

SOCIAL IMPACT REPORT 2024/2025



OFFERING



PATHWAYS



OUT OF



FINANCIAL



HARDSHIP



The Story of FreeShop in 2024/2025

This year we have hired and defined key staff and set up a clear management structure to enable us to keep our organisation running sustainably in the long run. With a stronger management team, our CEO and Project Development Manager had the time and space to effectively work on the growth and development of the organisation, putting us in a more sustainable position in future. **In just the last couple of years, we've grown from a £150k voluntary foodbank to a £270k professional organisation!**

Funders through grants



Local businesses that support us all year round

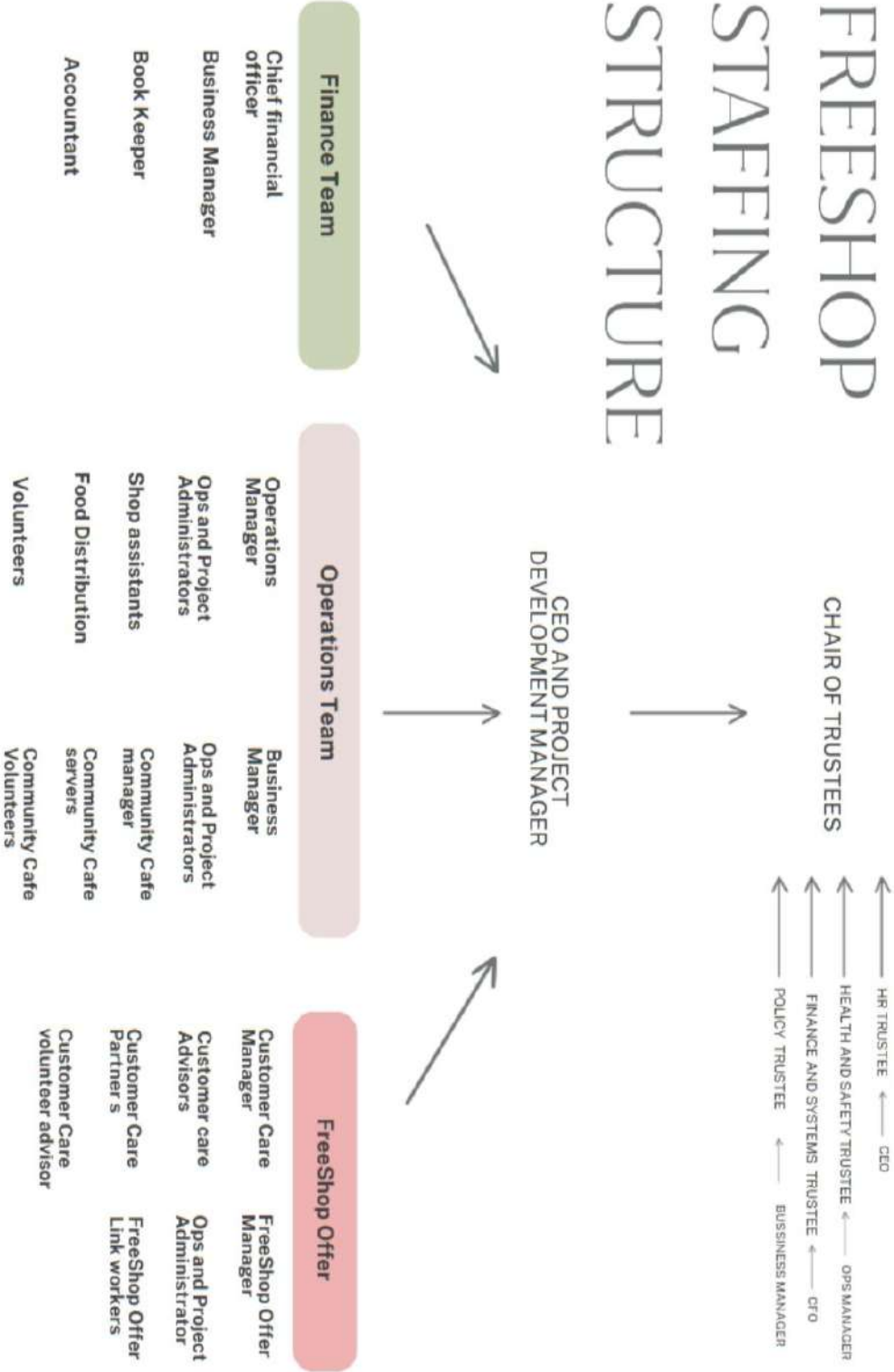


FREESHOP STATS 2024/2025



BENEFICIARIES ENGAGEMENT

FREESHOP STAFFING STRUCTURE



This year, we became really clear with our literature and our 'did you know?' campaign. This meant we have been able to help people with bespoke support and partners have been able to refer into our service more strategically.

