



Emergency food parcel distribution in Northern Ireland

March 2026

Contents

2026: Key facts across Northern Ireland.....	3
Despite progress on food bank use, levels remain well above pre-pandemic period	6
What’s driving recent changes in parcel numbers?	10
Use of food banks remains extremely high with some people at higher risk of needing support....	21
Food bank use is expected to continue to decline, but more urgency is needed to make meaningful inroads on entrenched hardship	35
We have an opportunity to turn the tide on hunger and hardship.....	36

2026: 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 January 2025 - 31 December 2025 (inclusive). During this time, food parcels were distributed from 48 locations across the Northern Ireland, as part of the Trussell community.¹

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.² There are also many people who are food insecure who do not access support from any form of charitable food provision.³

- Cost-of-living pressures, driven by the rapid increase in the cost of essentials, have eased for some people over the past 18 months, with food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland distributing fewer parcels in 2025 than the peak seen in 2023. Wider data suggests there has been a corresponding fall in need for food banks, not just use. This decrease is largely explained by the easing of inflation and fewer people losing their jobs.
- Easing inflation hasn't stopped appalling levels of severe hardship across Northern Ireland. Despite these recent improvements, the number of emergency food parcels distributed in 2025 remained significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels (2019).
- The impact of policy change in driving the recent reduction in the number of emergency food parcels is likely to be limited.
 - There have been positive changes such as the introduction of the Fair Repayment rate in Universal Credit (limiting the impact of deductions for debt), and the agreement of funding for the Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme. The Department for Communities in Northern Ireland has also allocated funding for social supermarkets during this period which is likely to have meant food bank use was displaced to these services.

¹ Locations are counted if they have distributed parcels at any stage during the year. Some will have opened, and some will have closed during this period. There were 51 locations in the previous year.

² 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 charitable food providers including soup kitchens and social supermarkets.

³ Research with Ipsos found that nearly two thirds (60%) of people experiencing food insecurity in Northern Ireland said that they had not used any form of charitable food provision in the last year. Trussell, (2023), <https://www.trussell.org.uk/publications/hunger-in-the-uk>.

- But the net impact of these has been mitigated by other decisions such as the freeze to Local Housing Allowance rates from April 2025 by the UK government, the continued impact of the two-child limit over this period, and the impact of managed migration on Universal Credit.
- Other potential drivers have a mixed or low level impact in driving these recent decreases:
 - Successive years of incredibly high need for food banks has led to some facing significant operational difficulties. Capacity issues in the advice sector also mean some people may find it difficult to be referred to a food bank. Taken together these are reducing the amount of support food banks are able to provide.
 - Some food bank use will have been displaced to other charitable food provision which has grown in recent years. However, available evidence indicates this expansion in provision is unlikely to be making a significant contribution to tackling underlying need.
 - Food banks have contributed through providing access to further support and improving the support that people get before turning to a food bank. There is evidence to suggest advice services meaningfully improve the finances of people supported. However, current advice provision at food banks does not have the capacity to address financial hardship at scale.
- We must not be complacent about the change needed to ensure that we can end hunger in Northern Ireland. The pandemic and the cost of living crisis have left deep scars on living standards across Northern Ireland. With the bold action to scrap the two-child limit from April 2026 confirmed in the recent Spring Statement we expect further decreases in the use of food banks across Northern Ireland. However, we do not expect the use of food banks to fall below 2019 levels even with this change. It is likely that improvements in living standards will not happen for everyone or happen fast enough.
 - Food banks are supporting far more people than they did in 2019 and are increasingly supporting people experiencing sustained hardship – meaning they are needing support more often. Planned cuts to the health element of Universal Credit by the UK government from April 2026 mean that people who fall ill will be more likely to experience hardship.
 - Further action is also needed for people living alone and people who do not own their home. In particular, the continued freeze to the Local Housing Allowance will drive more renters into hardship, leaving many at risk of homelessness.
 - Pensioners still make up a small proportion of people facing food insecurity and turning to food banks. However, in recent years we have started to see far more pensioners supported by food banks than in previous years, a trend that needs to be reversed.
- The priorities for further action to end hunger in Northern Ireland include:

- taking action to ensure everyone in Northern Ireland receives the support through the social security system they are eligible for, particularly through investment in holistic advice, debt and social security support;
- developing a pathway to end the need for food banks in Northern Ireland;
- calling on the UK government to take steps towards delivering an essentials guarantee;
- and investing in housing and employment pathways which support key life transitions that put people at risk of hunger and hardship.

