

Emergency food parcel distribution in Northern Ireland

April – September 2024

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Background

This factsheet reports on the number of emergency food parcels distributed by food banks in the Trussell community during the period 1 April to 30 September 2024 inclusive. During this time, food parcels were distributed from 49 locations across Northern Ireland, as part of the Trussell community.¹

It is important to recognise that data from food banks in the Trussell community is just one part of the picture of need across Northern Ireland. There is a wide range of charitable food aid that will be supporting people that is not captured in this parcel data. There are also many people who are severely food insecure who do not receive support from food banks.²

Key facts from the April – September statistics

Level of need for food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland almost double that compared to five years ago

Food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland distributed almost 35,000 emergency food parcels between 1 April to 30 September 2024. This is a 13% decrease compared to the same period in 2023 when close to 40,000 parcels were distributed. However, levels of need remain significantly higher than just five years ago.

This longer-term trend is stark. Despite the recent decrease, the number of parcels distributed in the first half of this financial year was almost double (+93%) than in the same period in 2019. The number of parcels distributed in this period remains significantly higher than any previous year apart from 2023. This is only the second time that food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland have distributed over 14,000 parcels for children in the first six months of the year.

It is deeply concerning that in the first six months of 2024/25 food banks in Northern Ireland distributed slightly more parcels than in the entirety of the 12-month period of 2017/18 (34,000).

¹ The locations that food banks distributed parcels from are not counted at a point in time. They are instead counted if they have distributed food parcels at any stage during the time period. Some will have opened, and some will have closed during this period. For reference there were 49 locations in the same period in the previous year.

² Research produced by Trussell, in partnership with Ipsos, reported that in the 12 months to mid-2022 one in seven (16%) people across Northern Ireland had experienced food insecurity, equating to an estimated 354,000 people. However, three in four (75%) people experiencing food insecurity reported that they have not used any form of food aid in the last year. Hunger in Northern Ireland (2023), Trussell, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/publications/hunger-in-the-uk>

