

"LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL"



The Impact of Good Company's
Support Work

July 2023

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Last but not least, thank you to Penny (Support Lead) and Alison and Heidi (Support Workers) for your dedication to this vital role.

*Not their real names.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As well as struggling to afford food and other essentials, many of our clients face other complex issues, such as domestic violence, problem debt, homelessness and poor mental health. Since employing our first support worker in 2018, this work has grown substantially, working with people to address these underlying issues and supporting them to not need the Foodbank. This report assesses the nature and impact of the support work from the clients' perspective, based on in-depth interviews we carried out in late 2022 with ten supported clients. These are the key findings:

The nature of the support work is extremely varied, reflecting the complexity of people's situations. This includes meeting people's **practical needs**, providing **emotional support**, and enabling people to access additional support to help them rebuild their lives through **welfare advice**, **signposting** to specialist agencies, and **advocacy** work.

I didn't know where to turn. I was just hanging on. I almost committed suicide. Then I go to the Foodbank and there is a hand around my shoulder - not being on my own facing these things.
(Vincent)

The people we interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about the support workers. They were seen to be caring, supportive and empathetic, helping to build strong trusting relationships in which people felt open to share and receive help.

Thank you so much for all your support, I can't tell you how much I appreciate you. I don't know what I would do without you, and it so concerns me that there are lots of people that are missing out on money, and they don't even know where to go... If it wasn't for Heidi, I'd be in poverty still."

(Susanna)

The practical and financial support they received was highly valued, particularly when it was offered proactively in response to a specific need. However, what people talked about and appreciated most was the emotional support - knowing there was someone there they could turn to in a crisis, who was on their side, who was knowledgeable and calm, and above all who really cared about and understood them.



The distinctive characteristics of Good Company's support work can be summarised under six headings, all beginning with P:

- Personal:** building strong, trusting, empathetic relationships;
- Persistent:** knowing there is someone there for you if or when needed;
- Positive:** having a 'can do' approach to people and problems;
- Proactive:** offering support without people always having to ask for it;
- Patient:** giving people time and space to make their own choices;
- Practical:** meeting immediate needs and making people feel cared for.



Something's clicked inside me over the past couple of weeks and months. I feel stronger in myself and it's all down to the help that Penny and Alison have given me. I don't feel so alone, because I know I've got people that I can turn to. I'm just starting to think that I can get out of [this situation] and I will get out of it. There is hope now, whereas before there wasn't.

(Linda)



In some cases, the support provided has literally been life-saving. In every case, it has played a vital role in helping people navigate a very difficult and traumatic period in their lives, by offering practical and emotional support, connecting them to other services and advocating on their behalf when they were feeling overwhelmed by their situation.

Most of those we spoke to continue to face significant challenges and have experienced ups and downs in the months before and since these interviews. But they are now more self-confident, better able to cope with adversity and more optimistic about their futures. In their words, "there is light at the end of the tunnel".



Although I still have a little bit of help, I think I'm doing quite well now. The biggest difference is to my mental health. I used to sit and cry. Now my mental health feels better, because I don't have those pressures. I feel more alive than before. Last year has been absolutely awful, but I look forward to each day no matter what I'm doing. And I've not felt like that for a long, long time. I'm a happy bunny and I can see light at the end of the tunnel.

(Dora)



SUSANNA'S STORY

Susanna's story shows how vital it is to have a strong support network of family and friends, but also local agencies that can be there for you through a difficult period in your life, especially when you've never been in this situation.

Before falling pregnant with twins, Susanna was working as a manager in a local store and had no real financial issues. But things went "terribly wrong" at the end of 2021, when she met someone during the pandemic and experienced an unplanned pregnancy: "He moved in during my last trimester, but things unravelled quickly. Having an extra person, more electric, more food, he wasn't working, put me under a lot of stress... Then two days before having the twins, he got physical with me – that was the final straw."

Fortunately, the hospital's safeguarding team were on call, and she got a lot of support straightaway. The police arrested her partner, and ESDAS – a local domestic violence charity – were involved too. After having the twins, who were 9 months old at the time of the interview, Susanna lived with her mum for a while because she couldn't even afford to heat her own home. Citizens Advice helped her deal with some existing debts, accumulated while her partner was living with her, and referred her to the Foodbank."

She still remembers her first visit to the Foodbank: "I was very anxious, almost ashamed that I'd got to this point in my life... but I soon realised that no one was judging, that everyone was there to help." Working over a period of about a year with two of Good Company's support workers, Susanna was able to challenge an error with her Universal Credit claim, apply for a crisis grant, receive several top-ups on her gas and electricity, and get help with clothes and baby equipment for her children - not to mention a great deal of emotional support.

Asked what has made the biggest difference, Susanna says: "If I didn't have the support from the Foodbank, I genuinely don't know where I'd be. I've never been in this situation, so I was completely lost. They are the ones that have guided me to the right places. They've taken the stress and pressure off me, so I can focus on parenting my children. They're helping me financially by letting me come to the Foodbank. It's the whole package."



