

Four years after it was established West Lothian Food Network secures charitable status

West Lothian's Food Network has achieved the "milestone" of full charitable status four years after its set up on the cusp of the Covid pandemic.

The group of food charities helped more than 73,000 people last year and another 22,000 between April and June.

The Network has also helped cement social ties and sustain communities in the cost of living crisis.

The Local Democracy Reporting Service spoke to two groups which provide food and other practical help, in Knightsridge, northern Livingston and in the village of Addiewell, near West Calder.



In Knightridge, Livingston, co-ordinator Julie Henderson said: "The people make it. This has brought the community together."

More working people are in poverty. Julie has customers who work in supermarkets do their shopping at the Vennie Outlet because it's more affordable.

The Vennie Food Outlet began operating long before the Covid outbreak and is one of the founding groups of the Network. The Vennie relies on donations; it was one of the first groups in the area to receive regular donations from the Cyrenians. They also have donations handed in.

Julie explained: "We have a pensioner who comes in each week with two bags of shopping for us. People are not less needy."

It's never quiet. Opening two mornings a week volunteers get

there for nine o'clock to set up. A long central table holds the fresh fruit and veg as well as the day's bread. There's also a small freezer. Alongside food the Vennie also has pet food and toiletries on sale.

There's always plenty of fresh veg which can be hard to find in small shops and are only available a bus ride away to much more expensive supermarkets.

Julie said: "We are finding people are really down on their luck. They've got absolutely nothing. If somebody's got nothing, they get food, nobody ever goes away empty handed. We say 'Once you are on feet come back get your food from here and you'll save yourself a fortune.' It helps them get on their feet."

Julie also can also refer customers to the School Bank which provides uniforms and to the council's Advice shops.

Local councillor Andrew Miller regularly volunteers. He said: "People come here and they are comfortable. They know Julie, hey know me. They know what the score is. They are comfortable and there are no barriers to engaging. It is really positive in the middle of the community."

Helen, a regular at the Vennie, said shopping there had helped her maintain her independence. She said she been invited to use a food bank once and her experience when she visited had made her want to "curl up and hide."

She told the LDRS: "Here they are friendly and welcoming. It's just like a shop."

"I have been coming since before the pandemic. It's absolutely fantastic. You don't feel like you're going to a food bank. I've been to one, and never again.

"To me it was insulting . You don't feel like that here. you feel like you're going shopping. It's a social thing for me as

well and I come along and see the staff and different people.

“It’s second to none. They are friendly and welcoming. You can pay your way and still feel independent.”

The Vennie has also boosted trade in Mosswood Community Centre. The Barn Cafe, a fellow charity in the Food Network now runs a busy cafe. On Tuesday nights they provide dinners for up to 60 people. It is more than just food though, it has become a social event where families can meet and get a decent dinner at what the Barn Cafe calls its Soul Food.

Out in Addiewell the Larder was born out of the Covid lockdown- delivering meals to 86 local pensioners.

Aside from one small shop in Addiewell, the nearest supermarkets are in Livingston, a £4 bus ride away. Volunteers got together and began delivering meals to old people sheltering from the Covid pandemic in their homes.

As in Livingston the service provided not only meals but maintained social contact with those who were self-isolating.

Now the Larder operates six mornings a week out of Loganlea Miners’ Welfare in the village.

Avril Finlayson and her volunteers offer that same friendly social contact and a bag of food that can tide families over.

It’s convenient for people like Claire, a single mum of two. She told the LDRS: “I think it’s great, being a single parent with two children, it’s just up the road for me. I can always get what I need when I’m there.”

She added: “I don’t drive. So it would have to be the bus to Livingston for food shopping. The prices in the Larder are reasonable, Aldi is a bit dear. I can always make soup from

what I get and I usually buy meat. I make stuff like sausage, mash and beans for the kids. I can also get fresh fruit and veg. I also get my dog food from the Larder. I've been using it since when it first opened. I go up at least once a week."

West Lothian Council is funding the Larder until next March. The volunteers buy food and sell it on at much reduced prices. Customers can fill a shopping bag for £6. The most expensive food such as meat cost no more than £2.50 – a bag of stewing steak which would normally sell for around £5, can easily feed a family.

Avril explained "You cannot get a full shop, but you can buy enough to tide you over. We also have a table of short dated meat that's always free. People feel comfortable coming to us. It's a social thing too."

As in Livingston too no-one will be turned away. If you have nothing they will put together a food bag for you. Avril said: "We do not judge there could be people that have other kinds of problems. Nobody knows the full story. We try to make people feel welcome which is good for everybody."

School uniforms are often donated to the Larder and it also plays host to the council and government agencies offering advice.

Ray Fallan, the Network's Development Officer said: "The Network received charitable status on 1 May. We are delighted to have achieved this milestone.

"The cost-of-living crisis affects us all. Last year we supported over 73,000 people."

"The Network helps prevent food insecurity and poverty, providing support before crises occur. We now have 22 member organisations, offering services such as pantries, food vouchers, budget cooking classes, and referrals to other

support services like the Anti-poverty team to maximise income support.

Ray added: "West Lothian Council's financial support has been invaluable. Charitable status allows us to apply for funding, fundraise, and provide donors with confidence that their contributions are going to a legal, regulated body.

"We seek financial support from the generous residents and businesses of West Lothian. Donations can be made via our website, Facebook page, or by calling 01506 650111. Your support is greatly appreciated and vital in preventing crises."

By Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter