

ST ALBANS TIMES

Inside the M Store – a school facility at the front line of tackling poverty



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in [Feature](#)

Ensuring every student has unimpeded access to education is at the heart of Marlborough Science Academy's M Store.

This is an in-school multi-bank facility, combining food bank, clothing bank, furnishings bank, toiletries bank and baby bank, all for the benefit of students and their families.

It was devised by MSA's family engagement worker Emma Hicks, and started off with a cupboard, expanded into a second, and moved into a small classroom, but would keep getting moved on as the area became needed for teaching space.

It's now housed in a bespoke building at the rear of the school.

“ I don’t want people to ever feel anything apart from special and happy and amazing when they come here. It’s a positive place.”

The new M Store might still be a work in progress – with walls to be painted and a ceiling to fit – but it has already come a long way.

Inside are shelves arranged like your average supermarket, divided into areas like toiletries, dried and tinned food, bedding, school uniforms, prom dresses and suits, and even a gifting section for those students who find they don’t have any money for a family member’s birthday.



The M Store at Marlborough Science Academy.

Emma also hunts down items from freecycle sites like beds and buggies: “There’s no limit to what I’ll source for those families who really need it.”

The initiative was not just prompted by the cost of living crisis: “Our headteacher Annie Thomson is really, keen on making sure there are no barriers to learning for our students, and what I do in both of my roles is plug that gap.”

“We’ve got an amazing pastoral team here at Marlborough, and I think well-being and mental health are very high up on our priorities as well because they all feed into the academic. At the end of the day, they’re not in isolation of each other.”

“I didn’t want to run it like a food bank, I want it to be a shop where people can come in, have a cup of tea and a biscuit, chat about other things that are going on in their life, and then I can signpost them and they can help themselves to things from the store.”

Surprisingly there is no limit to what people can take away, but nobody ever exploits this generosity and Emma often has to persuade them to take more than one item: “The culture we’ve developed here is incredible. I support over 20 families, which might not sound like much, but there’s maybe four children in some of those families, so that’s a lot of people, really.”

“They bring back stuff, ‘these school shoes don’t fit anymore, so I’m just going to pop those back’, as they all know how it all runs. Or they come in and they’ll volunteer doing some tidying up for me. Or, do you know, it’s just like a real family thing.”



The M Store at Marlborough Science Academy.

At the moment the M Store is unique in St Albans, but the template could be adopted by other schools across the district.

“I’ve had about six members of staff from other schools coming to visit us to see if they can try and set up something similar, because they’re all noticing the need, but we were the first ones to do it, for sure.”

She said a lot of people still don’t realise that there are areas of real deprivation in St Albans.

“The high street’s bustling, everyone looks very wealthy, there are some beautiful houses around the area, but there are pockets of extreme poverty which pass unnoticed by many people. But also, anyone can find themselves in a situation like that.

“During lockdown they might have lost their job, but they’ve still got this massive mortgage, and it starts off with cutting back on children’s clubs, but eventually gets to a point where people are just drowning in the lifestyle that they’ve got used to, so it can happen to anyone.

“Domestic violence as well is across the board, and that’s something we’re very aware of as a school. Most of the families I helped at the beginning, were victims of eviction due to having to flee their family homes and they leave everything behind. They had nothing and are starting again from the beginning. They’re staying in a hotel, but you can’t cook in a hotel, you can’t take pets to a hotel, you’re completely and utterly lost and alone. I think what we offer here is a helping hand, a bit of love, a bit of ‘What do you need? I can get this for you. I’ll bring it to you. I’ll take you to this appointment’. We’re getting them back up on their feet and it’s not very often that long-term intervention is required, it’s a helping hand.

“A couple of the families I put a lot of input into. We redid the whole children’s bedrooms with all the furniture, rugs, lamps, the works.”

“It’s becoming a household name now, the M Store. People know what the M Store is and word is getting around.