Susanna and her family are in a much happier place now. She was on an extended career break, thanks to her employer, but was planning to return to part-time work in 2023, because she wants to be a positive role model for her children.

INTRODUCTION

Due to increasing need at food bank sessions in 2017, we recognised that there was a gap in agency support and that many of our clients required more intensive and holistic support with a wide range of other issues. We were awarded a grant in 2018, which allowed us to employ our first part-time support worker, Penny. We soon realised the need for support work was far greater than we could meet with one support worker. With additional funding from Trussell Trust and other funders, we were able to recruit two more part-time support workers – Alison and Heidi – in 2021 and 2022, respectively. We now have a team of three support workers, who between them work a total of 86 hours a week.

As well as struggling to afford food and other essentials, a significant number of clients face other complex issues, such as domestic violence, problem debt, homelessness, and poor mental health. Without addressing these underlying issues, people are stuck in poverty and become dependent on the Foodbank. If we want to help people out of poverty and stem the growth in food bank use, then we have to support people not to need the Foodbank.



Our support work has expanded substantially over the past five years, growing organically in response to clients' needs and external circumstances, including the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis. Last year, we supported 283 people, offering a wide range of financial, practical and emotional support. The total financial gains to all clients in 2022/23 was £187,000. However, the value of the emotional support cannot readily be measured in pounds and pence.

The purpose of this research is to understand the nature and impact of the support work from the clients' perspective. We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten supported clients in August and September 2022, using a topic guide and creative tools to help people tell their story and reflect on the impact of the support work. Each interview lasted around an hour and was recorded and transcribed, to ensure we accurately captured what people told us in their own words. The list of interviewees was selected to represent the diversity of clients by age, gender, family type, and life experiences - see table below.

We ended each interview by asking people about their hopes and dreams for the future. Although we were asking them to talk about a very difficult period in their lives, people spoke very openly and said they appreciated the opportunity to tell their story and reflect on their experiences. Each interviewee was given a £30 voucher to thank them for their time and acknowledge their contribution to this research.



CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

Name*	Age/gender	Family Type	Life experiences
Carol	30s/F	Single parent	Loss of self-employment income, problem debt, ASB victim, depression
Dora	60s/F	Single (with older children)	Long-term illness, loss of job, moving home.
Emma	30s/F	Single parent	Homelessness, depression, addiction, child with special needs.
Linda	50s/F	Couple	Relationship breakdown, bereavement, poor health, job loss, debt problem.
Katie	40s/F	Single parent	Domestic violence, homelessness, addiction.
Katrina	40s/F	Couple with children	Unemployment (partner), children with special needs.
Rebecca	50s/F	Single (with older child)	Domestic violence, job loss, depression, problem debt.
Sophie	30s/F	Couple with children	Homelessness, child with special needs, ASB victim, unemployment (partner).
Susanna	30s/F	Single parent	Domestic violence, problem debt, unplanned pregnancy.
Vincent	60s/M	Single (with older children)	Health issues, insecure employment, depression, problem debt.

*Not their real names



FINANCIAL GAINS RESULTING FROM THE SUPPORT WORK IN 2022/23

Type of gain	Total value of financial gains (£s)
Increase in benefits (excl. PIP)	£58,982
New PIP (Personal Independence Payment) claims	£44,915
Household Support Fund (eg. energy top-ups)	£25,046
Children's clothes and equipment	£18,116
Housing gains	£5,753
Furniture	£5,543
Carers grants	£5,248
Surrey Crisis Fund	£3,860
Adult clothing	£3,103
Debt written off	£2,499
Other	£13,435
TOTAL	£186,501





LINDA'S STORY

Most of the people we meet at the Foodbank have experienced painful life events, such as a bereavement, the breakdown of a relationship, poor health or job loss. Linda was unlucky enough to experience all four of these in a short space of time. Having cared for people all her working life, as a nanny and mother of four grown up children, she desperately needed someone to look after her.

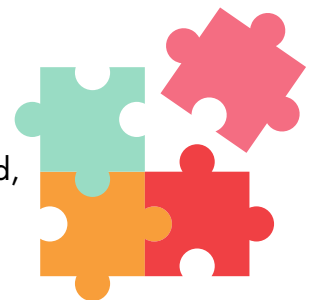
Linda, who is in her 50s, split from her a partner a few years ago, after she found out he had been cheating on her. Her brother, who she was very close to, died at around the same time. Linda also suffers from arthritis, which got so bad that she had to give up her job. That is when her financial situation really deteriorated: "A lot of things happened and I had a bit of a breakdown. I had no money and they were going to take my car away, so I stupidly went to one of these loan people". A work colleague offered to be a guarantor, but then got nasty. The only way Linda could repay the loan was to leave the home she loved and move to a smaller property.

