

The Hardship Times

News

Insight

Solutions



HUNDREDS OF FOOD BANKS CALL ON THE UK GOVERNMENT TO TAKE URGENT ACTION

SPECIAL ISSUE

Universal Credit falling short

Millions go without and share their stories

We can right this wrong

Our social security system should cover the essentials

Influential figures call for change

Celebrities and experts share their hopes and insights

Creating a better future

How governments can play their part

GUARANTEE OUR ESSENTIALS

Feature

UNITED FOR CHANGE

Communities and food banks across the UK rally for urgent action on hardship

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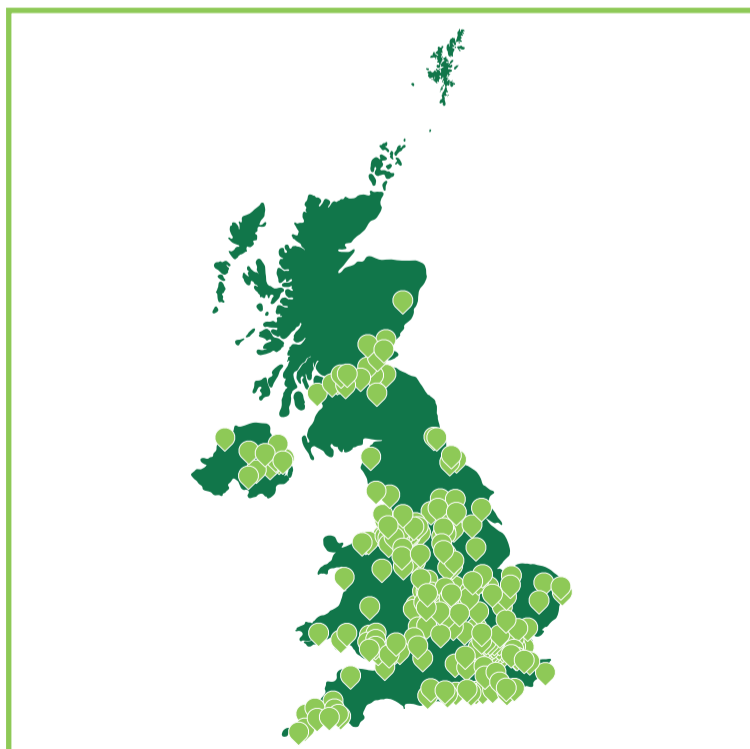
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Food banks and charities asked their communities to write stories of hardship and hope onto tablecloths



- 534 community events
- Over a thousand messages collected
- Thousands of conversations about hardship and hope in our communities

Food banks across the UK, as well as charities, faith groups and businesses, have brought their communities together to collect over a thousand stories of hardship and hope.

These messages reveal the devastating consequences of a social security system that's failing to protect people from going without the essentials, as well as a growing movement for change which is calling on the UK government to take urgent action on hunger.

"The food bank has been a lifeline for me and my six-year-old daughter. If we had to live on Universal Credit alone, we would not have enough for some meals. I have been in work for 20 years and always thought I would be alright. I cannot believe how little help there is." – Resident in Barry

Anti-poverty charities, volunteers, MPs, celebrities and people with lived experience of hardship were invited to pull up a seat at over 500 events and write messages onto tablecloths in their communities. In food banks, churches and at public events, tables have been filled with the experiences and perspectives of people whose voices are too often unheard.

Though the stories vary, the message is clear – many thousands of people are standing alongside each other to hope for a better future and call for change.

Food bank staff and volunteers from across the UK



LAYING IT ALL OUT ON THE TABLE

Hundreds of food banks across the UK, as well as charities, faith groups and businesses, have brought their communities together to tell their stories of hardship and hope.

Messages of Hope & Hardship



There's no time to waste.

"My hope is for a society where everyone can afford essentials such as food, bills and heating and a social security system that supports all of us." - Resident in Gateshead

"Everybody should have enough money to cover the essentials." - Resident in Ardcar

"It's sad that we need food banks and I hope the government really do change for the better." - Resident in Peebles

"Many of the messages are hard to read, but they also reveal the hope in our communities across the UK for a future where everyone can afford the essentials," says Emma Revie, CEO of Trussell. "This future *is* possible, but it will need everyone to play their part - and with the new UK government in place, there's no time to waste."

Trussell is an anti-poverty charity and community of food banks that works together to ensure no one needs a food

bank to survive. In partnership with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, they're calling on the UK government to update Universal Credit so, at the very least, it protects people from going without essentials.

Paul Kissack, Chief Executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, says:

"Our social security system is an essential public service and should be there for us all. However, the vast majority of low-income households receiving Universal Credit say they can't even cover their core costs like food, transport or household bills. It's clear to everyone who came out to support our

campaign to guarantee the essentials that this is pushing people towards food banks.

"The public are deeply concerned about the pressure hardship exerts on their families, friends, and communities. We know they are worried it could get worse before it gets better.

"The UK government has a moral responsibility to tackle hardship urgently and ensure our social security system is fit for purpose."

When asked what the impact would be in their community if everyone could afford the essentials, a resident of Llanelli said: "Not only would families be able to live, but they would start to feel more incorporated into society. It would give their children hope to build a better future."

"In this day and age we shouldn't need to rely on food banks."

"Without food banks I don't know what I would do."

"Sometimes I am going without food so my family can eat."

"Everything increases in price, especially food, petrol and electricity. I've been in a hostel for almost a year because I can't afford rent."

"I have PTSD and can't work - it feels like I'm being punished."

"Let's try to consign food banks to the history books."

"Not being able to put the heating on when it gets cold outside. Wearing all your coats in bed to keep warm."

"Everybody should have enough money to cover the essentials."

IT'S NOT RIGHT

That people are trapped in a cycle of debt and destitution because Universal Credit doesn't cover the essentials"



WATERLOO
FOODBANK

Laying it all out on the table Message #746

Insight

NO TIME TO LOSE

Helen Barnard

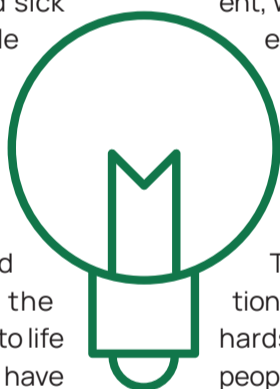
Director of Policy, Research & Impact, Trussell



The UK government must bring forward its plan to end the need for emergency food.

