



Annual Report 2023-24

This report covers the tenth year of our operation, from April 2023 to the end of March 2024.

Overview

This has proved to be another important year in the life charity, continuing the work and development reported last year and defining the future direction for the next few years. In addition to the four new trustees who joined the Board last year, Una McNicholl became the seventh trustee, joining early this financial year and bringing with her bringing a wealth of relevant knowledge and experience. During the year she also kindly took on the role of secretary.

The trustees met on a total of eight occasions throughout the course of the year. Meetings were always quorate. Every meeting was provided with a financial report and an operational report. Over the course of the first few meetings of the year, trustees considered whether to seek another member to lead on PR/Comms but eventually decided that such a role was not essential at this stage in the organisation's development.

Bensham Community Food Co-op

Prior to the above changes which took place early in 2023, the relationship with the Bensham Community Food Co-op took the form of paying for the monthly membership of FareShare along with a few direct purchases of food and goods. Collections of surplus food from local shops has never really picked up again since covid along with the pressure on volunteers collecting late in the evening or early morning. Fareshare provide an interesting and eclectic mix of items on a regular and consistent basis with much of the remainder of the food coming from local churches, charities, schools and individuals who now know to provide fresh produce, rather than just dried and tinned goods, which many have been conditioned to do by conventional food banks. Numbers attending the Food Co-op have continued to rise over the last year and reached or exceeded pre-covid levels on some occasions. A total of 4851 collected food over the last year, compared with 4134 the previous year and 4034 the year before that which on average is 99 people per week compared with 84 the previous year and 81 the year before that. Numbers of families, children benefiting, and single people all went up year on year over these three years. Growing levels of poverty and financial hardship in Bensham are affecting these numbers along with more asylum seekers being placed in the area and the North East in general because of the relatively cheaper housing costs for contract providers.

Finance

The Financial Accounts for 2023-24 show the incomings and outgoings of the charity. We had an income of £10,967 and expenditure of £4640 meaning that at year end, our balance was £12,214. This compares favourably with the previous year 2022-23, when we had an income of £6187 and expenditure of £3191 and an end of year balance of £5887. This meant that we had a 77% increase in donations but only a 45% increase in expenditure. Almost all of our direct expenditure related to the Food Co-op. As happened last year, our expenditure on the Food Coop was considerably reduced as a result of support received from Bensham & Saltwell Alive who in turn were beneficiaries of the Household Support Grant (HSG) which is a central government fund dispersed via Local Authorities, in our case Gateshead Council. Over the course of this year, we have benefitted from the ability to buy goods to the value of around £20,000 via this route. Central Government are no longer providing this fund and Gateshead Council have unable to take it on themselves. As such we have taken a decision not to spend the reserves of money this year to better help us meet the financial challenges which the Food Co-op will face when the HSG ceases to exist.

Work has begun to model and anticipate the extra income that we will need to fill the shortfall in funding caused by the loss of the HSG and to ensure that with the increased demand seen in 2023-4 we are able to continue to make a significant and valuable offer to those who need our service.

Governance

A lot of work has gone on this year to write and implement a number of policies and procedures which were not formerly in place. These include a Financial Policy, Data Protection, Safeguarding, Volunteering and Food Hygiene. This will continue into the next financial year and will involve regular reviews and updating to ensure relevance as well as more work to ensure that policies and practice are implemented.

The Future

Both the influx of new trustees and the decision that the charity would take a clearer responsibility for the Food Co-op have given us fresh impetus over the last year. Going into the new financial year, there are many challenges ahead as we seek to maintain and further develop the existing provision, embed policies and procedures and establish a properly costed and funded service. There are many opportunities too, not least in looking to see how we can continue to fulfil our wider charitable objects by supporting or developing other projects and activities which feed people physically, emotionally and spiritually as we managed to do in the early years. We have played our part in helping a great many people over the last year and we look forward to continuing to do so in the next year and in the years to come.