

SURVIVAL RATIONS: Braintree Area Foodbank was busy over Christmastime

'Things always hit you harder when it's this time of the year'

By Harriet Sinclair

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WHILE fridges all over Essex are still packed to bursting point with leftover Christmas food, there are some people in the county who consider eating to be a luxury.

For families dependent on food banks, there will be no turkey sandwiches or Christmas chocolates left over, no stuffed-to-the-brim feeling this week; just the cold, hard reality of a situation that has left thousands of local people unable to afford to feed themselves, a third of which were children, in the past year.

Delays

"We have a lot of people coming in because of benefit delays and low income, which always hits people harder over Christmas," said Sarah Maddox, voluntary publicity officer for Braintree



Area Foodbank, which has three centres in Braintree, Witham and Halstead.

Though food banks are no solution to the poverty that leaves people having to choose between heating their homes or feeding their children, the three-day emergency food packs do make a difference to those in dire need.

"Over Christmas, as well as the food we provide, we also added some Christmassy treats like cake and chocolate. We had one girl come in who cried when she saw we had put some Christmas things in her parcel. She said she just wasn't expecting that kindness," Mrs Maddox continued.

Braintree Area Foodbank is

just one of the local charities to benefit this year from Essex Community Foundation's Surviving Winter Appeal in conjunction with the Chronicle, receiving £1,000 from the fund.

And so far this year, Chronicle readers have raised more than £8,000 for the appeal, which has distributed to elderly and vulnerable people around Essex.

"As well as food donations, we also have expenses ourselves like electricity, heating and lighting to pay for, plus all of the admin we do – so for all of those things, any money we get is gratefully received," Mrs Maddox explained.

"The money from the Surviving Winter Appeal makes a big difference in letting us continue to function.

"The difference it makes to people is huge. It's also the kindness people miss out on – people



HELPING HANDS: Foodbank volunteers Dave McDonald and Jane Walker making up parcels of food

can come and have that here. No one will judge you.

"We provide three days of emergency food for people, and we get clients in all kinds of situations.

"If a family gets hit by an unexpected bill, it could be that they can't afford to buy food as well as pay it.

"I met one gentleman who had an accident at work, had to take time off sick and then had his pay cut to statutory sick pay.

"He had a wife and children, and a mortgage to pay, and he had never had benefits in his life but he suddenly ended up being referred to a food bank."

Although a beneficiary of the Surviving Winter Appeal, the Braintree Area Foodbank centres run year-round, with different

centres open Monday, Wednesday and Friday, offering assistance to those in need of food.

"It's incredible the amount of people who also turn up to donate food," Mrs Maddox said.

"It's what we survive on really, food deliveries from the public, schools, churches, especially around harvest festival time, we get a lot of donations.

"People have really hit rock-bottom when they come to a food bank. When you can't feed yourself and your family you are desperate.

"We have people coming back months after they have been to us with a bag of food, and they'll say 'you really helped me out when I needed it and I wanted to give something back'."

HOW TO HELP

- Text WINT77 to 70070 to donate £5
- Visit www.justgiving.com/Winter-Appeal-2014
- Send a cheque to Essex Community Foundation, 121 New London Road, Chelmsford, CM2 0QT. Please complete and return the form published in previous editions of the Chronicle and remember to tick the Gift Aid box
- For people in the 60-plus age bracket, ECF is suggesting that those who do not need their government Winter Fuel Payment could consider donating it to the Surviving Winter Appeal