DID YOU KNOW?



THE FREESHOP OFFER PROVIDES A WIDE RANGE OF SUPPORT, ACTIVITIES AND WORKSHOPS

PRIORITY FOR THE FREESHOP OFFER IS GIVEN TO REGISTERED FREESHOP CUSTOMERS AND THOSE IN FINANCIAL DIFFICULTY

FINANCIAL DIFFICULTY MEANS PRIORITY BILLS ARE COVERED, HOWEVER THERE IS NO SPARE MONEY FOR EMERGENCIES.

DID YOU KNOW ?



FREESHOP IS FOR PEOPLE IN FINANCIAL HARDSHIP

FINANCIAL HARDSHIP IS WHEN AN INDIVIDUAL IS UNABLE TO MEET FINANCIAL OBLIGATIONS,

THIS MEANS THEY ARE UNABLE TO PAY THEIR BILLS AND FEED THEMSELVES.

DID YOU KNOW ?



FREESHOP IS A FOOD BANK THAT RUNS ON A DONATION BASIS

WE PRIORITISE STOCKING ESSENTIAL FOOD ITEMS.

ANY NON FOOD ITEM THAT IS DONATED IS A BONUS.

This year, our CEO and Project Development Manager have been able to engineer some incredible developments for the charity. The top three accomplishments being:

1. **Transforming our Customer Care journey.** A reshuffle of the team means we now have 3 members on our Customer Care Team. With this team we ensure every single customer is able to access the wrap around support they might need to get themselves out of financial hardship, where previously some customers were slipping through the net.

Today, every customer has an initial meeting with our care team, then again at 2 months to understand if/why they still need to shop with us, which parts of our FreeShop offer they are engaging with, and to work together on a personalised care plan moving forward.

If after 4 months they still require our Free Shop, then we meet monthly to support customers to follow their plan, holding them accountable, highlighting and signposting if and where additional professional or partner support may be needed.



CUSTOMER JOURNEY CHECK LIST

- ☐ Initial phone call
- ☐ New person Traffic Light Form
- ☐ Essential bag rules signed
- ☐ Catch Up Traffic Light Form
- ☐ Customer Journey Plan
- ☐ Shop rules signed
- ☐ 4 month Catch Up Traffic Light Form
- ☐ Customer Journey Plan updated
- ☐ 6 month Catch Up Traffic Light Form
- ☐ Customer Journey Plan updated

Application for additional support

- ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

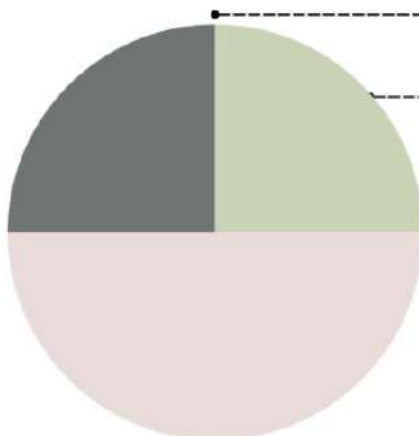
Moving on

- ☐ No longer in financial hardship
- ☐ Unknown
- ☐ Breached charity rules

Through implementing these changes, we have seen the following trends and collated further data:



LENGTH OF CUSTOMER JOURNEYS



25% 6 MONTHS OR LESS

People who shop with us for up to 6 months are generally those in temporary financial hardship due to a sudden lack of income

