



## Annual Report 2016-17

This report covers the third year of our operation, from April 2016 to March 2017. Over the course of the 12 months, the Trustees have met formally on three occasions and had one electronic meeting to discuss and agree on decisions about the income and expenditure of the charity, to plan activities and to review progress to date. This is fewer meetings than in the first or second year of operation and arose for a number of unavoidable reasons. At the last meeting of the year it was agreed that we would meet for a minimum of 4 times a year and plan these dates in advance to ensure they are regular. All trustee meetings were presented with up-to-date accounts by the Treasurer and a written record maintained.

### Activities

The Charity has continued with its approach of both funding other people to carry on their own work which fits with our charitable objects and initiating activities of our own, creating Soul Food Spaces in new locations. The principal development this year has been the launch of the **Bensham Community Food Co-op** in partnership with two other organisations – Peace of Mind, a small non-registered Charity seeking to help refugees and asylum seekers, especially women who had been victims of abuse and Corpus Christi Church who welcomed us into their building and provided room space, encouragement and every assistance to run the food co-op each week. We first met together in Autumn 2015 to plan the Co-op, reported on in the last annual report and finally launched in April 2016. The representatives of the three organisations recognised common values and goals, above all a desire to develop a different model of a Food Bank which would better meet the needs of those they were in contact with. They also wanted to create a community of mutual support and care – a co-operative. Early on we agreed to:

- Create a membership so that those using the co-op are part of the project
- Provide as much fresh food as possible
- Provide the highest quality food possible
- Allow members to select and choose their own food
- Provide food that is culturally relevant and appropriate to people living in Bensham
- Ensure that the majority of people volunteering at the food Co-op are also members and recipients to minimise stigma and build on personal assets
- Provide a service for as long as people need it, because lack of money and food poverty is generally a long-term problem.

People using Bensham Community Food Co-op are required to give basic personal information when they first join. They receive a plastic membership card rather like a credit card and only need to show this on future visits without any further requirement and for as many weeks as they want. Members are allowed to choose what they would like and can fill two very large “bags for life” with food. There are the firm favourites



such as onions, lentils, flour and oil, but as well as these staples there are usually less common items – red pointy peppers one week, aubergines the next and cauliflowers another week. These little unexpected things are what give many of us pleasure when shopping and the food co-op wants its members to have this joy too.

Soul Food Spaces has been the principal financial donor with purchases of fresh food agreed up to £3000 in the year as well as FareShare membership. As the Co-op has become more established, so the food purchased by SFS has been supplemented by donations from Corpus Christi, other churches, the local school, and neighbours. Clothes, kitchen utensils, toiletries, books and toys have been donated too and quickly find a new home and grateful



recipients. There are usually about 11 volunteers helping each week, 3 are local people but the remainder are all co-op members, from several different countries, all very reliable and wanting to get involved. There is now a tea and coffee area where people can sit and talk over refreshments because there is a growing sense of community and belonging amongst the regulars. Kindnesses abound – one person came back one lunchtime having cooked a meal for the volunteers using items she had been given only an hour or so before; on another occasion some members came back on a Saturday and weeded and tidied outside the Church.

Members are almost always grateful to be a part of this positive place and experience and thankful for food in a time of shortage. Although there are more than 20 different nationalities amongst the 200 or so members, there are an increasing number of local Bensham people who are in need – a man sanctioned for 12 weeks and without any income for this period was in tears as he told his story, a woman caring for her three grandchildren but without additional income as her daughter had drug and alcohol problems gratefully supplemented what she had with fresh food. These people are not freeloaders or con-merchants but people like us who have fallen on hard times and deserve to get and enjoy good food and friendship. Interestingly, most do know how to cook and use the produce, though some things like swede or beetroot can be a challenge. One of the volunteers often makes something to show people how to use these items or brings recipes which use these ingredients.

At year end we have 197 members of the co-op and have fed a total of 4635 people. Soul Food Spaces remains committed to continuing to provide core funding for the Bensham Community Food Co-op, making this our main funding commitment. Nobody quite knows how it will further develop over the next year. Currently we are exploring both the place of language classes and links to accommodation with the help of Action Foundation, a charity based in Newcastle.

Soul Food Spaces continued to run two other events though both ended in year: ***The Monthly Meditation*** continued to be a success, attracting significant numbers to its two sessions, one Saturday a month. To develop this further, a separate organisation was formed as a Community Interest Company called Just Meditation. It was agreed that the CIC would pay for the accommodation for the meditation sessions with a view to finding its own premises, whilst Soul Food Spaces agreed to continue funding the food provided between the sessions. This was for a maximum of one more year. In the event, Just Meditation found its own premises in October 2016 and the support from SFS and all financial contribution ceased.

