



## Making the change from food parcels to community grocery

Bridge Community Grocery is a project run by Bridge Community Church in Bury St Edmunds. Membership of the scheme is free, and their members can shop twice a week for £3 per visit.

The church moved to this community grocery model after providing food parcels to their local community for over 8 years. Pastor David Oakley tells us more about changing how their project runs.

### OUR HISTORY

Over 10 years ago, the church employed a community worker and as he connected with people in the local neighbourhood, he perceived a real need around food insecurity. Therefore, for the next 8 years, the church delivered food parcels and bags to support families and individuals in the local community.

2 years ago, as a church we became concerned that this model was not sustainable for us financially or for our volunteers. Also, we perceived a lack of dignity with this approach as people received what we delivered without choice and there was a lack of intentional pathways to move people out of food poverty and into greater independence.

Therefore, the church redeveloped its basement to create a 'farm-style' grocery shop where local people who are struggling can sign up to become members and do their own shop for £3, alongside receiving other help and support to move out of poverty.

Following the redevelopment of the church basement into a grocery, volunteers were recruited and trained to manage the shop, be the front of shop faces of the grocery, with background helpers to do delivery pick-ups, shelf stocking, inventory, food hygiene, listening and coffee shop provision.



*With this community grocery model we addressed the obvious needs of food and financial insecurity, but also underlying concerns around dignity, respect, empowerment, as well as helping with social, educational, family support and relational needs.*

## OUR PROJECT NOW

We have a dedicated space in our church for our community grocery that is set up to look and feel like a farm shop. We open on Monday afternoons and Friday mornings each week but also, during school term time, Wednesday evenings as well. Our aim is to cover the West side of Bury St Edmunds (primarily based around the IP33 postcode).

We offer food support in that twice a week people in need can get around 2 bags of shopping for £3 per shop, which is probably worth about £30. We supply canned, fresh and frozen foods alongside some hygiene products. We obtain these supplies from a combination of church congregations' donations, supermarket provision (e.g., Farmfoods, Asda, Cook etc), partnerships (local farmers), specific shopping runs by volunteers and Suffolk County Council

Alongside the grocery, we offer support in other areas because we are a family hub and so we can provide social connection, educational courses, signposting to other services and advocacy.

A typical visit feels like any other shopping experience as the customer comes and picks up a shopping basket and selects the goods, they need for their situation. However, this shopping experience is not impersonal as it is small, membership based, intimate and there is a sense of friendship and family around the place. Additionally, there are opportunities to connect over coffee, cake and chat with others to access further support and possible pathways to food security

2 paid church staff help supervise the grocery systems and support a team of 15 volunteers in response to up to 45 visits per week from members who represent around 140 beneficiaries.

To become a member of the Bridge Community Grocery, members must live within the IP33 west Bury St Edmunds postcode or be a partner or linked to a partner of the church. Then following an initial chat to assess the level of need, a person can then become a member of the grocery for free and access all the other services that Bridge Community Church and its Community Family Hub status offers.



*Overall the grocery has been a catalyst to offer support and help in other areas of people's lives where they are struggling.*

## CHALLENGES

*We overcomplicated things initially with paperwork and requirements, and this was off-putting for some, but simplifying things has helped greatly.*

*Management expertise of the grocery and pathways to food security, as we have primarily used volunteers, but they have only helped on a short-term basis*

*Volunteers across our grocery teams as the demand is constant and relentless as every week people need help. This demand sometimes exceeds supply in terms of time and support that can be offered.*

## SUCCESSSES

*Raising £20K from the church and then mobilising help from them to develop our disused storage basement area into a beautiful farm shop style community grocery.*

*We have seen some of our customers transitioning out of food insecurity into independent living and some even now volunteer to give back to the grocery.*

## MAKING THE CHANGE

The primary resource we needed initially was some space within our church building to turn into a farm shop style grocery. The storage area basement of the church was selected as the space to use and then we needed financial, plumbing, electrical, food hygiene, systems, volunteer team help as well as management to make the adjustment from a delivery-based system to a community grocery.

Our church congregation was our main resources for support in setting up the project as we know it today as they donated their time, money, food, expertise and resources. There was additional support from the local council and supermarkets in terms of stock. The Message Trust (based in Manchester but have network of Community Groceries across the country) were our primary inspiration and resource for embracing a Community Grocery approach to address local food poverty needs.

Overall the grocery has been a catalyst to offer support and help in other areas of people's lives where they are struggling.

## OUR IMPACT

The impact of our grocery has been seen in the pathways people have pursued as they have been supported with dignity, respect and a sense of empowerment.

People have accessed other avenues of support for their situation and their family beyond food and this has been liberating for many

For 3 people in particular, they moved from people who accessed our food provision services to being people who volunteer and help deliver our food provision services in order to help others, such is their gratitude for the help they received when in need.

## IF WE WERE DOING IT AGAIN

We wished we knew then that keeping things as simple as possible in terms of systems and paperwork is huge for building bridges rather than barriers.

Also, we were naïve in how much time, effort, energy and management input is required to make the grocery and the volunteer teams to work well.

With hindsight our aspirations for a volunteer only model may not be possible, and some funded part-time employed specialist support may well be necessary.

*For more information about the Bridge Community Church Grocery please contact Pastor Dave Oakley via email [david@bridgecommunitychurch.co.uk](mailto:david@bridgecommunitychurch.co.uk)*

