



Islwyn.  
Ministry Area

## **Rhymney Valley Foodbank Annual Report October 2020-October 2021**

### **Foreword by The Chairman of the Benefice of Islwyn – The Reverend Canon Mark Owen SCP**

As a member of the Foodbank Team, this last year has been a challenge to say the least, but it has been a real privilege to be part of it. I am so proud of our new Foodbank Operations Manager Steve, who has steered the Foodbank in such a positive and productive way, supported by wonderful volunteers who give so generously of time and energy, along with all those who donate from the kindness of their hearts to those in need. These are true Christian people living out their faith and showing the Good News of the Gospel in practical and loving ways.

So much has been achieved as our annual report shows, not just feeding people but loving respecting and helping people in many ways.

We are a Christian organisation run by Christians volunteering to help those in community in any way we can. We aim to treat everyone with equality dignity and love. Valuing everyone in our organisation from management, volunteers and especially those who need our services. We believe that all are welcome and loved without limit.

We read in Matthew 25:35-40 "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing

clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

We have fed, we have given a drink to the thirsty, we have invited in, we have clothed, we have given shelter, we have visited and we have loved people for who they are and where they are. We have sought to see the face of Jesus in all the people we have had the privilege to encounter in this last year, and we have seen his face. We have seen great random acts of kindness; we have seen light in dark places and we will continue to show that light in dark places and show love where we can. I am also hugely thankful for those who saw themselves in the margins or in dark places for what they have shown us, shared with us and taught us too.

Like many organisations across the UK, the Rhymney Valley Foodbank (RVFB) has navigated the challenges presented by the global Coronavirus Pandemic. Coronavirus has hit Caerphilly County Borough (CCB) hard. CCB was the only authority to impose a lockdown in Wales, from September 2020. A few weeks later, a national fire-break lockdown was imposed across Wales, lasting throughout October and part of November 2020. The subsequent nationwide lockdown in Wales from December 2020 to April 2021 (with some restrictions not lifted until August 2021) impacted on RVFB in many ways: operations and logistics became more complex against an environment where the foodbank became a more critical and urgent resource.

In early December 2020, we took the corporate decision to send the volunteer workforce home, until the Covid-19 Vaccination Programme was fully rolled out for the Most-At-Risk Groups – many of our volunteers fall into these categories. We have a dedicated, inspiring group of volunteers, committed to their community who reluctantly accepted that scientific and governmental advice and guidance could not be ignored as they accepted our Covid Risk Management Plan.

Foodbanks across the network in CCB were being supported from April 2020 to November 2020 by a free delivery service provided by the council, to assist foodbanks with increasing demand for services and to reduce footfall at the foodbank hub as it was not possible for individuals to collect parcels in person. This delivery service was suspended in November 2020.

RVFB operates in some of the most deprived communities in the county borough and in Wales as a whole, evidenced by the Wales Index of Multiple Deprivation. People living in these communities are living in perpetual poverty. Many individuals and families have poor or no education, are unable to drive or have access to their own vehicle. This is often exacerbated by poor public transport links. Unemployment is high, and the prospect of finding paid employment can be very limited. Rental accommodation is often in poor condition and in need of modernisation. All these factors, compounded by the limitations of the geographical location within the county borough, intensifies their disadvantage, and dampens optimism for an alternative to a life living in poverty.

Despite the challenges presented by the pandemic, there has been no disruption to our service. We have supported 3,347 individuals and

families with the provision of emergency food parcels throughout the period. In addition to addressing food poverty and insecurity, we have supported many individuals with onward referrals to other support services to ensure they receive a maximised level of care.

After the CCB delivery service ended, we quickly identified that a significant majority of individuals and families living in these isolated communities would continue to find it very difficult to get to a Foodbank Hub. We therefore, took the decision to implement a delivery service ourselves to ensure transport difficulties could not be a reason for those who needed food parcels to go without. We secured a small grant and hired the use of a van owned by a local community centre. Through our personalised delivery service, we have also identified further urgent support needs and made appropriate referrals. This has helped us ensure no disruption to deliveries and it is our hope that funding can be secured for it to continue from April 2022 onwards.



## **Partnership working**

Throughout the year, RVFB has been very fortunate to partner with several agencies (respecting Covid guidelines and restrictions at all times). This collaborative working has driven the growth and development of the foodbank and helped us maximise the support we can provide to assist people who need us most. One of our main partners is – ‘Caerphilly Cares’ (CC’s) part of the Community Regeneration Team at Caerphilly

County Borough Council. CC's have direct contact to a range of Officers from the different Directorates within the Council, and can deliver quick outcomes for people facing issues around housing, rent arrears, environmental issues and debt.