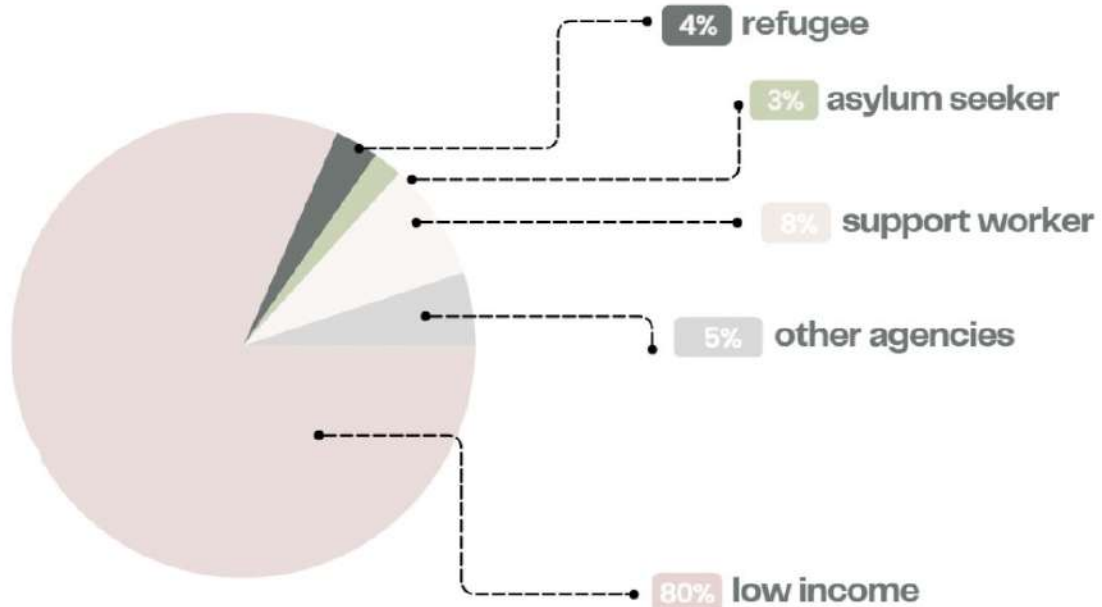
25% OVER A YEAR

We have found that those who need support for a long period of time have deep rooted challenges that need unpicking such as; mental health; neurodiversity ; disability ; physical ill health

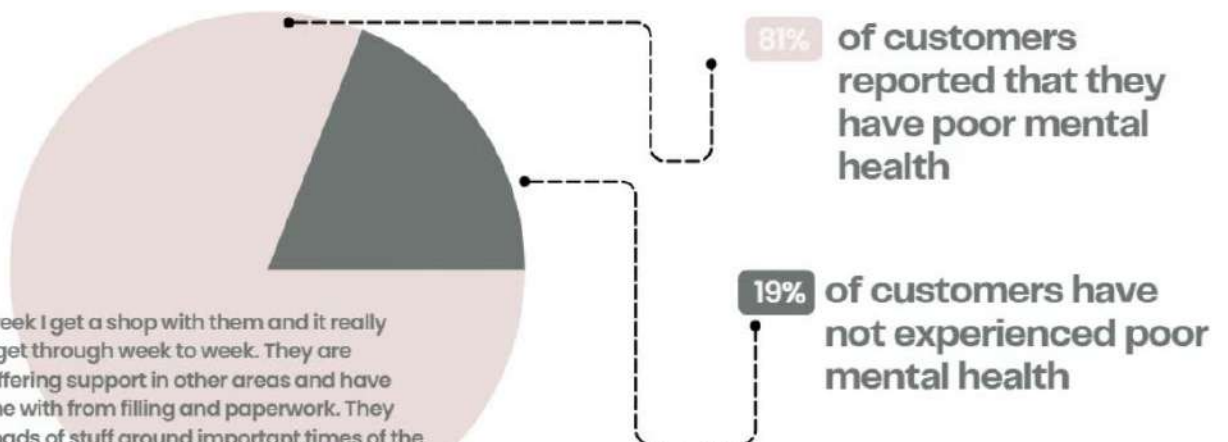
50% UP TO A YEAR

The majority people who shop with us need support with housing, budgeting, debt and anxiety. They work their way through our pathway and become self sufficient.

REASON FOR REFERRAL



CUSTOMERS WHO LIVE WITH POOR MENTAL HEALTH



Once a week I get a shop with them and it really help me get through week to week. They are always offering support in other areas and have helped me with from filling and paperwork. They also do loads of stuff around important times of the year like Christmas Easter Father's Day etc

"The free shop has been an absolute god send! Without them, I wouldn't be able to feed my two children. The team are fantastic too!"

