



When the Cupboard is Bare...

As the magazine is focusing on all things foodie this month I thought I would amuse you with tales of strange food requests from the Pierce Brosnan lair. But before I reveal all, you have to humour me by reading about a food problem that's been making my blood boil.

I caught a snippet of an interview on Radio 4 this week. A man who considered himself an authority said the only reason so many people are using the food banks is because they offer a free and easier alternative to using the supermarket. And he's right isn't he?

To prove it I decided to steal the identity of a nurse called Shirley who is married to Tom and has three children at home. Shirley has been a nurse for five years but last year her NHS contract changed. She now has a 'zero hour's' contract which means she is no longer guaranteed any weekly hours. Tom works in the retail industry and is also on a zero hour's contract. Until this year they enjoyed a secure lifestyle with holidays, a car, a comfortable home and food in the fridge.

Over the past year, Shirley and Tom's working hours have become so hectic that they have found it impossible to budget for the end of the month. They asked the bank for a loan but the bank refused because Shirley and Tom rent their home and the zero hours contracts mean there is no guaranteed income to make the repayments. When their eldest son started high school this year, Shirley saw no option but to take a high interest, unsecured loan to pay for his uniform, football kit etc. and the contribution to school transport. This totalled over £600.

This week there is nothing left after paying the bills. In three days' time Shirley and Tom will receive their wages but for now there's no food in the house. The situation may be better next month if they are given more hours but who knows?

Shirley bites the bullet and visits the local food bank where she finds she needs a referral before she can take a food parcel of basic food for three days. There are twelve places she can go for the referral but she can't access six of them because;

- She is not on benefits
- She is not a housing association tenant
- She does not have a support worker
- She is not recovering from an addiction
- She is not at college
- She is too old to approach the YMCA

From the other six, Shirley tries to choose the best option.

- She immediately rules out her doctor because she's known him for donkey's



years and would die of shame if she had to admit to him how bad things were. She's also worried he may contact Social Services and her children would be placed on an 'At Risk' register.

"At what point do two working parents admit defeat?"

- Shirley thinks about approaching her daughter's primary school but again worries about Social Services. There is also the risk of her daughter being teased if anyone overhears her request.

Where you can go for a food parcel referral voucher

- Job Centre
- Citizens Advice
- Doctors
- Support Worker
- Help Direct
- YMCA
- Inspire
- Your local MP
- Housing Association
- School
- College

- Her MP sounds like a possibility but she heard an MP on the radio this week saying that people who used the food banks only did so because it was easier

than going to the supermarket. She's worried he may tell her to go away.

- Stan the Van is sounding like a safe bet until she is told the council no longer funds Stan the Van when she calls the number listed.

• Shirley calls Citizen's Advice and is told they usually refer people who have accessed their services about other issues such as losing accommodation or debt problems but if she calls into the office with some evidence of her situation then they will try to help. They want to see pay slips for this month as proof of how few hours she and Tom have worked but she won't have those for another three days. By then they will also have their wages and food again.

- It's now 2pm and Shirley still has to walk to wherever she can collect the referral from, walk back to the food bank, walk home with the food and then walk to school to pick up the children by 3.30pm. It's looking like they won't eat tonight. She calls the last contact on her list, Help Direct and is told that her details will be forwarded to her local office who will call her back but it may not be today. At this point Shirley breaks down and begs. Help Direct say that if Shirley has asked all her relatives for help and been refused then they will call the local office and ask them to deal with Shirley's case as an emergency.

So what happens if the Help Direct local office call back too late for Shirley to pick up the referral before the food bank closes?

Well here's a thing. The call centre for Help Direct is actually Social Services (yes, we know she was trying to avoid them but she is now desperate) so if Shirley calls them back before the phone line closes at 5pm her children may eat tonight. The Emergency Duty Team of Social Services (or Social Care as it's now called) can in exceptional circumstances deliver food for one night.

You may read this and think Shirley and Tom should have asked for help sooner but at what point do two working parents admit defeat? The next time you hear some official voice tell you that using the food bank is easier than shopping think of Shirley.

And yes, I know I made you a promise but unfortunately I've run out of space so you'll have to go to gillwatson.co.uk and type 'Pierce Brosnan, breast milk' into the search bar to read all about it there. You won't be disappointed. 📺