## **Supporting disaffected communities**

In early 2021, during the coldest winter months, we witnessed many individuals with street addresses migrate up the Rhymney valley to a community in which we operate. These individuals were sleeping in doorways and congregating in Church grounds. In addition to living in exposed conditions, many were substance dependent. Typical with most communities, they were marginalised, stereotyped, and stigmatised and were able to access very few support services due to their own circumstances and restrictions, imposed by the winter lockdown. To expedite a positive outcome and to provide as much support to these individuals the RVFB led partnerships with local Churches and the Rotary Club of Blackwood to provide the foodbank with tents, sleeping bags, water-proof coats, and other necessary items. Working closely with the manager of the White Rose Resource and Information Centre in New Tredegar, these items were speedily collected and distributed to help improve the accommodation and basic life necessities to these individuals to provide some shelter, privacy, safety and hopefully restore some dignity and pride.

## **Community library**

Working closely with Bargoed Community, more than 2500 reading books for children and young people were collected to provide a community library resource. Local research identified that a significant number of children are not developing socially or educationally, and many do not have expected standards of literacy. Many children and young people have access to electronic devices before they have access to books, and some have no access to books at all. We were delighted to support this initiative in partnership with the community champion from the local Morrison's grocery store, the Blackwood Rotary Club, local Churches, and individuals.



## South Wales Fire and Rescue Service

RVFB formed a partnership with the local Fire Service to raise awareness of home fire safety. Five hundred emergency food parcels were made up using bags for life with home fire safety branding and disseminated them to our beneficiaries. Additionally, those receiving the emergency food parcels were provided with home fire safety manuals and invited to apply for free smoke and carbon monoxide alarms.



# Community Engagement Event and Table Top Sale

RVFB took the opportunity to connect with the community in which we operate and raise awareness of services provided during Summer 2021. Our Community Engagement event and Table-Top Sale was held in the grounds of St Peter's Church during the sunny bank holiday weekend. We welcomed local people to talk about the foodbank and to discuss what else we could do to support local initiatives, and our fund-raising table-top sale helped us raise some additional funds to purchase supplies for the emergency food parcels. We were delighted by the community spirit and pride evident in the community of Aberbargoed.

Some of our volunteers are featured in the photograph below proudly attending to their displays at the Table Top Sale.



## Blackwood Rotary Club

RVFB is extremely fortunate to enjoy an excellent partnership with the Rotary Club of Blackwood. Rotary Club members provided outstanding steel storage racking to safely and hygienically store food parcel supplies in our warehouse at St Peter's Church. Prior to this generous donation, RVFB had only very basic storage capacity at the Church. This donation has enabled us to develop a more user-friendly and organised system for stock replenishment.



RVFB is extremely grateful for the ongoing support and generosity extended from the President and Members of the Rotary Club.



# Championing Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

The RVFB was very proud to participate in the production of a short film to promote Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion. The film was made in conjunction with the Diocese of Monmouth and showcased in its annual Diocesan Conference. RVFB is an inclusive organisation. Respect and equality for diverse volunteers and individuals using the foodbank are paramount. We aim to ensure that no one is marginalised on the grounds of difference or due to particular characteristics.



## RVFB mascot

RVFB also feeds domestic pets, who can provide a lifeline of companionship for those who use the services of the Foodbank. To raise awareness of this service, we were delighted to borrow and feature “Tilly” in our recent marketing drive.



## Kitchen restoration

Welsh Government Food Poverty and Insecurity Fund awarded grant assistance to RVFB during 2021 to restore and upgrade the kitchen at St Peter's Church, Aberbargoed. As a result of the restoration, RVFB will be able to provide cookery demonstrations for young people (in strict adherence to prevailing Covid guidelines) to raise awareness of cultural diversity through culinary dishes from around the world and to help educate young people on the importance of healthy, nutritionally balanced meals.



## Healthy eating recipes

To support the beneficiaries of RVFB services, healthy eating recipe cards have been developed. These recipes can be used to create healthy meals from the core food items included in our emergency food parcels. Please see a sample recipe outlined below.

### **Soup it up**

*If needs must, some tinned soups can be mixed together e.g., chicken with vegetable broth, or tomato with minestrone. Add chopped tinned vegetables, baked beans, cooked rice, or cooked pasta shapes to make a chunky style soup.*

*Spice up tinned soup with a little chilli or curry powder. A little dried oregano or parsley adds interest.*

*Some soups e.g., mushroom or chicken make very good sauces for pasta dishes. Campbell's condensed soups work very well. Just add*

*the soup to drained macaroni and heat thoroughly, stirring slowly.  
Sprinkle with grated cheese and brown under the grill.*

## **Health and Emotional Well-being centre**

Working collaboratively with Caerphilly Cares our funding partner, and the White Rose Resource and Information Centre, RVFB is grateful for grant assistance to pilot a health and Wellbeing room at the White Rose Centre, New Tredegar. The aim of this project is to invite organisations from the Third sector to have a presence in our room to support individuals and families to build their resilience, address poverty, promote financial inclusion and to be a haven for people facing difficulties. This pilot commences in November 2021 for 6 months.

