

FREEDOM CENTRE* ANNUAL REPORT 2023

*(*formerly known as Freedom Matters)*

Overview

On reflection it feels like the main goal of 2023 was to **'Establish the Centre'** whilst managing several staffing and project changes. We have been working on establishing the Centre as a collection of intertwined projects, especially now the Centre provides a base for them all. We have done this by encouraging partnership working between staff and volunteers, as well as focusing on our communications to all our various partners reiterating the vision of the Freedom Centre as a whole.

We are shifting our language in line with this - now the Freedom Centre is well established, and all projects are run under this banner – we felt it was appropriate to transition out of using 'Freedom Matters' to describe this collection of projects, and instead refer to them as 'work of the Freedom Centre' or the Freedom Centre Programme internally. We find that this language is much easier for external partners to understand. We still sometimes use the term Freedom Matters internally from an accounting point of view.

Jo Ibbott moved on from her role as Community Leader in June 2023 – a big change for the Freedom Centre Programme. I took on management of the Freedom Centre Programme as a whole when Jo stepped down, and consequently asked Eve to step up back into the 'Foodbank Manager' role again. Debs Niblett also joined the team in Feb 2023 as the CAP Debt Centre Manager. Both Eve and Debs have settled into their roles very well and are a great contribution to the team. We feel the loss of Jo – who was so invested in the life and vision of the Centre but are grateful that she still very much supports the programme as part of her role on the leadership team, and through co-ordination of the community coaching project.

We're also very grateful for our amazing volunteer team; around 60 individuals who support all our various projects – we couldn't do what we do without them! We were sad to lose Amber Reed from this team, who felt it was time to step down from her volunteering role at the Centre in November 2023. We're very grateful for all she invested in the work of the Centre over the years she was with us.

A highlight of the year is always our Christmas Hamper Events. We saw around 125 families and individuals through the doors over 3 sessions. This is a great opportunity to connect with people in the community and to make them aware of the Centre's services. Volunteers from our Centre projects and the church family helped make these sessions happen - it's a great opportunity to come together as an organisation to do something for the community at Christmas. We were overwhelmed by the amount of Christmas goodies we were donated by various individuals, groups, and businesses too – it really was amazing! Our prayer trees were also back in action – many individuals and families engaged with this, grateful for the opportunity to share how we could be praying for them over the Christmas season.

I'm really enjoying overseeing the Centre – and all the variety that brings with it. We're grateful for the privilege and opportunity we get to serve our community in so many various ways. We know that the Freedom Centre is an important way in which the Freedom Church family – through it's time, finances and prayers – supports the wider community. We recognise that we have a unique opportunity to not only look out for the community's physical and mental health, but also the community's spiritual health, with Jesus as our role model in how he cared for the last and the least.

Beth Taxton

Freedom Centre Manager

Finances

In 2023 the Centre Programme’s expenses increased significantly. However thankfully it’s income also increased significantly allowing us to meet these rising costs and rely much less on the general Church fund than predicted.

We have been amazed at the generosity of both individuals and organisations in our community and are very grateful for their support – both in financial and food donations. We also are finding that more people are now wanting and willing to support the Centre programme as a whole rather than perhaps focusing on particular project, Financially this is really helpful for us as it better allows us to direct funds where they are needed most.

We received grant funds from the following sources in 2023:

Grant source:	Amount:	Purpose:
TVBC (first acquired in 2021)	Remaining £1,279.05 received and spent	Towards the cost of the new photocopier, fridge and bin.
Trussell Trust - Financial Inclusion Grant (originally awarded in 2021 for 3 years)	£15,792.64 for Year 3 of the grant term	CAB Caseworker Year 3 -2024.
Department for Culture, Sport and Media, via the National Lottery Community Fund	£22,200 awarded £15,480.00 received so far.	To cover 50% of the Freedom Centre Programme running costs for Oct '23 – Mar '23
NAVCA via Unity	£750	Towards the cost of a new fridge and bin for the downstairs café space.

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

CAP Debt Help and Money Coaching

Debs Niblett

12 new clients visited, half of whom are engaging with finding a solution to their debts

3 longer term clients went debt free



I had the privilege of starting as CAP Debt Centre Manager at the end of February 2023 and dived immediately into the comprehensive training CAP provides. Once approved to see clients, and working alongside Sara our debt coach, the CAP debt service in Romsey has worked with 12 households, many of whom have been in incredibly complicated circumstances. I quickly learned the difference between what the system looks like in theory and how it works in the practice of people's lives! Flexibility and patience are very much the order of the day, and the Holy Spirit equips us moment by moment as we adjust to what is needed. We are blessed with an incredible team of befrienders, and the level of work that comes through to us from Head Office means that we are able to spend much more time helping our clients navigate their issues, whether that is in matters directly related to debt, or signposting them to organisations that can help with other concerns, and supporting them to access that help.

Jesus is at the centre of everything we do. The team meets to pray once a month, seeking breakthrough in very challenging situations. We pray before each client meeting and are regularly able to pray with the clients themselves at the end of each meeting. Befrienders develop relationships with clients outside of the formal meetings, which is a great source of support and encouragement. We also had a wonderful Christmas meal, hosted and provided by the Baptist Church. 15 invitations were issued, and 7 households attended, from individuals to whole families. There were many beautiful moments, including clients' children finding their best friend in attendance to reconnection with clients that hadn't been able to engage with us for a while. Fun and games, as well as food, were enjoyed, and there was an opportunity to share the gospel, using The Muppet Christmas Carol, no less! Goody bags were given as gift, and these were also distributed to those who couldn't attend, giving further opportunity for conversation and blessing.