"Freeshop has been a lifeline for my daughter and I"

"FreeShop has saved me from hunger, when I met them I had no buffer for food as my ESA stopped at the time of year when bills increased. I was an emotional wreck"



2. Setting up our Learning Lab, in partnership with Employ Crawley. We now have a space right next to our FreeShop, where customers can use one of 12 laptops, a touch screen TV, and quiet space to do anything they might need – fill in forms for benefits, research, online banking, job hunting, etc. We also provide 1:1 support / training sessions for these activities. Twice a week our partners, The Melting Pot CIC, run courses in there (a wellbeing one and English as an Additional Language) and offer

CV workshops. On Wednesdays we use the Learning Lab for customer meetings with partners (including CAB, Housing, Pathfinders, and Employ Crawley). **Over this year, over 300 customers have used our learning lab, and found it crucial to their journey in moving out of financial hardship.**



Having the space that the learning lab provides us with has meant we have been able to support more of the community with; Helping to phone agencies; Read information to them; Support to write CVs; understand and organise their housing documents; support and show them how to talk to service providers; help them apply for available provisions; form filling; Help to understand their Universal Credit Journal; Help to understand their personal finances.

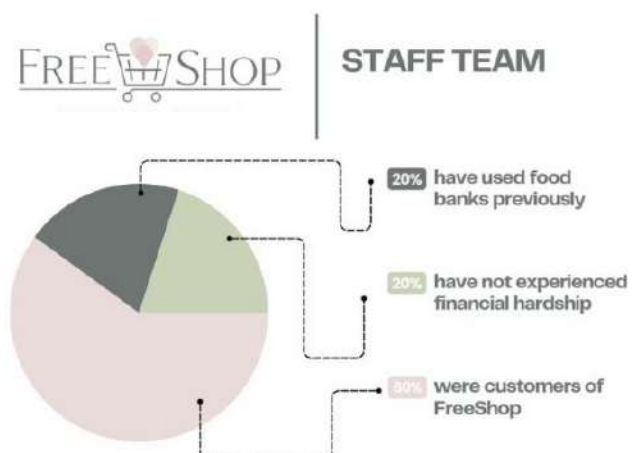
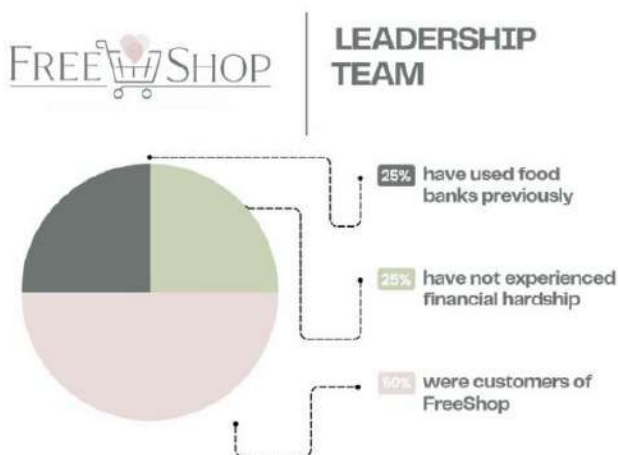
With funding, LPK Learning were able to deliver workshops that empowered customers with the tools and skills to improve their mental health, which is essential if people are to make positive steps towards gaining employment, learning, or improving their financial position. Over this funding period LPK delivered:

- **CLANGERS wellbeing workshop**, supporting 120 of our customers last year, to feel happier and healthier.
- **STILL Method anxiety workshop**, supporting 54 of our customers last year to build confidence, resilience, and self-esteem.

3. Building an even stronger relationship with West Sussex County Council (WSCC) and Crawley Borough Council (CBC). We have secured significant funding from CBC to expand our Community Café which we hold for one day a week until summer 2026. This means we provide the Bewbush community with free breakfast and hot lunches while enjoying community in a safe place. Meanwhile, WSCC they have asked for our help in supporting other foodbanks across other areas of Sussex, as they're recognising the enormous impact were making to the lives and communities in Crawley. While we are excited by this, we do not feel we are able to do this yet as we must continue to focus on sustainability over the next year but this is something we'll do in future!