The stories in this paper shine a spotlight on the unacceptably high levels of poverty and hardship across the UK. Where people are going without the essentials, struggling to afford food, heat their homes, and attend medical appointments. Where work is not providing a reliable route out of hardship, housing costs are forcing people to go without food to pay their rent, and sick and disabled people are not afforded the dignity and support needed for a decent life.

It is impossible not to feel angered and shocked by the stories. They bring to life the statistics that have been warning us for years of a crisis of deepening hardship and soaring food bank need. Research from Trussell shows that a record 9.3 million people are facing hunger and hardship across the UK, including 3 million children.



This is the highest number of people in the last 20 years and equivalent to three times the population of Wales. Without targeted action from the UK government, hundreds of thousands more people are expected to be pulled into hunger and hardship in just two years' time.

It doesn't have to be this way. We must have hope for a future that looks different, where everyone has enough money to get by and, when things are hard, people can get the right support, at the right time.

There are clear solutions to the hunger and hardship that so many people are experiencing – policy choices that, if implemented, would mean that millions fewer people face it.

We urgently must prioritise an update to our social security system. This is to ensure that it performs its most basic function of protecting people



This is our chance to make the world a better place.

from hardship by ensuring they can always afford the essentials. Right now, our social security system is the biggest factor pushing people to food banks. For years now, inadequate rates of social security meant that significant numbers of people were going without essentials like food, utility bills and transport.

The basic rate of Universal Credit should at the least cover the essentials, but it is not currently set according to any calculation of what these essentials actually cost. Right now, this basic

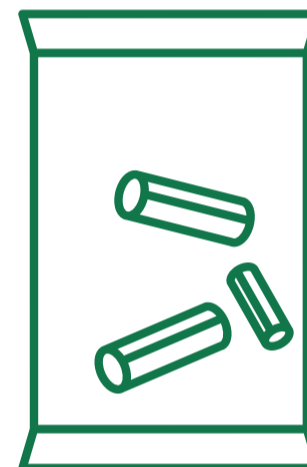
rate – known as the standard allowance – is only £91 a week for a single adult over 25. For many, deductions and caps reduce this already inadequate payment even further.

We see the fallout every day around us. The majority (89%) of people referred to food banks in the Trussell community are in receipt of means-tested

social security payments, including working households, people between jobs, and people who cannot work due to sickness, disability or caring responsibilities. But flaws in the system mean this isn't protecting them from severe hardship.

It is not right that our social security system isn't providing the security we all need. Alongside the human cost of

people not being able to afford the essentials and the affront to human dignity it brings, there is also a cost to the



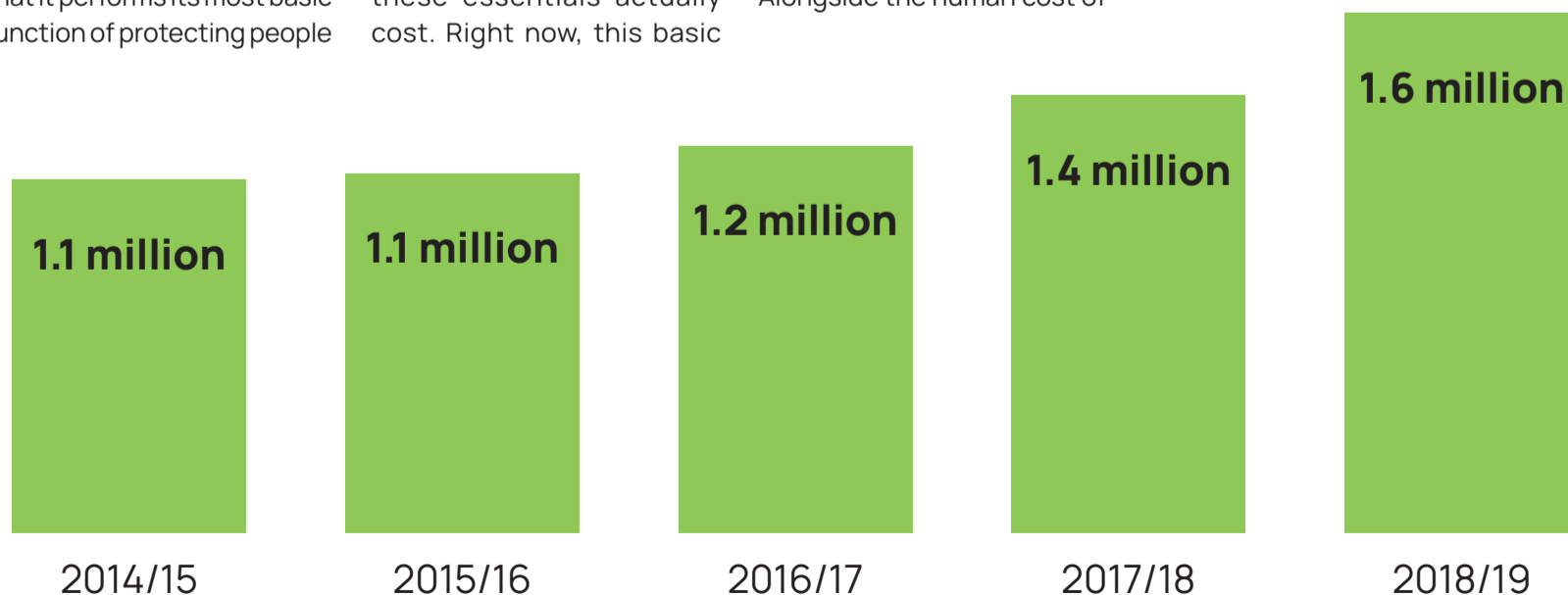
economy and public services. Our schools and GP surgeries are creaking under the pressure caused by hardship across our communities. The UK government cannot achieve its broader missions – on

growth, health or opportunity – unless it addresses the scale of hardship holding our society and economy back.