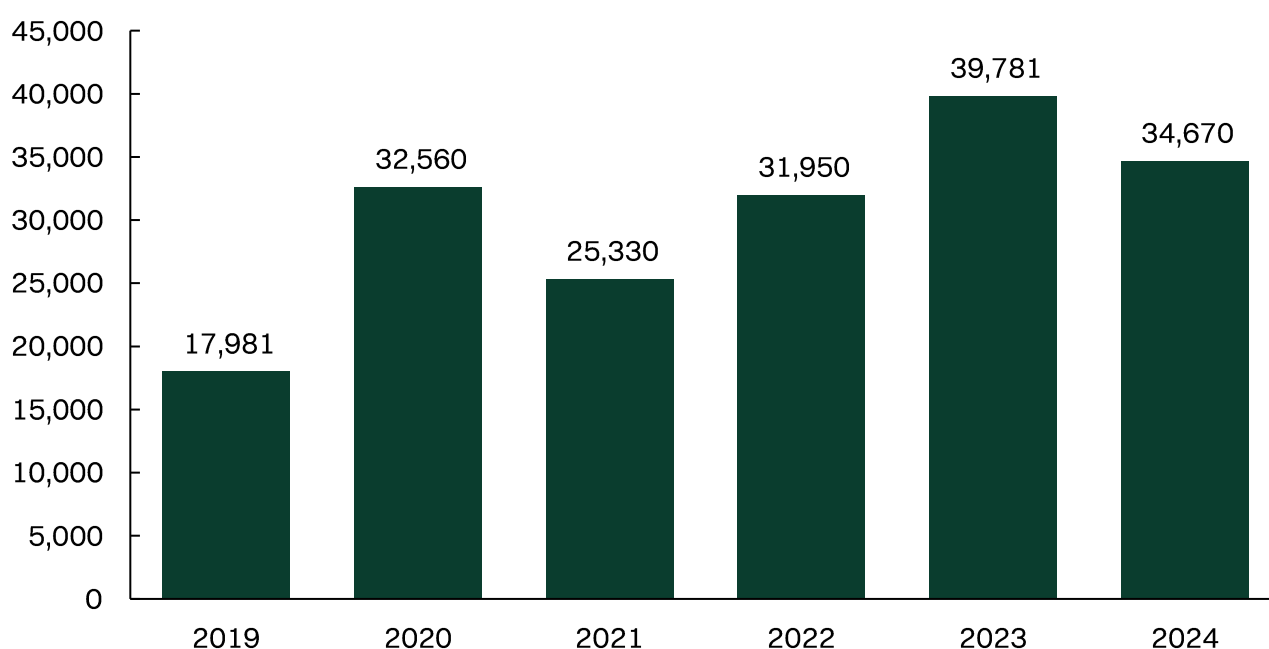
“

I had a car accident...I was in a coma for some time. And then, fractures, the prominent one that has really debilitated me now is the back one that rendered me disabled and then I couldn't go to work again.

”

Person referred to a food bank interviewed as part of Hunger in Northern Ireland research

Figure 1.1 Number of emergency food parcels distributed by food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland: 1 April – 30 September 2019 to 2024



Source: Trussell administrative data on the number of emergency food parcels distributed across Northern Ireland

Just over 14,000 parcels were distributed for children in the first half of this financial year. Over the last five years the number of parcels distributed for children has increased by 90%, from 7,400 between April and September in 2019.

Unlike in previous years, the number of parcels for children did not grow at a faster rate than the number of parcels for adults. Indeed, the figures for the first half of 2024/25 represent a decrease (-16%) from the same period last year. It is too early to tell if this is a one-off or a longer-term shift.

Last year when comparing April – September 2023 to the same period in 2018, we reported a 165% increase in the number of parcels distributed for adults compared with an 192% increase for children. The latest five-year trend (with 2019 as the baseline year), shows a 95% increase for adults and a 90% increase for children in parcels provided April - September.

Table 1.1. Number of parcels for adults, children, and total distributed by food banks in the Trussell community: 1 April to 30 September

	Apr - Sep 2024			Percentage change from Apr-Sep 2019			Percentage change from Apr-Sep 2023		
	Adults	Children	Total	Adults	Children	Total	Adults	Children	Total
United Kingdom	921,000	508,000	1,429,000	72%	64%	69%	-3%	-6%	-4%
England	764,000	425,000	1,189,000	86%	74%	81%	-3%	-6%	-4%
Scotland	82,000	40,000	122,000	9%	8%	9%	-6%	-5%	-6%
Wales	54,000	29,000	83,000	45%	36%	42%	-5%	-10%	-7%
Northern Ireland	21,000	14,000	35,000	95%	90%	93%	-10%	-16%	-13%

Source: Trussell administrative data on the number of emergency food parcels distributed across the UK

Emergency food parcel provision remains close to record levels first and foremost due to a weakened social security system that is unable to protect people from the most severe forms of hardship, forcing more people to the doors of food banks. The soaring cost of living and COVID-19 pandemic drew more people into hardship, but it is the longer-term failings of our social security system which continue to push people into hunger and hardship.

The slight decrease seen by food banks in the Trussell community in the first half of 2024/25 may in part reflect recent income boosts. Three changes particularly stand out. First, the overall inflation rate easing. Second, the impact of benefit uprating from April 2024, where benefits increased by the higher inflation rate of 6.7% from the previous September (as per standard uprating policy). And third, the unfreezing of Local Housing Allowance rates from April 2024, meant support for private renters was re-linked to the most affordable 30% of local rents.

However, we are hearing from many food banks that they are struggling to keep up with the need in their communities, as they seek to manage the food banks resources and capacity at a time of extremely high need. We also know that when local authority and other services in an area are struggling or having to cut back, that can make it more difficult for people in those communities to be referred to our food banks. We therefore know that the data reported for this period is particularly likely to be only the tip of the iceberg of actual need in communities.