How we've involved people from our community in the work we do

80% of our staff and volunteers were customers themselves at some point, or experienced significant financial hardship themselves. Having people who understand the challenges that our customers face is vital!



We continued to listen carefully to customers as they shop with us, to pick up on any issues or challenges they're experiencing and might need support with. E.g We started our TLC Tea group due to conversations with people who needed specialist support but said they couldn't face coming to a larger event like our community café.

We surveyed customers and volunteers each quarter to follow their current needs. For example, we applied for a Food Distribution Co-Ordinator following volunteer survey respondents telling us that they needed "someone to go to with queries" and "be given more notice for shifts." We visited the county mall every month and use this as a platform to speak to residents in Crawley about FreeShop, and address some of the public misconceptions about poverty, and what that 'looks like'. Off the back of this, we launched an individual giving campaign, encouraging members of the public to donate £10 month, we have increased this by 80% in the last 5 months.

We've learned better which projects and initiatives to run ourselves, and which we are not best placed to run. For example, after working with Christians Against Poverty Debt Management, they now run our 'Money Money Money' course with customers, as they have much more experience and expertise within their team to deliver this. We also work closely with Pathfinders for complex Mental Health support. Bear Learning for mental health coaching and we facilitate a weekly MenShare Group.

Our community partners continue to be hugely involved in the work we do. This year Crawley Community Action asked us to create a video of the work we do at Free Shop; <https://we.tl/t-CFLAwV0kjh> It was a collaboration with other organisations and we have been able to use this on our social media to promote the work we do.



This year we were awarded a recognition award from the High Sheriff for the way we collaborate with the community both the general public and the other organisations within Crawley, we were also recognised for the crucial work we do in the community. Awards like these mean so much to us as a charity, they show the team (staff and volunteers) that the work we do is valued and recognised by the wider community. Finally, our customers, the heart of our community, are involved in shaping what we can deliver. Earlier this year, when we ran out of funding for our Community Café, around 20 people wrote to the council saying how important the space was for them, and that its vital it doesn't shut, and 120 signed a petition. This combined with our efforts in demonstrating its value, encouraged CBC to fund the Community Café right up until summer 2026! This was incredibly empowering for our customers, to see that their voices

were heard and they had a say in what is important to them.

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FREE SHOP

— A PATHWAY OUT OF FINANCIAL HARDSHIP —



Crawley CAP Centre
A Multi-church Partnership in Crawley



pathfinder
west sussex
FOR BETTER MENTAL WELLBEING



Prevention Assessment Team



The differences we have made



Our Free Shop provided essentials to 600 customers per week. Overall, approximately 2500 customers have been supported over the year (some shopping with us for a few weeks to get over an initial crisis, and others needing a large amount of support to move out of financial hardship). We know from speaking with customers that this lifts the immediate financial pressure, and ensures they have groceries and essentials to feed themselves and their families with dignity. This then puts them in a much better position to begin to tackle the problems and issues their facing that got them here in the first place.

"Freeshop has helped us afford to eat while being in debt so now we can pay our debt of as little as we can afford and being able to eat without struggling as a family." Customer 2025



As well as our FreeShop, we have the 'Free Shop Offer', which is our holistic, wrap around support, that equips people with the knowledge, skills, confidence, wellbeing and community support they need to move out of financial hardship. Our Free Shop Offer ensured that the most of people we supported did not need free groceries and essentials beyond 6 months, as they were able access the FreeShop offer and move out of crisis point.

The Community Café, now fully funded by CBC

Around 150-200 visit our community café every Wednesday. People are invited to enjoy a healthy breakfast, lunch, or hot drink and cake completely free of charge. Our café provides a safe space for people to socialise, meet others in the same situation as them and offer peer support, and talk with FreeShop volunteers and staff to learn about what services they could benefit from (from either us or with partners).



We also invite partners to join so that people have support at their fingertips (housing, pathfinders, CAB etc). By speaking with people and building relationships at the Café, we've found we're able to support people much earlier in their journey out of financial hardship.

"Helped me learn to budget better than I already do. Helped me be around other people and out my house, kept us warm and fed to" Customer 2025

Alongside this, we run all sorts of fun special workshops from the Community Café on Wednesday, with help from partner organisations, like weekly crafts, arts, exercise classes, gardening, photography, history – whatever our community are interested in! These leave our customers feeling connected, happier, healthier, and better in themselves mentally.

