



**Why do people going
without essentials not
access charitable
food provision?**



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1.

Background and methodology



Background

This work explores why a significant proportion of people who are food insecure or going without essentials are not accessing charitable food provision, including the barriers to accessing support, perceptions about food bank use, and what trade-offs people are making between essential items.

- We have a good evidence base around people who are accessing food banks in the Trussell community, but this is only a small part of the picture of food insecurity. Exploring the experiences of people who aren't accessing charitable food provision helps us understand the full scope of hunger in the UK.
- People usually turn to charitable food provision as a last resort. This research highlights the hidden, and often unacceptable, coping strategies people are using to get by on insufficient income.
- The research builds understanding of the accessibility and inclusivity of charitable food provision, to understand if there are any groups of people who may be currently being excluded from this support.

Methodology

Quantitative research

A nationally representative online survey of 4,427 adults across the UK, including 683 people who are food insecure or going without essentials and not accessing charitable food provision.

Qualitative research

Interviews with 35 adults across the UK who are food insecure or going without essentials and not accessing charitable food provision. This included a mix of demographic characteristics across age, gender, disability, sexuality, ethnicity, employment status, caring responsibilities, household structures and individuals in receipt of social security.

Research was carried out by Ipsos between May and October 2024. We were interested in the experiences of people who:

1. Had experienced food insecurity in the past 12 months and/or had gone without at least two essentials in the past month.
2. Had not accessed any form of charitable food provision in the past 12 months.

Defining people who are food insecure or going without essentials

Food insecurity: Households are considered food insecure if they experience low or very low food security, as measured by the Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM). Food insecurity means going without or cutting back on quality or quantity of food because people can't afford it.

Going without essentials: Someone is considered destitute and going without essentials when they have lacked two or more out of six essentials over the past month, because they cannot afford them and/or their income is so extremely low that they are unable to purchase these essentials themselves. The essentials are: shelter, food, heating, lighting, clothing and footwear, and basic toiletries. (1)

Charitable food provision: Use of charitable food provision is captured by questions asking whether people have received food in any of the following forms: Food parcels from a food bank or other charitable food provider; hot or cold meals from an organisation like a soup kitchen; low-cost food from models such as food pantries or social supermarkets.

For simplicity, we refer to this group as **people going without essentials**.

2.

People who are
going without
essentials but not
accessing charitable
food provision



4.5 million households, including 14.1 million people, were food insecure in the UK in 2024.

