

Feature

How to help your local foodbank this Christmas

Suffolk's foodbanks are already gearing up for what they're predicting will be a long winter. By **Danielle Lett**

This year has seen unprecedented numbers of people turn to foodbanks in their time of need due to the Coronavirus crisis. As Christmas nears, charities across the county are putting in the extra man hours to ensure they can still provide for the people of Suffolk over the festive period. Find out how they've been doing during lockdown, how they're preparing for the winter season, and how you can help.

Stowmarket and Area Foodbank, Stowmarket

Mike Smith has been at the helm of Stowmarket and Area Foodbank for just under a decade, with his centre having celebrated its eighth birthday earlier this month. Serving Stowmarket, the surrounding villages, and any towns up to Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds, Mike has noticed an increase in those needing assistance throughout the pandemic – with numbers of families being referred to him tripling. “We normally average 15 families a week under normal circumstances, but due to Covid, we've gone up to 40 families a week,” he explained. “Coronavirus has transformed the foodbank - we've had to rely on

shops and wholesalers because customers weren't able to come in with donations due to the three months our centre was in lockdown.”

With people unable to make physical donations, kindness still prevailed, and many managed to donate money online to the foodbank, allowing Mike and his team to continue their hard work over the past few months. “All through the pandemic, we've been well-supported. We're now averaging 25 families a week, so it's dropped back down from the peak,” he added.

However, with numbers expected to rise again as Christmas approaches, Mike and the team have been preparing and making the most of this year's harvest festival, in order to ensure they're well stocked for the coming months. “We do more food parcels across November and December than any other month – that's normal every year, whether that's due to homelessness, or families who have lost jobs.

“But, we're expecting an even bigger surge towards the end of the year because of the mass of Covid-related job losses. I think we haven't seen anything yet, and the demand for foodbanks will go way past what it was in March

and April.”

In order to ensure the people of Stowmarket can still make the most of Christmas, alongside its regular food parcels, Mike's foodbank will also be putting together its annual seasonal hampers.

“We tend to deliver around 120 of these the week before Christmas. We get boxes donated to us, which are then gift-wrapped and filled by a group of volunteers, and it's not normal food, it's all Christmas food in there, so it'll be Christmas cake, pudding, selection boxes, nuts, crisps, pickles and the like. We'll then have volunteer drivers deliver the boxes to where they need to go.”

For anyone in Stowmarket who may be seeking the help of foodbanks this Christmas – or knows someone who does – Mike says there's a number of ways to be referred. “Throughout the year, we take referrals from organisations such as social services, the police, the NHS and Citizens Advice for our emergency food parcels. With the Christmas hampers, as it's a special one-off, we still use our normal referral system to have people come to us, but if someone knows a family who's in need at this time of year, they can nominate them on their behalf. Some local councillors, church leaders and businesses may have nomination forms, so they can nominate anyone they know. Sometimes it's simply



Stowmarket Foodbank coordinator Mike Smith, mayor's consort Annette Ekpenyong, Stowmarket Town mayor Paul Ekpenyong and Hazel Smith following a successful food drive
Picture: STOWMARKET FOODBANK

neighbours reaching out on behalf of other neighbours.”

If anyone is looking to donate food, Christmas or otherwise, to Stowmarket and Area Foodbank, there are a number of drop-off points near Mike's foodbank. These include Hillside Community Centre, Stowmarket Tesco, Asda and any of the Co-Ops throughout Stowmarket, Needham Market, Haughley, Elmswell and Stowupland Garage.

“The things we don't need are pasta, tins of soup or baked beans – I think every foodbank in the country has a mountain of those

three things,” added Mike.

To find out how to help Stowmarket and Area Foodbank, call 01449 774000.

FIND Ipswich, Ipswich

Maureen Reynel has been supporting those living in Ipswich and its surrounding towns for 30 years now – and like Mike Smith, is noticing how many more people need her service as the festive period approaches. “Numbers have obviously risen, and are rising again now - I think there's going to be more people in dire



Record numbers of people are turning to foodbanks this year due to Covid

Picture: GETTY IMAGES

Feature



Foodbanks and charities are already preparing for this year's festive season

Picture: GETTY IMAGES

straits this year."

FIND Ipswich – which provides food parcels for those living in Ipswich, Bergholt, Sudbury and Shotley – saw many of its volunteers and drivers go into self-isolation during the peak of the pandemic back in spring. "During lockdown, I lost 30 of my regular volunteers because of their age and vulnerability, so I was dependent on people who were furloughed to help out, but the numbers rose so drastically. It plateaued after a few months to just over a hundred parcels or so a week, but it's going up again. The before week last it was 140."

With numbers on the up, Maureen and her team are in the midst of preparing their annual festive food parcels and gift boxes. "What we do every year is make up food hampers with personalised gifts, and our intention this year is to still make up 1,000 boxes. With the gifts, lots of churches and schools won't be able to donate due to Covid, so we're asking for gift vouchers for specific shops, and those will go out with the food boxes. We've got two toy shops, Smyths and The Entertainer, and we're also asking for Primark, Argos, Boots, Sainsbury's, Waitrose and Co-Op vouchers."

In terms of food, FIND Ipswich is in need of large tubs of sweets, chocolates and biscuits for its Christmas hampers. "When it gets closer to Christmas, if there's any fresh food providers out there, I

always need good quality fresh fruit and vegetables as well for the boxes. What we don't need is pasta, soup, baked beans or porridge."

Donations to FIND Ipswich can be made directly to its foodbank, or to a number of its collection points across town. These include Ipswich's Co-Ops, two Sainsbury's and Waitrose.

"I just have to trust that we will have more people come on board to volunteer – there are some days when I have 10 cars going out, and some days when I have four or five. But people know FIND, and the work we've done for many years, I just have to trust and have faith that the people will be out there to help get the goods out."

To find out how to help FIND Ipswich, call 01473 833351.

Suggested foodbank donations this Christmas

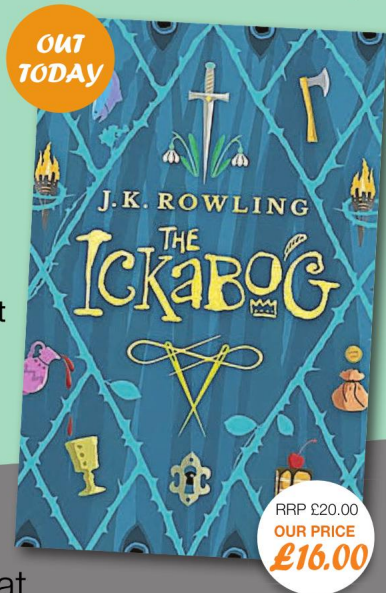
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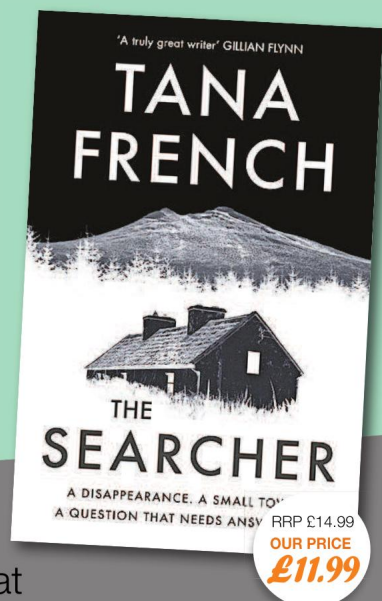
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