# Tech4Good Champions: BanktheFood

Freya Robinson: Welcome to another episode of The AbilityNet podcast, disability technology inclusion. I'm your host, Freya Robinson, marketing assistant at AbilityNet. A pioneering UK charity with a mission to create a digital world accessible to all. You can download a transcript of this session from the AbilityNet website at www.abilitynet.org.uk/podcast. So, sit back, grab your favourite drink, and let's get started.

Welcome, everybody to the AbilityNet Podcast. I'm delighted today to be joined by Emma Spring, who is co-founder and trustee of Bank the Food. So welcome, Emma, it's great to have you here today.

Emma Spring: Thanks for your time, really appreciate it.

Freya Robinson: Lovely. So, we're going to kick off just a little bit of an icebreaker question that we like to do on the AbilityNet podcast. So, what have you chosen today as your hot or cold beverage?

Emma Spring: Both actually, I've got a strong black coffee to get me through and also water, always need water at my desk with me.

Freya Robinson: Excellent. I am the exact same today actually strong black coffee and a lot of water. Brilliant. So, to start, can you just introduce yourself and tell our listeners a little bit about Bank the Food and the work that you do?

Emma Spring: Yeah, sure. So, I'm Emma spring, and I'm one of the trustees of the charity Bank the Food, and also the co-founder. We're a small charity, and we've only been running for a couple of years. So, my career prior to that was as a teacher, I worked in the education field, I was a primary school teacher and worked as an advisor as well, for the local for a local authority. And Bank the Food is a charity that we started a couple of years ago. Seeing the need and as I’m sure I'll explain more later on in the podcast, but seeing the need that food banks have really struggling to get their needs out to the donors to ask exactly what they need, because their needs change all the time. So, Bank the Food was born on the back of that we've got a lovely story about how it all started. And I was really passionate about helping because I've seen how food poverty can really affect children in the classroom and their life chances and their learning, and really wanting to help and make a difference. So that's me.

Freya Robinson: Brilliant. No, it's great to hear sort of your journey into it as well and the different backgrounds everyone has working in the charity sector. It's always really interesting. Great, thank you. So, Bank the Food were the winners of this year's Tech for Good Community Impact Award. What was it like winning the award? And what do you see as the effect of that win?

Emma Spring: We were firstly, I think, really flattered. I think we've worked really, really hard over the last couple of years to just crack try and put ourselves out there. And we're so passionate about what we're doing. And the fact that other people agree with us and said, Yeah, we are championing you, and we think this is a great idea was flattering and humbling. And that was and also to actually see the field of the other people, the other entrants and the wonderful work that people are doing. So, to be amongst that field of such incredible work was flattering for us. I think that's the word that we can use, and humbling. So, the fact that we were a winner as well, was just the recognition that we needed to keep us going and to kind of carry us on that right path. I had so many conversations with people that night at the awards ceremony as well, which was brilliant. And lots and lots of people said, as food banks have that we worked with along the way, that this is just a really good idea. And we've always thought it's a really good idea. But for more and more people to say it just makes such a difference to us. And it really kind of keeps showing us on so it was great. It really was wonderful night.

Freya Robinson: It's always lovely to get that sort of feedback because we love putting them on and obviously, we love being in the room. So, it's lovely to hear that it's that same experience as well. And obviously people may not know but you were part of the winner of winners’ countdown which was a very tense moment but great on the night.

Emma Spring: yeah, and up against access passport, who are doing incredible things. So, you know, they were an absolute worthy winner for the winners of winners. And it was great to hear their story as well. So yeah, that was a double-tipping icing on the cake. Yeah, we were really chuffed to be to be there as well.

Freya Robinson: Brilliant. So, to talk a little bit more about Bank the Food. I wonder how the need for the platform like Bank the Food was identified. And I suppose related to that, how have you seen demand grow or change since bank feeds creation?

