



'I'd love food bank to be put out of business'



Constant demand: Naomi Russell with fellow members of the Food Bank Aid team and, right, the inside of the warehouse on the Great North Leisure Park from where they distribute supplies to food banks across north London. Photos Mike Coles.

By Lynn Winton

East Finchley resident Naomi Russell is the powerhouse behind Food Bank Aid, the grassroots charity that commits to source and deliver supplies to as many as 20 food banks from Harrow to Tottenham.

Looking across the organisation's cavernous hub in North Finchley, which resembles the well-stocked warehouse of any supermarket, manned by an army of over 250 volunteers and less than a handful of paid members of staff, it is astonishing to hear that none of this existed before the start of the pandemic.

Naomi walked me round the warehouse, formerly a Mexican restaurant opposite Hollywood Bowl, where various volunteers were refilling the aisles after the latest delivery. "Not a day goes by when we don't get a huge order from a supplier, and today is no exception," she said. "We simply couldn't manage without all the people who volunteer to keep the wheels oiled, working under the guidance of a large team of volunteer managers."



Ready to go: Naomi with a typical box of household goods. need most.

Bespoke service

Since its inception, Food Bank Aid has distributed a staggering £3.5 million worth of vital goods to its ever-growing network of food banks, and spent around £100,000 on provisions each month, as well as sourcing donated goods. No other organisation holds up to comparison, as they give a bespoke service to the food banks they support, who place weekly orders and receive deliveries of what their clients

From tent to warehouse

"I never intended to set up a charity and Covid made this all happen," said Naomi, who has worked in a variety of jobs and had a long career break to bring up her children. "But night after night I watched the 6pm news and saw the ever lengthening queues at the food banks. I was heartbroken to think of children going to school hungry.

"I put up a tent in my drive and asked my friends to start donating. That's exactly how it

all started, and it's snowballed into this. We were so fortunate to be given this wonderful space rent-free by the landlords, originally Landsec but now Regal London who have been equally supportive. We deliver to 20 food banks from Totteridge to Bushey, and nearer home that includes Finchley Food Bank in the High Road, East Finchley.

"All those we supply are assessed to check they are properly managed with strict processes and also provide wrap-around services, which means they offer help and advice on all kinds of problems linked to food poverty, or at the very least signpost their clients to where to find that help."

Corporate connections include working with companies who have social responsibility programmes and volunteer days for local businesses. "We have had bankers from Black Rock and staff from Pinterest, to name but two, coming in small groups to volunteer and learn about us. We're set up to do a lot more of these programmes".

Naomi is also passionate about working with schools. So far 10,000 children in 80 schools have been involved in learning about the charity and many then go on to volunteer in some way.

I asked Naomi what she hopes for the future at Food Bank Aid. "I'd just love to be out of business," she laughed, ruefully, "but it's a never-ending cycle of escalation. Food prices are shooting up, client numbers are rising at all the food banks we help. We will keep on fundraising, recruiting volunteers and supporting the food banks."

Further information, contacts and a volunteering form can be found at foodbankaid.org.uk

Roll up, roll up, the festival needs you!

By Mike Hughes

East Finchley Festival is fast approaching – it will take place on Sunday 18 June in Cherry Tree Wood – and we are calling out to the community to volunteer at this year's event.



Big day out: A packed Cherry Tree Wood in 2022.

Volunteers

We need small teams of people to staff the raffle points throughout the day for 90 minute shifts. We also need volunteers to help steward the event and generally to be on hand to help keep things running smoothly. Every minute our volunteers give to the festival is hugely appreciated, not just by the organisers but by the wider community. East Finchley Festival CIC is a completely independent non-profit organisation and receives no outside funding, so we rely on volunteers to help make the festival the wonderful event it is.

Transport

We're also on the lookout for help with transport, as long-time supporters of the festival, Rogers Removals, are no longer able to assist. Big thanks to Rogers for all their years of support. If you've got a van or truck, and can spare a bit of time over the festival weekend, we'd love

to hear from you at organisers@eastfinchleyfestival.org

Raffle

The raffle is one of the highlights of the festival and we'd be super grateful for any donations from local businesses. Please get in touch with sponsorship@eastfinchleyfestival.org if you can help.

If you'd like to get involved, please sign-up on the festival website by scanning the QR code below or visiting www.eastfinchleyfestival.org/volunteer. We look forward to hearing from you, East Finchley!



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