

FREE FOOD IN HAVERHILL

Free Food in Haverhill is a community fridge project that focuses on preventing food waste. They rehome supermarket surplus food, ensuring that good food which can still be eaten makes its way into the local community.

Set up in 2021, the project has grown from a small set up at home to operating 7 days a week from a local cabin. Matt Yarwood tells us more about the project and how it was developed from scratch.

ABOUT OUR PROJECT

We offer free food (as per our name) on a daily basis, which is food from the local supermarkets which otherwise may have gone to waste had we not collected it. This can range from long life tins, cereals etc. to fresh fruit and veg, and even plants or more home related objects.

We open 7 days a week and aim to stick to 12pm-2pm Mon-Sat and 4:30pm-6:30pm on a Sunday. These times are dependent on volunteer and food availability. We post on our Facebook page that we are open and customers then make their way to us. This is to save people waiting around in an active car park unnecessarily, but once we are open anyone can come visit us.

Our premises are small so customers queue outside, then once at the front they receive a supermarket basket to take inside and fill up to a level top. It is completely up to the customer what food they take, but they must keep to the limits placed on various items. Often, there are no individual limits, as long as the customer can ensure that they will use the product that they take home. Once a customer has finished shopping they then unload their goods into their own bags which they have brought with them.

Anyone can visit us. We don't charge people to access our service, the name being 'free food' tells everyone that it is free. We do ask people for a donation if they are able to and suggest that a donation of £3 would be sufficient. Making our service open to all, regardless of who you are, how much money you may have or status you hold, makes a much more inclusive setting for both the general public and volunteers.

Our project primarily focuses on preventing food waste. However, we can help our customers who may need additional support by referring them to local services such as our local food bank, pet food bank or even Citizens Advice.

We see around 550 customers per week and have 6100 members on our Facebook page, which is increasing by the day, and are supported by a team of over 35 volunteers, as well as a committee.

We supply any foods which the supermarkets cannot stock on shelves, due to them being past their best before dates or at their use by dates.

We also have a small longlife section where we stock supplies donated through our local Aldi donation point.



HOW WE STARTED

Our project started small, with myself and my partner Lauren collecting food from an app called Olio. Initially we were collecting food from a Food Waste Hero - food which we had requested and was just for ourselves. We then had the chance to become Food Waste Heroes and collect food ourselves.

About a year later our local Tesco store started to contact us directly to collect surplus food from them.

We created the Facebook page 'Free Food in Haverhill' and started to give away the food from outside our home. This went from one or two collections a week to 22 collections a week within around 6 months. This often now sits at 40-48 depending on the week.

We then went on to set up our own constituted community group, and a Hub was donated to us by a local business, which enabled us to keep the project going.

We had to ensure that the hub met certain food hygiene standards and we had to register as a food business with our local authority. As part of this they had to inspect our premises and provide us with a certificate. We also ensured that our volunteers were Level 2 Food hygiene trained.

We chose to set up this style of food project because we liked the idea of Olio, where surplus was being rescued and shared with the community. Our model is social and relaxed, and is a model which suited around our already busy lives with three very young children.

The other decider on how we set it up originally was for me personally and how I work. At the time Lauren was pregnant and therefore couldn't do too much and, having ASD, I had to do things in a specific way.



SUCCESSES & CHALLENGES

We have achieved what we set out to do and have increased the amount of food that we have saved from waste as time has gone on.

We have found outlets for supermarket surplus food, even to the point where if we have food which is no longer for human consumption we have places to further distribute, such as farmers, local allotments and local people with animals. We have not and will not put any food or any donation into landfill.

However, with every avenue that leads to success there is a challenge that presents itself.

Having enough volunteers to accommodate our rapid growth.

Having an appropriate location and suitably sized accommodation for our Hub as we expand.

Learning how to deal with public expectations, attitudes and actions on a day to day basis.

We have more Out of town collections but have to consider transporting food within legal parameters that make it safe to consume

We bought a van but need to consider insurance, who drives it, servicing, maintenance, safety, security

Opening times – Distributing the food collected but doing it safety with the volunteers as a priority

Dealing with volunteers and public/running a business as volunteers ourselves alongside our own personal lives

DEVELOPING OUR PROJECT

Lauren and I have retail and hospitality backgrounds which helped when initially setting up our project, and we were supported by friends and neighbours.

Further down the line where we became a constituted community group we had the support of two local people who had experience in running community groups and legal processes, via their jobs.

We needed this knowledge behind us for policies, setting up bank accounts, insurance and also help making forms for people to apply as volunteers.

We also knew that a vehicle for the collections was a must. We did a lot of fund raising and grant applications, and were finally able to buy a van in June 2024.

Now we have support from our volunteers who are amazing. Some have taken up specific roles to help reduce our stresses as a family, in order to keep the project running.

Developing the project has very much been trial and error. We have taken opportunities when they have arisen, never said no, and investigated every avenue presented whether new avenues for food donations, monetary donations or even offers of help.

We have always felt that talking about different topics with the volunteers and/or committee have benefited the group and also helps the volunteers feel they have more of a say in the running of the group therefore increasing overall satisfaction of what they do.



With every new direction we have had to create new policies and forms and develop new training sheets to enable us to train up and provide our volunteers with our expectations of how we want things to be run on a daily basis.

We have always tried to do new things. If it has worked or improved our service we have kept it and further worked on implementing it into our model.

ADVICE TO ANYONE THINKING OF SETTING UP A SIMILAR PROJECT

Be prepared for how much of your own lives get taken over by the project. Make sure you have time to give to it.

Have your own premises which is a good size and in the right location for the project to work, ideally set up before you start the project to enable the proper health and safety protocols to be in place.

Have enough volunteers/staff to spread the load of collections, hub/shop running, rotas, emails, inductions, committee, legal paperwork and anything that may come up unexpectedly.

WE WISH WE HAD KNOWN...

How much red tape there is around everything

How much everything costs

How hard it is to find volunteers

How much work it takes behind the scenes