

Cllr Jim Millard: Hello and welcome back to Talk Richmond, with me, your host Jim Millard. As everyone feels the squeeze of the cost of living crisis, more food banks are seeing an increase in people coming to their doors. Today, I'm very pleased to be joined by Richmond Food Bank Manager Paul Beadle to discuss food support in Richmond upon Thames. Richmond Food Bank has four food distribution points in and near the borough and can provide three days of nutritionally balanced emergency food for people. The service is provided by the Trussell Trust, a nationwide network helping to combat poverty and food hunger across the UK. So, without further ado, welcome Paul to Talk Richmond.

Paul Beadle: Thank you very much.

Cllr Millard: It's great to have you here. Thank you, Paul. And to start with, could you tell us a bit more about the work that Richmond Food Bank does in the community?

Paul: Sure. Yeah. I'm actually employed by Vineyard Community Centre and Vineyard Community Centre has different services. So we run a morning drop-in: five days a week from 9am to 11am for people in crisis, people living on the streets, where they can come and get a free breakfast, a shower if they need it. We have a community fridge. We have caseworkers and support there, so that that's one of our services. We also have a couple of charity shops in Richmond which support the work we do as an organisation, and then we have the Food Bank, which I'm the manager of. And yeah, I think you said we currently have four food bank hubs around the borough. So, Richmond where we're based, Hampton, Whitton and Barnes. We're currently also working on opening 2 new hubs in different parts of the borough sometime early next year.

Cllr Millard: Thank you, Paul. Fantastic. And of course, you mentioned the Vineyard Community Centre. Can you explain a bit more how you work together with other services provided at the Vineyard?

Paul: So, we partner with other organisations such as Glass Door and Citizens Advice and SPEAR. So, when the SWEP protocol kicked in last week, the SPEAR workers came in and worked out of our drop in.

Cllr Millard: I'm just jumping in on acronym alert. SWEP is the 'severe weather emergency protocol'. So, when it drops below 0 degrees yeah.

Paul: Yeah, I only learnt about it myself last week. So yeah. So, we work in partnership with different agencies from across the borough. Also, we work together as a team across the services. So, when some of the new guests came into our drop-in and we were seeing some of the staff from SPEAR – a local organisation working with the homeless – some of them also need to access the food bank. So, they were able to refer them directly to us at the Food Bank. And the same with our charity shop, again with Food Bank we might refer people back to the drop-in. So we collaborate as a team, as staff as well across our different services.

Cllr Millard: Fantastic, and it's such an important service. Everything that happens at the Vineyard is so vital and, you know, especially in the current climate, of course. Have you seen a growing need in the borough as a result of this terrible cost of living crisis we're going through?

Paul: Yeah, we've seen a steady increase in need. I've been in the role now for about nine months, and since I've been there, we've seen a steady increase. So we're seeing about a 30% increase across our services, in need, in people in crisis or very much on the edge of crisis needing either one-off support or longer-term support.

Cllr Millard: Mm-hmm.

Paul: So we yeah, that's the sort of percentage we're working on at the moment, roughly about 30% and we're hoping it doesn't increase. But yeah, we'll have to wait and see what happens come the new year. With the ongoing squeeze on people's budgets, we just don't know at the moment how it's going to look in three, six months' time.

Cllr Millard: Are you able to share any stories of people who've been supported by Richmond Food Bank?

Paul: Yes. Well, when I first started back in March, April, we had initially a lot of people from Ukraine.

Cllr Millard: Right.

Paul: So we saw a real big spike in people come and needing our support. And interestingly, even some people who were hosts, who suddenly were hosting people, but the funds that they were getting from government was delayed for different reasons. So suddenly they were there not just having to feed themselves, but to feed others. So, not just only the refugees but the host. So that was an interesting sort of dynamic. And we've seen people, suddenly they're rent, they've had a big rent increase, unexpected and not a corresponding sort of salary increase. So rent increase has been a reason quite a few people have come to us. Of course, the increase in food and just cost generally. We had a chap come in recently. So, some people might need us a little bit longer term. Some people it's a one-off. And so we had a someone coming recently, who had an accident, damaged his hand and he was a manual worker, working on a contract basis, so he wasn't able to work for a few weeks, so found himself in a tight situation with a few extra unexpected bills as well on top of that, so needed to come and access our food bank. And I think also people who've been sanctioned, have their benefits sanctioned having missed appointments through sometimes or often, no fault of their own. Maybe it's just they've had a panic attack or some sort of anxiety or some sort of reason they weren't able to get to their appointment, had their benefit sanctioned and so have found themselves in again, a tight spot until they can get back on track. So, we have people coming to us for variety of reasons. What I found is – especially people who come to us for the first time – it's very difficult. You know, they feel a lot of shame in asking for help. Especially if they've been used to providing for themselves, it's very difficult for them to ask for help, to walk through the door. But we try and our team of volunteers, you know we try and be as welcoming as we can and help them realise that, you know, there's no shame. It's just often, like I said, it's no fault of their own, that the circumstances have just changed, and they suddenly found themselves in this often temporary crisis, or maybe slightly longer term crisis, until they get themselves back on their feet. So one thing I would say is if you find yourselves in a tricky spot or you're feeling, you know, your budget is squeezed, even if it's just for one-off, do get in touch, we can help you. We can talk you through the process so you can phone us. You can e-mail us, you can come and visit us. We are here to help and just to have that initial conversation and help you in that time of need. So, if there is anyone listening that's really feeling the pinch in the budget at the moment, we would just encourage them, if they feel the need to, please do get in touch with us.

