

# Emergency food parcel distribution in Northern Ireland

April 2024 – March 2025

25 May 2025

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# 2024/25: Key facts across Northern Ireland

This factsheet reports on the number of emergency food parcels distributed by food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland during the period 1 April 2024 to 30 March 2025 (inclusive). During this time, food parcels were distributed from 51 locations across Northern Ireland, as part of the Trussell community.<sup>1</sup>

Data from the Trussell community is just one part of the picture of need across Northern Ireland. There is a wide range of charitable food provision supporting people in communities that is not captured in this data.<sup>2</sup> There are also many people who are food insecure who do not access support from any form of charitable food provision.<sup>3</sup>

- Emergency food provision in Northern Ireland remains concerningly high. Over the last decade, provision has more than quadrupled.
- Positive steps in policy and practice in Northern Ireland have been important in stemming the record levels of emergency food provision witnessed in the previous year. However, there are clear warning signs that food bank need is either being displaced to alternative providers or simply left unmet.
- Trends vary; West Tyrone and Newry and Armagh have seen an increase in the number of parcels provided in the last year. Other areas have seen sharp increases over the last five years. 7 in 10 parcels went to families with children in 2024/25.
- Food banks are struggling under the weight of persistent poverty. Many people seeking help still cannot afford the essentials, even after acting on advice and support.
- The Northern Ireland Executive can go much further to end the need for food banks, particularly through mitigating Westminster social security policy, providing additional support for private renters affected by the housing crisis, and prioritising the implementation of an Anti-Poverty Strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> The locations from which food banks distributed parcels are 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 51 locations in Northern Ireland in the same period in the previous year.

<sup>2</sup> The Independent Food Aid Network has identified at least 1,172 independent food banks across the UK. There are also Salvation Army food banks, as well as food banks run from schools and hospitals. Beyond this, there are thousands of other food aid providers including soup kitchens and social supermarkets.

<sup>3</sup> 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>

## Emergency food provision has yet to return to pre-pandemic levels, embedding a ‘new normal’

Food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland distributed 77,000 emergency food parcels between 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025. This is a decrease (-15%) compared to the same period in 2023-24 when close to 91,000 parcels were distributed, the most parcels ever distributed in a year. The potential reasons behind this decrease are explored in the next section.

The longer-term trend is stark. The number of parcels distributed in 2024/25 is significantly higher (71%) than the same period five years ago, in 2019-20, and more than four times (336%) the amount distributed ten years ago in 2014/15.

For the third year in a row, food banks in Northern Ireland distributed over 30,000 parcels to children. This marks a 68% increase since 2019/20, including a 47% rise in parcels to support children under the age of five over the same period, and reflecting the wider rise (68%) in parcels provided to families with children over the past five years.

Despite the decrease seen this year, the figures make it clear that we are yet to return to (already high) pre-pandemic levels of emergency food provision in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland. There is a real risk that, without any significant shift, we are facing a new normal of extraordinarily high levels of severe financial hardship in our communities.

“

**Having no food in the cupboard...or no fuel at home and maybe no electricity...that brings so many other layers of harshness and that presents itself in many forms...depression, mental health issues, and family suffering.**

”

**Food bank in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland**

## Persistently high need far outweighs positive steps in policy and provision

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 continues to push people into hunger and hardship.

As noted in our Mid-Year Statistics update, boosts to income might have helped to prevent further rises in emergency food provision and contributed to the decrease in provision. At a devolved level in Northern Ireland, this includes support provided through the Department for Communities (DfC), including welfare mitigation schemes, which are designed to alleviate the financial impact of specific changes to the social security system, and support to local councils.

At a UK level, this includes overall high inflation easing and policy choices like maintaining CPI inflation to uprate benefits (increasing benefits by September 2023 CPI of 6.7%, when actual inflation by April 2024 was lower) and unfreezing the Local Housing Allowance rates from April 2024, re-linking support for private renters to the most affordable 30% of local rents.

Efforts from food banks to improve access to support which addresses people's underlying financial hardship may also have contributed in some local areas. For example, some food banks have described working more closely with referral partners to improve referral processes so people get access to the right support more quickly. A large proportion of food bank charities in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland now also provide access to some form of financial inclusion support – that is, support or advice on money matters. A recent evaluation shows how this support can make a tangible difference to people's finances.<sup>4</sup>

However, current additional provision at food banks does not have the capacity to address financial hardship at scale. Moreover, we know that even where financial inclusion services are in place, advisors are regularly finding people still cannot make ends meet even after people have exhausted all options to maximise their income. The overall decrease in the number of parcels distributed also covers a mixed picture across Northern Ireland, as explored further below. Most importantly, there is clear evidence that a slight decrease in provision does not necessarily reflect a decrease in need, with some factors standing out from our review of food banks' experiences.