With overall figures which remain significantly higher than historic levels, it is clear that far too many people on the lowest incomes are still facing extreme levels of financial insecurity. Trussell's recently released report looking at the scale of hunger and hardship across Northern Ireland is clear that real change is needed - not just small steps - if we are to significantly reduce the number of people experiencing hardship.³

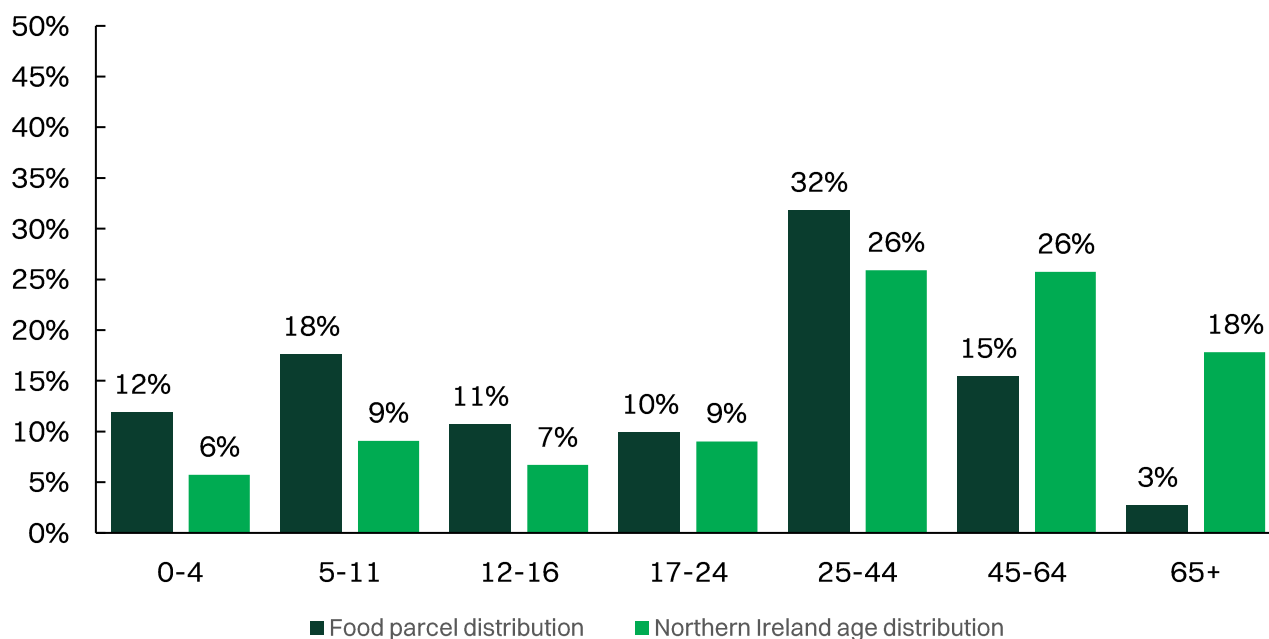
³ Weekes, T, et al, (2024), *Cost of Hunger and Hardship - interim report*, Trussell, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/the-cost-of-hunger-and-hardship>

Children continue to be disproportionately supported by food banks

Despite a fall in the number of parcels for children (see above) the distribution of support continues to be disproportionately weighted towards children. Two in five (40%) parcels provided by food banks in the first half of 2024/25 are for children aged 0-16, despite this age group making up just 21% of the Northern Irish population.⁴ It is notable that the proportion of parcels distributed for children aged 0-4 (12%) is double their population share across Northern Ireland (6%).

Just 3% of parcels distributed by food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland are for people aged 65 and over, despite them making up 18% of the Northern Irish population. People aged 45-64 are also under-represented in the data (15% of parcels were for people aged 45-64 vs. making up 26% of the population). This is a larger gap than is seen across the UK (21% of parcels are provided for people aged 45-64 across the UK vs. making up 25% of the population).

Figure 1.2 Percentage of emergency food parcels distributed for different age categories compared to population distribution across Northern Ireland: 1 April to 30 September 2024



Source: Trussell administrative data on the number of emergency food parcels distributed across the UK and ONS estimates of the population for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The long-term trends do however show a significant increase in the amount of support provided for pension age adults. In the first six months of 2024/25, 875 parcels were distributed for someone aged 65 and over. That is more than double the number from the same period in 2019, when 345 parcels were distributed. This is by far the highest growth rate for any age group across this period.⁵

⁴ ONS, (2024), *Estimates of the population for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland*, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesscotlandandnorthernireland>

⁵ Age ranges differ to the previous figure as Trussell update the age categories it collected in 2023. To allow comparison to pre-2023 data the age categories for 2024 have been recoded to the pre-2023 codes.