She regretted it the day she moved: "My old house was peaceful. Where I am now, the family above me are fighting all the time and the children don't go to bed until after midnight. My mental health hit rock bottom." Her anxiety got so bad that she finds it hard to leave the house, let alone go back to work.

Linda visited the Foodbank at the end of 2021, after being referred by her doctor. Penny, one of the support workers, was "really helpful from the word go." She immediately put Linda in touch with CAP, a debt advice charity, who put in place a Debt Relief Order to clear her debts: "That has taken a huge weight off my shoulders, not having to worry about bailiffs on the door. That's probably 80% of the reason that I'm where I am now." Meanwhile, one of the social prescribers from the local GP practice helped her with her mental health problems, showing how agencies can work together effectively to offer the holistic support people need.

Linda has learnt a lot from the way Penny supported her: "I've taken a lot on board by listening to Penny and how she deals with other agencies. They know they can't pull the wool over my eyes anymore. I'm more aware of my rights now." Having been suicidal when she first came to the Foodbank, Linda is feeling stronger in herself and more hopeful about the future.

Now that she is feeling more in control, she longs to move to a quieter place, where she can read, do jigsaw puzzles and a bit of gardening.



WHY DO PEOPLE NEED ADDITIONAL SUPPORT?

According to national research by the Trussell Trust, nearly three-quarters of food bank users have experienced one or more adverse life events in the previous year, such as a long-term illness or disability, homelessness, relationship breakdown, or domestic violence; and a quarter have recently lost their job.

Without their own personal safety net – a pot of savings or support from family and friends – people are reliant on a social security system that does not provide adequate protection against the financial impact of adverse life events, frequently pushing them into poverty.



Poverty in turn impinges on almost every aspect of people's lives. The majority of clients have mental health problems or some form of problem debt, due to the financial and emotional pressures of living on a low income for an extended period of time. A survey of our clients found that 24% of them were unable to pay their rent, 57% were behind on other bills, and 58% had experienced poorer mental health in the previous month.

The people we interviewed are no different; indeed, all of them had experienced at least two or more adverse life events in the recent past, and most of them have also been affected by mental health issues and problem debts. Their stories are told throughout this report, but these are some of the challenges they have faced:

- Being evicted from their home;
- Losing their job or income from self-employment;
- Onset of a long-term illness or disability;
- Domestic violence – both physical and financial abuse;
- Caring for children with mental health and/or behavioural problems;
- Being harassed and bullied by anti-social neighbours;
- Bereavement of a close relative or breakdown of a long-term relationship;
- Dealing with rising energy and food prices and unexpected costs.
- Having their benefits cut due to government policy or administrative errors.



It is not surprising that many people cannot cope and get trapped in a downward cycle, becoming dependent on the Foodbank. For people in this situation, emergency food aid is a “sticking plaster”, offering only a brief respite from the stress of trying to make ends meet.

People with extra support needs are identified when they visit the Foodbank and followed up by one of our support workers. The aim is to work with clients to find a sustainable route out of poverty, by addressing any underlying issues that are keeping them in poverty, as well as helping to maximise their income and manage their spending. There is no specific time limit on the support work, although clients are encouraged to become more self-reliant over time.



VINCENT'S STORY

We often meet people who have not received adequate support before they are referred to the Foodbank. Vincent's story shows how things turn around when advice and support is accessible.



Vincent was working locally for many years in a job he enjoyed, but one day started to feel unwell. His doctor referred him to hospital, where he was admitted for major surgery. He went back to work again, but then had to take more time off work after suffering a stroke. As Vincent was recuperating, he found it harder and harder to pay his rent and felt increasingly isolated:

"I was close to falling off the edge, like thinking of committing suicide and people would just find me in my flat, because everything's spiralling. I didn't have no one to talk to. I watched TV all day, by myself."

The first time Vincent came to the Foodbank was before Christmas 2021. One of our support workers asked him about his situation and offered him an energy top up. Vincent recalls: "The first time I met Alison, she paid my electric bill. I didn't know you could get this kind of help. Not so many people want to hear my problem or, to deal with it. Then I go to the Foodbank and I met somebody who would listen to me and she's on my side, helping me to do things."



Vincent continued to receive support and got help from us with applying for Personal Independence Payment (PIP), which meant that he was able to cover his living costs. Alison, his support worker, also referred him to StepChange to deal with his debts, secured a discount on his water bill, and supported him through back-to-work interviews.

Vincent is now working part-time again and volunteers every week at Epsom Pantry. When asked to describe how the support work has made a difference to him, Vincent said: "Before, I was just hanging on and then I went to the Foodbank and there was a hand around my shoulder."

WHAT DOES THE SUPPORT WORK INVOLVE?

