

Sharing our story: A food co-operative at St. Barnabas Church, Oldham



Provided by Rev Paul Monk, vicar

“The food co-operative follows the ‘food pantry’ model. Members come from all areas of Oldham and from all sectors of society. Members give a donation for each bag of food they collect and choose the food in those bags themselves. Some food is frozen, some is fresh (fruit and vegetables, milk and cheese) and some is tinned, in jars or in packets.

The food co-operative is housed in two large bespoke rooms at St Barnabas. Most of the food is purchased by St Barnabas from FareShare Greater Manchester. The fee comes from an array of grants, and from the member’s own contributions.

The project is not intended as a crisis support (‘though it often does help those in extremis). Rather, we offer food at an exceptionally low fee, so that families and individuals can have sufficient food that is nutritious, plentiful and affordable. Members don’t need to be referred by an external agency, and can attend every week or infrequently, choosing up to one large bag of food per person per week.

Membership falls into three broad categories:

- Some members pay a token amount because they’re asylum seekers. Fairly often, they are destitute because they should receive Universal Credit but their benefits claim is delayed or wrong, or they have been sanctioned incorrectly, or a sudden bill has tipped them over the edge ...
- Some members choose to pay an average of £2.50 per person per week. The value of this food (if purchased in a supermarket) would amount to about £30.
- Some members elect to pay more. They still receive good food in plentiful amounts but choose to live in solidarity and subsidise others.

CASE STUDY

We ask all members to pay something, but members choose their own donation amount. We are not offering charity but a new vision of how a co-operative can improve local lives. Giving a donation gives ownership and prevents a sense of dependency or even fraud.



Notes

1. The new rooms were being built between August and October hence the sporadic attendance indicated by the spikes near the centre of the graph.
2. Anecdotal evidence suggests the dip over the New Year was due to some folk buying their own food for Christmas; other folk assumed we were shut.
3. The strong growth in 2021 is caused by word of mouth, Brexit prices and scarcity; and we order more food to accommodate more members.