“Students will come to me and ask to have a look inside, and then you get talking to them. Sometimes students will introduce themselves or say, ‘I’ve got a friend who’s really struggling’ so it just happens organically.”



The M Store at Marlborough Science Academy.

Unfortunately non-perishable food items are now in short supply after a major source of donations ended. Despite visiting local supermarkets and sending email after email requesting goods, Emma has heard nothing back.

“People often say, ‘well, why can’t they just use the normal food bank?’ I have a really good answer for that one because it comes up a lot. It’s because some of the families aren’t used to

having to reach out for help or to access something like this. The one place that all parents tend to come to is in schools. It's a more natural thing. It's more comfortable for them.

"Obviously we can't compete with food banks, but I'd prefer to see us running alongside other agencies. We've got children who aren't on free school meals as they're just out of that bracket of eligibility to have access to anything, or their parents are working low- income jobs and the outgoings are far greater than the incomings, and they're just struggling every day.

"So, these children either have a very small packed lunch or nothing at all, and they can often pass by really unnoticed as they're not flagged on any system.

"There's also less shame in coming here. You're not queuing in the street with your bag, they can come in around the back and no one knows they're here. It's so discreet. I also do my other family work here, so nobody knows why someone is in here.

"I actually think if anything it's become quite cool to be in the M Store. It's not embarrassing or shameful. I get students come in here at lunch and break times and they do some homework or revision at the table.

The M-Store receives a great deal of support from the St Albans and Harpenden Hygiene Bank, and it was writing a feature on their work which made me aware of what was happening at Marlborough.

"They have been behind a lot of what I've done here. Organisers Katy McCarthy and Lorna Harris were so kind. They understood my vision of what I wanted to do. I wanted to set up something different from them, not because what they do isn't fantastic, but I wanted it to be a family store people can come to.

"It isn't just about the products, it's also about signposting other help that they might need or just providing a warm space to sit and have a chat. Sometimes lonely single parents come in to have a cup of tea, and they bring their little ones with them so I always have lots of toys available. It's a special place; unique I think."



The M Store at Marlborough Science Academy.

Emma runs the entire operation on her own, enlisting the school's site staff to help move any heavy furniture, but she believes it has a vital place in the heart of the MSA community.

"I think schools are now the fourth emergency service. The need's not going away, it's getting greater. I think it takes quite a lot of confidence to go, right, we're going to do this as a school. It's quite a big statement, you know, but Annie says, 'everyone who comes to this school, we want them to have the same opportunity'.

"They don't have the same upbringing, they don't have the same parenting. But when they're here, they should have access to deodorants and period products and uniform and washing stuff, toothpaste. We don't want that sort of poverty happening in our school. We all know that if a child is struggling with hygiene, it's going to impact on them socially and then it'll impact on them educationally. So, education is still the focus underneath it all.

"Obviously we're not going to have amazing results immediately, but over time, I'm hoping that we will break that cycle of poverty.

"Even poverty is a tricky word. It's different in every family that I work with. Mental health is a huge problem for some of the families, and it's not necessarily a visible disability.

"I think we're going to move away from the problem of evictions now with the Section 21s because there's a law coming out about that. But we've had quite a few families being made homeless and I also help with the housing side of things as well, I'm on the homeless forum at St Albans council. We've helped home six families now."

Emma is looking ahead to expanding the facility outdoors, hopefully transforming a disused area of grass outside the building into a combination garden and allotment, growing fruit and vegetables for students and families to take away.

“I get carried away with my ideas, but I tend to be quite tenacious with it all. Once I’ve got an idea, I do stick with it and it will happen. I just love the idea of people coming to get fresh stuff, even at break times when kids haven’t got a snack they can come and pick an apple off the tree or get a carrot.

“I’m so passionate about this. I absolutely love what we do as a school, but really it’s about the head allowing us to be in a position where we can do something this amazing. I’ve got the best job in the world really, I love what we do. I work with the nicest families, the nicest students, and every day I’m doing something really good and I love it.”



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