An Essentials Guarantee would embed the principle that, at a minimum, Universal Credit should protect people from going without essentials, such as food and

Number of emergency food parcels provided to people facing hardship

by food banks in the UK-wide Trussell community





¹Research from The Cost of Hunger and Hardship, October 2024, Trussell

²2024 Public Attitudes Survey. Nationally representative sample of 5,142 people aged 16 or older across the UK. Fieldwork 15-30 August 2024, conducted by YouGov

3 MILLION CHILDREN
face hunger and hardship

That's 46% more than two decades ago¹

9.3 MILLION PEOPLE
face hunger and hardship

This is the highest level of hunger and hardship ever recorded in the UK¹

94% OF PEOPLE
think that poverty in the UK is a problem²

85% OF PEOPLE
agree that people in receipt of benefit payments should receive enough money to ensure they do not experience hunger²

Messages of Hope & Hardship

“The system is not designed for elderly or disabled people. Many find online difficult to use.”

“It’s not fair that the most vulnerable people are trapped in a cycle of debt and destitution because Universal Credit doesn’t cover the essentials.”

“Break the cycle of hardship by income that AT LEAST covers essentials.”

“Increase Universal Credit so people can afford to eat & heat.”

“My hope is for a society where everyone can afford needs such as food, bills and heating, and for a social security system that supports all of us.”

“Everyone deserves access to basic necessities.”

“How are the voices of people like me heard? I don’t hear politicians or people who speak from my experience.”

“Living costs more than Universal Credit allows.”

bills. This should be based on an independent process to regularly determine the Essentials Guarantee level, based on the cost of essentials, ensuring the Universal Credit standard allowance at least meets this level, and any reductions from people's payments never pull support below this.

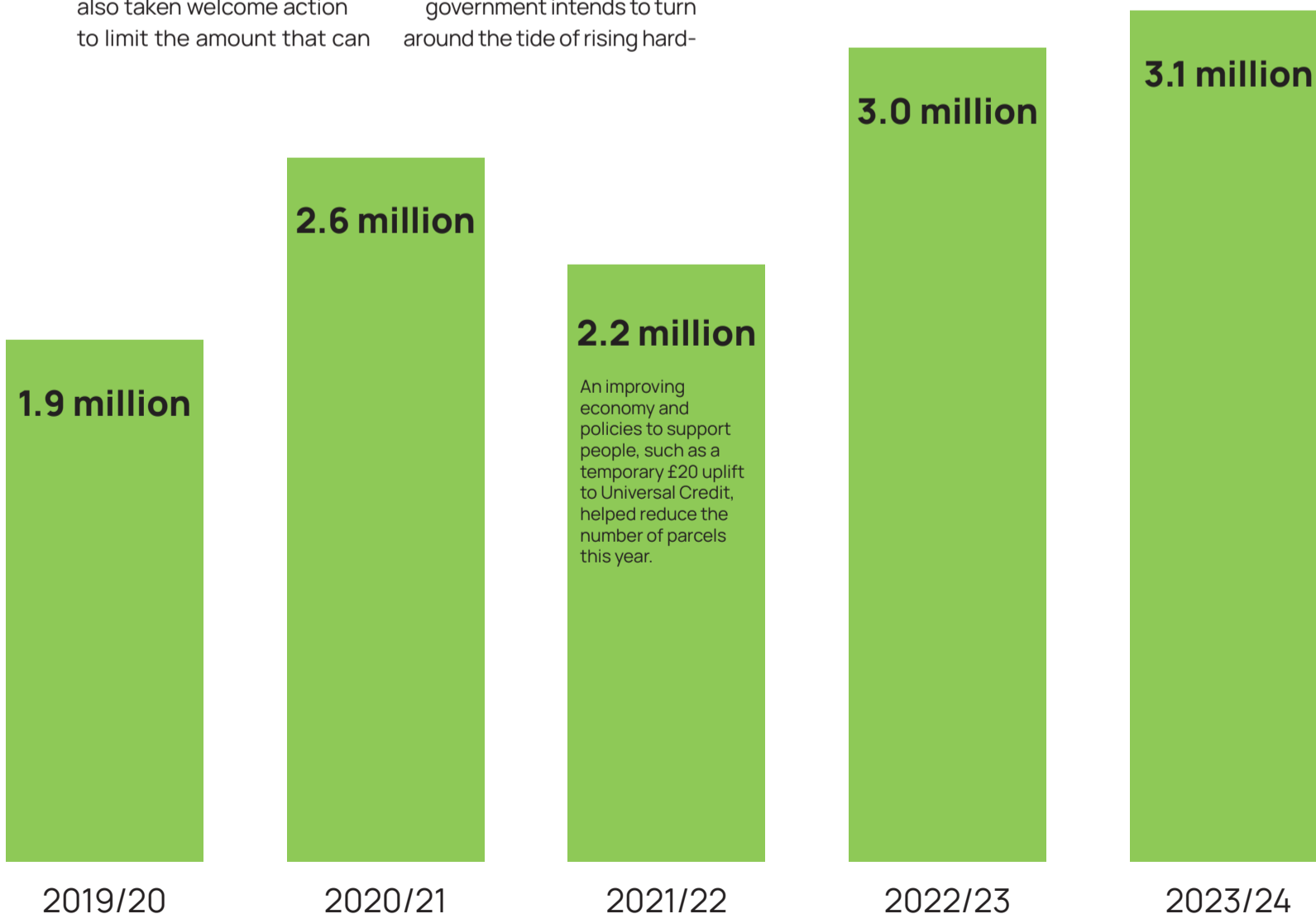
The UK government has stated the need for emergency food parcels is a 'moral scar'. It has also taken welcome action to limit the amount that can



be taken from a person's Universal Credit payment to repay debts, helping people on the lowest incomes both in and out of work. Alongside this, the government has extended the Household Support Fund, introduced new legislation to improve workers' and renters' rights, proposed overhauling employment support and established a child poverty taskforce. These are important signs the UK government intends to turn around the tide of rising hard-

ship. But the journey isn't over. We must use this moment to now agree a more ambitious path for long-term progress so we can see meaningful change in five years' time. People across the UK want change, it's now for the UK government to show that this change is coming and demonstrate how they will deliver it. Governments across all parts of the UK, alongside many others working on the frontline and in communities across the UK, stand ready

to work with the UK government and across all sectors to tackle hunger and hardship. Millions of us agree our social security system should ensure that everyone can afford the essentials. We have already seen some positive steps towards a more hopeful future, but we now need a clear plan to build a future without the need for food banks. There is no time to lose.