Despite progress on food bank use, levels remain well above pre-pandemic period

Food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland provided 68,000 emergency food parcels from 1 January 2025 to 31 December 2025. This was a decrease (-17%) compared to 2024 when 81,900 parcels were distributed. A larger decrease was seen compared to 2023 (-26%) - the Trussell community’s busiest year on record in Northern Ireland.

The level of emergency food provision seen across food banks in the Trussell community in 2025 remains well above pre-pandemic levels. The number of parcels distributed in 2025 was 60% higher than the number distributed in the pre-pandemic year of 2019. Data (Figure 2) further confirms that there remain deep scars on living standards as the underlying need for food banks in Northern Ireland remains far higher than six years ago.



There's a lot of anxiety because no one really feels safe or secure. Everyone's worrying about money, everyone's talking about money, everyone's worrying about debt and the cost of everything, how are they going to feed their kids?



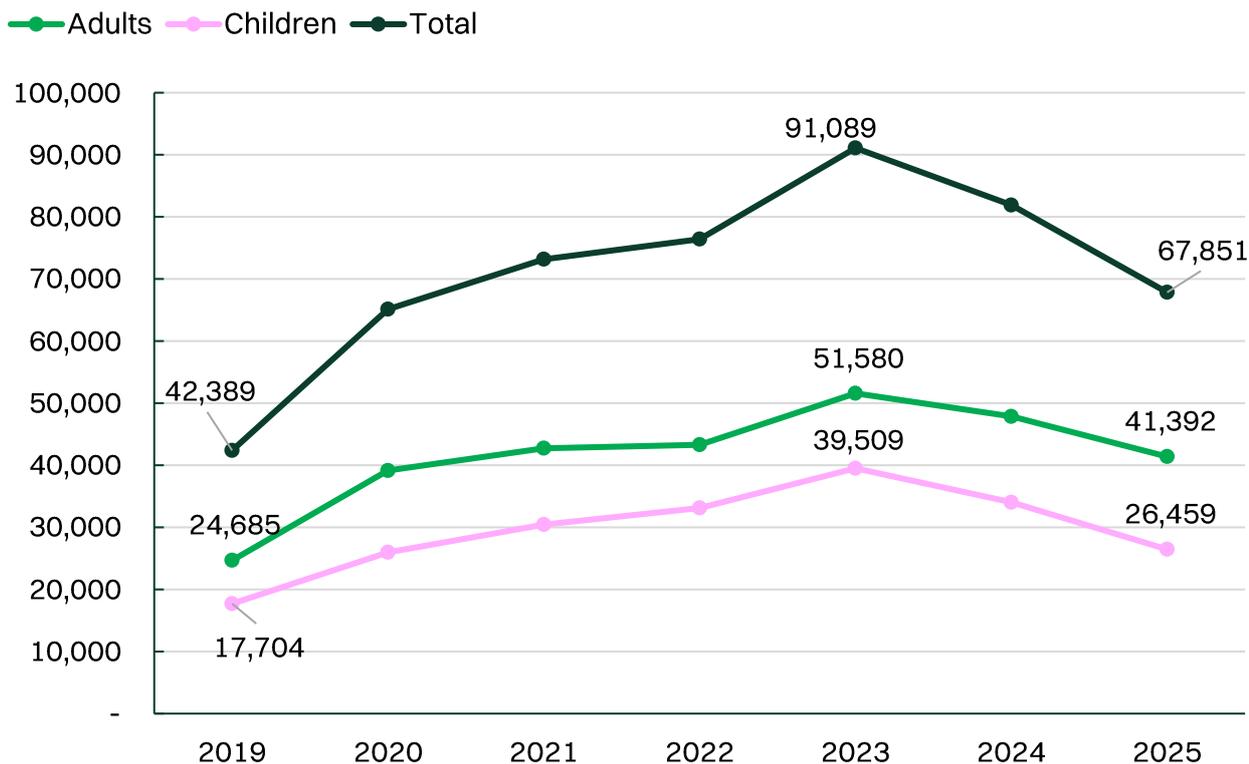
Chief Executive of a food bank in Trussell community, Northern Ireland, 2026