***Pilgrim Street***, the faith based meeting which began in November 2014 continued to run throughout the year on the first Sunday afternoon of the month. It is preceded by tea and cake and a time of sharing, discussion and liturgy follows. Numbers remained quite small but this enabled a strong trusting group to form. Although correspondence and administration is handled by Soul Food Spaces there is no cost to the charity of running Pilgrim Street because cakes and refreshments are donated and a very low cost room hire has been negotiated which is paid directly by members. A number of options were explored including setting up as a New Monastic Community, and a partnership with a church in Gateshead but this came to nothing and towards the end of the year, it was agreed to suspend the meetings for six months to allow members to take stock as most had many other commitments and we were not really reaching the people we were seeking – though we still believe they are out there and looking for something to help them connect. A website independent of SFS has been set up to maintain a virtual presence for Pilgrim Street.

In addition to the direct activities Soul Food Spaces has played a part in running over the last year, which have taken priority in terms of both finance and time, we have continued to want offer financial support to any other activities and initiatives run by other Organisations which fit with our Charitable Objects. As we do not publicise our grant making and seek partners or beneficiaries through networks and other contacts this can be time consuming and opportunistic but we believe that this mode of operation still fits best with our charitable objects and our limited income which could not meet a welter of external applications.

The principle support was offered to:

- ***Gateshead Young Carers*** who were able to run a cooking programme for a number of young carers. This not only offered them practical skills for cooking at home but a fun and enjoyable programme with others including a residential weekend. Our funding also helped to pay for hampers for them at Christmas.

## **Finance**

The Financial Accounts for 2016-17 show the incomings and outgoings of the charity. Once again we have not sought external grant funding and have relied upon a number

of private donations to maintain the charity. We received donations amounting to £1450 and a one Gift Aid payment from HM Revenue and Customs amounting to £650 giving us in-year income of nearly £2500. We gave grants and supported activities totalling £3722, a slight increase on year one with a closing balance of £5647. We made fewer grants this year as outlined elsewhere in this report; our priority was the Bensham Community Food Coop – and it will remain so in the forthcoming year, but now we have a grasp on the sort of commitment this amounts to we can confidently look to make grants to more external groups in the next year. We do not have a set amount of reserves agreed and will look to develop this in the year ahead. Whilst it is important to be able to fulfil our agreed funding commitments we do not want to be guilty of holding too much money in reserve when times are so hard for many groups and the needs of people and communities for food are increasing too.

### **Partnerships**

As well as the partnerships with Peace of Mind and Corpus Christi to deliver the food Co-op we have developed and maintained strong working relationships with other organisations such as Food Nation, The Wayne Hemingway Estate, Bensham and Saltwell Alive and the Network for Independent Food Aid Providers. We recognise that partnership is not just a better way of making our very small resources go further but a healthier and more positive way of working with others to make a real difference in feeding people in body, mind and spirit.

### **Communications**

We are not a charity which seeks publicity for itself or its work however we do want to draw attention to need and positive stories of how people can be fed. As such we continue to have a website, though it is looking a little tired and needs refreshing in the forthcoming year; our social media activity, principally twitter is sporadic and as such does not really promote our work or work to best advantage. This needs to be reviewed in the next year. We were invited to speak at a Food Bank event in North Shields run by Newcastle Anglican Diocese to highlight the work of the co-op and this was well received and a useful conference report written.

### **The Future**

This year we have managed to consolidate the work of the charity, maintaining what we started and initiating an important and innovative food programme. As we move into our next year of operation we are mindful of the need to build on what we have achieved over the past year and to further develop links and opportunities to support the amazing things other people are doing to feed the hungry and to see gaps and opening where we might set up other new ventures. Part of the development is likely to be changes in the composition of the Management Committee as we seek to grow and progress by bringing in new trustees who can help us to better meet our charitable objects.

Thanks to all those who have donated their money, time, skills and energy to enable Soul Food Spaces to continue to do so many of the things that we set out to achieve. Thanks too for your continued interest and good will extended towards our work. The writer and catholic theologian Henri Nouwen said that “Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space, where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of

an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people but to offer them space where change can take place". In the forthcoming year Soul Food Spaces will continue to help make places of hospitality where the hungry and the stranger may meet together and be fed.

Soul Food Spaces Trustees; May 2017