Work has continued on developing relationships with local organisations and referral partners. Having the DWP and Citizens Advice present in the centre is incredibly valuable, and I was able to speak with the DWP team in Eastleigh on their staff development day, to raise awareness of what we do, why it is important, and how to refer to us.

I had intended to develop a regular pattern of CAP courses this year, but that is still a work in progress. CAP Money has been rebranded as CAP Money Coaching, with new material and resources. This necessitated training for the coaches and delayed our plans, but the first Money Coaching course took place in November and was very warmly received. The material is fresh and accessible and we look forward to increasing access to Money Coaching courses in the year ahead. We planned and advertised a Life Skills course in the autumn term but whilst a number signed up only one attended. In God's perfect timing, however, this was exactly what they needed, and was a very beneficial time. This experience, and our Life Skills Manager moving on, has led us to make the decision to stop running Life Skills at the Freedom Centre but to work with clients who need that type of support under the banner of Community Coaching.

Romsey Foodbank

Eve Ibbott



At the Foodbank, 2023 was a very busy year again. We gave out 22,000kg of food to local families compared to 21,000kg in 2022. Our teams have worked incredibly hard in both our Romsey and North Baddesley locations. We had another very successful Harvest Festival with just under 4,000kg of food donated by local schools, churches and community groups. In August, I took over the role of Romsey Foodbank Manager from Beth releasing both to have oversight of the whole Freedom Centre Programme.

The demand in 2023 was very similar compared to 2022. Last year we provided 319 unique households with food parcels. Giving out 753 food parcels in total over the year, providing an estimated 6000 meals* for adults and children in our community. We noticed an increasing number of households with 5+ people coming to the foodbank through the winter months that have been able to gain access to household support funds through our Citizen's Advice Caseworker, Manders. We're grateful to have Manders as part of team – her work supporting clients that visit the Freedom Centre is invaluable and helps us support people to move out of crisis. In 2023 274 people accessed support and advice via this service, with a total of £90,296 financial gains achieved for these households.

During December, we also offered extra support with 3 hamper making events. During this period, we saw around 130 families and individuals and were able to give out over 600kg of Christmas goodies. Thank you so much to all those in our community who either donated their time, money or food for the Foodbank in 2023. We couldn't run without the constant flow of generosity and support.

**Each food parcel provides about 3x meals for each household member. There were over 2000 household members across the 753 food parcels given out.*

Community Coaching

Jo Ibbott



There hasn't been much overall development of the Community Coaching Programme (CCP) during 2023. We ran an introductory session for staff at Freedom Church so they could better understand what it is and how they might be able to use Community Coaching within their areas of ministry and service. I hope this will develop further and that we can train appropriate staff as community coaches in 2024. We have also taken the training to five other organisations to date and plan to expand it further. This has taken much of the time and focus and meant that at Freedom Church it's coasted this year.

CCP was effectively handed back to me, as without me it doesn't exist, when I left being an employee of Freedom Church in May 2023. I hold responsibility for running and developing it at Freedom Church, as project lead and am in the process of getting the appropriate legal agreements in place for the CCP under the banner of Courage Coaching. I will have a Licence Agreement in place soon consisting of annual charge to each organisation running the CCP (post training) which in turn gives them permission to use the model, protects our Intellectual Property Rights and gives access to ongoing support from myself and Jo Topley.

During 2023 at Freedom, we had 2 active participants with 2 coaches. One has had successful outcomes, the other had to end as the participant's mental health deteriorated, and she was unable to meaningfully engage. Following a refresh of focus of CCP at Freedom I'm pleased to say that we already have three new participants referred to us and I shall also be looking at expanding the Community Coach Team as we are ready to move things forward again.

Freedom Centre Employment Support

Ben Tanton



Our employment support project has continued to develop over the last year. Jan from the DWP sees or calls roughly 15 clients each Tuesday from the Freedom Centre – 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. One of the newer developments with our employment support projects is that we have begun to explore how we can partner with external agencies that can deliver targeted group training for jobseekers in the Freedom Centre. This could include industry-specific training (e.g. Hospitality or Care), basic skills, or back-to-work courses in lieu of the CAP job club which finished this year. People are still able to access CV help and work coaching through appointments with myself and other members of the team which continues to be valuable to the community.

TLG Coaching in Schools

Marion Carter



5 children 5 coaches 3 schools (Cupernham/Romsey Abbey/Romsey)

TLG Early Intervention coaching continues to be an extremely highly valued programme with both children and their families and schools. Nick and Trisha are a wonderful addition to the coaching family but the schools would love more if we can find volunteers. Very positive relationships with our schools and the enthusiasm and God given gifts of the coaches means that children who often struggle the most have a champion who they look forward to seeing (often quoted as the highlight of their week) and who has the time to listen, to have fun, to share their interests and help them identify struggles and develop ways to help. All this only happens because of the prayer behind it all and we are grateful for all the prayer partners that have signed up this year to pray for the coaches, their children and families.

OTHER UPDATES

Warm Welcome Hub

This project ended in Summer 2023, however some of the activities that sat under this banner continue. We have 'Community Lunch' every Wednesday – now sitting under the Church programme as part of our efforts to gather as a community. And we also still have a small group that meets every Wednesday in term-time to playboard games together.

Ukrainian English Lessons

This project also finished at the end of the Summer term in 2023. We are grateful for all the volunteers who enabled these lessons to run – we know they were greatly appreciated by those who attended. This service was continued by another local provider who was better equipped to take the lessons 'to the next level'.