In 2025, over 26,000 parcels were distributed for children by food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland, an increase of nearly 9,000 parcels since 2019. This marks a 49% increase since 2019, and is the sixth year in succession that the number of parcels provided for children has been above 25,000.

Table 1 Number of parcels for adults, children, and in total distributed, UK: 2019-2025

	2025			Percentage change from 2019			Percentage change from 2024		
	Adults	Children	Total	Adults	Children	Total	Adults	Children	Total
United Kingdom	1,732,619	912,216	2,644,835	51%	34%	45%	-10%	-15%	-12%
England	1,437,794	766,312	2,204,106	63%	44%	56%	-9%	-15%	-11%
Scotland	151,086	67,752	218,838	-4%	-16%	-8%	-10%	-17%	-13%
Wales	102,347	51,693	154,040	26%	8%	19%	-11%	-19%	-14%
Northern Ireland	41,392	26,459	67,851	68%	49%	60%	-14%	-22%	-17%

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: 2019-2025

Source: Trussell administrative data.

Emergency food parcel data from the Trussell community is only one part of the picture of need for food banks in Northern Ireland. To understand the scale of underlying need, Trussell monitors the number of people experiencing food insecurity⁴ and the number of people experiencing severe hardship⁵ across Northern Ireland. Recent data from these measures shows that the need for food banks likely peaked in 2023, with a slight decrease since. As with food bank figures these measures remain far higher than pre-pandemic levels – showing little progress on living standards over the last six years.

Food and You 2 is the most recent and robust measure of food insecurity.⁶ As **Figure 2** indicates, food insecurity in Northern Ireland appears to be following a similar pattern to Trussell parcel data. There was a clear increase from 2020 into a peak of 2023 when 27% of adults experienced food insecurity. This has declined to 22% in the latest figures for October 2024 – February 2025.⁷ This five

⁴ Food insecurity means going without or cutting back on quality or quantity of food because people can't afford it: Weekes, T, et al, (2025), *Hunger in the UK 2025*, Trussell, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/hunger-in-the-uk-2025>

⁵ Severe hardship measures the number of people who have available financial resources so low that they are at risk of needing to use a food bank. For more information on the definition and measurement of severe hardship please see: Weekes, T, et al, (2024), *The cost of hunger and hardship – interim report*, Trussell, https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/Cost%20of%20hunger%20and%20hardship_Interim%20report%202024_4.pdf