- First, as reported in November, we are hearing even more clearly that many food banks are struggling to keep up with the need in their communities. Many food banks are having to carefully manage resources and capacity at a time of extremely high need.
- Second, there are many cases when councils and other services in an area are struggling or having to cut back provision, making it more difficult for people in those communities to be referred to Trussell food banks.
- Third, investment in alternative forms of charitable food aid by the DfC may have also had contributed to the decrease in emergency food parcels distributed in the last year. Since 2017, the DfC has run a Social Supermarket Pilot Programme seeking to mitigate the impact of UK-wide welfare reforms in Northern Ireland. In 2024/25, the DfC increased their financial support for social supermarkets, providing £2.75 million in funding for social supermarkets across Northern Ireland. This is a 38% increase in funding compared to 2023/24. The increased provision provided through social supermarkets, may have meant that people experiencing

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<sup>4</sup> The impact evaluation of Trussell's advice services, conducted by the University of Bristol in 2023-24, estimated that the financial impact of food bank advice services is large. Through income gains, debts managed, and debts written off it was estimated an average financial impact of around £1,000 was achieved per person accessing a Trussell advice service. Finney, et al, (2024), *Evaluating the advice and support services provided through food banks*, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/evaluation/evaluating-our-money-matters-advice-and-support-services>

financial hardship in Northern Ireland have been supported through this initiative instead of being referred to a food bank. In other words, rather than food bank need reducing, it may have been displaced elsewhere.

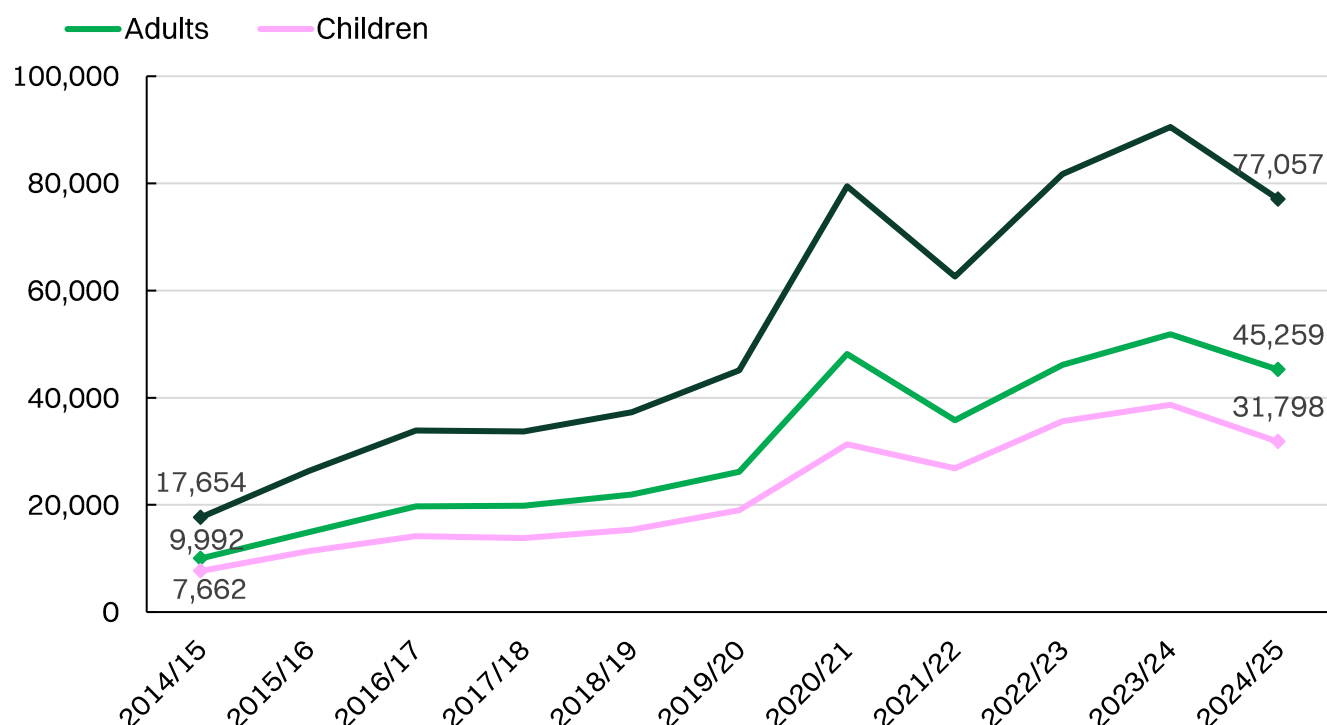
Taken together, the picture our 2024/25 evidence paints is one of unrelentingly high levels of severe hardship in our communities. Any green shoots from inflation easing, policy choices under the previous UK government and Stormont, or action by food banks themselves are far outweighed by persistently high need that is either now having to be increasingly supported by other similar charitable community support or simply unmet.