Table 1.2 Percentage increase in the number of parcels by age category: 1 April – 30 September 2019 to 2024

Age	Percentage increase from 2019
0-4	66%
5-11	79%
12-16	99%
17-24	79%
25-64	83%
65+	153%

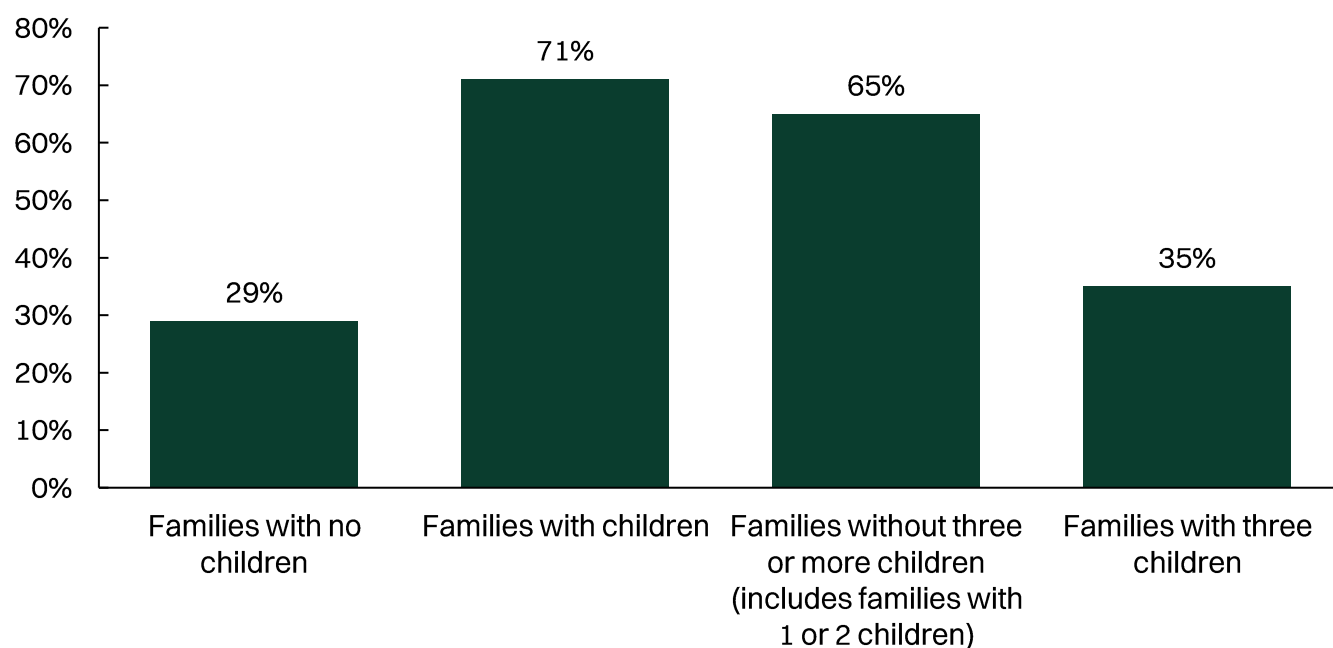
Source: Trussell administrative data on the number of emergency food parcels distributed across Northern Ireland

Support is most commonly provided for families with children

When taking a whole household view (i.e. not just children but also the adults living with them) the majority (71%) of support provided by food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland is for families with children.

A significant minority (35%) of parcels were provided in the first half of 2024/25 to families with three or more children.

Figure 1.3 Percentage of emergency food parcels distributed for different family types: 1 April to 30 September 2024



Source: Trussell administrative data on the number of emergency food parcels distributed across Northern Ireland

In previous six-month periods, the rate of growth in provision for families with children, particularly families with three or more children, has been higher than that of other families. We do not see this pattern in this latest period (Table 1.3). Comparing the first six months of 2024/25 to the same period in 2019/20, there has been a 90% increase in the number of parcels distributed for families with children compared with a 101% increase for families without children. The increase for families with three or more children (91%) was broadly the same as the increase for all families with children. As previously mentioned, it is too early to tell if this is a long-term shift or not.