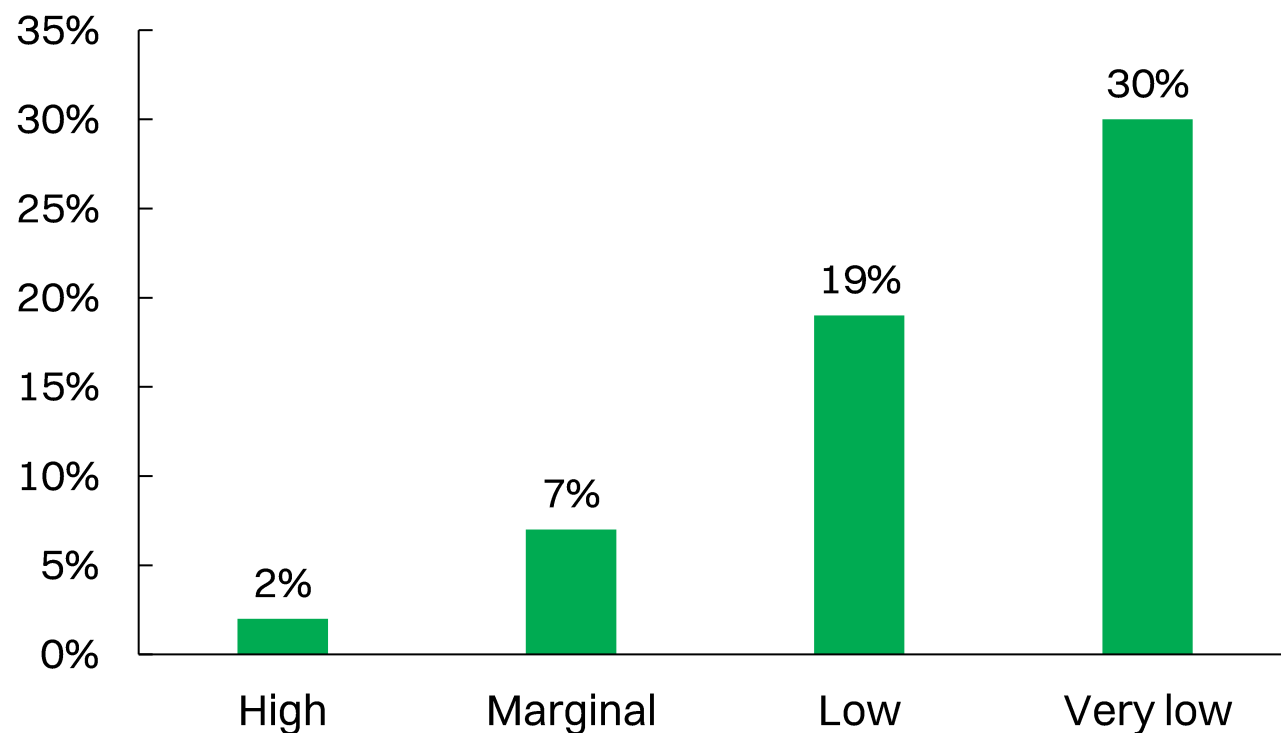
Of these, 2.7 million households - representing 6 in 10 (61%) food insecure households - had not used any form of charitable food provision in the previous year.

Deeper hardship drives access to charitable food provision, but not for everyone

The likelihood of turning to charitable food **provision increases as household food security decreases**, reflecting how hardship drives people to access charitable food provision.

However, there are still large numbers of people across people with low or very low food security who are not accessing any charitable food provision.

Proportion of people who had accessed charitable food provision by food security level



Source: Hunger in the UK Wave 2 general population survey.

Certain groups of people going without essentials are **less** likely to have accessed charitable food provision

These groups may have better access to coping mechanisms or other support, have lower inescapable costs, or be less likely to experience intersecting challenges that make the impacts of hunger more challenging.

People aged 55 and over

83% of people aged 55+ had **not** used charitable food provision compared to 51% of people aged 18-34.

People who are not LGBTQIA+

72% of people who are **not** LGBTQIA+ had **not** accessed charitable food provision, compared to 57% of people who are in the LGBTQIA+ community.

People from white ethnicity

People from a white ethnicity were more likely to have **not** accessed any charitable food provision than people from racialised communities (72% vs 50%).

People who do not have a caring responsibility

73% of people that **don't** have a caring responsibility had **not** accessed charitable food provision, compared to 60% of people that are carers.

People without a disability

73% of people **without** a disability had **not** used charitable food provision, compared to 66% of disabled people. A similar story can be seen for households where there is a disabled person.

People without children

72% of people **without** a child aged 0-16 in the household had **not** accessed charitable food provision, compared to 63% that did have a child in the household.

Some factors **protect people** from needing charitable food provision

People with savings are less likely to use food provision when going without essentials

74% of people who had savings had **not** accessed charitable food provision, compared to 61% of people that had no savings.

However, one in five (19%) people that have savings **had** accessed charitable food provision, indicating that this is not always a protective factor.

People who are better socially connected are less likely to use food provision when going without essentials

72% of people with at least monthly social contact had **not** accessed charitable food provision, compared to 44% of people who had social contact less than once a month.

Some factors may **exacerbate** need for charitable food provision

People who aren't receiving income through social security are more likely to use food provision when going without essentials

56% of people receiving any means tested social security payment had **not** used charitable food provision, compared to 74% of people not receiving means tested social security.

People that had experienced challenging life changes were more likely to access food provision when going without essentials

64% of people that had experienced any challenging change in the past 12 months had **not** accessed charitable food provision, compared to 78% of people that had not experienced any challenging life experiences.