Belfast

THERE'S ALWAYS HOPE

Devastating stories of hardship have emerged in Belfast. But there are solutions – and South-West Belfast Foodbank is driving change in the local community.

A young dad comes into a food bank in Northern Ireland. He needs baby food for his six-month-old son. They haven't had any baby food donations, so a volunteer takes him to the local chemist and, with her own money, buys him food, nappies and anything else he needs for the baby.

A lady with three small children arrives. Universal Credit is not enough to feed her family, so volunteers chat with her for an hour, gather enough food to get the family through the weekend, drive them home and unpack everything into the kitchen.

“
I meet people with harrowing stories.

Volunteer Deirdre has only been helping at the food bank a matter of weeks – but already she's shocked at the level of hardship in her own community. “I haven't been here long but I'm meeting people with these harrowing stories,” says Deirdre, a retired nurse. “It's very hard to deal with babies and small children not having food, not in this day and age.”



The stories emerging from South-West Belfast Foodbank highlight the compassion of food bank volunteers and staff – as well as their drive to change the things that are leaving people without enough for the essentials.

Food banks are filling in the gaps

There are four Belfast food banks in the Trussell community, and South-West Belfast Foodbank manager, Edel Diamond, says people are routinely going without life's essentials.

“People need toiletries to wash themselves, they lack nutrition because they can't afford food, and families are going without clothing for children,” she says. “People can't even afford the £4 bus fare to town, because that money could go in the gas meter for heating. People are living off little or nothing.”

Edel says the high cost of childcare is pushing people into poverty, and money being taken off Universal Credit payments is pulling people's incomes below what it's possible to survive on. But what's most disturbing is that food banks are being left with no option but to step in where the social security system should be supporting people.



Alice, volunteer at South-West Belfast Foodbank

130% increase

South-West Belfast Foodbank have seen a 130% increase in the amount of food parcels they provide to people facing hardship in their community since 2019.

Sharron Morrison from Belfast Central Mission says, “Food banks were put in place for emergencies – but now they are literally part of our social security system.” But even here, there's hope.

Envisioning better

Sharron says, “Part of my job is to help people to envision a Belfast where we don't have food banks, where people have dignity and choice.”

Jonny Currie, Trussell's Network Lead for Northern Ireland, says it's about setting Universal Credit at a level that at least covers life's essentials. It's about communities finding local solutions. And it's about kindness. “What gives me hope,” says Jonny, “are the people who want to make a difference.”

Food banks in Belfast are creating a better future – and the compassion of volunteers like Deirdre is driving change.

“If you can be anything in the world, be kind,” says Deirdre. “People will always help each other, and I'd like to think that eventually we won't need food banks. I mean, we're in the year 2024.”



Event at South-West Belfast Foodbank to collect stories



Cardiff

A COLLECTIVE CALL FOR CHANGE IN WALES

When food banks in Wales invited people to share messages of hardship and hope, no one imagined that 'laying it all out on the table' could be so powerful.

Shortly after having started working at Cardiff Foodbank, Imy Hopkins was invited by Trussell to gather stories of hardship and hope in her community through the tablecloth activity.

"We were having a volunteer event in the summer, around 40 or 50 people came, and I got them to write on the tablecloths," says Imy.

"They wrote about hope... one person mentioned a child's eyes lighting up when they saw sweets in their food parcel. And they wrote about hardship... someone couldn't forget the indignity of people having to ask for toilet roll."

The messages, little windows into people's real lives, were deeply moving. The idea of writing on the tablecloths was a great conversation-starter. Food banks in Wales started collecting their own stories of hardship and hope – and the idea grew.

"We took the tablecloths to Pride Cymru, the biggest Pride event in Wales, to Eisteddfod, a Welsh festival attended by 180,000 people, and even to an event at the Senedd, the Welsh Parliament," says Imy.

Growing need

What was striking was people's lack of awareness about food banks. "There are more food bank centres in Wales than there are McDonald's," says Imy. "People hadn't really realised the extent of food bank need – but it's not always been this way, and it doesn't have to be this way."

The fact is, the scale of hunger and hardship in Wales today is shocking. At Cardiff Foodbank, the number of food parcels given out increased from 12,729 in 2021-22, to 19,253 in 2022-23. Meanwhile, the team have spent thousands on food as donations fail to keep pace with the level of need.



It doesn't have to be this way.

For Imy, the way to end this enormous need is not food – but a social security system that's fit for purpose.

"At food banks, I meet people with temporary jobs or on zero-hours contracts, people fleeing domestic violence, refugees and asylum seekers, people just out of prison... our social security system just isn't there for them," she says. "78% of people we support receive some kind of social security payment, which shows it isn't going far enough. Even adding £30 a week to people's income can make a big difference."

Message for leaders

One story Imy cannot forget is the grandmother caring for her grandchildren while her daughter struggled with mental health problems. "This lady was down to her last 30p when she came to the food bank, having spent all her savings to look after the kids," says Imy. "She was doing everything to help her family – any of us would do the same – but it drove her to a food bank... It's heartbreaking."

Taking stories of hardship and hope around Wales – and especially to politicians at the Senedd – is something Imy is proud of. Now she has a message for the UK government: "Rethink our social security system and introduce an Essentials Guarantee so Universal Credit at least covers life's essentials."



Messages of Hope & Hardship

"I am an NHS nurse and my husband works in retail. We have to use the food bank."

"Nothing worse than feeling hungry. Let's all help each other."

"Give us back our dignity."

"Stop debt deductions from benefits. Benefit level already too low to live off."

"I am a teacher and still need help from food banks. I'm a single Mum of three and everything. Wages need to be higher."

"A choice between heating and eating isn't really a choice at all."

"When the cost of living payments were made, less people needed to use our food bank."

"I'm very grateful for all the help I was receiving when I was struggling."

"Housing benefit doesn't cover rent. How is this right?"

"Our community is at breaking point!"



53% increase

Cardiff Foodbank have seen a 53% increase in the amount of food parcels they provide to people facing hardship in their community since 2019.

