

Ever growing demand for West Lothian Food Network

Hundreds of people a day rely on the West Lothian Food Network for meals, operators have said.

In the first three months of the last financial year almost 4,000 used the support service.

That quarterly figure is more than more than the numbers relying on help pre-pandemic, which prompted the launch of the Network.

Now, as it prepares to establish itself as an independent charity, it is facing ever growing demands from local people struggling with the cost of living crisis.

In the last year it helped more than 73,000 people in the county with food support – more than 6000 a month and around 200 every day on average.

The Network was set up only a month before the lockdown in 2020 to address a huge problem of food poverty in the county.

The onset of the pandemic and immediate lockdown of the country was a baptism of fire for the charity groups involved in supplying hot meals to the housebound as well as foodstuffs.

Nationally, the respected Joseph Rowntree Foundation says that more than 14 million people are now living in poverty in the UK – four million of those children. The reliance on food banks and other sources such as food network has grown hugely in the last few years

In West Lothian the Food Network is a coalition of charities, community groups and social enterprises with the key aim to support food insecurity within the community.

The Network is a collaborative of 19-member organisations. Member organisations offer a wide range of support including educational cooking classes, community shops, cafes, larders, drop in pantries, distribute cooked meals, community fridges, debt & welfare advice, Anti-Poverty Service referrals and food vouchers/parcels within local communities, providing place-based support.

From 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 the Network members have provided food support to 73,196 people.

The average age of those being supported is between 40-50 years. Of those being supported 62% are unemployed and/or on benefits; 35% of those accessing food support are single adults, 16% are a two-adult household.

During the last year the Voluntary Sector Gateway (VSG) has continued to support the Network and its members, by providing independent governance support to the network.

The VSG – West Lothian's Third sector umbrella group- receives and pays out funds on behalf of the Food Network until the Scottish Charitable Independent Organisation (SCIO) is established as a legal registered entity and has its own bank account. That establishment is set to be conferred by the end of the year, possibly as early as August.

The VSG and the Network have worked in collaboration with the support of West Lothian Council, particularly the Anti-Poverty Service. In 2023/24, West Lothian Council provided the Food Network with £280,000 of funding to support those most in need.

West Lothian Council has supported the Network from the outset with emergency funding in 2020 and with almost £2m of

funding from April 2021 to March this year.

Speaking at a recent meeting of the Economy, Community Empowerment and Wealth Building PDSP Alan McCloskey praised the work of volunteers in the Food Network and across services provided under the auspices of the VSG generally

“The report highlights the incredible amount of work volunteers do,” he told councillors.

Food poverty had been a problem in West Lothian long before the Covid lockdown.

Many people were already having to turn to emergency food provision, such as food banks, to ensure they could put food on the table.

West Lothian Foodbank, supported by the council, had already grown to meet existing demand. The Food Network brought more groups together.

Between April 2018 and March 2019, almost 3,000 West Lothian Foodbank vouchers were issued to individuals and families to keep them from going hungry.

A number of organisations and projects had been set up across the county working to address food insecurity.

Innovative community initiatives such as communal fridges and pantries, shared meals and community gardens were already helping to provide an invaluable lifeline to people struggling to keep their head above water.