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank the following partners:

- Moondance Foundation
- Blackwood Rotary Club
- Caerphilly Cares
- Caerphilly County Borough Council
- White Rose Resource and Information Centre
- Tesco Supermarkets
- Morrison's Supermarkets
- Sainsbury's Supermarkets
- Welsh Government (Y Senydd)
- The Benefice of Islwyn
- The Benefice of Mynydd Bedwellte
- The Parish of Bedwellty and New Tredegar
- Local schools, organisations, businesses', Chapels, and individuals

Rhymney Valley Foodbank offers far more support than addressing food insecurity. However, by doing this, we are often the first point of support for people facing challenging situations. As we have developed partnerships with an excellent network of support services, we are able to quickly identify the correct service for them and make immediate referrals.

Without the ongoing support of the organisations listed above, and the generosity of individuals living in our communities, the Rhymney Valley

Foodbank would not be able to continue to provide critical service to support the most disadvantaged individuals in our local communities.

Finally, special thanks go out to the wonderful volunteer workforce who support the RVFB Operations Manager in keeping the foodbank running. They provide continued, steadfast commitment and support to the Foodbank and have a huge impact in our community.

Personal reflections and acknowledgements from volunteers, partners and beneficiaries of our service are outlined below.

## **Partners:**

“My colleagues and I have worked alongside RVFB since the start of the pandemic in March 2020. This developed into a very close working relationship and has continued throughout. Steve has always been accommodating and willing to support others, even if it’s outside of his area. Nothing is too much trouble for him!! We look forward to continuing to support each other in the future.” Rebecca Lewis, ‘Caerphilly Cares’

“Within my new role in Caerphilly Cares the links with Rhymney Valley Foodbank have been invaluable. Not only have we been able to easily access food for our most vulnerable community members we have also received referrals for those in need of additional support. The partnership working allows for us to ensure all community members are receiving a well-rounded support service, ensuring the right support is accessed at the right time. We have been able to develop this professional relationship more strongly the last 12 months which has had a positive impact on the communities in which we support.” Kirstie James, ‘Caerphilly Cares’

“The Rhymney Valley Foodbank has been exemplar in supporting our vulnerable residents during the toughest of times, especially working through a global pandemic and the complexity that it brings with it. Despite these challenges, they have supported residents by making sure those who are caught up by the cuts to Universal Credit, increase costs in energy and food bills are not left behind. They have simply been the lifeline for so many people. I wish to express my thanks and appreciation to all those involved with the daily operation of our foodbank and I would urge residents to support their local foodbank during these times.”

## **Cllr Carl Cuss**

Cynghorydd Sir - Twyn Carno | County Councillor - Twyn Carno  
Cyngor Bwrdeistref Sirol Caerffili | Caerphilly County Borough Council

## **Beneficiaries:**

“Well first off its more than a food bank as we’ve made a friend, also I would like to say that its fantastic what you do, having a food parcel has helped us and our dog massively, we honestly don’t know where we’d be without it, from not having help and going without food most days to now having someone to talk to and help with food is a great thing to have”  
Martin, Michelle and Milo (dog) Beneficiary ‘RVFB’

“Thank you so much for delivering the food, I’ve been starving”. John Beneficiary ‘RVFB’

“Sorry for crying, I wasn’t expecting all this. I thought you were bringing emergency food and you’ve brought clothes, nappies and all this for my baby, I can’t thank you enough”. Sarah Beneficiary ‘RVFB’

“I met Steve when he brought me food. After I told him my problems, he got me in touch with my support worker. I’m getting my life sorted” Paul Beneficiary ‘RVFB’

**Names of our beneficiaries have been anonymised to protect their identity.**

## **Volunteers:**

“Being a mother and having experienced a few hard times when it was difficult to provide food for my children made me want to help other families when they were facing a similar situation. Also being a Christian, I am proud that my Church is involved with such an enterprise. On a personal level, filling the bags with food gives me such a warm feeling knowing that a local family will be well fed for a few days until they can get financial assistance.” Jeannette Vaughan ‘RVFB Volunteer’

