

FREEDOM CENTRE ANNUAL REPORT 2024

Prepared for the Trustee Board – January 2025

Overview

We had a great year in 2024 building on the work of previous years. We are still purposefully choosing to refine and get better at what we already do, rather than significantly expand the work of the Centre itself. This has still resulted in some changes, including launching our new community fridge project at the Freedom Centre, as well as the employment of a foodbank manager for the North Baddesley distribution site. However, overall, we have just continued investing in our main projects: the Romsey Foodbank, CAP Debt Centre, TLG mentoring, Community Coaching and Employment support.

Some of our highlights this year include:

- The annual Freedom Centre volunteer training day
- Running a stall at the Mayors' Picnic raising funds and awareness
- Hosting a Freedom Centre Open afternoon - inviting all our referral partners and supporters to come and meet us in person and find out more about what support we offer
- Our Christmas Hamper sessions in December
- Joining the Andover Food Partnership Board with the longer-term aim of supporting expansion for it to cover the whole of Test Valley
- The people we get to meet, and the stories we get to be part of

We are so grateful for the amazing team of staff and volunteers who all work so hard to help deliver the Freedom Centre programme. Please read on for more detailed updates from each of the main projects. Every year we are blown away by the generosity of our local community – individuals and organisations who continue to support our work in various ways. So a big thank you always to all those that partner with us in delivering the aim of the Centre – providing support in times of crisis; encouraging, enabling and equipping people to become 'unstuck' where they are 'stuck'. The dream is to see people reconnect with their purpose and find hope. We have been blessed to witness this many times this year – and pray that this will continue into 2025.

Finances

In 2024 we are very pleased to report that the Freedom Centre Programme broke even. During this year we were awarded grants from the following sources: Trussell Trust, Hampshire County Council (Household Support Fund), Neighbourly (Co-op Community Grant) and Test Valley Borough Council (Cost of Living Grant, and Cllr Community Grant).

Key Partnerships

- Christians Against Poverty (CAP) – we work in partnership with CAP to deliver 1:1 debt counselling and money coaching courses to individuals living in Romsey and the surrounding areas.
- Trussell Trust (TT) – our foodbank project is part of the Trussell Trust network of foodbanks.
- Transforming Lives for Good (TLG) – we work in partnership with TLG to deliver coaching to children in 3 schools in Romsey.
- Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) – we have a DWP work coach from Eastleigh Job Centre based at the Centre once a week on a Tuesday running job centre appointments for those individuals living in Romsey.
- Test Valley Citizen's Advice (CA) – we have a CA adviser based at the Centre during the Foodbank drop-in opening times. We contract CA to provide this service, funded by a grant from Trussell Trust.

KEY PROJECT UPDATES

This section of the report has updates from our 5 project leads, covering the 5 main projects that come under the Freedom Centre banner:

1. Romsey Foodbank Project
2. CAP Debt Help and Money Coaching Project (previously included Life Skills)
3. Employment Support Project (including the DWP job centre drop-in)
4. Community Coaching Project
5. TLG Project

Romsey Foodbank

2024 was yet another busy year at Romsey Foodbank. We fulfilled 627 vouchers supporting 305 number of individual households. Within those 627 vouchers, 927 adults and 808 children were supported with food. 149 of those were first-time referrals.



Our Harvest Festival was yet another successful one with 3,300kg of food donated. This was down by 600kg from last year but is the second biggest we've ever had. We live in such a generous town and are reminded of it every year. Thank you to all who participated in donating through schools and churches.

Following on from this, our Hamper Making events in December were busier than the previous year. We had 152 families attend who all received a parcel costing a minimum of £40 before gifts and toys. We had so many companies and other organisations donate to us this year for our hamper events which meant we were able to give generously to those who needed it most. We were even able to have a whole room dedicated to gifts and toys for all ages for the first time, including visits from Father Christmas himself!

In total, we gave out 23,785kg of food to foodbank users and other charities in our community, including Romsey Young Carers, Romsey Family Support Group, and others. We also received 21,432kg in donations from organisations, charities and individuals in our community.

In 2024, we grew a good relationship with Romsey Hygiene Bank which has started supplying most of our toiletries and cleaning products. They and their supporters have donated 927kg of items in 2024 and we are so grateful for their partnership.

Another key development in 2024 was the acquisition of a strategic development grant from Trussell Trust which allowed us to employ Ali Tuft to manage the North Baddesley distribution site. We love having Ali on the team – he is doing a great job developing foodbank operations at the community life centre.

We still work closely with Citizen's Advice Test Valley and contract a caseworker (Manders) to be available to talk to foodbank clients during foodbank opening times. In 2024 150 unique people accessed support and advice via this service, with a total of £142,000 financial gains achieved for these households. We are grateful to have secured a further two years of grant funding which will allow us to continue providing this service as part of the Romsey Foodbank project.

