

Salvation Army and Foodbanks: A Major Procurement Operation

Steve Apted tells how the Faith-based organisation Salvation Army has forged some strong relationships with major restaurant and hospitality businesses to support local communities through the Pandemic.

The Salvation Army is 156 years old this year. It is a global Christian evangelical church and, in the UK, the largest provider of social care after the UK government. As a Christian denomination the Salvation Army has 700 local Corps (churches) in its UK with Republic of Ireland Territory (Area), all of which have a range of community-based social care programmes. These include coffee shops, mother and toddler groups, drop-in lunches, youth work, debt counselling, temporary night shelter provision and food banks. The wider social care ministry of the Salvation Army includes: 12 care homes for the elderly and a range of older people's services; 80 Lifehouses providing residential care for various groups of vulnerable people; homeless

services; appointment as prime contractor to the Home Office for the care of victims of modern slavery and anti-trafficking; and Employment Plus services for the vulnerable seeking work. There also 300 charity shops run as a separate trading arm, a housing association, an ethical retail bank and a not-for-profit Insurance company.

The mission statement of the Salvation Army is to 'Save Souls, Grow Saints and Serve Suffering Humanity'. At various times the Salvation Army has been described as 'Christianity with its sleeves rolled up' and 'Faith in Action'. In the early days of the Salvation Army its founder William Booth used to refer to Soup, Soap and Salvation. The thinking was and is that people need full

stomachs and shelter before they will listen to the gospel message.

On the 23rd March 2020 the Salvation Army, along with countless other organisations in the UK, found itself facing its biggest challenge since 1945. The economic impacts of COVID-19 on the economy have been widely and meticulously reported in the press and all sections of the media. At various stages of the pandemic up to 25% of businesses have been closed and on average 21% of employees placed on government furlough schemes.

As a result of lockdown the Salvation Army foodbanks were particularly hard-hit. Foodbanks operate on a cottage industry network reliant on donations



Watford Corps foodbank

Photo: Salvation Army



placed in collection bins by shoppers who add a few extra items to their weekly shop. Overnight supermarkets started to ration key items like baked beans and pasta and many shoppers who regularly donated items moved to shop online. The stockpiling of some lines like toilet paper by shoppers resulted in empty shelves. Many workers who would normally travel to offices and places of work found themselves working from home if they could, and as a result the eating out market catered for by coffee shops, restaurants and pubs largely disappeared. The 'eating out' market moved to 'eating in', placing further unprecedented demands on food retailers.

Food retail supply chains are finely balanced and as shoppers added an extra item of produce for themselves to their basket 'just in case', this placed huge demands on 'Just-In-Time' supply chains that were already finely tuned¹. As a result of these rapid changes there was a complete destabilisation of the supply chains across the food retail and commercial food service and hospitality sectors. While supermarkets were facing stockouts of key lines, there were hotels, coffee shops, restaurants, food service operators and commercial catering companies experiencing massive food surpluses in both their outlet stocks and their distribution and supply chains. Into this disequilibrium stepped organisations such as the Salvation Army, The Trussell Trust and Fairshares, seeking to act as brokers,

and moving corporately donated surplus food from areas of over-supply and potential waste to areas of shortage.

In the immediate short-term this posed several challenges for the Salvation Army in particular. Steady-state Salvation Army foodbank operations pre-Covid were based on donated retail size food packs which consisted of products with long shelf life at ambient temperature. Approaches to restaurant operators like Whitbread Restaurants and Premier Inns (where I had worked for several years in food logistics) prompted immediate offers to donate food. However, these were for short shelf life chilled products like dairy, desserts, fruit and veg and bakery lines. So, unless these were moved rapidly to recipients with the chill chain maintained, the produce would be wasted. This required rapid mobilisation to link local Salvation Army Corps and Lifehouses with those restaurant and food retail outlets which had items to donate. In many instances the Salvation Army Corps did not have sufficient fridge and freezer space to store the quantities being offered. This necessitated a rapid adaptation of the 'just-in-time' approach, collecting donated food items and transferring them directly to the intended recipients in small quantities. Sadly, several potential food service corporate donations had to be declined due to the limitation of moving whole pallets of chilled and frozen product in the middle of summer when they had no multi-

temperature transportation and also a lack of adequate freezer space.

The wider Salvation Army UK Territory strategic response to the pandemic was to mobilise its Silver and Gold command structure, used when major emergencies arise, in order to provide focused support and leadership oversight. The COVID-19 crisis created huge challenges across a wide range of Salvation Army ministry areas, and food bank resilience was just one small segment of a massive operational and pastoral refocus faced by the top leadership.

Within the first couple of weeks it became clear that a national foodbank distribution network would be required for a number of reasons:

1. Local donations of produce were insufficient.
2. Demand was anticipated to increase dramatically.
3. Local Corps purchases from supermarkets were unable to meet the quantities now required by local foodbanks.
4. There was concern over the risk of infection to Salvation Army personnel from regular and repeated visits to supermarkets.
5. Bulk procurements by means of centrally and professionally negotiated discounts were the only means to reach the quantities required. The coordination of both procured and donated foodbank supply chain operations fell to the Salvation Army Procurement team.

