

University staff and students help distribute food to those in need, writes Stuart Tooley

To mark Volunteers' Week, Kirsteen Shields speaks about her work to co-ordinate volunteers to help local charity, Cyrenians.

Shortages of food and other essentials on supermarket shelves was an early defining image of the Covid-19 crisis.

While for many of us, that meant queues at the shops and temporary changes to family meal plans, for Kirsteen Shields, Lecturer in International Law and Food Security at the Global Academy of Agriculture and Food Security at the University of Edinburgh, a different thought came to mind.

“Food security and food poverty is part of my research. Like many others, I was concerned that panic buying in shops would create additional demand shocks on food banks. I contacted various food banks in Edinburgh and it soon became apparent the impending shortage wasn't in food, it was in volunteers.”

Due to the lockdown rules, the traditional food bank volunteer base – many of whom are retired – are in the shielding group or otherwise advised to stay at home.

“I wanted to make sure that regular volunteers who may be required to reduce movements could do so with peace of mind. I was also aware that charities are not in a position to take on the additional work of coordinating a new stream of volunteers at a time of crisis.”

Quickly, Kirsteen was organising emails to colleagues and students. Within half an hour, she had a list of 40 people willing to lend a hand. Now, there is a rota, with between two and four volunteers from the University attending the

Cyrenians food depot each weekday.

One of these volunteers is Global Academy of Agriculture and Food Security student, Julian Mashingaidze: “With the whole situation of Covid-19, I suddenly found myself with a lot of free time. I had finished a lot of my university assignments or was on course to doing so. So I found myself wanting to do something that edified myself and actively made a difference to the university community.

“So when the opportunity to volunteer came I was more than happy to take part. It also had the added benefit of allowing me to get out of my room for a bit, which helps immensely with my mental health.”

Julian has become a student team leader, and is also part of a student society looking at food security and sustainability.

With volunteer support, food is now heading out daily from the Cyrenians depot to foodbanks across the city, as well as local community groups helping to distribute food to vulnerable people.

Cyrenians CEO Ewan Aitken said: “Covid-19 has impacted all our work across Cyrenians, but we have seen particular challenges at our FareShare Depot where the demand for our services has increased exponentially week on week.

“Volunteers from the University of Edinburgh have been an essential part of the team at our FareShare Depot. Without them it simply wouldn’t have been possible to achieve all that we have over the past few weeks.

“In a matter of weeks we’ve trebled the amount of food that we’re receiving and distributing across Central and South East Scotland, going from an average of 50 tonnes per month to 164 tonnes last month. This simply cannot happen without people at our depot to get the food moving.

“I’m incredibly grateful to all the team at our depot, volunteers and staff who are making a real difference to the lives of so many during such a difficult time.”

The University has also played its part, with Accommodation, Catering and Events donating much of its perishable food – which otherwise would have gone to waste – to the Cyrenians in March.

For Kirsteen, whose impressive volunteer recruitment and organisation have led to such a rewarding experience, she is keen to engage more people in community food networks. “It has been incredibly heartening to see community food projects spring to life during the coronavirus lockdown – in Edinburgh, Bridgend Farmhouse and Scran Academy are doing great things too. It is all about showing up and showing solidarity at a really tough time. Everyone has been so supportive of these projects, that give me a lot of hope for ‘community’ in the post-Covid future,” she said.

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