Another notable difference is the larger increase in the number of parcels for families with at least one person aged 65 and over. Since 2019, the number of parcels for these families has almost doubled (+98%) – substantively higher than the increase for families without someone aged 65 or over (79%).

Table 1.3 Number of parcels distributed in Northern Ireland by household type: 1 April – 30 September

Household type	Number of parcels, Apr-Sep 2024	Percentage change from Apr-Sep 2019	Percentage change from Apr-Sep 2023
Families with children	25,000	90%	-15%
Families without children	10,000	101%	-6%
Families with three or more children	12,000	91%	-19%
Families without three or more children	22,000	94%	-9%
Families with someone aged 65 or over	1,400	98%	-33%
Families without someone aged 65 or over	31,000	79%	-8%

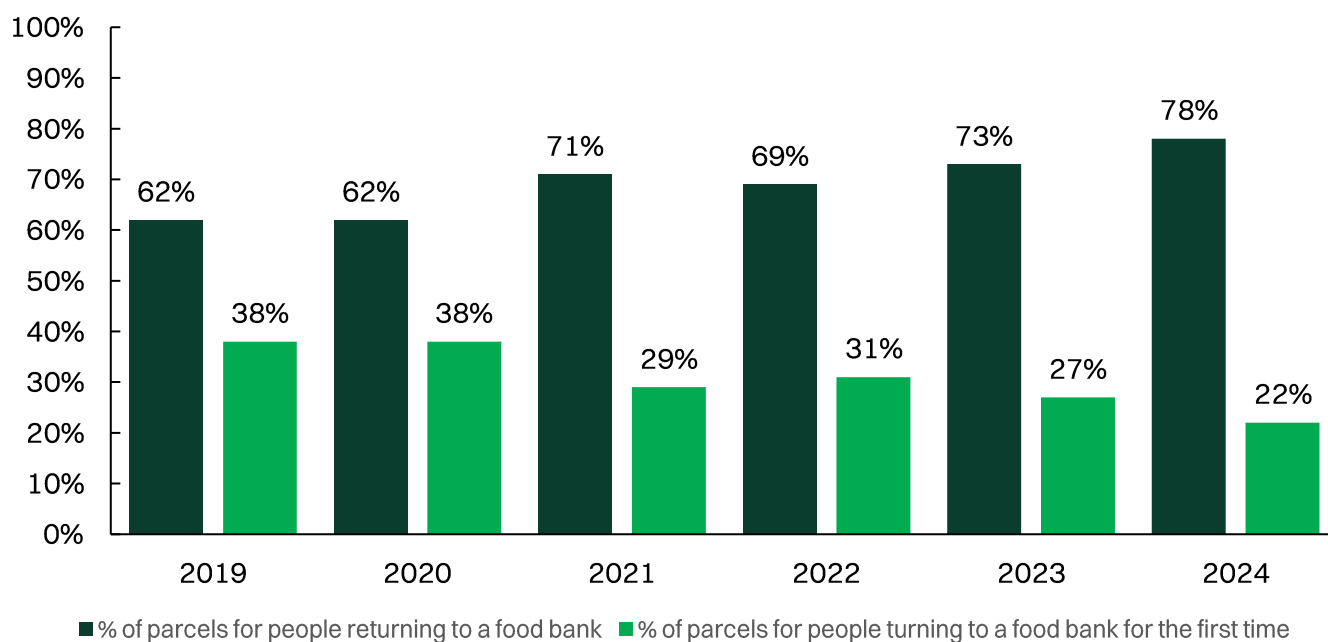
Source: Trussell administrative data on the number of emergency food parcels distributed across Northern Ireland

7,400 people forced to turn to a food bank in Trussell community for the first time

In the first six months of 2024/25, 3,100 families were forced to turn to a food bank in our community for the first time in Northern Ireland. These families included 7,400 people (4,500 adults and 2,900 children). This is a 15% increase in the number of people having to turn to a food bank for the first time compared to the same period in 2019, but a 26% decrease compared to the same period in 2023.