In order to meet the demands of this initiative they had to pivot rapidly away from the 'day job'. Their focus became to ensure enhanced food bank resilience in the face of a reduction in donated foodbank items at local level, combined with the anticipated increase in demand for foodbank services created by the economic meltdown.

The Salvation Army UK Territory is structured into 22 divisions, each led by a divisional Commander with a local divisional leadership structure. Each of the divisions was asked to nominate a divisional Foodhub to act as a food logistics centre to receive bulk food deliveries. Bulk packs could then be broken down and individual food packs picked, packed and collected by local Corps. These food packs could then be taken by Salvation Army Corps officers and volunteers to their local food bank, and then either collected by recipients or delivered direct to their homes for those unable to collect. The 22 divisional food hubs have become reliant on teams of Salvation Army volunteers who are willing to help unload vehicles and assemble the food packs. Where it proved impossible for corporate

donations of food to be collected by the Salvation Army, or where volumes were too large, the donations were shared with other foodbanks in the area, including a mosque in one location.

Several commercial food services operators from which the Salvation Army was already procuring for Lifehouses were approached to supply the food hubs. These companies however had commercial supply chains built around commercial catering pack size units and product ranges; these proved unsuitable for delivery to the domestic market. An ideal solution was found through a sourcing and networking initiative working with ex-colleagues from the food logistics sector - Morrison Wholesale, a division of the Morrison's supermarket chain who supply small convenience stores. A standard food pack was agreed with the 22 regional food hubs and these formed the basis of weekly deliveries to the hubs. The food packs comprised Baked Beans, Sugar, Orange Juice, Tomato Soup, Chicken Soup, Tinned Potatoes, Tinned Peas, Tinned Carrots, Corn Flakes, Instant Mash, Easy Cook Rice, Penne Pasta, Pasta Sauce, Corned Beef, Tuna, Plain Flour and UHT Long Life Milk.

To date around £1.2m has been spent on food bank provisioning using this model - in addition to the donated food from food service and hospitality operators which is now well in excess of £1m at book value. The procured food has been funded through public appeals and Salvation Army investment in food bank operations. Due to the cutbacks in TV advertising by the corporates it was possible for the foodbank work of the Salvation Army to appear on mainstream commercial channels, which helped raise the profile considerably. In May 2020 the Salvation Army was honoured by a visit from Princess Eugenie and her husband Jack Brookbanks who came and worked alongside foodbank volunteers for a day.

In addition to the food donated by Whitbread Restaurants and Premier Inns, a major donation of food was received from Debenhams stores. Debenhams decided early in the pandemic to withdraw from directly running their own restaurant and coffee shop outlets and to contract with several high street brands to take over the facilities. As a result, Debenhams generously donated all their food and dry goods in their 124 stores

Princess Eugenie and husband Jack Brookbanks helping at a Salvation Army Foodbank

Photo: Salvation Army





Photo: Salvation Army

Commissioners Anthony and Gill Cotterill and Paul Sharman, Bandmaster of Regent Hall Corps who played at the Windsor Castle reception for charities in December 2020

to the Salvation Army foodbank and Lifehouse operations. In two locations the entire fixtures and fittings from the restaurants were also donated.

As well as the large household name corporates already mentioned, the Salvation Army were also very grateful for gifts from a wide range of smaller independent food service operators, a soft drinks manufacturer, a three-masted training ship forced to moor up in Barry docks, and even a coffee shop located in a bingo hall in East London.

In December 2020 Her Majesty the Queen invited a number of charities who had been heavily involved in a wide range of activities arising from the pandemic to attend a socially distanced reception at Windsor Castle, where Salvation Army Commissioners Anthony and Gill Cotterill were thanked by the Queen.

The lessons learned from this rapid dash into national food distribution have been the need for agility, flexibility, creativity and responsiveness.

As I reflect on the intense period of activity to build food bank supply chain resilience from the commencement of lockdown in March 2020 I am drawn to the words of James 2.:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

It has been both a huge and a very humbling privilege to work with colleagues in the Salvation Army to serve 'suffering humanity' 'in just such a time as this' (Esther 4:14) as we pass through a time of significant global history. It is the unique combination of Christian faith and a 156-year heritage of practical 'hands on' service that has enabled the Salvation Army to hold a level of esteem and respect in the public

square that has to a large extent been lost by other faith communities. This has been borne out by the public response to the annual Christmas 2020 appeal for funds. This can never be taken for granted or lead to complacency. It places a weight of responsibility on Salvation Army officers, Salvationists, employees and volunteers to act with courtesy, openness, honesty and integrity in each telephone conversation, email, Zoom call and supplier negotiation. We must 'live a life worthy of the calling we have received' (Ephesians 4:1).

The centralised Procurement team at the Salvation Army had only been in place for around four years prior to the pandemic. Partly as a result of the response described in this article the Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply, the professional body for the procurement profession, awarded the Procurement team its much-coveted 'Procurement team of the Year' award for 2020 in the small organisation category. (<£500M turnover). 

1. See my article on 'The Use and Abuse of Power in Retail Supply Chains' in FiBQ 17:2.



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