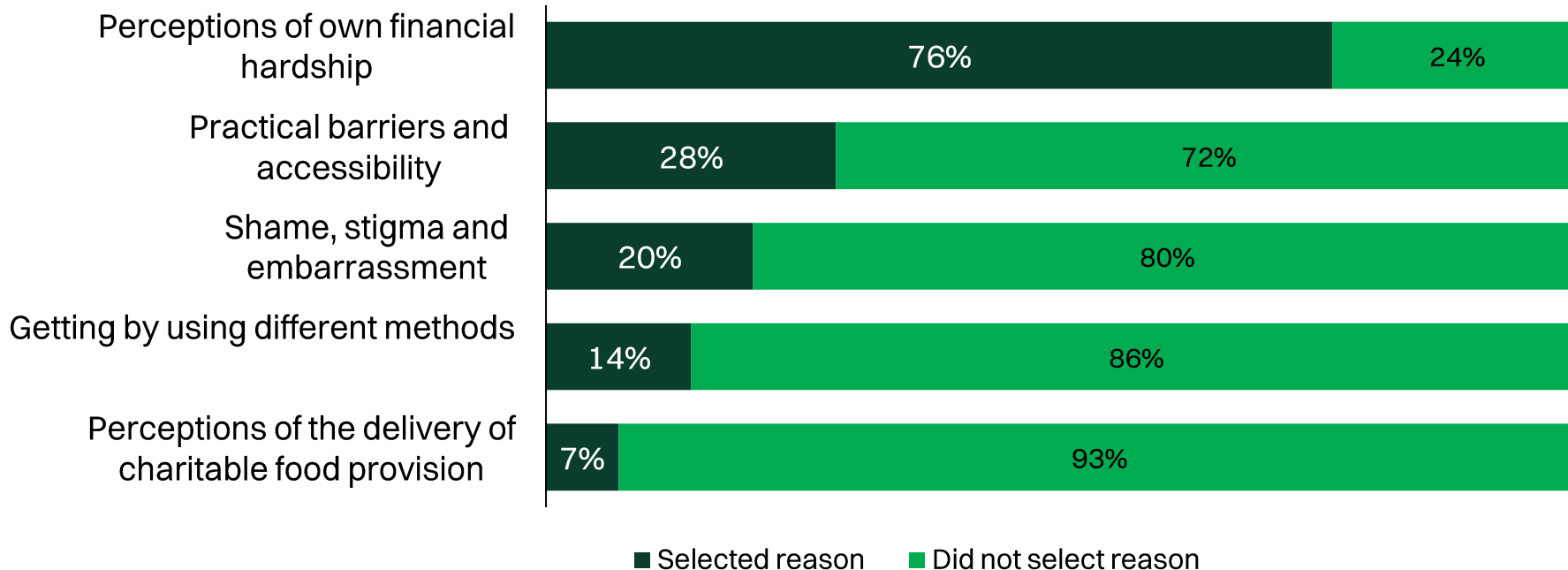
This includes a range of experiences such as bereavement and relationship breakdown.

3.

Why are people who are going without essentials not accessing charitable food provision?



People's perception of their own hardship is the main reason why they have not used charitable food provision when going without essentials



The main reason why people going without essentials had not accessed accessing charitable food provision related to **perceptions of their own financial hardship**, including feeling like they weren't facing financial hardship. This was followed by people **facing practical barriers** around accessing charitable food provision. In the following slides we explore these reasons in more detail.

4.

Perceptions of own financial hardship



76%

had not accessed
charitable food
provision due to
perceptions of their
own financial
hardship

People who are going without essentials reported not accessing charitable food provision because they think:

They are not facing financial hardship

55%

They did not think
they needed it

32%

Other people
need it more

23%

Please note: Percentages show the percentage of people going without essentials who hadn't accessed charitable food support, broken down by individual reasons (left) which is grouped into an overall theme (right). These do not sum to 76% as people taking part could select multiple categories.