Emma Spring: Well, we came in it came by its kind of accidentally. We heard About there was a class of children working with South End Food Bank, and Southend Food Bank, were communicating to the children, that they really struggle to get their needs across to communicate their daily needs, to their donors, because their needs change all the time. They might need pasta and nappies one day and then they get an influx of that and then they need to change is it really is a big logistical problem for food banks to get the food to their to their warehouses to move them around in date order and then to get them out into those really crucial food parcels for the for the people that that really need their support. And so, they sometimes have supermarkets. Sorry, noticeboards, supermarkets or they might have a website. But actually, those needs change all the time. So, one of the children in the class at self and Food Bank said, well, why isn't there an app for that, because children love that don't know, they always come up with such brilliant ideas. And, you know, the world is their oyster. And the teacher actually kind of Googled, try to find a web app, or an app for maker, and came across Dan, who's our other co-founder. And he didn't realise that this was a really big problem. And actually thought, yeah, this is this is a good idea to be able to help this and put all of his corporate social responsibility into building that app. And apps take a long time and a lot of money. But they he and his team worked on it for a good couple of years, before COVID, during COVID, to just try and get something that would work really, really well for the food bank to really communicate, communicate their needs. And then it was just an app, it was just there. And Dan and I talked about it. And I said, well, actually, I think this needs to be a charity, because then we can get it out there to more people. And we can, it can be free. And we can see where we can go with this. And so, I came on board as the other co-founder of the charity, I think teachers always have so many transferable skills. So actually, it was it was a brilliant new challenge for me. So together, we set up the charity, we've I volunteer all of my time to run the charity. So, I do the admin work, podcast interviews, onboarding of new food banks, I do all of that bit. Dan and his team do all of the tech, they run all the service for the app, and you know, the tweaking and making it making it work from their Bank the Food was born and the thing that Bank the Food, that the thing that makes it really special is it sends notifications for users when they're at the supermarket, because that's the time that you need to have that reminder, so many people are wellbeing and they really want to give donations. And I'm sure you'll notice that those drop off locations are at the end of the tail after you go through the tills. And so, you don't actually know what food banks need. So you go, oh, I've got some extra pasture, you can have that which is really well-meaning donation. But actually, some food banks that are visited have always got so much pasture and they need something else hygiene products, or I don't know pasture sources or other things, they've always got so many different needs. So, the app sends the notification as you walk into the supermarket reminding you at that exact time. So, it really does. And food banks can take management of their food bank on the app, they can change their needs as much or as little as they need. They can do it on a daily basis. If it does, they can list all their job of locations. And they can also see how many users they've got following them. So, we have a sort of follow system a bit like any other social media, and they can see how many followers they've got. They can see what donations they've been given any week. So, it's working really well. We've got over 400 food banks now listed on the app, right the way across the UK. And we've actually made a decision quite early on that it wouldn't just be for food banks, we will let any food poverty organisation that are offering food for free to be able to be listed on the app if they think it's helpful for them. So we've got pet food banks, we've got a baby food bank, we've got community shops, soup kitchens, community cafes, anybody that's working to help with this big crisis that's happening in our country at the moment are welcome to come on the app if they think it's going to help them and it's always going to be free. It's free for food banks, and it's also free for donors. So, we hope well, we know it is making a difference. Food banks are really I say food banks being that generic term for anyone that's, that's using it. But they're saying it really is helping a big difference with their logistics and their sourcing needs. So, we're delighted.

Freya Robinson: Yeah, it's just such a brilliant initiative. You know, as you're talking about, I was thinking about those drop off bins that you have at the end of tills, and it, you know, like you say, you get to the end. And it is just so helpful to have that push at the beginning when you enter the shop, to say, this is what we need. And then you have the option to pick it up as you go around. And like you say, We're, there's just that demand isn't there at the moment. You know, it's just a tough time.

Emma Spring: Yeah, it's a tough time. I mean, every time you turn on the news, you hear about the cost-of-living crisis and struggles for so many people. And, you know, food banks are not a stigma it any of us can find ourselves in that situation, at the moment, it might be, I don't know, a loss of a job or a car breaking down. And so many people are struggling at the moment that they find themselves actually, we're in trouble, we're really going to find it hard to be able to get the weekly shop this week. And so, food banks are seeing a big, big increase in demand. At the same time, at the cost-of-living crisis is really hitting them hard as well. They've got warehouses to run, they've got fuel to put into their vans, they've have, you know, warehouse costs with lighting and etc. So, they're their costs are going up as well. And also, we did a survey back in May, of all of the food banks that use that use our app just to see how they're finding everything at the moment how they're finding the out the cost-of-living crisis. And 97% of the food banks that we surveyed, said that they experienced in a bit higher demands in their services. And then 92% said, they have a real worry about their ability to continue. So what we're asking is, is if you are in the position to support food banks, and that's your charitable gift of choice, then download the app, you know, we're not asking everybody to download it, because we absolutely understand that not everybody is in that position to donate. But what we're trying to do is we're trying to have Bank the Food as a community at really, because bank, food banks are within every single community at the moment, and people within the community are shopping every day. So, to be able to kind of the app to be kind of a conduit to bring the community together is a great tool, a really good tech tool to use.

Freya Robinson: Yeah, it's just such a lovely way to put it as well because it is that community and bringing it in just making it, yeah, making it so the food banks are part of the community because as you say they are and so building that space around them. Yeah, it's just a lovely environment to have.

Emma Spring: And we've got, we've got plans in the future to try and do a kind of a young person schools youth type project, because the kids are all about the tech to see how they can kind of market bank, the Bank the Food within their communities, within their schools, their scouts, groups, etc. to their parents to the people that shop. So that's a that's a great idea we've got coming in the future that we hope to really look into. But yeah, that's it exactly. It's the food bank is at the heart of the community, supporting people in the community that really need it. So, we like to think that Bank the Food is a little bit of tech to help support that.