The nature of the support work is extremely varied, reflecting the complexity of people's situations. This includes meeting people's **practical needs**, providing **emotional support**, and enabling people to access additional support to help them rebuild their lives through **welfare advice**, **signposting** to specialist agencies and **advocacy** work.

The support is holistic and encompasses the whole family, unlike most other agencies who are usually focused on delivering a specific service. People come to the Foodbank for food and are surprised by the wide range of other support that is available. We have been able to offer this level of support due to specific grants and donations, and by building strong relationships with other local charities, such as Besom, CAP, Citizens Advice, and Stripey Stork.

PRACTICAL NEED

When people first come to the Foodbank and meet one of our support workers, they are usually in an acute financial crisis and the first priority is to meet their immediate need for food and other practical items, such as furniture, bedding, and children's clothes. Over time, this practical support can extend beyond the basic essentials to include help with paying for school trips or carers' breaks, recognising that we want people to thrive, not simply survive.

"[My son] needed some school trousers and Alison said she would sort it. I couldn't understand that it was a food bank and they were helping me with school uniform. I didn't know the scope of what the Foodbank did. More than food and more important than food." (Rebecca)



"I moved to the local area] in March 2022, but didn't have any furniture, so [my daughter] encouraged me to contact Alison. She was brilliant, got me through. She helped me to get a fridge-freezer, cooker, and a bed from Surrey Crisis Scheme. She also got me a microwave, a toaster, towels, mugs and cutlery. I didn't even have a set of knives when I moved here." (Dora)

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

When asked what aspect of the support work had made the biggest difference to them, most people said it was the emotional support they appreciated more than anything else. Knowing there is someone who understands their situation and who they can turn to if they need help is a major source of strength and encouragement.



"It's made a massive difference knowing there is someone to turn to if I'm having a bad day, if I'm in need of something, if the kids need something." (Susanna)

"I met Penny last year when I came to the Foodbank the first time. She was really, really helpful from the word go and has been the whole time.... I feel there's someone's watching my back. I can just pick up the phone. We're in touch at least every other week – home visits to start with, then phone calls, text messages, or meeting here at Leatherhead Community Hub." (Linda)

WELFARE ADVICE

Many of the people we support at the Foodbank are not fully aware of the financial assistance available to people on low incomes or do not know how to access it, often because they have never been in this situation before. One of the vital services provided by our support team is help with filling in complex application forms for PIP and other benefits, in some cases boosting people's income by thousands of pounds a year.

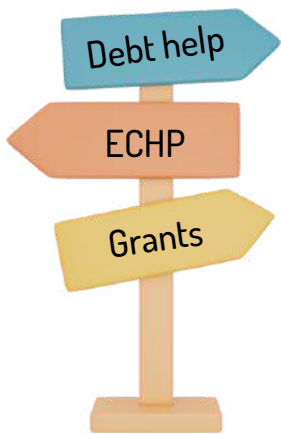
"Alison was the one who suggested the PIP claim and she represented me on the phone, which made me feel more confident in myself. She did the paperwork for the appeal, and she was sitting right beside me when we did the interview. I was really happy, as I didn't know such help was there." (Vincent)



"Alison and Penny helped me with my UC claim. I tried to do it myself, but the form is very overwhelming. Having Penny and Alison there to go through it with me took the stress away, so I could focus on the boys." (Susanna)

SIGNPOSTING

Support work is most effective when other agencies are also involved, through signposting or referring people to debt advice and other specialist support services. Our support workers are well-respected and have good connections with other local agencies, helping to ensure people are able to access the holistic support they need.



“[The support workers] have given me websites to visit and stuff and encouraged me to apply for an EHCP (Education Health & Care Plan) for my older son. College have been really rubbish with this. But with Penny and the doctor’s help, I am hoping that he will get extra help at college.” (Emma)

“Alison gave me support with energy top-ups and with PIP, and signposted me to Stepchange, because I had some debts - and that came through. They did something called a DRO, to write off all the debts. I learn from my mistakes, so Alison really helped me to free myself....I didn’t know about these things if Alison hadn’t told me about them.” (Vincent)

ADVOCACY

As well as connecting people to other services, it is sometimes necessary for our support workers to attend meetings and advocate on their behalf, to ensure they get the support they and their family need - especially when they feel they are not being listened to or lack confidence in engaging with other service providers.

“[My daughter] was nearly kicked out of school and Penny even came to meet with them. She was amazing. If you go in there just as parents, you feel like they lay it on a bit. If you go with someone official, they don’t do that too much. I was asking for help, but no one seemed to want to help at all.” (Katrina)



“Alison was amazing. She took me through all the courts, came with us to the police. She supported the children. She was at the schools. She was at every social worker meeting with the children. She was their rock. Out of all the agencies, she’s the only one that I talked to properly.” (Katie)



KATRINA'S STORY

There are often misconceptions about people who experience poverty; that they are somehow at fault or haven't tried hard enough. Katrina's story exposes just how wrong that is. She works so hard to run her household and contributes an amazing amount to her local community through her volunteering activities. However, her family's situation means that from time to time she needs some additional support.