People who are going without essentials do not think they are facing financial hardship

Despite going without food and other essentials, many people described feeling that their situation **did not warrant using charitable food provision**.

People sometimes referred to the, often extreme, **measures they were taking to manage on limited resources**, that meant they felt they were getting by.

People often described feeling that **others are worse off than them**. There was a strong moral sense of not wanting to access charitable food provision in case this takes support and resources away from people who may be facing more severe hardship.

Some people linked financial factors like being **employed and receiving support through social security** to not needing as much help as others.

“

I would probably class myself as someone that wouldn't or shouldn't access it. I know it's there for everybody, but I feel like there would probably be a lot of people that are in a lot worse position than me, like maybe single parents or people that have become recently unemployed.

”

Woman, aged 31-54, Wales

Understanding perceptions of hardship

There are some indicators that this group of people **generally do have better access to financial buffers and protective factors** than people that have accessed charitable food provision, although this is not always the case.

Compared to people that **had** used charitable food provision (and were going without essentials), people who **hadn't accessed charitable food provision when going without essentials** because of their **perceptions of their financial hardship** were less likely to:

Have no savings

30% vs 49%

Have three or more debts

28% vs 51%

Be struggling with bills

34% vs 64%

Have lower weekly income*

£470 vs £281

The impact of inescapable costs

As well as having better access to financial buffers, people who hadn't accessed charitable food provision due to perceptions of their own financial hardship were also less likely to face **inescapable costs relating to disability, care, and caring**.

This means that the income that they do have **is likely to stretch further**, making it less likely for them to perceive themselves as being in financial hardship or in need of support from charitable food provision.

People that **had** accessed charitable food provision were more likely than people who hadn't accessed charitable food provision due to perceptions of their own financial hardship to:

Be disabled

51% vs 37%

Have caring responsibilities

38% vs 23%

Have children at home

49% vs 33%

People who feel they aren't in hardship are facing unacceptable conditions

Whilst these factors shed some light on why people who are going without essentials may not think they are in financial hardship, **it is still clear that these people are frequently facing unacceptable experiences.**

When compared to the general population, this group of people are **more likely to have no savings** (30% vs 15%), have **three or more debts** (28% vs 16%) and have **lower average weekly income*** (£470 vs £604).

Everyone we spoke to was **experiencing food insecurity** and/or **were going without at least two essentials**, such as clothing, toiletries, heating or electricity. Many people were facing **even deeper levels of hardship than this**. Work for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation with the general population highlights that going without two or more of these essentials is **widely recognised as unacceptable**. (2)

25%

of people who are saying they aren't facing hardship are **going without three or more essential items**

22%

of people who are saying they aren't facing hardship are experiencing **very low food insecurity**

The normalisation of severe hardship

The scale of people who are going without essentials who don't consider themselves to be facing financial hardship is a worrying sign that **unacceptable forms of hardship are becoming normalised** across the UK.

Wider evidence shows that living on a low income and the challenges that come with that experience, **such as skipping meals and feeling hungry, are becoming normalised**, and people can employ mechanisms to cognitively distance themselves from identifying with poverty. (3)

When presented with a comparable case study, individuals often acknowledged the severity of hardship and the need for charitable food support. This shows a **disconnect between people's views of their own experiences and a more objective view** on what is an acceptable standard of living.

“

I still feel I'm far better off than a lot of people. And, I would feel very uncomfortable taking food away from someone like that when there are others who desperately need it. I don't eat very much. I can survive on what I have even though it's not very much.

”

Woman, aged 55+, Wales

5.

Practical barriers and accessibility



28%

**had not accessed
charitable food
provision due to
practical barriers and
accessibility**

People who are going without essentials reported not accessing charitable food provision because they:

Don't know how to access it or where it is

13%

Think they are not eligible

13%

4% Don't have enough time or energy

3% There is no accessible/affordable transport

3% The services aren't available locally

3% Have health problems

2% Have dietary or cultural restrictions

1% Have mental health problems

Please note: Percentages show the percentage of people going without essentials who hadn't accessed charitable food support, broken down by individual reasons (left) which is grouped into an overall theme (right). These do not sum to 28% as people taking part could select multiple categories.