"A really lovely place to come and socialise, especially for children, the toys and the craft is amazing. Great for any type of support you need, thank you".

"A friendly warm place for respite".

"The café is kind friendly, inviting"

"Really enjoyed the sewing workshop, Learning a new skill that will help me in the future"

The TLC Tea group supported 40 particularly vulnerable people last year. In the Tea Room, we've been supporting particularly vulnerable people, including survivors of domestic violence, people in hiding, people with HIV, refugees etc. One lady we support had her children taken away from her by social services, as she was struggling to parent them. When she came to us, she was suicidal. Through our support, she's now having job interviews, making vast life-improvements, looking after herself, and is doing amazingly. This is just one of many of our customer stories. The TLC Team Room has been truly transformative for them.

Our regular workshops help people build better skills, knowledge and confidence on topics that will help them manage their money, health and wellbeing, to stay out of poverty, for good!

- **Our energy saving workshop** supported 40 people last year to get better at saving money on their energy bills.
- **CLANGERS wellbeing workshop**, delivered by LPK learning supported 120 people last year, to feel happier and healthier.
- **STILL Method anxiety workshop group and 1:1's**, delivered by Bear Learning supported 54 people last year to build confidence, resilience, and self-esteem.

- **Money Money Money workshop**, delivered by Christians Against Poverty supported 52 people last year, to get better at budgeting and personal financial management.
- **Know your Worth workshop** – Self-esteem workshop supported 20 people to build their self-esteem and resilience.
- **1:1 budgeting/ form clinics** – this is an advocacy service where customers can go look at their finances in a safe and supportive space and we are able to help them access other support and organisations by filling in forms and helping them to make challenging phone calls



“It’s been good to meet with other people and talk about a variety of things in a safe and friendly environment “– Clangers attendee 2024

“The clangers event has helped me with my mental health. Lucy is a lovely lady very supportive and understanding. And it was great having just a small group.” Clangers attendee 2024

Our free events helped people feel happier, healthier, and part of a positive and supportive community. This year we put on:

1. **Our Summer Fair** welcomed approximately 3,500-4,000 attendees, offering an affordable and fun family day out.
2. **A Christmas Event**, called "Elfridges" for 150 families, where we transformed our venue into the North Pole. Children were able to choose presents for the important adults in their lives.
3. Our **Community Concert** for approximately 200 people, involved a play written and performed by locals, along with food, live music, and karaoke.



“It’s helps the kids were happy wearing costumes and perform on the stage and there were really happy and that makes me happy as well. Thank you” – Christmas event attendee, 2024

4. **Monthly town events**, where we host activities like glitter tattoos, crafts, and mental health conferences.
5. **A Christmas Party** attended by approximately 300 people, for the community to come together and enjoy the holiday season.
6. **Community Cafe** supported 200 people per week, in our community café for people to come and enjoy a hot drink, warm space, and support during the colder months.

“I loved the coffee mornings & winter warmers as not only was the coffees, snacks & lunches really yummy lol but all the staff helping worked hard. Such a great team helping those in need.” Community Café attendee, 2024

7. **The Mini Word Fest**, a series of drama workshops led by authors and actors, encouraging people to go to the bigger Word Fest, for 20 children.

8. **A lantern-making event**, in partnership with "Same Sky" for, which brought in 120 people, and the light-up display was enjoyed by many.



9. **Splat and Chat**, the community were given the opportunity to learn a new skill or develop their painting skills while making friends

10. **Our STEM family day out to Gatwick Airport**, we visited their STEM centre with 13 families. made cars and bridges, had lunch.