Freya Robinson: Yeah, I think definitely is. So, I wonder we've touched on it a little bit, but I wonder if we could touch on what you see as sort of maybe just one or two common misconceptions about food banks and what you'd say to people that held that idea.

Emma Spring: I think, like I touched on earlier, it's a common misconception, maybe not so much now, but in the past that, you know, there's a, there's a certain people that use food banks. And that is not the case at all. We're seeing more teachers, we're seeing more nurses, we're seeing more families, with working families with young children using food banks, just because of the cost-of-living crisis. So, it's, it shouldn't be stigmatised. It shouldn't be at all. It's a really, really useful tool for people, charities, volunteer led, a lot of them there's the brilliant work that Trussell trust do. But there's also so many independent food banks as well across the UK that are working my local food bank is run in a village hall with two retired couple that are retired couple that run it, they get the food out, they work really, really hard to support. There's so many new food banks that are popping up on the on the back of COVID and the cost-of-living crisis and everything that's going on at the moment. So, I think I think the stigma is the big common misconception. And that's something that if, of course, if we could there wouldn't be any food banks Bank the Food wouldn't exist. We'd love that. But unfortunately, it does. So, we're just trying to help in a problem that is very, very big in the UK at the moment.

Freya Robinson: Yeah, no, I think that's so important to sort of focus on, like, so it's definitely so clear that demand is growing. And people that may not have ever expected to engage with food banks are now doing so and it's just so important there's that space and acceptance that it is okay to turn to the services for help, and that they're there to help people. And things like Bank the Food are just going to make that so much more accessible for them to make sure that everything's got the right what it needs.

Emma Spring: Absolutely. And that's what we're hoping, and our big struggle has always been just letting people know about our app that we're there, that it's free. And people can use it for free. And once people because once people hear about our story and what we're doing and why everyone says oh, well, of course, I'll download the app, you know, that's the water. Great idea. So, I think that's been our biggest struggle today to just get ourselves out there. We launched a film over a year ago now. And we were really lucky to have Joe Lycett voice it for us. And we used a brilliant other charity called Help film that makes films for charities for free. And we combined it together, they did a wonderful animation for us. And Joe likes it launched it on his birthday. And so that got some really good recognition. And we got more and more users. On the back of that. And we're now just written down the stat from this morning, I just looked at the stats before we came on 41,000 users on the app, so we're growing really nicely. And the app also has the opportunity for people to tick what they've donated to their local food bank. So, their local food bank can see exactly what they've donated, we know that a lot of people don't. And we're urging users if they do if they do use the app to ticket because then that really helps food banks with their logistics and moving food around. And just we're over 301,000 donations. So, we're hoping to get to half a million soon. And that's only the donations that people have ticked on the app so to or that we don't even know about. So, it's working really, really well.

Freya Robinson: So, it's brilliant to hear some of those numbers. And I think I actually was aware of Bank the Food before the sort of the application came across us because of the Joe Lycett film so I remember seeing it. And then it popped up and it rang a bell. And so, it was great looking more into it. But yeah, it's great that you're getting those names to, to help get it out there. Like you say, it's so important that that awareness is out there, and that people are using it.

Emma Spring: Absolutely. And we're there's so many needy charities out there. And we're only tiny, but we've got such a huge reach. And it's such a simple concept that I'm hoping more and more people will see it, we're now starting to look at a little bit more funding, it'd be nice to have an admin person to help me. But a little bit more funding, we want to make the tech better, we know that there's lots more that we can do. To make it better to improve the functionality of it, we'd like to maybe include some online shopping options where we can, we've got lots and lots of ideas about how we can make it better. I had we’d like to be able to look at different individual requirements of our users as well. I had a great call with a partially sighted user recently, and he was talking to me about different ways that we can change the app to help support partially sighted people. So that was brilliant. But all of that comes with more money, unfortunately and time. And so, we're quite stretched. But we have got really, really bold ambitions. And that's what we're working at the moment. That's what we're looking at. We're looking at being able to grow really and get ourselves out there even more.

Freya Robinson: Yeah, that's just it's brilliant. Yeah. And that to hear the sort of future plans, like you say it does, unfortunately, require that that input of funds, but yeah, the plans just sound brilliant. And yeah, improving the accessibility of apps is something we're always passionate about. So, it's great that that's in the works as well. Yeah.

Emma Spring: Yeah, we've got we've got we've got goal plans. And we've always had very, very big ambitions about what we're going to do. And the fact that in the two short years we've been running, we've grown that well, that that big, we've got our amazing award, we've had some other recognitions, as well. So, we were absolutely delighted with that. And we just want to keep on going because we know that the app is making a difference to people.