Bristol

HUNGER ISN'T A FOOD PROBLEM, IT'S AN INCOME PROBLEM

Ollie found compassion and community at his local food bank. Though stories of hardship in Bristol can feel overwhelming, one thing can make a difference.

Since 2019, the number of emergency food parcels provided to children by South & East Bristol Foodbank has more than doubled.



Staff and volunteers at South & East Bristol Foodbank ▼

This place kind of saved my life." Ollie gestures towards a light, airy room buzzing with activity. Volunteers organise food parcels, Citizens Advice support workers go from person to person, and someone is always making tea.

This is South and East Bristol Foodbank, doing everything it can to help people who face hardship – like Ollie.

"I was a painter and decorator by trade, but I sustained an injury and cracked my ribs. I was signed off work and it led to depression," he says. When Universal Credit failed to cover the essentials, Ollie's mental health worsened.

"It's hard to survive with the cost of living, and obviously rent goes straight to my landlord. I got to the point where I didn't have enough to live on, so I reached out to the food bank."

Here, Ollie was met with compassion and care. "At first I was anxious about coming," he says, "but it was like a community hub, with lovely staff, a relaxed atmosphere, no judgement, and people from all walks of life."

I didn't have enough to live on, so I reached out for help.

Ollie received emergency food, help to access disability payments, specifically Personal Independence Payments, and the team applied for a grant to get him a microwave. "The support has been incredible for me," he says with a smile.

Ollie's story is filled with hope. But it's a hard won glimmer of light in a community where more and more people are facing hunger and hardship.



Nothing left

During South and East Bristol Foodbank's tablecloth discussions, similar themes came up as across the rest of the country.

"After paying our bills, we have nothing left," said one person. "I used to give to charity three or four years ago. Now I am charity," said another.

"Since my husband died two weeks ago, I have been living on Weetabix," added one woman. "It's the only thing in the cupboard. My account was frozen and Universal Credit has not started. I have nothing. Only Weetabix."

For Beth, an Empowerment and Support Worker at Citizens Advice Bristol, the descriptions of relentless hunger and poverty are deeply troubling. "You realise a huge number of problems, like debt and mental health problems, stem from people not having enough money," says Beth. "People are just so desperate. Hearing their

stories day in, day out, is really difficult. We do as much as we can, but often it feels like we're just putting on a band-aid."

The food bank's 'More than Food' project means people can get help with bills, Universal Credit and budgeting, as well as things like clothes, school uniform and household appliances.

But food banks cannot make up for the failures of a social

security system that should be there to support people. Lauren Pritchard from South & East Bristol Foodbank is clear: Universal Credit needs updating so it at least cover the cost of life's essentials.

"People shouldn't be going without food, heating, electricity, the internet or clothing," she says. "It's time for an Essentials Guarantee."



Members of the public add their messages ▲

Peeblesshire

REALITY OF RURAL POVERTY

Country living isn't all chocolate-box cottages and woodland walks. Hardship hits rural communities hard – but, says one food bank in Scotland, there is hope.

Step into someone else's life for a moment. Imagine you need to visit the job centre, 20 miles away. You don't have a car so you take the bus. You climb aboard and get out some coins to pay. You can't believe what you hear: the fare is equivalent to one day's income.

That's the reality for too many rural people, says Jennie Jones, Engagement Officer at a food bank in Scotland.

Peeblesshire Foodbank, where Jennie works, is based in the small town of Peebles. Around 10,000 people live here, but the food bank covers an area of 500 square miles south of Edinburgh.

"The nearest large towns are 20 miles in either direction, and people need to visit for hospitals and appointments," says Jennie. "But a return bus fare is £13. When you're on Universal Credit of £91 a week, £13 is a huge chunk of your budget. What can you do?"

The high cost of public transport is just one factor intensifying hardship in rural communities. Peebles has no budget supermarkets, says Jennie, and going on the bus to buy cheaper food wipes out any savings you make. People tend to be more isolated in the countryside, and local work is often seasonal and low-paid.

Meanwhile, many households are on oil-fired heating rather than mains gas – which makes budgeting almost impossible. "You can't just put £20 of oil in the tank," says Jennie. "It costs hundreds to top up your oil, and people on low income don't have that money."

“We feel sad, frustrated and angry.**”**

Increasing need

These enormous challenges add up – more and more people are facing hunger and hardship in their community.

"We see lone parent families struggling to make ends meet and single people unable to stretch their social security payments. We have people facing illness, job loss and addiction, and we see older people going without heating," she explains.

"Statutory support agencies have been cut to the bone and charities that used to help have lost funding. Social security is not keeping people on the lowest incomes out of poverty."

Expanding support

In response, Peeblesshire Foodbank has stepped up with extraordinary support. They run community cafes, and fund an outreach worker at the Citizens Advice Scotland. Fuel vouchers and warm boxes, packed with blankets and hot water bottles, are supplied to families. In the summer holidays, more than 5,000 packed lunches were delivered to 180 local children.

"We often feel saddened, frustrated and angry, but we also know we are in a unique

position to help," says Jennie. The positive impact of Peeblesshire Foodbank means there's hope in this rural community – and Jennie believes long-term change could be on the horizon too.

"The change in UK government feels like an opportu-

nity," says Jennie. "There are signs the new UK government would like to deal more effectively with the rising need for food banks and review Universal Credit, which is the foundation of the income problems we see. To me, that feels hopeful."



Staff and volunteers at Peeblesshire Foodbank



Fiona, Peeblesshire Foodbank Manager ▲



Messages of Hope & Hardship

"What's on my plate? Not much these days."

"People are surviving, not thriving."

"I hope the new government will do away with food bank need."

"My outgoings are more than my income."

"It's a joke there are so many food banks in the UK."

"Please sort out the anomalies and injustices of Universal Credit."

"Utterly appalling that food banks are needed. Poverty in 2024 is unacceptable."

"There is enough for everyone if we can learn to care and share."

"Universal Credit doesn't cover my outgoings."

"Poverty isn't an 'issue' – it's mums going to bed hungry, dads crying with shame at food banks, kids being starved of hope for something better."

▼ Ann, from Newcastle (Staffs) Foodbank, adds messages



Newcastle-Under-Lyme

THE STORIES BEHIND THE STATISTICS

The social security system is not fit for purpose, people are facing hunger, and things are getting worse. Newcastle (Staffs) Foodbank shines a light on hardship in their community and the stories too often hidden from view.