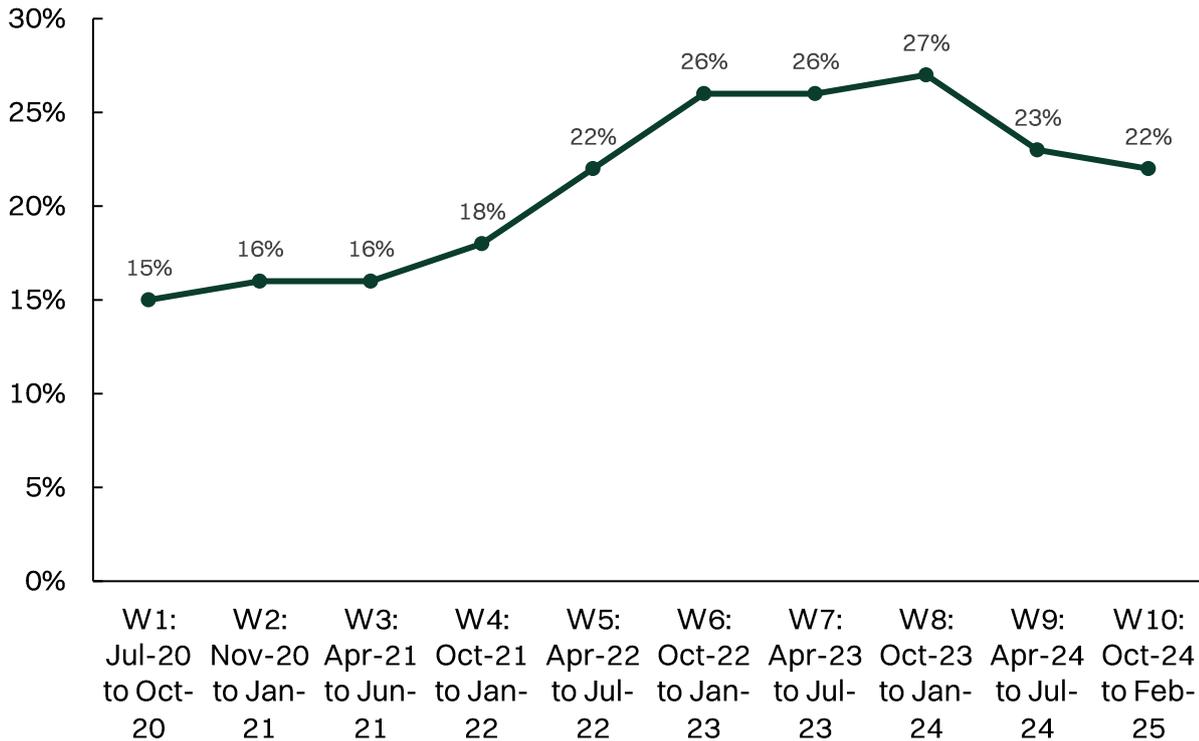
⁶ Food Standards Agency, (2025), *Food and You 2*, <https://www.food.gov.uk/research/food-and-you-2>

⁷ Food Standards Agency, (2025), *Food and You 2*, <https://www.food.gov.uk/research/food-and-you-2>

percentage point decrease represents a 19% decrease in the number of adults experiencing food insecurity in Northern Ireland between 2023 and 2025.

As with food bank use, the number of people experiencing food insecurity remains well above previous levels. In 2020, 15% of adults were experiencing food insecurity - at the start of 2025 this remained at an elevated rate of 22%.

Figure 2 Percentage of adults experiencing food insecurity in previous 12 months in Northern Ireland – Food and You 2



Source: Food Standards Agency – Food and You 2

In the absence of recent data on the number of people experiencing severe hardship⁸, we can look at some proxies to understand changes to people’s financial situation/resilience between 2023 and 2025. These include:

- People in Northern Ireland are now more confident that their household can keep up with bills and buy the essentials they need every month: In November 2022, just 45% of people in Northern Ireland felt they could keep up with these costs. By July 2025 this had increased to 74%.⁹
- Similarly, it appears that people’s costs in Northern Ireland (which form a key part of our severe hardship measure) are becoming more affordable – meaning they have more money to spend

⁸ This measure is derived from the Family Resources Survey – the most recent data available at the time of writing for this survey was 2023/24.

⁹ Consumer Council, (2026), *Northern Ireland Consumers and the Cost of Living - Pulse Survey November 2025*, <https://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk/research/northern-ireland-consumers-and-cost-living-pulse-survey-november-2025>

after paying them. In October 2022 76% of people in Northern Ireland said that after paying their housing costs and any loan or overdraft payments, they had had to cut back spending on other essentials. By July 2025 this had decreased to 58%.¹⁰

- People are also more likely to report that they have savings to fall back on or use for an unexpected expense: In December 2023 just over half (51%) of people in Northern Ireland reported that they had savings to fall back on or use for an unexpected expense. By July 2025 this had increased to 56%.¹¹

¹⁰Consumer Council, (2026), *Northern Ireland Consumers and the Cost of Living - Pulse Survey November 2025*, <https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/research/northern-ireland-consumers-and-cost-living-pulse-survey-november-2025>

¹¹Consumer Council, (2026), *Northern Ireland Consumers and the Cost of Living - Pulse Survey November 2025*, <https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/research/northern-ireland-consumers-and-cost-living-pulse-survey-november-2025>

What's driving recent changes in parcel numbers?