Katrina is married to Phil and has four children, three of whom have been diagnosed with Special Educational Needs. Katrina thinks all the time about how best to support them emotionally and practically. She likes to be busy, and for the past few years has volunteered with a local charity, which redistributes surplus food that would otherwise go to waste.

Katrina first came to the Foodbank in 2020. She had bought a second-hand car which broke down within a couple of months and needed to save money towards a new car. There, she met one of our support workers, Penny: "She just started asking questions and it was coming from a really nice, understanding person. I can talk to Penny, she doesn't judge. She opened up lots of other avenues for us, like the carers' break grant, school uniform and help with applying for disability benefits for the children."



When one of her children was having challenges at school, Penny came to the meeting to meet with teachers as Katrina feels that the school are more likely to listen with Penny there: "I was asking for help but no one seemed to want to help at all." Her child now has a full Education & Health Care Plan (EHCP).

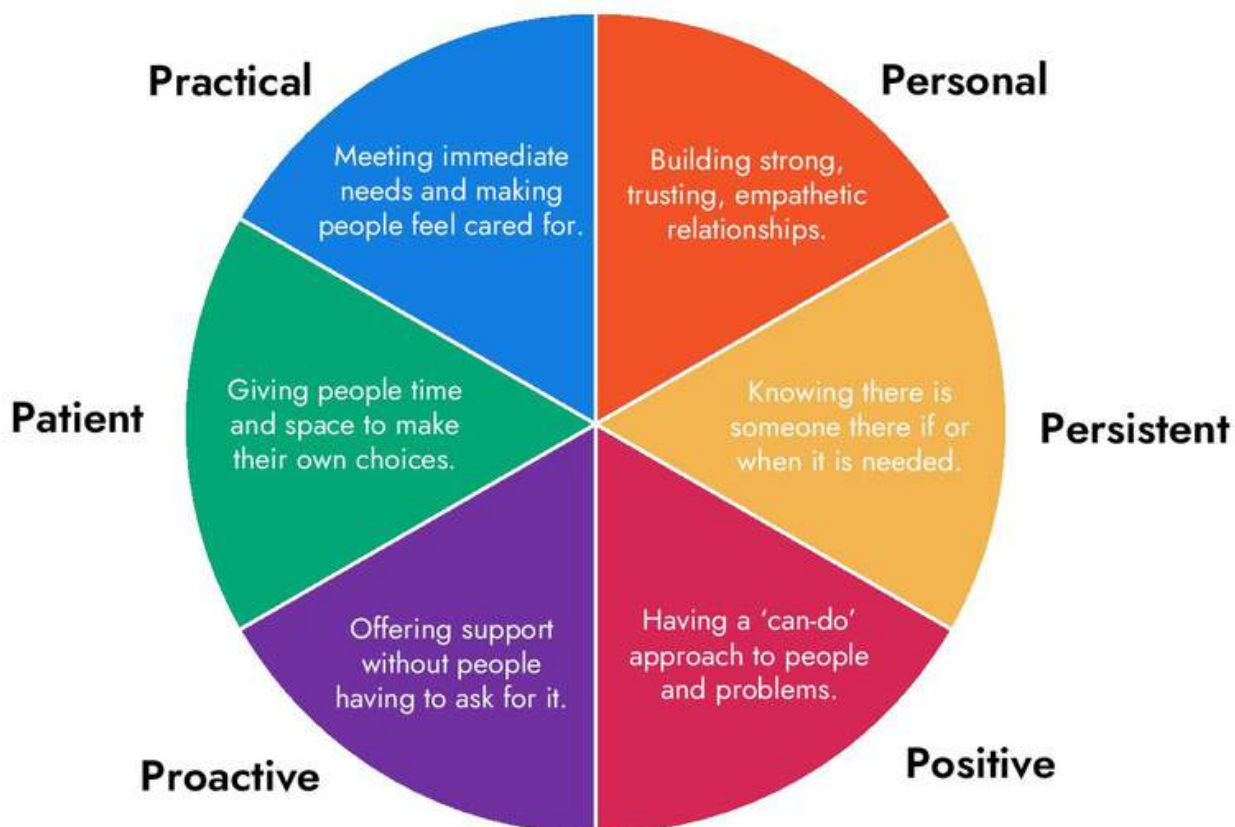


Katrina is very savvy when it comes to reducing the family outgoings, but the cost-of-living crisis is putting more financial pressure on them: "I was buying the cheapest brands anyway. Even the prices of the basic ranges have all gone up now. In 2019, I was spending £70 month on gas, but it's £120 a month now."