The proportion of food parcels distributed for people turning to a food bank in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland for the first time has been steadily declining since a recent high of 38% in the first six months of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020). In the first six months of this financial year, just over one in five (22%) parcels were distributed for families turning to a food bank in our community for the first time. This is a significant decline from the 2020 figure and a nine-percentage point decline from the figure in 2022 when cost of living pressures began to intensify.

Figure 1.4 Percentage of emergency food parcels distributed for people returning to a food bank and people turning to a food bank for the first time in Northern Ireland: 1 April – 30 September 2019 to 2024



Source: Trussell administrative data on the number of emergency food parcels distributed across Northern Ireland

This could mean that fewer people are newly facing hunger and hardship. It might also mean that people newly facing hunger and hardship are more able to draw on formal and informal support from others than in the recent past, particularly if other people's financial pressures are easing. It could also reflect the huge increases in people turning to food banks during the pandemic and early stages of the cost-of-living crisis, meaning that there is a much smaller pool of people who cannot afford the essentials, or are at risk of not being able to, who have not yet turned to a food bank for support.

It is difficult to identify the driving factor from this data alone. Regardless, the data suggests that provision over the past six months has been driven to a greater extent by people needing to return to a food bank rather than people needing support for the first time, compared with the pandemic or peak of the cost-of-living crisis. And as emergency food parcel data still suggests more than two visits over six months is still relatively infrequent, we can surmise that recent emergency food parcel data now tends to reflect longer term hunger and hardship where people have nowhere else to turn, and/or people cycling in and out of deep financial hardship over a longer period of time.

Slight decreases in parcels provided seen across the UK

As table 1.1. shows, there have been decreases from the previous year in the number of parcels distributed across the UK in Northern Ireland (-13%), Wales (-7%), Scotland (-6%), and England (-4%).

In Wales (-10%), Northern Ireland (-16%), and England (-6%) the decreases were greater for the number of parcels distributed for children than the overall change.

As noted, the level of emergency food provision remains significantly higher in the first six months of 2024/25 than the same period five years ago. Northern Ireland recorded the largest increase across the UK (93%), but England (81%) and Wales (42%) have also seen significant increases. In Scotland, the growth rate has been relatively smaller at 9%.

Change in provision varies across Northern Ireland

The picture of provision by food banks in Northern Ireland is mixed. Looking at the Northern Ireland Assembly constituency breakdown of the first half of the financial year, Foyle, Newry and Armagh, and West Tyrone recorded increases in the number of parcels provided compared with last year.

The longer term picture is also varied. Provision increased in all constituencies compared with five years ago, but several areas have seen very large increases. The number of parcels provided in the first six months of the financial year was more than twice the 2019 figures in Belfast East, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, Foyle, Mid Ulster, North Down, South Antrim, and West Tyrone.

Table 1.4 Number of parcels for adults, children, and total distributed by food bank in the Trussell network – Northern Ireland Assembly constituency breakdown: 1 April to 30 September

	Apr-Sep 2024			Percentage change from Apr-Sep 2019			Percentage change from Apr-Sep 2023		
	Adult	Children	Total	Adult	Children	Total	Adults	Children	Total
Belfast East	1,072	705	1,777	234%	126%	181%	-20%	-39%	-29%
Belfast North	1,648	991	2,639	104%	61%	85%	-2%	-23%	-11%
Belfast South	2,269	1,101	3,370	37%	-5%	20%	9%	-15%	0%
Belfast West	1,067	754	1,821	60%	25%	44%	-40%	-43%	-42%
East Antrim	919	633	1,552	54%	58%	56%	-18%	-23%	-20%
East Londonderry	800	354	1,154	100%	29%	71%	-33%	-26%	-31%
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	2,877	2,202	5,079	497%	519%	506%	-7%	-14%	-10%
Foyle	1,994	1,619	3,613	127%	157%	140%	0%	20%	8%
Lagan Valley	624	312	936	51%	23%	40%	-15%	-30%	-21%
Mid Ulster	242	159	401	155%	169%	160%	-25%	-34%	-29%
Newry and Armagh	458	266	724	108%	32%	72%	30%	-7%	14%
North Antrim	1,583	906	2,489	66%	60%	64%	-26%	-38%	-31%
North Down	681	560	1,241	151%	273%	195%	-18%	-25%	-22%
South Antrim	2,105	1,612	3,717	95%	126%	107%	4%	-9%	-2%
Strangford	612	474	1,086	25%	42%	32%	-19%	-10%	-15%
Upper Bann	1,329	1,038	2,367	22%	51%	33%	0%	-1%	0%
West Tyrone	301	403	704	94%	284%	171%	126%	561%	263%

