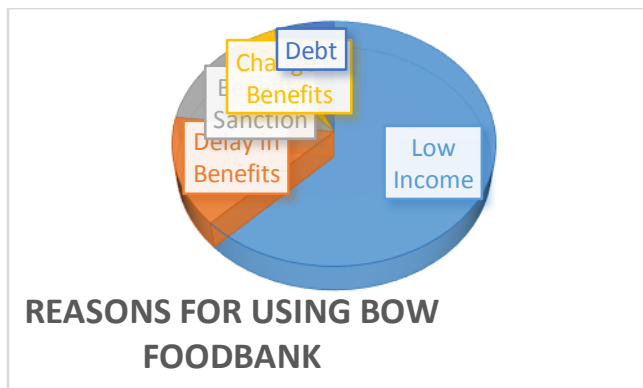
**Amount of food served** Because many of our clients visit us more than once, during our first year Bow provided clients and their families with 2,523 baskets (25,230 items) of food and other goods: at a value of more than £15,000.

**Our clients** are extremely diverse. Almost as many men (47%) as women (53%) make use of the food bank, and clients include both single people and those with families, as well as a large number of homeless people (31% of clients) staying either in local hostel accommodation, insecure housing, or with friends or relatives. The majority of clients are either unemployed (52%) or registered long-term sick/disabled (34%).

*When my claims were being sorted out it was helpful to have some extra food. It still helps me as I live in a hostel and have to cater for myself.* Bow Foodbank client, Stephen

**Why people come to Bow Foodbank** Reflecting the growing problems associated with welfare reforms, almost a third (27%) of our clients turn to Bow because of a problem with their benefits; either a change to their benefits (4%) a delay in payments (13%), or some kind of sanction (11%) – frequently leaving people with no income whatsoever.

Importantly, though, for the majority of people turning to Bow has less to do with some kind of unexpected, or only temporary crisis, than with the persistent and on-going difficulties of making ends meet on low incomes (57% of clients).



**Volunteers and donations** All the work at Bow is provided by volunteers, and the food bank is supported by more than 50 volunteers drawn from a very wide range of organisations and from the local community. As well as helping to store and serve the food, our volunteers work in stock control, on reception and record keeping, befriending, and refreshments. They also help organise fundraising events and food drives, and we are especially grateful to Asda (Isle of Dogs) and Waitrose (St Katherine's Dock) for their generous support of our food collections.

**Finances** Bow Foodbank incurs a number of unavoidable expenses – including the purchase of additional food, as demand continues to outstrip donations.

While some food is donated, more must be bought in whilst we are developing our food drive opportunities, and in our first year Bow spent £11,000 on food, with additional expenditure on, for example, storage boxes (£918), van hire for the transportation of food (£495), refreshments for clients (£418), public liability insurance (£360) and accountancy fees (£300), bringing the food bank's total expenditure in its first financial year to £13,985.

**Moving forward and what you can do to help** As demand continues to grow, Bow will need to continue to purchase additional food on a regular basis. Since our first financial return, when we spent £11,000 on food, demand has doubled.

Above all else, Bow Foodbank is committed to offering a dependable service to people facing severe difficulties. One of the greatest difficulties faced by any voluntary organisation is securing a dependable flow of donations. Whilst Bow Foodbank continues to welcome occasional donations, whether financial or food, we would most welcome financial donations, of whatever size, from individuals and organisations on a regular basis. Each basket of food Bow Foodbank distributes costs approximately £6. A donation of just £12 a month would enable us to guarantee a basket of food every fortnight to people in need. A regular donation of £24 would provide a basket every week. We very much hope you may feel able to support us in our work.

**Bow Foodbank would like to thank the following organisations for their generous financial support over the past year:** Caritas Westminster (£3000), Our Lady and St Catherine's Church (£4,430), The Ismaili Centre (£1000), St Mary-Le-Bow Cheapside (£2022), St Mary's Bow Church (£200), Tower Hamlets Rotary Club (£1000), The Mercer's Hall (£2000), Aberdeen Asset Management (£200), The Grocer's Hall (£1000), Victoria Park Singers (£3000), and the Alexandra Trust (£750).