Katrina says that she hasn't needed to use the Foodbank recently but might need to again in the future. Finances are always at the back of her mind: "I try to watch money, try and put a bit aside but it doesn't always work." Asked what difference having a support worker has made, Katrina says: "I was hanging on before I met Penny but she has been really supportive. If I have a problem she is always there, always has time. Nothing is ever a problem. With Penny I feel like I can open up."

WHAT IS VALUED AND DISTINCTIVE ABOUT THE SUPPORT WORK?

The distinctive characteristics of Good Company's support work can be summarised under six headings, all beginning with P:



PERSONAL

The foundation for the support work is building strong, trusting, empathetic relationships, in which people feel safe, listened to, and not judged. This enables people to open up about the difficult, often traumatic situations, they are dealing with, and to accept help.

“That's all I felt from Alison. Just sheer acceptance, love, holding, you know. She held me so safe at a time when we felt so vulnerable and unsafe. You can't put that in a job description.
(Katie)



PERSISTENT

Unlike most agencies, the support work is not time-limited, but offered if or when it is needed within appropriate boundaries - in some cases over a period of years. Knowing there is help available and they are not on their own, gives people stability and confidence to face difficult situations and rebuild their lives.



If you are feeling really low, whether it's losing a job, whether it's not being able to pay the bills, things become overwhelming and hit your mental health. And if you've got somebody there that can just hold you and go, do you know what I'm right here on this journey with you, I will help you do this. Not take it away from you because you still have that responsibility, but guide you.

[Katie]



POSITIVE

One of the defining characteristics of the support work is a positive, can-do approach to people and to the issues they are facing – always seeking to build people up and looking for potential solutions. This helps to develop people's self-worth and empower them.



When you talk to them, there's always an answer, it can be sorted out... It's always been a very calm way of doing it as well. I like that. I respond better to that. That fills me with confidence, because they're not getting in a state about anything.

[Linda]



PROACTIVE

One of the things that people appreciated about the support work is that help and advice are offered without people always having to ask for it and in anticipation of their need. This contrasts with many other services, where there are forms to complete and barriers to overcome.



My support worker] thinks of us even when we're not on her case, she looks out for people. Who doesn't like to be thought of and having help without having to ask for it. It's nice not having to go around and say, 'actually, can you help me again please'. It's really nice to know we've got somebody else on our side.

[Carol]



PATIENT

For some people, particularly those who have been in abusive relationships, it's important that advice and support are offered gently and not forced upon people, giving them time and space to make their own decisions and take control of their lives.

“

[My support worker] lets me do it at my pace. Rather than telling me what to do... I have to work things out in my head, and in my time. And Alison gave me that time. She did nudge me a bit and say it is a good idea, they will help, and then she leaves it.

(Rebecca)

”

PRACTICAL

One strand of the support work we are able to offer is very practical – baby equipment, school uniform, bedding, energy top-ups, alongside food and toiletries from the Foodbank. As well as meeting immediate needs, this shows that the support workers understand people's situations and care about them, helping them to feel emotionally supported, too.

“

If you're struggling financially, you can get some extra help with food and (energy) top ups, it really does help. The comfort of knowing there are people there who are willing to help.

(Emma)

”



EMMA'S STORY

Emma's story shows how people's lives can be turned upside down by events beyond their control. It also shows how having a strong support network and a good employer can be vital in helping people to get back on their own two feet.

Emma, a single mum and fitness fanatic, was living happily in Epsom with her two sons, when her landlord decided he wanted to sell his property. Unable to find anywhere else that was affordable on her income, she was forced to go on the council's homelessness register and relocated to emergency accommodation in outer London. Moving away was very hard on the family, as the children were still at local schools and Emma's job was local, too. They were getting up at the crack of dawn to travel to Epsom each day:

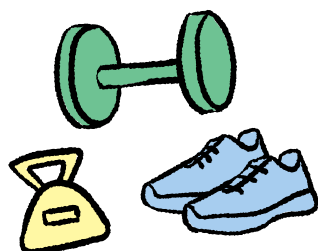


"Moving to [emergency accommodation in a different area] made me realise that I want to be near family and friends. The boys were literally stuck at home in the evening and at weekends". Emma has suffered with depression since having children and being so isolated made it much worse: "I went downhill after moving and started drinking. I was using it as an escape route when it got too much. I wasn't seeing anyone or doing anything." Travelling to and from Epsom was also very expensive, adding to the financial pressure on the family. That is when a friend told her about the Foodbank: "I wouldn't say I relied on it, but it helped me every now and then... My mum and dad are really good, but I don't want to have to rely on them all the time."

Initially, it was just the food, but then she was given additional support: "I didn't realise there was so much more help that you offer... I started chatting to Penny and she offered help with [my eldest son's] PIP claim. I wouldn't have been able to do the form without this. It's so nice to have someone who knows what they're talking about."



Emma, who works at a local gym, is fortunate to have a supportive employer. When she needed time off last year at her lowest point, her manager was really understanding: "She said to take as much time off as you need. Knowing I could go back to work after was great."