Cllr Millard: Fantastic. That sounds great. I mean, for people who aren't new to this current situation is doing that to a lot of people, they may be experiencing hardship. You've said how to get in touch with you, which is brilliant, and I just wonder, you know, if they're not used to understanding the eligibility side of things, can you tell us a bit more about how people can access support in those ways?

Paul: Yeah. Well, I think as you said at the beginning, we are affiliated to Trussell Trust. So we're a Trussell Trust food bank, that means we get their support, we get their training, work, we use their operating manual. So, there's a certain process and Trussell Trust food banks work through a voucher system.

Cllr Millard: Right.

Paul: And I know some people think that's prohibitive, but there's a really good reason to get the vouchers that we work through and in partnership with local agencies. So, it might be the Job Centre, Citizens Advice, GP surgeries, schools, health visitors, social workers, there's dozens and dozens of them. So, the whole point is that the people will be referred through a local agency who will issue the food bank vouchers. And the reason for that is that they will get a proper assessment. And so, any sort of long-term support they might need because we're here for in the time of crisis and we can obviously provide the food for three days, but for the longer-term support to help address the issues behind the need or why they're in this crisis, we find it's better, best practice to work in partnership with local agencies who can both understand their needs and offer them the support that they need to help them get out of their crisis. So, people have to, you know, go through a referral agency. But having said that – look, if you can't get a voucher, if you're find it difficult to get a voucher through agency, please again come to us. We're not going to turn you away just because you haven't got a voucher. We can issue vouchers ourselves if you're really struggling to get one from a referral agency and then we will also help you and sign post you to where – if you need to use the Food bank a second or third time – how you can access a voucher. So, that so that's how we operate getting vouchers through local agencies and like I said, if you're not sure where to get one, get in touch. But also, the Trust, all of those stats and figures and reasons people need to access the food bank all gets entered into a central data collection system which is a Trussell Trust system. So all Trussell Trust food banks will enter all the voucher details onto the system and Trussell Trust use all that data to try and influence local and government at the national level to try and influence policy so that people around benefits or whatever else it might be. So to help people longer term. But as I said, if you're struggling to get a voucher, please do give us a call or e-mail us and we'll help you with that.

Cllr Millard: And we'll put the details in the show notes. And how long does it take to get through, you know, once you've just decided you want to get in touch, how long does that process take of getting referral and getting a voucher?

Paul: It can be really quick. It shouldn't need to take too long. So a local agency would know the right questions to ask. They will ask you about your circumstances, ask you about why you're in need. What's your current income? Are you accessing all the support and benefits you can? So that's as I said, that's one of the reasons we work with agencies because they know the right questions to ask. I'm not going to ask you for bank statements and all of that sort of thing - they'll ask you these questions. And most agencies now can also do that electronically, we're trying to get all of our local agencies onto issuing vouchers electronically rather than a paper-based system, which makes it a lot easier for everyone, especially our guests. You're trying to access the food bank, so that can be emailed or sent by text. And if you haven't got smartphone, they can just give you the voucher number over the phone and you can just literally write down the 10-digit number and bring that into us. In terms of accessing of voucher for food banks, if people can't obtain one from a local agency, Trussell Trust do have a national helpline. We've trained Citizen Advice advisors who can issue food bank vouchers and so people can call them, and their number is 0808 208 2138 and they're open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.

Cllr Millard: Great, great. And it's worth adding for our listeners who our parents, I should add that Richmond Council, we're stepping up once again to provide food vouchers over the holidays for those children on free school meals, so that's worth knowing as well. And we'll put details about free school meals in the show notes as well. And so you also got a lot of experience of this, do you have any tips on how people can keep food costs down?

Paul: One of the things we do when people come to see us, our volunteers have a conversation with them about whatever needs they might have. Our volunteers do give people some information about how else they can access free food across the borough. So that's one of the main things we do to help people keep food costs down. So as I mentioned earlier, we have a morning drop in. So that's Monday to Friday, 9am to 11am at our Vineyard Community Centre on the Vineyard in Richmond. And people can come for free breakfast. So cereal. It might be porridge, hot dogs. There's all sorts of things our morning Chef makes so people can come for free breakfast, teas and coffees. We also receive surplus food from local supermarkets every morning so we have some bread, cakes. We have a community fridge and people can take some items from there. So that's a really good way for people to access some food and some fresh food. We also signpost people to another local organisation called the Real Junk Food Project, so they have different places across the borough where they take surplus food and make it into meals.