The evidence all points to headline trends in emergency food provision that reflect a high level of hunger and hardship in our communities, which show no signs of meaningful change. It is also increasingly clear from speaking with food banks in the Trussell community that it is impossible for food banks to have the capacity and resources to turn this tide. Without others playing their part, particularly government at all levels, we are placing an unrealistic and increasingly overwhelming burden on volunteer-led community provision like food banks.

**Table 1 Number of parcels for adults, children, and total distributed, UK: 2019/20-2024/25**

	FY 2024/25			Percentage change from FY 2019/20			Percentage change from FY 2023/24		
	Adults	Children	Total	Adults	Children	Total	Adults	Children	Total
United Kingdom	1,860,909	1,024,177	2,885,086	57%	41%	51%	-6%	-11%	-8%
England	1,541,71	855,142	2,396,853	68%	49%	61%	-6%	-10%	-7%
Scotland	162,424	77,079	239,503	3%	-5%	0%	-9%	-11%	-10%
Wales	111,515	60,158	171,673	32%	16%	26%	-6%	-13%	-9%
Northern Ireland	45,259	31,798	77,057	73%	68%	71%	-13%	-18%	-15%

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

**Figure 1 Number of emergency food parcels distributed, Northern Ireland: 2014/15-2024/25<sup>5</sup>**

Source: Trussell administrative data.

## Food banks in Northern Ireland are witnessing a deepening and more prolonged level of severe hardship

There has been a considerable amount of people who have newly faced hunger and hardship in 2024/25, with 7,525 households<sup>6</sup> forced to turn to a food bank for the first time this year. These households included 18,880 people (11,315 adults and 7,565 children). This is a 21% decrease compared to the same period last year (2023/24). The decrease seen this year suggests that provision over the last year in Northern Ireland 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.

In line with this, food banks have told us that they are now supporting people who are experiencing a deepening and more prolonged level of hardship. They are seeing people who are stuck in a cycle of financial difficulty, living in increasingly challenging situations, which are putting immense pressure

<sup>5</sup> The number of food bank centres has increased over this ten-year period. While increased provision is associated with some increase in food parcel take-up, this is relatively small in proportional terms. Increased provision of food banks results in increased uptake primarily because of the underlying unmet need in an area. See Bramley, G, et al. (2021), *State of Hunger: Building the evidence on poverty, destitution, and food insecurity in the UK*, Trussell and Heriot-Watt University, <https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/wp-assets/State-of-Hunger-2021-Report-Final.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Trussell have previously used the word 'family' to define this measure. Households include individuals living alone, single parents, or multi-generational households. Households also include people that are homeless or with no fixed address.

on people's mental health. This reflects wider trends, which show a long-term increase in people living in very deep poverty, with incomes far below the standard poverty line.<sup>7</sup>



**What we're seeing is that situations are more critical now than ever. People are living in constant poverty. People are staying with us longer because they have no other option.**



### **Food bank in the Trussell Community in Northern Ireland**

In line with previous years, almost four in ten (37%) people referred to food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland needed to use a food bank more than once this year. Almost a quarter (24%) used the food bank two-three times, and over one in ten (11%) four-nine times. A small, but notable, minority of people (2%) made over 10 visits to the food bank to access emergency food. Notably, we have also seen a small, but statistically significant, increase in the average number of visits over the last five years – from 2.2 visits in 2019/20 to 2.6 visits in 2024/25 in the UK. This trend is also seen in repeat visits to food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland. This further indicates that there are more people for whom support from a food bank is not a one-off emergency at a point of crisis, but a means of managing a more entrenched level of need.

## **Trends vary widely, including across Northern Ireland**

As Table 1 shows, there have been decreases across the UK from the previous year in the number of parcels distributed, with Northern Ireland seeing the biggest decrease (-15%), followed by Scotland (-10%), Wales (-9%), and England (-7%). The decrease in number of parcels distributed for children in Northern Ireland (-18%) is greater than the overall change across the UK (-11%).

The picture of provision by food banks across Northern Ireland Assembly constituencies is mixed. Despite an overall decrease in the number of parcels distributed in Northern Ireland in the last year, West Tyrone and Newry and Armagh recorded an increase. Belfast North, South Antrim, Upper Bann and Foyle saw similar levels to last year or a very slight decrease (Table 2).