After writing to her local MP about her situation, the council offered her temporary accommodation back in Epsom, about a year after becoming homeless. Although Emma still worries about her eldest son, she is much happier and already making plans for the future, including taking a level 3 fitness qualification, with help from her employer."

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THE SUPPORT WORK MAKE?

In some cases, the impact of the support work has literally been life-saving. In every case, it has played a vital role in helping people navigate a very difficult and traumatic period in their lives, by offering practical and emotional support, connecting them to other services and advocating on their behalf when they are overwhelmed by their situation.

““

Penny put my partner in contact with somebody who's potentially saved his life. He was so good at masking that nobody else could see it. Now he has someone that he can talk to about absolutely anything, and I think it's absolutely saved his life.

(Sophie)

””

““

I didn't know where to turn. I was just hanging on. I almost committed suicide. Then I go to the Foodbank and there is a hand around my shoulder - not being on my own facing these things.

(Vincent)

””

““

Thank you so much for all your support, I can't tell you how much I appreciate you. I don't know what I would do without you, and it so concerns me that there are lots of people that are missing out on money, and they don't even know where to go... If it wasn't for Heidi, I'd be in poverty still.

(Susanna)

””

““

She's made me feel like I've got support. I've not got many friends. I keep myself to myself a lot, but with Penny I feel like I can open up and feel supported in that way.

(Katrina)

””

When we asked each person we interviewed about their dreams for the future, they were able to look ahead with hope and purpose, with plans to improve their lives and others'. Their aspirations are simple: for their children to be happy and doing well; to have a safe and stable home; to get back to work and be able to stand on their own two feet; to feel more in control and get their confidence back; and to help others and give something back.



“

I'd like to see our family somewhere back this way. I don't care if it's long-term or temporary, just somewhere we can call home, something that we can get a little bit attached to and emotionally involved in, paint our own house and do the garden and have a dog.

(Katie)

”

“

My hope for the future is to go back to work, and save some money, so I can take my boys to Jamaica. I could take them on a trip to where I'm from.

They'd love that.

(Vincent)

”

“

What are my hopes for the future? That I carry on feeling stronger, more in control, get more of my confidence back, and that I move. I just want a bit of peace, I think I've been through more in the past ten years than some people have in a whole lifetime.

(Linda)

”

“

Where I live now, there are people around who need help for different reasons, and I love helping them, because I know what it's like when you don't want to ask for help, but how grateful you are for it in the end.

(Dora)

”

Most of the people we spoke to continue to face significant challenges and have experienced ups and downs in the months before and since the interviews. But they are now more self-confident, better able to cope with adversity and more optimistic about their future. In their words, “there is light at the end of the tunnel”.

“

Although I still have a little bit of help, I think I'm doing quite well now. The biggest difference is to my mental health. I used to sit and cry. Now my mental health feels better, because I don't have those pressures. I feel more alive than before. Last year has been absolutely awful, but I look forward to each day no matter what I'm doing. And I've not felt like that for a long, long time. I'm a happy bunny and I can see light at the end of the tunnel.

(Dora)

”



CAROL'S STORY

Anyone can find themselves facing an unexpected financial crisis. When people are juggling multiple responsibilities, just one negative event can cause plans to go awry and lives to be knocked off course. Carol's story shows how quickly things can unravel and how the caring intervention of others is helping her to rebuild her life.

Carol had a successful career as a childminder alongside caring for her young son and wider family. After being on the housing needs register for 16 years, she was told that a property was available. The maisonette she was offered seemed perfect for her needs. Carol decided to take out a loan based on her earnings at the time, to furnish the property and make it a suitable venue for her childminding business.



But within months of moving in, one of the families whose children she looked after, and who were her biggest source of income, left. It wasn't long before Carol was overwhelmed with debt. After seeing how Carol was struggling, a teacher at her son's school referred her to Foodbank: "The first time I walked in, I cried like a baby. I was so embarrassed that it had got to that point. After realising it wasn't judgmental and that I wasn't the only one, I thought: my children need what they need and I need to put them first."

The pandemic meant that Carol lost all her business, as families looked after their children at home during lockdown. To make matters worse, her neighbour began to act in increasingly negative and abusive ways towards her: banging on the ceiling, leaving rubbish in her garden and filming and shouting at her through security cameras. Carol felt so intimidated that she had to leave the property and move back in with her mum.

LOCKDOWN

Health professionals, the local Family Centre and one of our Foodbank support workers all came together to provide the help and support Carol needed. She received emotional support through regular phone calls and meetings with her support worker, and had assistance with school uniform and clothes for her children. She has also been able to move home to a different property thanks to the housing association's exchange scheme.

Asked what the biggest impact the support has made, Carol said: "It's knowing I'm not fighting a losing battle and that there is help there if I need it. It's made a massive difference. It's knowing there is someone to turn to if I'm having a bad day."