Source: Trussell administrative data. Pre-2024 constituency boundaries. There were no food bank centre locations in South Down during this period.

What this means for policy at Stormont

People need to turn to food banks because they don't have enough money for the essentials. Some are between jobs, have health conditions or are looking after relatives and children. Some people are in work that's insecure, inaccessible, and doesn't pay enough to live on. And the lack of affordable childcare, housing, and transport are further barriers holding too many people back from opportunities to increase their income.

Our latest emergency food parcel statistics continue to show appalling levels of hunger and hardship in communities across the country. Yet this can, and must, change.

While the UK government needs to take action now to fulfil its manifesto promise to reduce the need for emergency food, the Northern Ireland Executive has the opportunity to take decisive action. We believe the Northern Ireland Executive should:

- **Include a clear commitment to addressing hunger and hardship in the final Programme for Government PfG (2024-2027).** At the time of publication, The Executive Office (TEO) is currently analysing consultation responses on its Draft Programme for Government (2024).⁶ This ambitious document sets out nine immediate priorities over three missions, underpinned by a cross-cutting commitment to peace. Trussell has called on the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that eradicating poverty is included, resourced, and prioritised in the PfG.
- **Prioritise implementing an Anti-Poverty Strategy.** This should identify short, medium, and long-term objectives for tackling poverty, corresponding inclusion strategies, and measurable outcomes and targets. For the Anti-Poverty Strategy to be successfully implemented, a ring-fenced budget must be linked to achieving these objectives.
- **Prioritise extending and strengthening the current welfare mitigations, including addressing the five-week wait for Universal Credit.** Currently the Welfare Supplementary Payments (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 will cease in March 2025. Without an extension of this legislation, the mitigations that protect claimants from welfare reforms such as the 'bedroom tax' and 'benefit cap' will end. This impending cliff edge means many households across Northern Ireland would abruptly lose vital support.

Trussell is calling on the Northern Ireland Executive to strengthen these mitigations by resolving the five-week wait in Universal Credit and to call on the UK government to introduce a protected minimum floor to minimise the impact of welfare reform and minimise the need for mitigations.

- **Call on the UK Government to scrap the two-child limit and in the meantime, mitigate the two-child limit to help larger families in Northern Ireland (NI).** This policy further disadvantages families given the higher average family size resulting in 1 in 10 children in

⁶ [Draft Programme for Government Consultation 2024-2027 - NI Direct - Citizen Space](#)

Northern Ireland living in households affected by the 2-child limit. This amounts to over 45,000 children across Northern Ireland.⁷ Trussell, in line with the Cliff Edge Coalition, calls on the NI Executive to mitigate the two-child limit by introducing a Welfare Supplemental Payment alongside a “Better Start Larger Families payment.”⁸

- **Provide support to private renters affected by the Local Housing Allowance (LHA).** Rent has been rising at unprecedented levels in NI, almost twice as fast as elsewhere in the UK.⁹ Whilst some support is available via Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs), this is temporary, discretionary and often insufficient to cover the shortfall between LHA rates and actual rents. Trussell is calling for the establishment of a Financial Inclusion Service to provide advice and money management for low-income families who have been impacted by the LHA shortfalls.

What this means for policy at Westminster

We welcome the first steps the UK government has taken towards tackling the severe hardship that pushes people to the doors of food banks. Long-overdue changes to reduce the amount that can be taken off Universal Credit payments to repay loans and debts are a particularly welcome relief. Trussell’s research shows that the lack of cash-first support in a crisis, and the heavy burden of debt can both pull people into long-term, spiralling hardship.