“I entered the Foodbank during a difficult time. I had always been passionate about social justice issues and I wanted to become an advocate for those marginalised by disadvantage, discrimination and poverty. As a graduate, I knew I wanted to utilise my career to help others and invoke the most amount of positive meaningful change. When I struggled to find a pathway, the Foodbank was there for me. I would not

have the confidence to have progressed into the positions I have now without volunteering at the Rhymney Valley Foodbank. I've learned a tremendous amount about the struggles facing those in my community and even more so about the value of helping others from my fellow volunteers". Emma-Jayne Harris 'RVFB Volunteer'

"For me it was just down to wanting to help people. I've always found it disgraceful that in a country as rich and developed as ours there are people who through no fault of their own are going hungry. I wanted to do something that was local where I could see I was making a difference, however small. The Foodbank suits me because it's not my personality to go out and shake a tin at people, I'm much happier writing the use by dates on them". Dave Ham 'RVFB Volunteer'

"What a privilege to be a tiny cog in my local Foodbank wheel! Now retired, the least I can do is to repay the kindness my community has always extended to me. Perhaps this granny's few hours of volunteering might make a difference to a young local family going through a tough time". Barbara Prentice 'RVFB Volunteer'

"Back in the seventies in the early days of our marriage we had to count the pennies, and at times would only be able to manage with the help of family, and whilst we were never in the desperate situation that we see families today, food poverty did exist, but I'm sure it's worse today than then. Now that we have the time and resources to help in a very small way it's a pleasure to be involved". Colin Jelly 'RVFB Volunteer'

Following a minor workplace assault, I was off for five years. I was at a bit of a low point, I'd lost all confidence in myself and structure of day to day life. It took a year to pluck up the courage to reach out to my local food bank to see if they wanted any help. I hoped in some small, manageable way I'd be able to help those in need, in my community. It was one of the best decisions I've ever had the privilege to make. Those involved at every level often, unpaid volunteers are open and hugely friendly in their drive to help others, without judgement. I gained friends for life, confidence and a huge admiration for everyone who plays a part in making the food bank work: from the manager who deals face to face with people in need, volunteers who do anything and everything to help out, to the individuals, organisations and businesses that donate money, long life food and other goods throughout the year which literally keeps the food bank going every single week. There is so much love and kindness in my community. I knew my South Wales valley community

was derived in its past which reverberates down history to the present day. However the depth and breadth of the need from people living in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain, one of the richest countries in the world is both shocking and shameful. I have met someone employed, hadn't eaten in days due to Universal credit changes, another person cried when they saw the Christmas food parcels we gave them and when we leafleted in our area about the food bank just before the start of the six week holidays 8 people from one street got in contact.

A change in circumstances can happen to anyone, at any time, for any reason. Physical or mental ill health, job loss or reduction in hours, rent arrears, covid-19 and its knock on effects, caring responsibilities, benefit sanctions, fleeing domestic violence, language barriers the list is endless. Austerity, the bed room tax and universal credit changes were biting and I wanted to help those being demonised by the government through no fault of their own.

I still give a few hours each week in sorting food at the warehouse-come Church. When I'm sorting through donations, checking the date and putting everything in its specific crate I think this can of veg, meat, rice pudding means that someone somewhere, not far from me will not have to go through the day hungry, will not have to go to sleep hungry. Something that should not be happening in today's Britain or world for that matter". Kirsty Williams 'RVFB Volunteer'

"I became involved with my local Food bank after my retirement just over two years ago. It has been a rewarding experience for me enabling me to meet and become friends with an amazing group of volunteers. The ability to use some of the skills acquired during my working life, to help provide much needed short term relief to those in the local community in dire need, and to work towards the goal of eliminating food poverty is personally fulfilling" Stephen Holdroyd 'RVFB Volunteer'

"It is a terrible indictment that one of the richest countries in the world needs food banks to help ensure that those members of the community who need help, can feed themselves and their families. With this in mind I feel compelled to volunteer at the Rhymney Valley Food Bank and feel privileged that I am able to do this". Janie Hughes 'RVFB Volunteer'

"It is with trepidation I first became involved with Rhymney Valley Foodbank. I was angry that in a Welfare State there was a sizeable section of society living in food poverty and that lobbying the government

was the only solution. It became clear this wasn't making any difference and to maybe not solve the problem, but alleviate it, caring sections of society had to step in. They have done so, admirably, all over the UK. We at RVFB made up of varying folk in the community, CARE! For myself being part gives me the satisfaction that although it is just a drop in the ocean to solving problems that one of the richest countries on our planet should be ashamed of admitting, I have made new friends of a like mind".  
Jacqui Prosser 'RVFB Volunteer'

**Please note that any personal or political views or opinions presented in these reflections are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of The Benefice of Islwyn or Rhymney Valley Foodbank.**