At the end of 2024, our core volunteer team lost a very important member, David Percival. David has been with us since we first opened in 2016. Sadly, he passed just before Christmas. It will be a big job filling his shoes as he has given so much time, care and work to Romsey Foodbank as well as so many other organisations around Romsey. We will miss him very much.

CAP Debt Help and Money Coaching

When we reflect on 2024 from a CAP point of view, perseverance is the word that jumps to mind! We have had the immense privilege of seeing clients become debt-free or become established on their journey to becoming debt-free, but that has taken a huge amount of time, prayer and determination on the part of our two debt coaches and wonderful team of befrienders. Most of the people we find ourselves working with are very vulnerable, for one reason or another, and often have additional challenges in their lives, including struggles with mental health or learning difficulties. Below we'll give a snapshot of our work from a numbers point of view but that can never convey the impact we have had in people's lives, and the hope and freedom working with CAP brings.



In 2024 we had 17 new contacts in our debt work, alongside 8 continuing contacts from the previous year(s). This included 13 first visits, of which 9 have progressed to third visits (where the budget is presented and a way forward out of debt is established). Statistically, that is higher than the usual average of approximately 50% of cases making it through to the third visit - testimony to the time and effort that has been put in to support those who are struggling. We saw two households presented with debt repayment plans and four debt relief orders (a form of insolvency) put in place. Some of the remaining households, in very complex situations, are in the process of setting up their route out of debt. In total we saw just over £31,000 worth of debt managed for clients using the service last year.

Managing money well is also very much on our radar, not only for those who have been in debt but for everyone who could benefit from knowledge, skills and tools to enable better financial control. We ran CAP Money Coaching courses, once each term over the year, which were well received and something we plan to build on in the future.

Liaising with external organisations is an essential part of supporting our clients, both in enabling referrals and in ensuring their finances are as stable as possible. We have met with representatives of Aster (local housing association), social prescribers (from the local GP's surgeries), and had a three-way meeting with Citizens Advice and a lead from Test Valley Borough Council responsible for council tax and council tax support. In addition, we have worked alongside the North Baddesley foodbank distribution site to increase awareness of the services that are available to the community there.

Our debt coaches have received ongoing training on many topics including gambling awareness, and suicide awareness, and have also participated in the pilot of the new computer platform all CAP debt centres will be moving over to using.

In reflecting on the need for perseverance our CAP team has been drawn to James 1:2-4 and echoes what we find there – that in the trials and challenges of life (whether our own or other people's) leaning into the Lord and finding our faith strengthened as we do so enables us (and them) not just to carry on, but to grow, mature and to flourish. We give thanks to the Lord for all he has done in 2024 and look forward to all he has for us in the year ahead.

Freedom Centre Employment Support

Our employment support project continued in the same format in 2024. A work coach from the DWP holds a job centre clinic at the Freedom Centre every Tuesday. The coach sees or calls roughly 15 clients each week – all living within SO51 & SO52 postcodes. There is a broad range of clients, who are out of work or who have limited capacity to work- many of these could be described as neurodiverse. People are still able to access CV help and work coaching via appointments with our Community Pastor Ben Tanton.



Community Coaching Programme

In 2024 Jo Ibbott handed over the co-ordination of the CCP at Freedom Church to Ben and Beth Tanton, with Beth supporting the co-ordination of the programme and Ben handling the people side. During 2024 at Freedom, we had 3 active participants with 3 coaches. We have seen varying outcomes from these partnerships – it's hard to summarise in a few sentences what can be very complex and personal situations. We know that the clients who engage with CCP really value having someone they can talk to, someone independent of their circumstances who will help remind them of the things they are aiming for – in a caring and supportive manner.



TLG Coaching in Schools

We have seen a few changes this year with Sally Wilmshurst stepping down last summer and Joe Land-Jones beginning to train as a coach. Three of our four existing coaches began with new children in September and have made positive relationships very quickly. Hampers were delivered to each of the families at Christmas which were very well received. Our annual review is scheduled for the start of 2025 with the TLG area coordinator – this is an opportunity to keep up to date with the schools and coaches, celebrate successes, and offer support for any challenges we come across. The TLG team meet each term to look at new resources and training opportunities as well as to share their experiences and ideas and to pray for one another. They are grateful for their prayer partners and Freedom Church who support the work both financially and prayerfully. It is often a very unseen work, but God uses it to make a difference to children who may find school life difficult sometimes.



OTHER UPDATES

Community Fridge

In 2024 we launched our community fridge project at the Freedom Centre. A large fridge and shelving unit were purchased using funds kindly provided by the Romsey Rotary Club. A Community Fridge is a space where anyone can share food to combat food waste, either by bringing food to leave in the fridge or by taking food from the fridge to use themselves. We now have a regular collection slot from Aldi's on a Tuesday morning, helping reduce food that would otherwise be thrown away. The fridge is accessible whenever the Freedom Centre is open to the public and is managed by the Foodbank team. Our community fridge is part of the Hubbub network.