Plans to improve workers’ and renters’ rights, increase the supply of social housing and overhaul employment support are also important building blocks that must be in place to end the need for food banks.

However, there is much more to do if the UK government is to fulfil its pledge to end the need for emergency food. Our social security system is supposed to protect people from hunger and hardship, but right now problems in the design and delivery of social security are the biggest and most immediate drivers of need for food banks. Benefit levels are too low, payments are reduced further still by deductions and caps, and people struggle to access the support for which they are eligible.

We urgently need the UK government to value the role our social security system plays in providing people with the financial security to prepare for and seek work, sustain work, manage health conditions and disability, and caring responsibilities. It will not be possible for the government to achieve its broader missions – on growth, health or opportunity – unless it addresses the scale of hardship holding us back.

This is why we are calling for the UK government to swiftly follow up recent announcements with a much clearer **plan to end the need for emergency food** if we are to make meaningful inroads in turning the tide on hunger and hardship in this Parliament. Autumn Budget announcements will only

⁷ [Data on impact of 2-child limit - NIAPN - Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network](#)

⁸ [Cliff-Edge-Member-Briefing-March-2024-1.pdf](#)

⁹ *Ibid.*

be the 'downpayment' on tackling financial hardship that the government claims if it is followed by action which goes much further. In the coming months, it must prioritise:

- **Introducing a protected minimum floor in Universal Credit (UC) as a low cost but concrete step towards ensuring our social security system protects people from going without the essentials.** A protected minimum floor below which UC's standard allowance is not permitted to fall would build on the UK government's welcome plans to lower the cap on automatic debt deductions from 25% to 15% of the UC standard allowance. It would build in stronger protections for people on the lowest incomes by reducing the impact of the benefit cap, as well as debt deductions. It would also help to lay the groundwork for the forthcoming review of UC, by ensuring that any future improvements are minimally affected by reductions to UC payments. A protected minimum floor set at 15% below UC's current standard allowance would result in around 1.9 million families seeing their reductions to UC lowered by around £48 a month on average, at a very limited annual cost of around £150 million.¹⁰ It is encouraging to see progress towards this with the lower cap on debt deductions, but the UK government has a chance to make a more concrete step-change by extending this protection beyond reductions for debt repayment.
- **Maintaining financial support for private renters by keeping Local Housing Allowance (LHA) linked to the lowest 30% of local rents.** It is deeply concerning that the UK government plans to freeze LHA rates at 2024/25 levels next year. With rents forecast to increase, this means a growing shortfall for private renters between their support for housing costs and actual rents paid. This is likely to drive up homelessness and hunger as people are unable to afford rent and other essential costs, and we urge the government to reconsider.
- **Ensuring reforms to health and disability benefits deliver new support and opportunities for disabled people.** We need certainty that the UK government's plans to reduce the cost of disability benefits will be achieved by genuine improvements to employment support and access to healthcare, and by opening up new opportunities for disabled people, not by cutting already precarious incomes. The previous government's plans to reform the Work Capability Assessment would end eligibility for additional support worth over £400 a month for 424,000 new claimants by 2028/29 with minimal effect on actual employment rates. This would be the wrong approach.
- **Making investment in social security the bedrock of the child poverty strategy and review of UC.** If the UK government's child poverty strategy is to make a meaningful difference to the number of children facing hunger and hardship, it must address necessary updates to our social security system to ensure everyone can afford the essentials. The two-child limit should be scrapped. This would mean that 630,000 fewer people could be facing hunger and hardship by 2025/26, including 430,000 children. The strategy should also include clear steps towards an Essentials Guarantee in Universal Credit. That includes steps to agree how the government will ensure benefit payments cover the cost of essentials, and steps to improve the sorely inadequate rate of payments in the interim. Setting the UC standard

¹⁰ Ibid.

allowance at the Essentials Guarantee level would ensure over 1.9 million fewer people would be at risk of facing hunger and hardship in 2025/26, including 580,000 children.¹¹

Alongside these priority actions, the UK government should bring together the full range of policy changes and reforms it will commit to, in a plan to end the need for emergency food.

¹¹ Ibid.

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