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.<sup>8</sup> The number of parcels provided in 2024-25 was more than double in Belfast East, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, Foyle, North Down and South Antrim.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025), *UK Poverty 2025*, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-2025-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk>

<sup>8</sup> There were no food bank centres operating in South Down during this period.



As discussed above, the differences in parcel numbers does not necessarily reflect higher or lower levels of need in those areas. It may be that the need is being picked up by different food aid providers in the area, or changes to services in some areas have made it harder for people to be referred to food banks in the Trussell community.

**Table 2 Number of parcels for adults, children, and total distributed – Northern Ireland Assembly constituency breakdown: 2024/25, compared to 2019/20 and 2023/24**

	2024/25			Percentage change from 2019/20			Percentage change from 2023/24		
	Adult	Children	Total	Adult	Children	Total	Adults	Children	Total
Belfast East	2,333	1,628	3,961	172%	111%	143%	-18%	-30%	-24%
Belfast North	3,962	2,667	6,629	108%	77%	94%	3%	-5%	0%
Belfast South	4,800	2,597	7,397	31%	0%	18%	-4%	-18%	-9%
Belfast West	2,419	1,640	4,059	36%	2%	20%	-34%	-43%	-38%
East Antrim	2,206	1,499	3,705	43%	50%	46%	-19%	-25%	-22%
East Londonderry	1,701	833	2,534	55%	8%	36%	-32%	-28%	-30%
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	5,486	4,146	9,632	350%	380%	363%	-10%	-19%	-14%
Foyle	4,714	3,900	8,614	92%	112%	100%	-6%	2%	-3%
Lagan Valley	1,626	1,004	2,630	20%	0%	12%	-28%	-38%	-32%
Mid Ulster	518	307	825	34%	19%	28%	-27%	-36%	-30%
Newry and Armagh	1,003	624	1,627	69%	23%	48%	13%	-2%	7%
North Antrim	3,450	2,083	5,533	52%	53%	52%	-27%	-34%	-30%
North Down	1,404	1,165	2,569	169%	282%	211%	-19%	-23%	-21%
South Antrim	4,822	3,717	8,539	110%	141%	122%	3%	-8%	-2%
Strangford	1,452	1,146	2,598	1%	2%	2%	-18%	-11%	-15%
Upper Bann	3,001	2,412	5,413	23%	44%	32%	-3%	-1%	-2%
West Tyrone	362	430	792	3%	88%	36%	-4%	90%	31%

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

## Some groups are particularly at risk of needing support from food banks

### Children continue to be disproportionately supported by food banks

“

There's some very harrowing stories on how children are living and how they're not living...one story...where there was no beds, no white goods, no nothing.

”

#### Food bank in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland

While there has been a reduction (-18%) in the number of parcels for children in Northern Ireland in the last year, the distribution of support provided by food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland continues to be weighted towards children.

Comparing the distribution of parcels to the distribution of people by age in Northern Ireland (Figure 2) we see a notable difference for children aged 0-16. The proportion of parcels distributed to children aged 0-16 (41%) is almost double their population share (22%).<sup>9</sup> At the other end of the scale, just under 3% of parcels were for people aged 65 and over, despite them making up 18% of the population in Northern Ireland.

“

If they're not able to go on the trip or they don't have what other children have, or maybe like, their uniform needs [to be] replaced? And you aren't really in a position to do that, so. It can cause tension between your relationship with your child and stuff at home, and then that child's going into school and then probably feels like under the microscope