4,000

Between 1 April and 30 September this year, Newcastle (Staffs) Foodbank provided over 4,000 emergency food parcels to people facing hardship in their community.

Food bank staff and volunteers pack parcels ▼



“ “ LET'S TRY AND CONSIGN FOOD BANKS TO THE HISTORY BOOKS ” ”

TRAFFORD NORTH FOODBANK

Laying it all out on the table
Message #1,365

More people than ever are facing hunger and hardship in Newcastle-Under-Lyme. And as individuals share their stories at Newcastle (Staffs) Foodbank, a common thread emerges.

“Every story is different,” says Ann King from Newcastle (Staffs) Foodbank. “The fact that such a wide variety of people need support from a food bank is telling us: we need a change in the system.”

Around 700 people a month visit the food bank, which operates out of six centres – and each person has an experience to share. A working dad whose wages don’t cover

food and bills. A young woman who’s given up work to care for an elderly parent. A family hit by bereavement, or an unexpected medical issue.

“There’s a range of reasons why people come to a food bank,” says Ann. “But at the end of the day, nobody should have to turn to a charity to put food on the table.”

Alarming, Ann believes there’s also an overwhelming hidden need which has yet to surface.

“Quite often, people come to us very distressed. They have been battling for a long time before they actually approach a food bank,” says



Mandy, volunteer at Newcastle (Staffs) Foodbank

MANDY'S STORY

Mandy lost her job due to ill health and, after working all her life, fell into financial difficulty. But when she sought help, it felt like no one listened, the system was impossible to navigate, and Universal Credit didn't stretch far enough.

"I budget for everything – I'm good at that – but the money just doesn't last," says Mandy. "You know the yellow labels at the supermarket, when things are going out of date? I used to save my 5ps, keep them in a jar, and every Friday I went to buy yellow label food. I might get three bags of shopping. It meant we had bread for the weekend."

Mandy's teenage granddaughter lives with her – and Mandy's eyes fill with tears as she remembers: "It would come to the third week [after Universal Credit payment] and we literally didn't have anything to eat. The most important thing is for the child to eat. She's my priority, so I'd give up food. Mandy received help to claim disability payments, specifically Personal Independence Payments, and it made all the difference. Now she volunteers at the food bank. "I listen to people, I cry with them, I tell them: I've been there," she said.



Messages of Hope & Hardship

"Nowadays I can't afford the food I need, much less washing powder, shampoo, nappies. Impossible."

"I'm a single parent. You need two incomes to buy your essentials. I can't make it on my own."

"When people have to report to food bank charities to feed themselves and their families, the government has already failed in its duty of care to the nation."

"Every day is a struggle to make ends meet"

"When our benefits system is not built to cover the basics of heat eat or roof over your head we really need to think about what's going on."

"I'm often not able to feed my family and making the decision to pay the bills or eat."

"Looking forward to seeing the day where we don't need food banks anymore."

"Everyday is a struggle to make ends meet"



People don't feel they are being listened to.

Ann. "There are people out there who have yet to find the courage to ask for help. There may be many more who are suffering, their health and wellbeing affected."

Food bank manager Jane Baker agrees – and says it all comes down to people simply not having enough money. "It's not food that's the issue, it's a lack of income," she says. "People come in at the end of the month because the money has run out."

The stories shared at Newcastle (Staffs) Foodbank paint a concerning picture – of a Universal Credit system impossible to navigate, of

insufficient income, of frustration, shame and stigma.

But a desire to be heard is also apparent throughout all the stories from Newcastle (Staffs) Foodbank

"The message coming through loud and clear is that people don't feel they are being listened to," says Ann. "So we hope to tell the story of Newcastle-under-Lyme in 2024, and demonstrate to the UK government that it's essential to bring our social security system up to standard, to improve the lives of people everywhere."



Mandy volunteering at Newcastle (Staffs) Foodbank

Feature

BEYOND THE ESSENTIALS

The power of food bank volunteers

Photo Credit: J Harrison 2024

The images in this article are from Twelve – a photography project exhibited as part of the 2024 National Festival of Making. The work explores the motivations behind volunteering in a series of powerful portraits of volunteers at Blackburn Foodbank. Using a creative, participatory approach, local photographers John Harrison and Shaun McAllister worked with volunteers to select their photos and tell their stories of what drove them to gift their time to their local community.

To browse all photos and stories, head to john-harrison-photo.com/12-2/



“
I make people smile.”

A cup of tea and a chat at a food bank is crucial. As many of the messages food banks across the UK have collected over the summer describe, that warm welcome from a friendly volunteer and space to be heard is often the first-time people facing hardship feel really listened to.

“Today, I went to the food bank. The people there were amazing, and made me feel very welcome,” wrote a resident of Truro. “I did cry! The ladies could see I was overwhelmed, but they made the experience easy and I felt cared about.”

There are over 40,000 volunteers that power Trussell’s community of food banks – a movement of people who support people in their hardest moments with dignity and respect.

“I make people smile,” says Femi, a volunteer at Blackburn Foodbank. “And I think that’s a big thing because, actually, you don’t know what that person is going through... they could be having a hard day. So, something as simple as that can change things.”

As one in four (26%) people referred to food banks in the Trussell community are in contact with relatives, friends

or neighbours once a month or even less, these conversations with volunteers are more important than ever. They also create vital opportunities to share what’s going on and be connected to advice and support with things like housing, mental health and social security payments, making it less likely someone will need a food bank in the future.

But with so many people needing food banks, making time and space for that cup of tea and space to chat is becoming harder. Under

huge amounts of pressure, these community-run, volunteer-powered charities are meeting more and more people needing emergency food and support for the first time.

“People use us as a lifeline, and we’ve had a lot of new people who previously wouldn’t have needed to use a food bank. We see people who receive benefits but just can’t make ends meet,” says Aamirah, Volunteer Coordinator at Blackburn Foodbank.

The support that food banks and their volunteers provide to their communities can be life changing. But the level of need food banks and their volunteers

are seeing is too high for them to handle alone.

