

Mile in My Shoes: Matt's story

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My policy with trainers is, I basically wait until my current trainers are falling apart and then I go to TK Maxx or, like, JD Sports and get like a cheap pair of functional trainers and then I wear 'em to destruction. I think I've got these just in the pandemic or just after the pandemic? They've been in the food bank sessions, food bank warehouses, school meetings, anti-poverty groups, council strategy punch-ups – *laughs* – whatever they are – everything that happened in the food banking campaigns that I was involved in for probably about a year and a half, I had days on.

Hello, my name is Matt Stallard. I am the Campaigns Manager at Manchester Central Foodbank.

Okay, so we're going into the main food bank warehouse... This is where we store all the food that has already been sorted, put into individual crates for each of the different categories of food items which you can see a very high-tech labelling system. Potatoes, vegetables, bacon, tomatoes etcetera.

So, Manchester Central Food Bank, we've been here for almost 11 years now. Which is a real kind of, like bittersweet anniversary, because on the one hand we justifiably have to celebrate, you know, tens of thousands of people who've been supported in that time. You know, people in, in real crisis and hardship, our neighbours, our community members. And like, the donations and the volunteering and the support of literally thousands of Mancunians to make that possible is an absolutely amazing thing. But at the same time, even from the very start, we kind of always talked about the fact that we didn't want to be here, we shouldn't be here. In our, kind of, early team meetings we always used to talk about can we, can we close the food bank yet. We – it was always a kind of, like short-term measure. Sadly, we just got busier and busier and busier and busier, every year.

So, for the first, probably, I don't know, four years or so the food bank was going, I was a volunteer, mainly doing at least one session every week. It was difficult to see the kind of situations people were finding themselves in. The common kind of issues that would come up would be, you know, someone's... fridge is broken and buying a new fridge is like basically cleaning them out for a couple of weeks. Loads of people, say, with kind of health conditions, who've had to stop working for a period while they're getting treatment, and then just simply not being supported quickly enough, properly enough by whatever kind of benefits or state support or other support should be there. Particularly around insecure work. People, like zero-hour contracts, people not being able to get enough work in order to keep themselves going, even though they're perhaps wanted to.

I remember in some of those early months and years meeting a family with a, probably like three, four-year-old little girl who had rickets, which was you know, something that I don't

think I'd ever expected to come into contact with. It's quite, you know, difficult... eye-opening thing to have to see and... you know, try and do your best to... particularly when you, when we're quite a young, new organization, kind of how you best signpost or support people with these kind of situations that you perhaps never expected.

We had a number of people back when I first started who were full-time carers for family members with disabilities or special educational needs who were, you know, not able to work because they were full-time carers but then weren't getting the support they needed. We had a massive game in those early years with the local job centres. It was the time of the transition from the... previous benefit system to Universal Credit. So, people were, through absolutely no fault of their own, being either... You know, they've lost their job, and they need to sign on for Universal Credit or they're transitioning from the previous regime. And the immediate thing that happened was they were given a five, six-week wait before they could get any money while things were processed. Who in this society can have five, six weeks with no money? Whoever you are, whatever your job was before, whatever your situation. So just the kind of, the absolute injustice of a system that could very easily not do that.

We're currently now... have been supporting over 1,600 people per month. That is double what it was about a year and a half ago. And that was double what it was during and then before the pandemic. We started off doing three sessions a week from Ardwick, which is near the centre of the city like, based on the university campus. But we just found more and more people particularly coming from North and East Manchester. Clearly there's a massive gap in the provision in those areas. So, we took the decision after the pandemic that we were gonna move our sessions so that we now do one per week in central, East and North Manchester.

You come away feeling like you've done something good when you've done a session. There's a feeling of like, reward. Like, at least we did that. But like, to kind of, the disempowerment – obviously the people in the situation are feeling, but you as someone who's like, 'Right okay, how can we help you?' And then actually it's like, so capricious and out of your hands. And totally unjust and just illogical. Like, why would you make people – *laughs* – wait five, six weeks with no money. What do you think is gonna happen?

Part of why the food bank's here is deeply systemic issues that started well before austerity but have been compacted by austerity. North Manchester for example, has got the highest levels of temporary accommodation I think in the entire UK. Probably one of the worst outside London, I would guess. So, we need loads more affordable and council houses as fast as possible. That'd be a massive structural, you know, medium, long-term thing.

There are people who come to the food bank more than just that kind of two, three times in a crisis. 11 per cent of the households that we support now come once a month, or more than that. Across Manchester, we've got some of the highest rates, in certain wards, in the country where people's discretionary incomes are less than 20, 30 quid a month. So that's after all their essential bills are paid, there's less than 20 or 30 quid a month left for

everything else. Obviously, as a food bank and all the other kind of anti-poverty and food provision around us, we are now just plugging that gap.

The only way we're gonna end that need is through ending the destitution. So that is things like, making sure that Universal Credit and your core benefits actually match the cost of the essentials. The two-child benefit cap is absolutely punishing children and families through no fault of their own. Of the people that we support every month, 46 per cent come from households with more than two children in them, 24 per cent of the people we support are from families where they have four or more children. So, you know, the more children you have, disproportionately even more you're getting, you're getting hammered and you needing to rely on the food bank and other support like that. You know, totally disproportionately we can see the impact of that two-child benefit cap, and who's getting punished is children in the hardest little bits of Manchester.

It is challenging at times to kind of keep, keep going... When you know, just month after month, year after year, you see the need, the problems. Yeah... it can be difficult. I mean you get small, marginal victories now and then when you're asking for stuff and that you kind of feel like you've had at least a small role in pushing an issue forward or making some kind of change around you. One of them – *laughs* – every few months is maybe just about enough to, to keep you going.

There's a great joy and reward in just connecting with people and listening. And you know, even if it doesn't directly – you know, you listen to one person who tells you about their experience and then tomorrow you've suddenly changed the system – just the process of building relationships and sharing and listening and communicating with, you know, all different people, kind of has its own power and energy it gives you, I suppose, as well.