Link to press release - <https://www.mediacentre.gatwickairport.com/news/london-gatwick-contributes-to-support-...>
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Customer Journey Testimonials

"The person I am today is not the person I was 6 months ago. I have grown as a person and improved my quality of life and I could not have done any of it if it was not for FreeShop. Attending clangers and STILL method has reduced my anxiety, improved how I view myself and built my confidence up. I regularly attend community cafe where I have formed friendships and feel like I finally have somewhere I belong. I enjoy the extra sessions (splat and chat, singing etc) and attending these doesn't just build confidence and friends, it also does wonders for the mind and wellbeing. FreeShop has enabled me to engage with CAP, melting project and various other support to help address my debt and get me back into work. They have also been able to support me with food despite my difficult dietary requirements. All the staff are kind and understanding and go out of there way to help however they can. Like I said, my life has changed drastically for the better over the last 6 months and I will never be able to express the gratitude I feel for FreeShop for helping me with this. I believe this is the most needed charity in our community, FreeShop is totally underrated and everyone working for them deserves the very best. Thank you FreeShop for making me have a life worth living." Customer now volunteer 2025

"I have always seen myself as an individual that doesn't like to rely on other people to live, but last year when the prices kept rising I found myself unable to give my children new shoes when they broke and their school referred me to freeshop for help.

Initially it was to help me with my financial burden so I could afford necessities for my children.

As I got to know the people of FreeShop more, I found out they also offer short courses to support people in other areas, they run a class called clangers that can help support people in gaining more self-confidence and money money money that can help teach you how to make and stick to a budget. There is no judgement from any of the people that are a part of FreeShop and they care about everyone dearly.

The first course I went on was clangers and it helped me not only to get more confident, but it also let me meet other people that were in a similar situation as myself.

The people at FreeShop also makes sure to look out for us all, I had a meeting with Laura-Jane to check how my finances were doing, and it helped me check if my family were claiming the benefits we are entitled to. It turned out that we were not and this has been rectified since, however due to this change in our finances we are no longer struggling to make ends meet every month.

I would say that FreeShop has helped my family tremendously, I am now more confident in my own abilities and able to pay for my monthly expenses without worry.

Thank you for helping me while I needed it the most" This person was a customer and is now a volunteer.

'I have been involved in FreeShop for the past 2 and a half years. I cant explain how much FreeShop saved my life. I fled DA from my husband 2 and half years ago, I came back to Crawley with 4 children and a bag of clothes. I had no idea where to turn or where to go. And FreeShop was there. They helped me access support for myself and my children, helped is with food and clothes and helped me get the children into school

My eldest and my youngest have difficulties and they supported me to get the answers I needed for them. It offered me a safe place to go where I could start to heal or let my guard down. It allowed me to start healing.

FreeShop in my eyes is a one stop shop for of support. There isn't a time limit on your time with them and they offer courses for mental health and money management amongst other things. They support you to get yourself back on your feet and be able to support yourself going forward.

They also gave me the chance to volunteer with them in the café and the shop. It was step back into the employment life that I wouldn't have had the chance to have otherwise. It gave me my identity back. Not as a victim, or a survivor or a carer or a parent. They helped me rebuild myself and my identity. After volunteering with them for a few months due to grants they have been given I was able to start earning a wage. I am now an employee with a career, something that I feared I had lost forever.

FreeShop isn't a short term help charity, it is a long term permanent plan. They are there for as long as it takes to get back on your feet and stable. And I wouldn't be alive right now without them' This person was a customer, then a volunteer and now a staff team member." This person was a customer, then a volunteer and is now a customer.

The FreeShop offer info poster

FREE SHOP

A PATHWAY OUT OF FINANCIAL HARDSHIP



DID YOU KNOW? THE FREESHOP OFFER INCLUDES...

COMMUNITY CAFE
Our free community cafe is open to everyone, whether you are one of our customers or not. There is delicious food and drink, community and friendship. We invite other agencies to this so that if you need help it is all at your finger tips.

FORM FILLING CLINICS

We understand how hard it is to navigate the world of forms whether that be CVs or benefits. Just let us know what you need help with and we will do our best to get the right person to help you.

BESPOKE WORKSHOPS

As we get to know our customers, different needs arise and if we can't signpost you, we will do our best to offer solutions with our own bespoke workshops.

STILL METHOD

Anxiety impacts your everyday life, the STILL Method programme uses a step-by-step approach to help understand and manage anxiety, improve low self-esteem and gain resilience.

CLANGERS WELLBEING

Look after your wellbeing in our CLANGERS groups. CLANGERS is a series of weekly sessions exploring simple activities that will help to keep you and your family happy and healthy.

The challenges this year, and what we've learned...