Awareness of charitable food provision and how to access it varied

Most people were aware of charitable food provision and food banks, but there was **limited practical knowledge** of how to access support and what the process involves.

Some people assumed charitable food provision is **only for people in certain circumstances**, for example people who are unemployed, homeless or receiving social security, and so did not think they were eligible (see Appendix 1 for more information on this).

Whilst some felt like a referral process is needed, others felt **uncomfortable about feeling like they had to prove they needed support** and sharing their situation with multiple organisations.

However, there were some that **felt confident that they could get advice or information** on how to access a food bank if they needed it.

“

**I wouldn't even know where to start if I did
need access to it.**

”

Woman, aged 18-30, England

Practical barriers prevented some people accessing charitable food provision

This included **getting to the food bank** and the **cost of transport, inaccessible opening hours** and **heavy bags**.

However, several people acknowledged that practicalities **wouldn't be a barrier**.

People who have **limited social contact*** were more likely to say they hadn't accessed charitable food provision when going without essentials due to practical barriers than people who have at least monthly social contact (47% vs 26%).

This reflects the role that **informal networks play in helping people get support**.

The **impact of caring was less pronounced** and mainly focussed on challenges for people caring for young children.

Overall people with caring responsibilities were **no more likely** to say they hadn't accessed charitable food provision due to practical barriers than people without these responsibilities.

The impact of disability on accessing charitable food provision

Disabled people going without essentials were **more likely** to say that they hadn't used charitable food provision because of practical barriers or accessibility than similar people who were not disabled (39% vs 22%).

People described additional challenges of physical disabilities or conditions including limited **people's ability to travel** or **carry heavy food home**.

Mental health conditions also made it difficult for people to **leave the house** or feel **motivated to access support**. Conditions such as anxiety were also linked to fears of stigma and judgement.

“

It's only 3 miles up the road, but it's almost £7. That's a lot of money just for one journey to get up and get back, whereas that £7 could get you quite a wee bit of food at Asda or Tesco.

”

Man, aged 31-54, Scotland

6.

Shame, stigma and embarrassment



20%

had not accessed
charitable food
provision due to
shame, stigma and
embarrassment

People who are going without essentials reported not accessing charitable food provision because:

They were embarrassed

17%

They were afraid of being
judged or stigmatised

12%

Shame, stigma and embarrassment

Several people described **shame and pride as a barrier accessing charitable food provision**.

People associated accessing charitable food provision with perceptions that they are **not managing their money** and feelings of **failure**.

For people with children, there was huge concern about being seen as **unable to provide** for their family.

The **stigma associated with charitable food provision**, and this being linked to wider portrayals of poverty, is well evidenced (4).

People who live in households where **no one is working** were **more likely** to not access charitable food provision when going without essentials due to shame, stigma and embarrassment than people in working households (27% vs 18%).

In addition, people that are receiving income through social security are **more likely to be embarrassed** to use services than people who are not (35% vs 14%).

This is perhaps a result of the **stigma and stereotypes** these groups of people are already subject to from society, media and within the social security system, as well as **internalised stigma**. (5)

Fear of judgement

Other people were afraid of being **judged or stigmatised by others** for using charitable food provision.

This was prominent in **close-knit communities** or areas where food banks are **more visible** e.g. near schools.

Some people linked concerns around being judged to the **referral process** and having to **divulge details of their financial situation to strangers**, and possibly to multiple organisations.

Several people felt that there was **no shame** in accessing support, and some people acknowledged that they would **put their pride** aside if they really needed to access charitable food provision, especially parents.

A small number of people expressed potentially stigmatising or negative views of people who access charitable food provision, again **indicating a tendency to avoid identifying as someone experiencing hardship or in need of help**.