Many factors can contribute to reductions in the use of food banks, and some may play bigger roles in different parts of the Northern Ireland, and within local communities. Based on a review of the available evidence Trussell has identified the following factors (in order of magnitude) as being the main drivers of reduced use of food banks across Northern Ireland.

- Reductions in the rate of inflation, alongside a stabilised redundancy rate, have had the most substantive impact on driving the reduced use of food banks.
- After years of extremely high levels of need, food banks and their referral partners are at the limit of the support that they can provide. There are key capacity constraints in the advice sector, with the need for these services far outstripping provision. This means that some people may not be able to get a referral to food banks. Food banks are also facing challenges in operating, particularly due to the cost of increasingly having to purchase food. This means some food banks have had to close locations or reduce the hours they are open for. Food banks are also having to operate limits on the number of times that people can get support (most commonly up to six times in six months).
- There has been a rapid growth in the number of organisations and locations providing charitable food provision. This is particularly the case in the provision of social supermarkets. It is likely that this growth in support has displaced some use of food banks to these services. The evidence suggests it is unlikely that the growth in these services has had a significant impact on the underlying need for food banks.
- Far more food banks in the Trussell community are now providing access to broader support for people coming to them – particularly through advice services. Evidence indicates that these services are improving the financial situation of the people supported by them, reducing their risk of needing to use food banks in the future. However, current advice provision at food banks does not have the capacity to address financial hardship at scale

An easing of cost-of-living pressures and fewer job losses are the main drivers of reduced food bank use

The rapid increase in the cost of essentials through inflation between late 2021 and the end of 2023 was a key driver of the increased use of food banks during that period.¹² During this period the overall rate of annual CPI inflation peaked at 11.1%. Prices for key essentials like food and electricity, gas and other fuels rose at a far higher rate than this. Food prices rose by a peak of 19.6% in March 2023 –

¹² Bull, R, et al, (2023), *Hunger in the UK*, Trussell, <https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/wp-assets/2023-The-Trussell-Trust-Hunger-in-the-UK-report-web-updated-10Aug23.pdf>

with a longer period of sustained increases than overall inflation – inflation on electricity, gas, and other fuels peaked at 90% in January 2023.¹³

These inflationary pressures were felt more acutely by low income households as they exposed years of income stagnation and below inflation increases to social security payments leading up to the cost of living crisis. Essential products like food and energy take up a larger proportion of low-income household's budgets and they often cannot reduce spending on these areas without incurring significant harm. Lower income households also have the fewest financial options to absorb price rises e.g. switching to cheaper items, access to savings, or access to credit cards, which may act as a buffer to unexpected price rises.¹⁴

Since the 2023 peak, the overall inflation rate has reduced significantly to 3.4% in December 2025. Inflation on food has also decreased to 4.4% and inflation on fuels has fallen to 2.5% as of December 2025.¹⁵ While for the most part this means that prices aren't decreasing, they are not increasing at a pace that is as damaging or unmanageable as previously seen. This is likely to have played a substantive role in reducing the use of food banks in the Trussell community since 2023.



Going back two or three years ago, we felt the cost of living was a big part of that [financial situation of food bank users], but it's maybe not going up as much... There's still an increase, but I'm not seeing that as being a reason."

