



Co-operative Councils

Innovation Network

COVID-19

Staffordshire County Council Labour and Co-operative Group

Leek Community Cupboard / Survive Together Leek

The introduction of food bags and the creation of a new community hub to meet the needs of low-income families.

Context

Covid-19 affected many vulnerable and shielding residents on the Haregate Estate, one of the most deprived areas of Leek. The Community Cupboard which grew out of an earlier initiative by Staffordshire County Council to provide cheap bags of fresh fruit and vegetables expanded massively from the Haregate Community Centre. But there was also the wider community need for support for those who were shielding. Out of that need, Survive Together Leek emerged as an entirely volunteer-run project.



Development

Staffordshire County Council launched the Leek Community Cupboard (LCC) under a Council project leader, working with school pupils from the Haregate Community Centre in Leek. The LCC offered all residents a large bag of fresh fruit and vegetables for £3. The operation wasn't financially viable after the project funding ended, so the Haregate Community Centre manager took over, running the scheme from the venue two days a week, mostly using volunteers, with great success. LCC expanded massively during the pandemic and took over the distribution of Staffordshire County Council's parcels for people who are shielding. As the cost of food rose, additional funding had to be found to subsidise the bags of food, with the price held at £3. Local Councillors donated some of their community fund monies to ensure the food bags remained affordable for all. Survive Together Leek (STL) – set up to identify all those people who needed some help – also emerged through the work of the Haregate Community Centre. A leaflet with contact details was delivered to every house in Leek and beyond. If the resident needed help, they were matched with a local volunteer to provide support during lockdown. The local Labour party stepped in and printed a non-political leaflet advertising their befriending, shopping and delivery services. The leafleting made it possible to learn the needs of the local community and use volunteers to meet those needs – from delivering prescriptions and making phone calls to alleviate isolation, to doing food shopping. The scheme was so successful that those running it have now taken over a local church building which they are turning into a community hub and a standalone charity.

Implementation

LCC was so successful that it has now been expanded to cover 60 surrounding villages but is still largely run by volunteers out of the Haregate Community Centre using the Fareshare project and local suppliers. A big bag of fresh fruit and vegetables is still available for £3 every Tuesday and Friday – for local collection or delivered by volunteers. The bag service is not just for food – it can also include items including household goods and toiletries. The project has been subsidised by local District and County Councillors from their community funds. STL has expanded its role to include providing children's activities, clothes and advice for local families in need. They have a pool of volunteers and advertise their services widely using social media. The local Trinity Methodist Church in Leek has for several years given its backing to the ASHA project to support refugees in nearby Stoke-on-Trent. This year at Harvest Festival, the church has encouraged its large congregation to donate non-perishable food items to support their refugees and asylum seekers. They have also reached out to the whole community to encourage them to donate goods as well, to help ASHA in their work with refugees.

Review

Both LCC and STL are now well established as community projects which enjoy cross party-political support. Staffordshire wants to actively support both projects as they are run by volunteers who are based in the local community – a clear demonstration of the values of cooperation in action. While the number of volunteers has declined as people have gone back to work, the projects can call on a large pool of people to help out. As a result, they have now become a permanent and valued part of the voluntary sector in the county



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