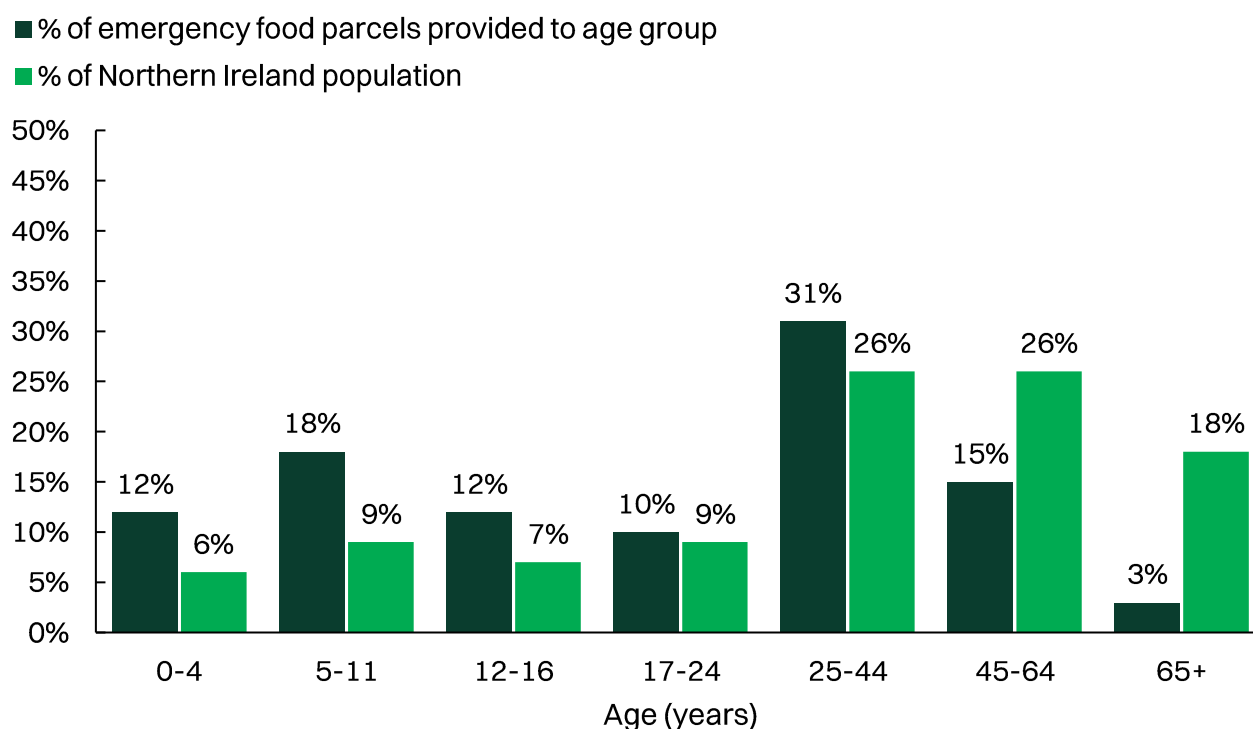
”

Female, 30s, Northern Ireland, has children. Participant in 'The Cost of Hunger and Hardship'.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> ONS, (2024), *Estimates of the population for UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland*, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesscotlandandnorthernireland>

<sup>10</sup> Weekes, T, et al, (2025), *The Cost of Hunger and Hardship*, Trussell, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/cost-of-hunger-and-hardship-final-report>

**Figure 2 Percentage of emergency food parcels distributed for different age categories compared to population distribution, Northern Ireland: 2024/25**

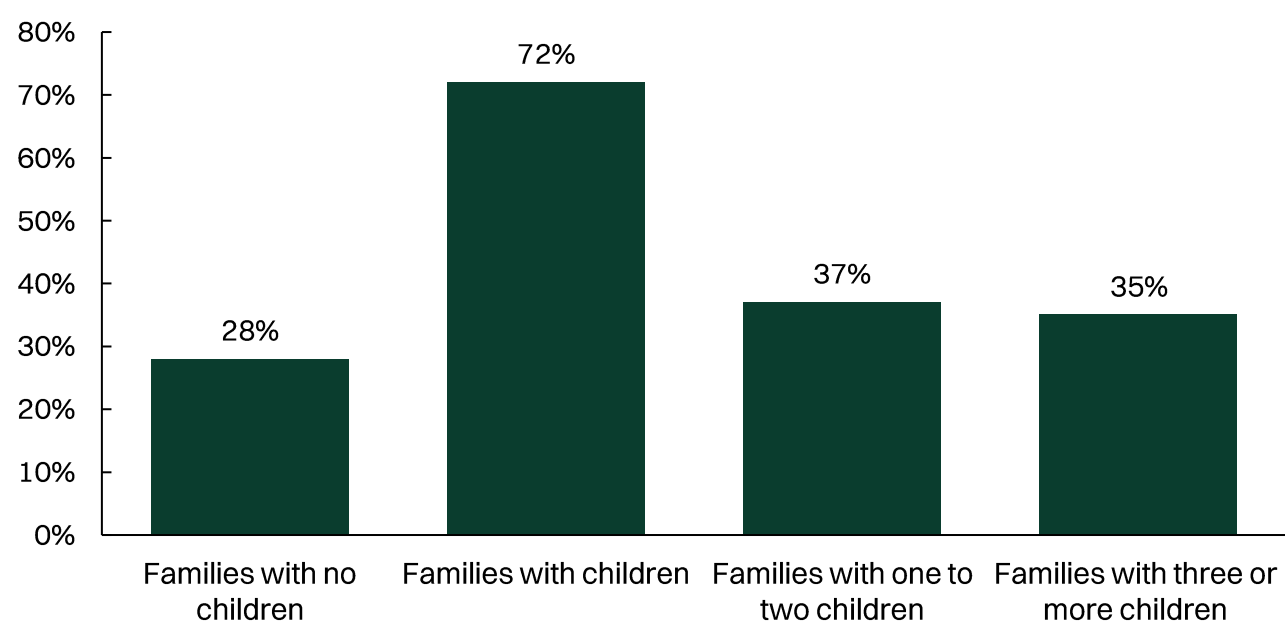


Source: Trussell administrative data and Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) estimates of the population for Northern Ireland. Data may not total 100% due to rounding.