“Things need to change, and we know what needs to happen,” says Danni Malone, Chief Network Officer at Trussell. “Together, we have roots into hundreds of communities, and while one person can’t change the issues driving the need for food banks on their own, thousands of us working together can.”

Or as Jo, a volunteer from Blackburn Foodbank, put it:

“There’s hope. There’s an alternative. We can change the world.”

Feature

WORK WITH US TO BUILD A BETTER FUTURE

People who've experienced hardship should have a seat at the table

Who has a better understanding of what a more just future where everyone can afford the essentials looks like, than the people who have gone without themselves? Living through and living with the challenges that hardship brings, the challenges that no one should have to face, offers an invaluable insight into how we can end hunger for good, as shown by the suggestions and solutions written on tablecloths across the UK.

Trussell partners with people who have lived experience of financial hardship. Recently, Trussell has been

working with a community of 150 people to help shape strategy and policy at every level, gathering their perspectives and solutions to hardship.



Let us live with the dignity and respect we deserve.

“Investing in sustainable solutions to poverty is investing in our nation's future,” writes Lydia, one of Trussell's experts by experience. “Let's prioritise policies that uplift the most vulnerable in society and create lasting change. Together, we can build a more equitable and prosperous UK for all.”

“How much hope for our future and our children's future would we have if we no longer needed the use of food banks but had enough money instead to live on?” Writes Diedre. “Reducing the cost of living will reduce the need for food banks. Let

us live with the dignity and respect we deserve.”

The UK government committed to develop an ambitious strategy to reduce child poverty in their 2024 manifesto, and to work with communities to bring about change.

Dave Coffin, Head of Participation at Trussell, agrees this is the right approach, adding “People with direct experience of financial hardship have the ideas, drive and insight to help end hunger and hardship.”

Val, Policy Advocate at Trussell who has personal experience of hardship, has shared her story at Parliament several times to explain to politicians why an Essentials Guarantee is so desperately needed. She writes:

“Once upon a time there was a world where there was no need for food banks. This is our chance to make the world a better place.”

Dave Coffin adds, “The invitation is there for the UK government to work with people with lived experience to help create this future. Will they take it?”



Messages of Hope & Hardship

“Ending hunger is an act of pure justice.”

“A country that cares ensures no one is left behind. Let's build a social security system that truly supports everyone.”

“The only way we can begin to end the need for food banks is by guaranteeing the rate of UC covers the essentials.”

“If my basic essentials were covered it would make me feel like I am worthwhile and that I can provide for my children.”

“Our new government have the opportunity to help fix this horrible situation and should back the Guarantee our Essentials campaign.”

“Now is the time to come together to end poverty and the need for food banks.”

“It's our birth right to experience fairness, equality and respect... always.”



children under five face hunger and hardship

making them the age group most at risk

Trussell (2024) The Cost of Hunger and Hardship



Photo Credit: Andi Oliver - Sky UK, Bill Nighy - Aliona Adrianova, AJ Odudu & LadBaby- Dan Prince, Dame Joanna Lumley - Gemma Levine, Stanley Tucci - Gerhard Kassner

Stephen Fry

It is a travesty that in a nation as wealthy as ours, so many people are unable to afford even the most essential items like food and electricity. Trussell continues its vital work, but food banks shouldn't need to exist. The UK government must step up and guarantee that no one in the UK goes without the essentials they need to live.



Andi Oliver

We are witnessing an unacceptable rise in the number of families needing help just to put food on the table. Trussell is doing extraordinary work, but no one should have to turn to a charity for their next meal. It's time for the UK government to guarantee our essentials so every family can live with dignity.



Bill Nighy

It's breathtaking that the number of people needing food banks is growing all the time. People with two jobs still unable to feed their families. The UK government's basic brief is the health and welfare of its citizens. It's time they prioritised those without enough to eat in a modern society in 2024.



AJ Odudu

I'm playing my part by speaking up about the need to support our local food banks and push for the solutions that will end hunger for good. Whilst the work food banks do is critical, they shouldn't be needed.



Mark and Roxanne Hoyle (LadBaby)

It's heartbreaking to think that so many parents are being forced into the situation of not eating to ensure their children have food on their plate. Trussell has been a beacon of hope to millions, but this crisis is not something charity alone can solve. The UK government must guarantee that everyone has access to life's essentials!



Dame Joanna Lumley

It is deeply troubling to know that so many people in our country are being forced to choose between staying warm and having enough to eat. Trussell's efforts to support people on the lowest incomes are truly heroic, but charity alone is not the answer. No one should live in fear of hunger or cold.



Support

LETTERS

PRAYING FOR WISDOM

The Rt Revd David Walker,
Bishop of Manchester

I hear from clergy across the diocese and have seen from my visits to food banks that the inadequate levels of social security are pushing people to the doors of food banks and are the main driver of the rising levels of destitution we are seeing.

This is not inevitable in a country like the UK, and we could end the need for food banks on an industrial scale if we prioritised the needs of people facing financial hardship. I believe that each human is made in the image of God

and should live with dignity, a more just society would mean people could buy the essentials we all need and not have to rely on emergency food aid.

I am praying for wisdom and compassion as our new UK government make decisions about the economy and I pray for justice and dignity for people facing financial hardship. I think implementing an Essentials Guarantee would be an answer to prayer for so many people – as well as an answer to my prayers!

TIME FOR COMPASSION

Stanley Tucci

As someone who has always found joy in the beauty and comfort of food, it breaks my heart to know that so many people in a country as wealthy and developed as the UK are experiencing hunger.

Are any of us really okay with people having to turn to charity for something as essential as food, or that so many families are facing impossible decisions, like whether to eat or heat their homes?

One in seven people across the UK are facing hunger and hardship, including one in five children; it's real life for millions of people who never imagined they'd find themselves in such a position. It's happening right now, on our doorstep.

Not so long ago, food banks were not needed to the extent they are today. It's time the UK government showed compassionate and dignified leader-

ship to help end hunger and hardship once and for all.

Food banks are doing extraordinary work, but charity can't solve this alone. We need urgent action on hunger in the UK. We need our UK government to guarantee that everyone has access to life's essentials, and the distribution of emergency food can end for good.

No one should ever have to choose between a warm home and a hot meal.