Shame and stigma compounds with mental health and social isolation

One in three (35%) people that had a **mental health condition** said they hadn't accessed charitable food provision when they were going without essentials due to **shame, stigma and embarrassment**. This is **more than two times** the proportion of people that don't have a mental health condition (16%).

People described how mental health challenges **compound with feelings of shame and stigma**, leaving people put off from accessing support. This included **navigating the referral process** and fears of **judgement from others**.

Over a quarter (27%) of people who have limited social contact* said they hadn't accessed charitable food provision when they were going without essentials due to **shame, stigma and embarrassment**, compared to 19% of people who have at least monthly social contact.

This highlights the **protective effects** of social support and community in reducing feelings of shame and stigma. We explore further impacts of informal support in the following section.

“

They associate it with you don't have enough money to pay for your food. It's more of a pride thing... If I needed something, I would put myself in debt to go and get that instead of going somewhere where you'd probably get it for nothing.

”

Man, aged 31-54, Northern Ireland

7.

Getting by using
different means
and methods



14%

**had not accessed
charitable food
provision as they
were getting by using
different methods**

This included:



Cutting down on meals or other items



Buying reduced price food or using food-waste apps



Receiving support from family and friends

People cut back on food and essentials to get by on limited resources



Skipping meals or
eating smaller
portions



Eating less
nutritious food e.g.
dried/tinned food



Reducing heating
and electricity



Avoiding socialising
and leisure
activities



Not replacing
clothes and
essential toiletries



Buying reduced
price food



Extreme budgeting
e.g. visiting multiple
shops



Not paying bills,
using credit and
building debt



Cutting out travel by
car or public
transport



In one case,
someone stopped
taking medication

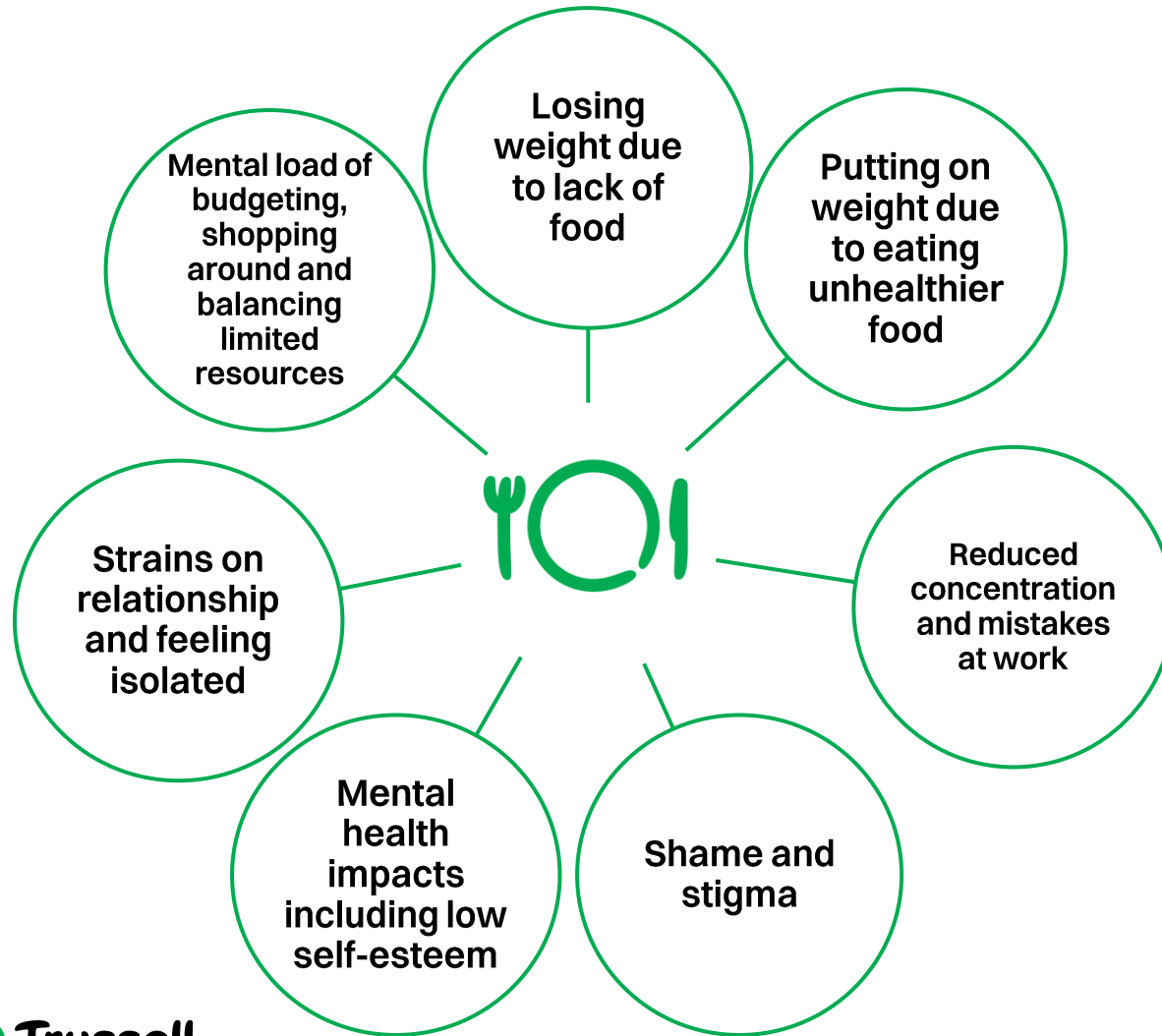
“

What we would have for dinner is maybe some toast, whereas before we would have a meal. We'd have some toast, maybe a cup of coffee, and then we would just go to bed early.

”

Man, aged 31-54, Scotland

Going without essentials comes at a cost



People described a range of **negative impacts** relating to going without food and other essentials.

This is in line with previous research from Trussell which demonstrates the significant and wide-reaching impacts that facing hunger and hardship has on individuals, including **eroding physical and mental health**, barriers to succeeding in **education and work**, and damage to **relationships and communities** (6).