Freya Robinson: Yeah, and just on that, you know, we've definitely heard some amazing bits about the impact that Bank the Food has had already throughout this conversation. But I wondered if just touch again on the impact that you've seen of Bank the Foods work, and just how it's helping in that space?

Emma Spring: Yeah, I think I think I don't actually I rarely speak to actually Food Bank users. But I speak to the food banks. And the impact for them is phenomenal because it helps them manage it helps them. And they have they have food, canned food coming in from all different sources, they have to manage all their different supermarkets. They also have money coming in where they buy food. So, they've got they've got lots of different ways to be able to source the food that they need to then go out to help with the people that really, really need it. So being able to open a screen and just say, ah, you know, I've got, I've got this amount of food coming in, that will really help in the warehouse. And some food banks have lots and lots of different warehouses. And also, bearing in mind, all the food has to be stacked in date, order, and rotated just like any shop. But every food has to be checked, it has to be written on the day. So, it's really easy to see when the pickers come in and make those food parcels. Also, they have food parcels, for so many different needs, it might be a family of five, will need something in their feed parser, which is very different to a single person that might not even have a cooker and only cooks on a microwave. And so, food banks work is hard enough. They work tirelessly, tirelessly with and with many, many volunteers. So logistically, it is a big job for them. So, the impact of the app is just one less thing to think about because their job is so big anyway. So, the fact that you know, we've given them at all that can really, really help. We've had some great talks with the Trussell trust, we have many Trussell trust V banks using us. And they're really, they're really supporting us with our work as well. And lots of different organisations that use us are really championing us, because they've seen the difference it makes so we're delighted with that.

Freya Robinson: Amazing, it's, it's just so clear that the service is sort of a needed and b just making a huge difference to everybody involved.

Emma Spring: Yeah, it's sad that it's needed. Like I said, ideally, in an ideal world, we wouldn't have food banks, but we do. So, this is our this is our little gift to be able to help where we can.

Freya Robinson: Yeah, definitely. And we're reaching the end of this conversation, which has just been such a joy. And I wanted to end on how people can support and find out more about bank food, how can they find you? How can they interact?

Emma Spring: Brilliant. Well, our website is BanktheFood.org. What we're asking people to do is if they do support their local food bank, just download the app have a little play with it, you can put your postcode in, follow your local food bank, or you can follow more than one Food Bank and just see what their needs are that that will help if you sent turn on the notifications, you'll get alerts when you arrive at the at the donation points, you don't have to have the alerts if you don't want that you can just see the shopping list. So, it's entirely up to you. We'd ask people that if their local food bank they know of a local food bank that isn't listed on the app to just tell them about it, if they've got a relationship with them. That would be really, really great because we're trying to reach the food banks from our little office in Essex. But to be able to get out to more would be amazing. And we're more than happy to talk to anyone that wants to use the app if they think it's going to be useful to them. And have a look on the website and follow us on our socials. We've got a Facebook, we're Bank the Foods on x we're Bank the Food, and on our sorry, on x, we're bank the food UK and on Insta, we're just Bank food. So, we'd really appreciate everyone's support.

Freya Robinson: Brilliant. And we'll be sure to include links and descriptions and things that go out so people can find you and get involved.

Emma Spring: Wonderful, brilliant. Well, thank you for I was really great to chat to you.

Freya Robinson: No thank you so much for coming to talk to me. It's been absolutely brilliant. And yeah, it's just been so lovely to hear more about Bank the Food and the important work that you do.

Emma Spring: And thanks for the work that you're doing. And also, once again for that award. We were delighted with it.

Freya Robinson: Amazing. Thank you so much Emma for coming to talk to me about Bank the Food.

Ron Maclean: My name is Ron Maclean. I'm the Digital Inclusion programme officer for ability net in partnership with BT. So, I'm reaching out today to ask for your help in contact in organisations, clubs and charities and that would benefit from our free service. You want to find older people that need our help and how to use their phones, laptops, access digital appointments, pay for parking, or video call their family, the things that most of us take for granted every day, but our older generation our parents and grandparents feel a need to help with. So how can I encourage my older relatives to learn how to use the phones more effectively? We can a direct mail declined to get support. We're using tech. How do I get help setting my laptop up? Your printer. If any of these questions are on your mind of someone that you know AbilityNet can help. As part of the bill in its partnership with telecommunications company BT group, we're delighted to offer the opportunity for individuals and groups in the range of areas across the UK to take part in free workshops to improve the digital skills of older and digitally excluded people. Sessions are now available in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Birmingham, Manchester, and London. If you're an individual aged 65 years old, or over, and could benefit from informal training, to help use your computer or phone more effectively, or if you work with older people in an organisation or charity in those regions with clients who could benefit from digital skills training, apply now for a free training workshops at www.abilitynet.org.uk/BTDigitalSkills or call us free on 0800 0487642