CONCLUSIONS

The people we interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about the support workers. They were seen to be caring, supportive and empathetic, helping to build strong trusting relationships in which people felt open to share and receive help. What people talked about and appreciated most was the emotional support - knowing there was someone there they could turn to in a crisis, who was on their side, who was knowledgeable and calm, and above all who cared about and understood them.

In some cases, the support provided has literally been life-saving. In every case, it has played a vital role in helping people to navigate a very difficult and traumatic period in their lives, by offering practical and emotional support, connecting them to other services and advocating on their behalf. Most of those we spoke to continue to face significant challenges and have experienced ups and downs in the months before and since the interviews. But they are now more self-confident, better able to cope with adversity and more optimistic about their futures.



WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Carol

Carol says her situation is “unrecognisable” to what it was before. Moving home has made a massive difference – “I can sit in my garden and not have to worry that my neighbour is watching me. It’s totally home now.” She has gone from having children’s services involved in supporting the whole family to being able to stand on her own two feet - all in the space of a year. Finances are still very tight, but she is getting by and using any spare money to re-decorate her new home. A friend of hers said he couldn’t believe the difference in her and how relaxed she is compared to before, and her mum says “she has found her smile again”.

Emma

Emma’s financial situation has improved now she is working and getting PIP for her eldest son. She no longer worries about affording what he needs and has not visited the Foodbank at all this year. However, Emma struggles with being in temporary housing, and having to sleep in the living room so that her teenage sons can have their own bedrooms. The uncertainty of not knowing if or when she will be offered a permanent home is difficult to live with – “it’s up and down at the moment”, and she is still getting some support from staff at Good Company.

Katrina

Katrina says that her family is in a better position now, since her husband, Phil went back to work as a driver, which he is enjoying. He sleeps better and his mental health has improved, which has benefited the whole family. They continue to get some support through Universal Credit to supplement Phil’s earnings – and being able to retain some of the additional benefits they had when he was not working, like free school meals, has helped to offset the rising cost of living. Meanwhile, Katrina continues to volunteer regularly at the local community centre, as well as caring for the children. She keeps in touch with Penny, her support worker, who recently helped with a DLA claim for her youngest son and who also applied for a Short Break grant, so the family can go away together for a few days.

Linda

Shortly after we interviewed her, Linda went to Tribunal about her PIP claim and won. Although the appeals process was stressful, the extra financial support has been a great help – and she has not been back to the Foodbank since. Linda still has bad days with her mental health, but is receiving counselling to help her manage this. When we spoke again in July 2023, she was very excited about moving to a new home in a beautiful and quiet village nearby, after requesting a move to get away from noisy neighbours.

Susanna

Susanna's support worker, Heidi, spent months helping to prepare the evidence needed for a judicial review of her Universal Credit claim. The judges found that the benefit cap had been incorrectly applied and she received a substantial back payment. Susanna is now back at work after having twins and is doing one night shift and two evenings a week, which she manages only because a family member looks after the children when she is at work. Life is still really hard for Susanna; although her Universal Credit went up, her rent and council tax have also increased, along with the cost of basic essentials, like food and nappies. Susanna says it is like "one jar filling up and one jar going down at the same time". She is continually making decisions about what to prioritise and feels upset when she can't buy the things for her children that she would like to.

Vincent

Vincent is still working part-time as a cleaner at a local school; he enjoys his job and is careful to look after his health. He continues to volunteer every week at Epsom Pantry and was interviewed by the Your Local Pantry network as a positive example of how pantries are benefitting individuals and communities. Vincent is left with around £87 a month after his outgoings, so it is hard when a big expense is needed. Recently, when his mattress wore out, he got in touch with his support worker to see if there was any help available, and they were able to provide a replacement. Vincent has been invited to be a community commissioner on the East Surrey Poverty Truth Commission, which he is looking forward to.

ABOUT GOOD COMPANY

Our Mission is to lead our community towards a poverty-free future, while supporting those who need our help.

We work for the prevention and alleviation of poverty through the following activities:

- Five food bank centres: providing emergency food and other essentials to people in crisis who are referred to us. We also signpost and refer clients to local agencies that can help them address other needs.
- Support Work: offering holistic support to help people address complex underlying needs and to reduce reliance on the Foodbank by offering practical and emotional support and advocating for clients.
- Epsom Pantry: a member-led community shop offering choice and low cost, nutritious food alongside community activities and volunteering opportunities, to help people build financial and emotional resilience.
- East Surrey Poverty Truth Commission: bringing together those with lived experience of poverty and those who make decisions that affect them, to listen, understand the reality of poverty, empower those in poverty, and seek transformative culture change in our local community to reduce poverty.
- Epsom Refugee Network: building networks of support for refugees and asylum seekers through social events, English classes and partnership working.

To find out more about what we do and to read stories shared by people with lived experience of poverty, please go to: www.goodcompany.org.



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