As reported on in our Mid-Year Statistics, we have seen a slight change in the long-term pattern in provision for children. Unlike previous years, growth in parcels for children no longer outstrips or matches the growth in parcels for adults. The latest five-year trend (2019/20–2024/25), shows a 73% increase for adults and a 67% increase for children in parcels provided. It is too early to tell if this is a longer-term shift towards adults driving more of the growth in emergency food parcels provided.

When taking a whole household view, the majority (72%) of support provided by food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland is for families with children (Figure 3). A significant minority (35%) of parcels were provided in 2024–25 to families with three or more children.

**Figure 3 Percentage of emergency food parcels distributed by family type, Northern Ireland: 2024/2025**



Source: Trussell administrative data.

## Food bank provision for pensioners is still rising

While it is from a low base, and they are still significantly under-represented (see Figure 2) there is a large increase in emergency food provided for pension age adults by food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland. In 2024-25, close to 1,900 parcels (1,878) were distributed for someone aged 65 and over. This is nearly double the number provided in 2019/20 when 983 parcels were distributed.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 3 Percentage increase in the number of parcels by age group, Northern Ireland: 2019/20 – 2024/25**

Age	Percentage increase from 2019/20
0-4	47%
5-11	53%
12-16	84%
17-24	63%
25-64	63%
65+	91%

Source: Trussell administrative data.

<sup>11</sup> Age ranges differ to the previous figure as Trussell updated 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.

This long-term trend is also to some extent reflected when looking at parcels by household type. As Table 4 shows, while it is from a low base, the number of parcels for families with at least one person aged 65 and over living in the household has increased notably more than households without someone of pension age since 2019 (69% vs 59%).

**Table 4 Number of parcels distributed by household type, Northern Ireland: 2024/25, compared with 2019/20 and 2023/24**

Household type	Number of parcels, 2024/25	Percentage change from 2019/20	Percentage change from 2023/24
Families with children	55,771	68%	-17%
Families without children	21,286	79%	-9%
Families with one to two children	28,795	72%	-14%
Families with three or more children	26,976	63%	-20%
Families with someone aged 65 or over	3,074	69%	-30%
Families without someone aged 65 or over	68,462	59%	-11%

Source: Trussell administrative data.

## People need support from a food bank because their income is insufficient to meet the cost of essentials

Referral data from food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland continues to support wider evidence that people need to use a food bank because their incomes are too low and insufficient to cover the cost of essentials and/or is driving people into unmanageable situations (65% of referrals). From looking at the specific reasons selected, concerns around the increasing cost of essentials is particularly prevalent. This is often coupled with issues with benefits such as long waits, delays or sanctions which affect a significant minority of referrals to food banks (14%).

**Table 5 Reasons for referral for people supported by food banks, Northern Ireland: 2024/25**

Reason for referral	% of referrals with reason selected
Income or debt	65%
Health	22%
Issue with benefits	14%
Immigration status	10%
Insecure housing	6%
Change in work hours or unemployment	6%
Change in personal circumstances	6%
Domestic abuse	2%

Source: Trussell administrative data. Data entry is multiple choice – referral partners could select up to four responses. Data has been recoded to combine categories.

Wider Trussell research has consistently shown that inadequate and insecure incomes are the primary driver of food bank need. People referred to food banks have usually exhausted all possible finances before a food bank referral, don't have enough money to live on and are regularly unable to afford essential items such as food and heating. Most people referred to food banks in the Trussell community are in receipt of some form of income from social security, with the design and delivery of the social security system being a major contributor to people being unable to afford essentials.<sup>12</sup> This is reflected in the sources of income for people referred to the Trussell community (Table 6). The vast majority (77%) of people referred to food banks in Northern Ireland in 2024/25 report their sole source of income is social security, with a further 8% having earned income as well as income from social security.



**Universal Credit, that's always been a struggle, that 6-7 week gap is horrendous. It's absolutely a brutal process that people have to go through...it's what it's doing to them as their self-esteem, their mental health. It's just pulling people down**



### **Food bank in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland**

Paid work is also not always a solution in reducing the risk of needing a food bank. This year, over one in ten (12%) of people referred to food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland were earning. Low pay and insecure jobs can leave people with insufficient income to afford the essentials. Households who reported that they were receiving earned income and benefits, or solely

<sup>12</sup> Weekes, T, et al, (2023), *Hunger in the UK*, Trussell, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/publications/hunger-in-the-uk>

earned income, were also more likely to be referred due to a change in their work hours or unemployment than the overall average (Table 7).