“

My job is really physical, so I'm very active and I need that sort of food that would keep me fuller for longer. So, I find my concentration at work drops, tend to make mistakes in there as well because of it.

”

Man, aged 31-54, Northern Ireland

Informal support from family, friends and communities were a lifeline for many

Many people relied on informal support to help them to afford essentials.

Some people said this **directly removed the need** to access charitable food provision.

The support people received included:

- Financial support
- Food - including paying for shopping and providing meals
- Essential items such as school uniform and toiletries
- Childcare
- Budgeting
- Emotional support

People who going without essentials and not using charitable food aid because they are getting by using other methods, are **nearly twice as likely** to have had help with rent and bills from family or friends that they don't live with than people who had accessed charitable food provision **(19% vs 9%)**.

Informal support is not a sustainable solution to going without essentials

Some people expressed a **preference to receive support from friends and family** over using charitable food provision. This was often linked to not wanting to take resources away from others who didn't have this support.

For other people, receiving informal support was **more challenging**.

People described support from family and friends as **unsustainable** e.g. people who were relying on parents that were aging or retiring. Other people reflected that they **felt like a burden** on their loved ones.

Several people did not have access to any informal support at all.

It is often at the point that **informal support is exhausted** that people need to turn to charitable food aid as a last resort. **Half (51%)** of people referred to food banks had already relied on a loan from family or friends.

Whilst informal support is valuable, **it will not sustainably protect everyone** who is going without essentials.

Formal support for going without essentials was not being well utilised

Access to any **formal support to afford essentials** was more limited.

Some examples of formal support people described as helpful included **financial support** (e.g. Household Support Fund, Winter Fuel Payment, Cost of Living payments); **financial advice** including around debt and social security; **fruit and vegetable vouchers**; and schemes that provide **discounted rent** for social housing.

This is in line with our wider research finding that a third (34%) of people referred to food banks **had not accessed any formal support or advice** prior to a food bank referral, including support around mental health, debt, housing and employment.