More and more people are needing to shop at FreeShop, and we're at full capacity. Ideally, we'd open the shop for longer hours to reach more people, but we don't yet have the funds to pay the shop assistants, or the administration time to manage the volunteers. We're committed to paying people fairly, which means we currently can't afford to hire more staff or pay people to work more hours than they already work.

Members of our team experienced various personal and quite difficult challenges this year, but it didn't affect the service that we were able to provide, as the teams were able to pick up the slack where needed, and support each other to get through it. This highlighted why it's important to look after our team of staff and volunteers, 80% of whom have been through challenging financial struggles of their own in the past. This year we offered our staff emotional support, counselling, and psychologist support as part of the job. They are not replaceable. They share lived experience with the people we help, which is important because it helps them relate to customers, understand their needs, builds trust (something that many customers do not have for statutory services), and enables them to provide better support and help them move on from Free Shop more efficiently and quickly. Our team also help customers build trust with statutory services that we partner with, which is incredibly important for their current and future wellbeing.

We've also learned how important it is for us to be a family-friendly employer. To help our staff and customers to stay economically active we want to give them the freedom to work hours that suit their family, or the freedom to bring their children into work if they need to (since childcare costs are so high). We do risk assessments to ensure it's a safe space for children to be. Children and family members are free to use the Community Cafe and take part in art and craft projects etc. This kind of culture has led to many more customers wanting to volunteer at Free Shop as they know it's a positive place to be and they want to give back to a service that has helped them so much.

This year, we've been learning about neurodiversity, that affects many our staff, volunteers and our customers. We are committed to being an inclusive and neurodiverse friendly employer. We want to recognise everyone's unique strengths and support them to make the most of them.

This year, we've had some setbacks with regards to funding. For example, some unsuccessful grant requests from funders who we'd been previously successful with. This highlights the need to dedicate significant time and resource into funding over the next year, so we can build on what we've achieved this year.

What's next?

Next year we want to continue to broaden and diversify our funding stream. In around a years' time, we'll be ready to grow again. We've started by trialling and marketing some individual giving, which we've had some success with, but would like to build on. In addition, we plan to dedicate more time to applying to trusts and foundations for grants, and working on some crowdfunding around Christmas time (our busiest time of year). Meanwhile our CEO will spend more time working to secure more Local Authority funding and corporate sponsors.



We're are getting much better at data collection, working with Thales over the past 2 years to create much more robust database and systems. This makes daily tasks a lot easier, helps us to evaluate numbers and service use, and then enables us to improve efficiency and better support our customers.

With more funding, and continuing to develop better-quality monitoring systems, we will be in a good position to launch the following projects over the next two years:



The Freeshop Ambassador Program; we are really excited to be rolling this award out over the next year!

As part of our creative ways to get food donations in and reduce our expenditure on food to increase our unrestricted funds we are encouraging schools to have their own One Can Campaign.

The Freeshop Ambassador Program is a programme where we work with local schools and companies to teach children about FreeShop, giving and upskilling them byworking with project managers from local companies. As part of the CBC and WSCC cost of living working party that our CEO was asked to join.

We are working in partnership with CBC and WSCC to change the way communities think about giving, we want to try and encourage people to give just one can!

We have created an award that will be presented by the Leader of the council to the schools who have completed the award.

This year we have piloted this with Gossips Green school to see how we can adapt and change the award. They worked with volunteer project managers to learn how to project manage their schools 'one can' appeal. We had their posters printed by a local printing firm who support us regularly.

The pilot was a huge success and we aim to get 12 schools on board next year to access this award and opportunity.



Other areas of development;

- Working with Thales to create an app that helps people to manage their finances better (particularly with neurodivergent people in mind)
- Support groups for men – working with Menshare to offer lunch, support network and professional advice around mental health.
- Community Café extension – we've been asked by Everyone Active to run their café (in the same building we operate from). We plan to utilise the space to deliver more workshops, offer further supported volunteering opportunities and apprenticeships that will help people get back into work, all while creating unrestricted funds for the charity.
- Run breakfast clubs in the morning for children and young people before school. Work with CCYS to provide a youth worker to give young people a safe space to come before school and eat a healthy meal.

In the long term, we've been asked by WCSS and Crawley Borough Council to help other organisations and foodbanks across the county develop the way they work. They've recognised the enormous difference that FreeShop Crawley makes to the people and community in Crawley, and want to replicate our successful model elsewhere.