While these figures are broadly the same as the previous year, some food banks have told us that they are seeing more working people struggling to get by, with some adjusting their operating hours to allow working people to access emergency food.

“

We've started to open at night time to meet that demand because people can't afford to take time off work

”

Food bank in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland

Table 6: Source of income for people referred to food banks, Northern Ireland: 2024/25

Source of income	% of referrals
Benefits, not earning	77%
Earnings and benefits	8%
Earning, no benefits	4%
No income or insufficient access to it	12%

Source: Trussell administrative data. Data may not total 100% due to rounding.

## Health is a notable trigger for referrals to food banks

Beyond income, problems with health are reported as a reason for referral in over one in five (22%) referrals to food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland (Table 7). Illness and disability drive up costs for households and a lack of healthcare, appropriate employment support, and accessible jobs can make it difficult to find or sustain suitable work. Our recent research found that severe hardship affects people’s mental and physical health, cutting people off from the things that make life enjoyable, with financial situations often exacerbating, or contributing to, the development of mental and physical health problems.<sup>13</sup>

Households who report that they have no income or limited access to it have distinct reasons for referral. The most common of these is issues with their immigration status (58%), which is far higher than average (10%). In fact, it is far higher than the UK average (38% of referrals for this group), likely explaining why the rate of immigration status-related referrals in Northern Ireland (10%) is twice the UK rate (5%). The majority of people moving into the UK to join family, work or study, have ‘no recourse to public funds’ (NRPF), meaning they are unable to access many mainstream benefits and are at high risk of experiencing severe hardship.<sup>14</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation report that since

<sup>13</sup> Weekes, T, et al, (2025), *The Cost of Hunger and Hardship*, Trussell, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/cost-of-hunger-and-hardship-final-report>

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023), *Protection for everyone in our communities*, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/neighbourhoods-and-communities/protection-for-everyone-in-our-communities>

2019, there has been a 92% increase in the number of migrant households experiencing destitution, with long waits for an asylum decision, lack of support once people are granted refugee status, and a lack of access to both cash and in-kind forms of support playing a key part in driving this increase.<sup>15</sup>

**Table 7: Reason for referral amongst households by income sources, Northern Ireland: 2024/25**

Reason for referral	Benefits, not earning	Benefits, earning	No benefits, earning	No income, or insufficient access to it	Total % of referrals with reason selected
Income or debt	67%	83%	76%	32%	65%
Health	25%	21%	14%	13%	22%
Issue with benefits	14%	12%	11%	16%	14%
Immigration status	3%	<1%	10%	58%	10%
Insecure housing	6%	3%	4%	6%	6%
Change in work hours or unemployment	5%	16%	20%	8%	6%
Change in personal circumstances	6%	8%	10%	4%	6%
Domestic abuse	2%	2%	2%	1%	2%

Source: Trussell administrative data. Data entry was multiple choice – referral partners could select up to four responses. Data has been recoded to combine categories.

## Food banks remain deeply concerned about the future

“

There's so many rewarding moments and times with people when they do see a light at the end of the tunnel. So yeah...there's a lot of positives with the work that we do.

But it is important to relate back to you the stark reality of the harshness that people are living through.

”

### Food bank in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland

Food bank staff and volunteers in Northern Ireland continue to provide a critical service in their communities. They have repeatedly adapted their operational practices to meet a 71% increase in need for their support in the last five years.

Food banks provide a lifeline for so many people facing hardship, but they shouldn't have to exist in a just and compassionate society. They also weren't set up to respond to this level of need. Food banks have told us that they are struggling to keep up with need in their communities. Reduced donations

<sup>15</sup> Fitzpatrick, S, et al. (2023), *Destitution in the UK 2023*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Heriot Watt University, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/deep-poverty-and-destitution/destitution-in-the-uk-2023>



mean many food banks are having to purchase food themselves and therefore must also manage high food prices (following recent high inflation) within their limited budgets.

Despite food banks' concerted work to increase access to wider advice and support, particularly on money matters, food banks continue to report that people across their communities do not have enough to afford the essentials. They are seeing people living in persistent poverty, who continue to need support from a food bank because incomes, even when maximised, are insufficient to match the cost of living.