◀ The Rt Revd David Walker, Bishop of Manchester, stood with food banks, celebrities, charities and over 150,000 members of the public to call on politicians to introduce an Essentials Guarantee into Universal Credit.

Messages of Hope & Hardship

“My bills are so high. I have a disabled son who has special needs. Our bills are even higher because we use more electricity and water. We need help. Our money is not enough.”

“When the cost of living payments were made, less people needed to use our food bank.”

“Travelling to medical appointments is almost as expensive as a weekly food shop. The last two weeks of each month I can't afford to eat. You have to choose between eating and getting help.”

“No one should have to use a food bank in the 21st century.”

“The UK is one of the most affluent nations in the world. Why do so many of us rely on charities like the amazing food bank so we can eat?”

“I have hope that food banks aren't needed because the state will provide support - not charities.”

Organisations across the charity sector stand together in support of an Essentials Guarantee

SCOPE

James Taylor
Executive Director of Strategy
at disability equality charity Scope

Life costs a lot more for disabled people, whose households need an extra £1,010 a month on average to have the same standard of living as others.

Those extra costs have a devastating impact, and the rising cost of living has pushed disabled people beyond breaking point.

Disabled people have cut back everything they can and are going without heating, turning off vital equipment and forgoing medical treatment. These sacrifices put their health at risk, and at worst are life-threatening. The government must step in to fix this.



Tom MacInnes
Director of Policy at Citizens Advice

We know essential living costs are higher than income for millions of people, pushing them further into the red each month. Every day, we hear from those simply unable to afford basic necessities like rent and food.

There is an opportunity now for the UK government to offer practical solutions we urgently need to raise living standards and help people get by.

The public wants to know what concrete steps will be taken to help them. The new government will be judged on how well it addresses living standards.



Lynn Perry MBE
CEO at Barnardo's

Our latest research found that a quarter of parents in Great Britain were struggling to provide sufficient food for their families - affecting more than 3 million children. It also showed that a third of parents were having to cut back on heating their homes.

For a child, that might mean worrying about where your next meal will come from or returning home to a cold house - which can have repercussions for their health long into adulthood.

Whilst we welcome the government's announcement of a Child Poverty Taskforce, families need urgent action. We're backing calls for an Essentials Guarantee in Universal Credit, so that families can afford to put enough food on the table and keep the electricity meter topped up. We also want to see an end to the unfair two-child limit, or 'sibling penalty' on benefits.



Mark Rowland
CEO at Mental Health Foundation

Not having enough money to cover essentials like food and basic utilities is a common contributor to poor mental health. It can cause people to feel anxious, stressed, and even hopeless - and nobody should feel like that.

Providing people on the very lowest incomes with enough money to live is one of the best ways to prevent this. It would be pivotal in better protecting everyone's mental health when times get hard. The UK government needs to act now to prevent hardship and poor mental health by backing an Essentials Guarantee.

ACTION FOR CHILDREN, ADVICE UK, AGE UK, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL UK, BAPTISTS TOGETHER, BARNARDO'S, BEVAN FOUNDATION, BLACK COUNTRY FOOD BANK, BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS, BRITISH LIVER TRUST, BUTTLE UK, CARERS TRUST, CARERS UK, THE CARING FAMILY FOUNDATION, CARNEGIE UK, CENTRE FOR MENTAL HEALTH, CENTRE FOR PROGRESSIVE POLICY, CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF HOUSING, CITIZENS ADVICE, CITIZENS ADVICE SCOTLAND, CHILDREN NORTH EAST, CHRISTIANS AGAINST POVERTY, CLARION HOUSING GROUP, COMMUNITY HOUSING CYMRU, COMMUNITY MONEY ADVICE, COMMUNITIES THAT WORK, COMPASSION IN POLITICS, DEBT JUSTICE, DIABETES UK, END FURNITURE POVERTY, FAIR BY DESIGN, FAMILY FUND, GOOD THINGS FOUNDATION, GREEN ALLIANCE, HARTLEPOOL FOOD BANK, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, HUMANOLOGY, INDEPENDENT FOOD AID NETWORK, INK, JOINT PUBLIC ISSUES TEAM, JUST FAIR, KASABIAN, LIGHTNING BOLT, LONDON SHELTER, MACHUCA, MENTAL HEALTH FOUNDATION, MENTAL HEALTH UK, MIND, MONEY ADVICE TRUST, MOTOR NEUROLOGICAL DISEASE SOCIETY, NATIONAL AIDS TRUST, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY ACTION, NATIONAL HOUSING FEDERATION, NATIONAL NEW ECONOMICS FOUNDATION, NORTH EAST CHILD POVERTY COMMISSION, NOURISH SCOTLAND, ONE PARENT FAMILIES SCOTLAND, OXFAM GB, PARKINSON'S UK, PLACESHAPERS, PURLEY FOOD HUB, RENÉ CASSIN, RETHINK MENTAL ILLNESS, REUSE NETWORK, ROYAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF BLIND PEOPLE (RNIB), RUNNYMEDE TRUST, SAVE THE CHILDREN, SCOPE, SCOTTISH FEDERATION OF HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS, SCOTTISH OUT OF SCHOOL CARE NETWORK, SCOTTISH WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP, SENSE, ST MUNGO'S, ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY (ENGLAND), THE CHILDREN'S TRUST, THE FACILITY FOR PUBLIC HEALTH, THE FOOD FOUNDATION, THE HYGIENE BANK, THE METHODIST CHURCH, THE MIGHTY CREATIVES, THE POVERTY ALLIANCE, THE POVERTY TRUTH COMMUNITY, THE ROBERTSON TRUST, THE SALVATION ARMY, THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH, THE WELCOME CENTRE, TRUST FOR LONDON, TURN2US, UK COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS, VIVID HOUSING, VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS DISABILITY GROUP, WE CARE CAMPAIGN, WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP, WOMEN'S REGIONAL CONSORTIUM (NI), WOMEN'S SUPPORT NETWORK (NI), YMCA - ENGLAND & WALES, Z2K

EVERYONE SHOULD BE ABLE TO AFFORD THE ESSENTIALS

OVER 100 ORGANISATIONS AGREE

It's time to...

GUARANTEE OUR ESSENTIALS

Find out more by visiting trussell.org.uk/guarantee-our-essentials



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