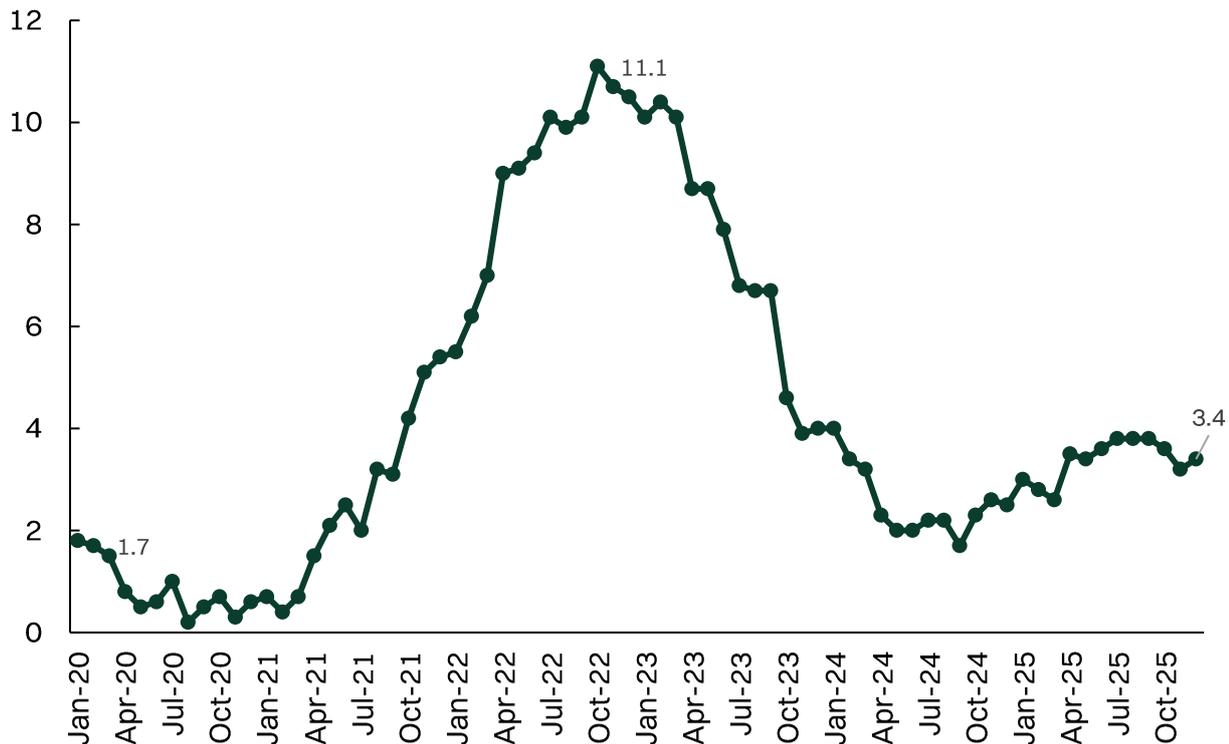


Manager of a food bank in Trussell community, Northern Ireland, 2026

¹³ ONS, (2026), *Consumer Price inflation, UK: December 2025*, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/bulletins/consumerpriceinflation/december2025>

¹⁴ NIESR, (2022), *The unequal impact of rising inflation*, <https://niesr.ac.uk/blog/unequal-impact-rising-inflation>

¹⁵ ONS, (2026), *Consumer Price inflation, UK: December 2025*, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/bulletins/consumerpriceinflation/december2025>

Figure 3 CPI inflation Jan 2020 – December 2025

Similarly, during the Covid-19 pandemic, job loss was identified as a significant driver of the rapid increase in people turning to food banks.¹⁶ Wider evidence has also shown a link between job loss and food insecurity.¹⁷

The financial impact of rapid changes to people's income through job loss can have short and medium term impacts:

- In the short term, for people who move from work and need to claim Universal Credit the income shock is likely to be significant – making it difficult to manage their finances. Universal Credit has one of the lowest 'income replacement rates' amongst high-income OECD countries.¹⁸

¹⁶ Trussell, (2020), *Lockdown, Lifelines and the Long Haul Ahead*, <https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/wp-assets/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-food-banks-report.pdf>

¹⁷ See: Milovanska-Farrington, S, (2022), *Job loss and food insecurity during the Covid-19 pandemic*, Journal of economic studies, <https://www.emerald.com/jes/article-abstract/50/2/300/1118828/Job-loss-and-food-insecurity-during-the-Covid-19?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

Mabli, J, (2023), *Food insecurity transitions and changes in employment and earnings*, American Journal of Preventative Medicine, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0749379722005050>