Food banks remain deeply concerned about the future. The proposed reforms to sickness and disability benefits set out in the UK government's Spring Statement are a key source for concern. These concerns are borne out when data shows the already disproportionate risk of severe hardship facing disabled families. 114,000 people who live in disabled families in Northern Ireland now face severe hardship, with people living in disabled families in Northern Ireland far more likely to experience severe hardship than people in a non-disabled family (15% vs 8%).<sup>16</sup> Food banks in Northern Ireland are particularly worried about the long-term impact of these cuts and the risk of deepening existing scars on people's health, given the relationship between conflict in Northern Ireland, inter-generational trauma, and mental health problems.

Food banks are already supporting people whose only option is to cut spending on essential items, who have been making impossible decisions between necessities for some time. They are concerned about the long-lasting impact that going without essentials is having on people in their community, and that more people will be pushed into requiring emergency food in the face of the UK government's plans to cut disability benefits.

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**We're not on a cliff edge today, but I think we're just really nervous about what is coming up because the need is only getting greater across the community**

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### **Food bank in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland**

Food banks continue to support people in their communities facing hunger and hardship with resilience, strength and compassion. However, food banks are neither the right nor sustainable response to people going without essentials because their incomes are too low. The impact of severe hardship is harming people's chances of finding or keeping work; damaging people's health, education, and housing security; and worsening people's future employment and wages strains our public services and holds back our economy. It is only through building a society where everyone can afford the essentials that we can unlock the potential in our communities and remove the need for emergency food. We know what's needed to end the need for food banks, and we know that it is achievable if we make the right decisions.

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<sup>16</sup> Weekes, T, et al (2024), *The cost of hunger and hardship in Northern Ireland*, [https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/Cost%20of%20Hunger%20and%20Hardship\\_Northern%20Ireland.pdf](https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/Cost%20of%20Hunger%20and%20Hardship_Northern%20Ireland.pdf)

# We have an opportunity to turn the tide on hunger and hardship

Hunger is not a food problem, it is an income problem. People need to turn not food banks because they don't have enough money for essentials. Some people are between jobs, have health conditions, or look 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 is a further barrier preventing too many people from accessing opportunities to increase their income.

Experiencing hunger and hardship has a huge impact on people's everyday lives and is linked to worse health, poorer living conditions and increased stress of consistently struggling financially. It also has a significant impact on public finances and the public purse, with over 210,000 people facing hunger and hardship, including 62,000 children, costing Northern Irish public services £160 million relating to health costs and £80 million in housing annually.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the small decrease of the last year, this was relative to record levels and the latest parcel figures show appalling levels of hunger and hardship in communities persist across Northern Ireland. This can and must change.

In order to end hunger and hardship in Northern Ireland, we all have a role to play. While the UK government needs to take immediate action in stopping planned cuts to disability benefits and updating Universal Credit with steps towards an Essentials Guarantee, there is still much the Northern Ireland Executive can do to deliver a tangible reduction in food bank need:

1. **Prioritise implementing an Anti-Poverty Strategy:** This should identify cross-departmental short, medium and long-term objectives for tackling poverty. To be successful, the strategy must include corresponding inclusion strategies based on a lifecycle approach, measurable outcomes and targets that are accompanied by a ring-fenced multi-year budget.
2. **Endorse an Essentials Guarantee:** The NI Executive should formally call on the UK government to deliver an [Essentials Guarantee in our social security system](#).
3. **Fully mitigating against the five-week wait for a first Universal Credit payment:** In the short term, ensure that the newly renamed New Claims Grant is offered to every eligible Universal Credit claimant instead of the advance payment (loan). Long-term work is required to look at sustainable solutions through a dedicated working group that includes input from people with lived experience.
4. **Protect children in Northern Ireland from the impact of the two-child limit.** At the time of publication, it is unclear whether the UK government will address the two-child limit in its forthcoming child poverty strategy. Therefore, until the UK government acts, the NI Executive

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<sup>17</sup> Weekes, T, et al (2025)

must also mitigate against the two-child limit by introducing a Welfare Supplementary Payment called a 'Better Start for Larger Families Payment' while continuing to call on the UK government to scrap the two-child limit.<sup>18</sup>

5. **Provide support to individuals and families affected by the social housing crisis.** Soaring social housing waiting lists exceeding 47,000 forces more people into private rentals where rent has been rising at an unprecedented level in Northern Ireland, almost twice as fast as elsewhere in the UK. People in private rented accommodation have limited support; Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) are only temporary, discretionary and often insufficient to cover the shortfall between Local Housing Rates (LHR) and actual rents. Trussell is calling for the establishment of a Financial Inclusion Service to provide advice and resources to people affected by LHR shortfalls.

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<sup>18</sup> NIAPN (2024) *Data on impact of 2-child limit* <https://niapn.org/resources/data-on-impact-of-2-child-limit/>

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