Cllr Millard: We're doing a podcast with them as well.

Paul: Oh, perfect. So quite a few people who come to us and come to our drop-in also go along to the Real Junk Food Project. So, they do three times a week out the ETNA Centre just across Richmond Bridge from us so that's a really helpful organisation that we can sign post people to. Richmond AID also – I don't know if you're talking to them as well – they in Teddington do a weekly stall on a Wednesday morning outside of their building on Waldegrave Road. So yeah, they have a stall, a giveaway store, and we actually help them with some of their sort of long-life goods there. So, they have some surplus food. But they also have some tin goods which, as I say, we help them a bit with that. So that's yeah, the morning drop-in, the Real Junk Food Project, Richmond AID and I know there's an organisation in Heathfield over near Whitton area and I think that's on the Council website all those details as well.

Cllr Millard: And as well as accessing those sort of sources of help, is there anything you can recommend for people to do to keep their food costs down? When they're shopping for food or preparing food, or thinking about that sort of thing.

Paul: Well all of us, whether you use the food bank or not, you know, we're all trying to. I know for us as a family, you know, we're trying to eat less meat or example at the moment. So, we see meat as a bit of the luxury now. So trying to have more sort of vegetarian meals. Special offers, any vouchers, just any offers especially when used in supermarket apps now. A lot of them have their own apps where there might be special offers. I think it's just keeping our eyes open to whatever might be offered, and maybe having to change our eating habits a bit whilst we might be going through a time where our budgets are squeezed or through a time of crisis.

Cllr Millard: Thanks, Paul. Of course, I mean it eating well, so important and our public health colleagues are very clear about this. They want us to share the information that it, you know, eating well is so important because it gives you the energy you need to keep active throughout the day as well as the nutrients you need for growth and repair, helping us to stay strong and healthy and help prevent diet related illness and eating regularly and trying to have at least one hot meal per day can also help you keep warm, which is crucial with the rising energy costs we're experiencing at the

moment. That's an important message from public health. It's a sign of the times we're in that we have to actually be saying that, you know, but it's so important. I know people are sometimes going without to provide for their families and that's why it's so good to have the information about services like yours, Paul. That makes sure that people don't have to make that decision.

I know a lot of people listen to this, will find this very helpful. What you've said and also, we'll want to help to support the great work that Richmond Food Bank are doing so. Last question really, but how can people help?

Paul: We rely on our volunteers. We have four staff, I do four days, the other three all part time so we're limited in what we can do, what we can offer as a staff, but we have a team of over 50 volunteers working across our four sites. I think I mentioned earlier we are working towards opening 2 new sites, one in the Fulwell area, one in the Mortlake area. Happen to have spoken to one of your colleagues, another councillor asking us to look into that. So we are going to be looking for some new volunteers and we do post that on our website. So, volunteering with us. We do get a lot of people asking to volunteer and not always have roles available, but we'd say to people do get in touch and if you want to stay on our books and we'll contact you soon as position is available or if someone's, one of our volunteers is unavailable for a period of time, you can come and fill a gap. We also have people who do like community groups, like neighbourhood groups or who do food collections for us. So it might just be your street or a couple of streets. If people wanted to set that up and we can help you with that. So, it's just a like, it might be a weekly thing. It might be a monthly thing where you might have a street WhatsApp group for example, and want to, once a month, people can come and drop some goods. So we can give you a list of items we need on your doorstep and we can either come a collect it or you can come and deliver that to us. So donating food - individually as well. If you want to come and drop that off with us in Richmond or our warehouse over in Hampton, the details on our website or we can give those to you. So, if you want to just even drop off – some people come and drop two items off, some people drop five bags off. Every little helps if you want to donate food individually. That's really, really helpful. We rely in a purely on donations. We don't, we're in the fortunate position – we haven't needed to have to buy any food in. And I know some food banks sometimes have to do that, but we're in a fortunate position where we've had good support from local supermarkets, individuals, community groups. Financial donations as well, of course, are really key to help us keep running and operating again. That can be done via our website. We have a donate button. And also, increasingly now in corporate partnerships, not just with the Food Bank, Vineyard, but with community itself, with any local corporate interested in partnering with us. That's something our CEO can help with. Again though if you want more information, you can contact the Food Bank for that and we can put you in touch with our CEO.

Cllr Millard: Fantastic. Well, thank you so much Paul, for joining us on Talk Richmond and talking about the amazing work you're doing.

Paul: Yeah. Thank you. Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

Cllr Millard: No one in our community should have to face going hungry. I'd encourage all those listening to check the show notes for links to Richmond Food Bank and how you can get support or get involved. We also have included links to the Richmond Cost of Living Hub, which includes details on all the support available in the borough. If you have any questions or concerns, e-mail [talk@richmond.gov.uk](mailto:talk@richmond.gov.uk) and we will do our very best to help answer them. And please share this episode with any friends or family if you think it would help. And of course, leave a review that would give us a bit of food for thoughts. I'm Jim Millard. Thanks very much for listening.