Limited access to formal support services is leaving individuals **unsupported in the face of hardship**, with many resorting to **extreme measures** before seeking charitable aid as a last resort.

“

If we didn't have my mum, we would
probably have needed support years ago.

”

Woman, aged 18-30, England

8.

Perceptions of the delivery of charitable food provision



7%

**had not accessed
charitable food
provision due to
perceptions of the
delivery of charitable
food provision**

People who are going without essentials reported not accessing charitable food provision because:

**They did not want to engage with the
religious aspects of the service**

4%

**Did not trust the quality or
safety of the food**

3%

**It was in a place where
they didn't feel comfortable**

2%

Perceptions of delivery of charitable food provision

A less prominent reason that people who are going without essentials had not accessed charitable food provision was around the **perceptions of the delivery of charitable food provision**.

Some people held perceptions that charitable food provision would only offer **limited options or no choice**, and that food provided would be of **poor quality and low nutritional value**.

Some people expressed concerns that charitable food provision would **not cater to dietary requirements or allergies**, or people felt like it was unreasonable to express preferences when receiving free food.

There were few concerns about provision being offered in **religious spaces**. However, people who aren't religious were **more likely** to not have accessed charitable food provision due to perceptions of how charitable food provision is delivered than people who are Christian (11% vs 2%).

“

I am vegan by choice, but I do have other dietary requirements and restrictions due to my health. I don't know if a lot of the food available would be suitable for me, because how silly would I be walking into a food bank and being like, 'Everything needs to be gluten free.'

”

Woman, aged 31-54, Wales

9.

Conclusions



Removing barriers to support

People who are going without essentials spoke about factors that would reduce barriers to accessing charitable food provision when it is needed. Key themes that came through related to clear and visible information about eligibility and how to access a food bank, stigma, and discretion/confidentiality. Specific suggestions included:

- Clear and visible information about referrals, eligibility and voucher limits (e.g. online, through council website)
- Information about flexibility for dietary requirements
- Advertising charitable food provision in local area (e.g. through posters, notice boards)
- Triaging from government or local authority (e.g. DWP, Housing association)

- Sharing stories of people who use food support to dispel assumptions around who it is for, alleviate shame, stigma and stereotypes
- Creating ways to make food support more discrete and less visible to community, such as having referral process online
- Options to have food delivered
- Ensuring food banks are in accessible locations for communities that need them

What does this tell us about hunger in the UK?

1.

It is clear that charitable food provision is not an acceptable alternative to affording essentials.

Food banks are a lifeline for many, but a large number of people are going without essentials like food without receiving any support. Many of these people do not consider charitable food provision as appropriate support for them.

2.

Unacceptable experiences of severe hardship are being normalised.

People feel as though they must get by on their own, even if this means skipping food, heating, or cutting themselves off from their social networks. It is clear that the use of charitable food provision is just the tip of the iceberg of the wider problem of severe hardship across the UK.

3.

People are exhausting other forms of support or resources before turning to charitable food provision as a last resort.

By the time people reach food banks, they have often depleted personal savings and relied heavily on informal support networks such as family, friends, and community connections. This is not sustainable and will not protect people from hunger and hardship in the long term.

10.

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11.

Appendices



Appendix 1: Trussell referral process

Food banks in the Trussell community provide emergency food to people who are experiencing a short-term crisis. The Trussell model has been designed to avoid dependency on a food bank and to help people find solutions to the underlying cause of their crisis.

Food banks work on a voucher referral system to ensure that people experiencing hardship receive the most appropriate support from the donated food. The data collected on a voucher contributes to informing national policy asks and campaigning as we work towards the end of hunger in the UK.

The Trussell referral system has been designed to help ensure people are supported and helped out of financial hardship.

Referral agencies are best placed to assess a person's need for a food bank parcel. We recommend that referral agencies should be able to issue up to three food bank vouchers within a six-month period in the first instance to an individual or family without contacting the food bank.