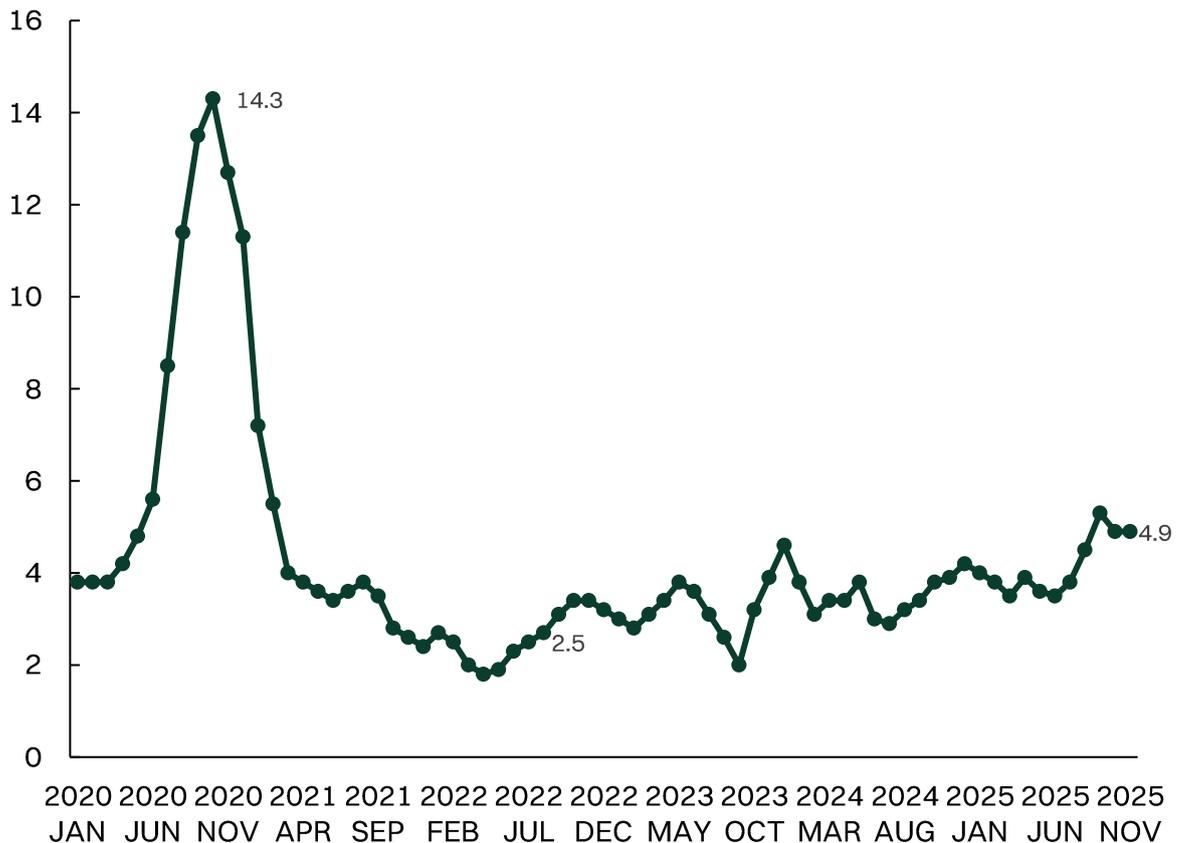
Raifman, J, Bor, J, and Venkataramani, A, (2021), *Association between receipt of unemployment insurance and food insecurity among people who lost employment during the COVID-19 Pandemic in the United States*, JAMA Network, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7402065/>

¹⁸ Trussell and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, (2026), *Guarantee Our Essentials: Reforming Universal Credit to ensure we can all afford the essentials in hard time*, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/social-security/guarantee-our-essentials-reforming-universal-credit-to-ensure-we-can-all-afford-the#:~:text=Social%20security-Guarantee%20our%20Essentials:%20reforming%20Universal%20Credit%20to%20ensure%20we%20can,%2C%20but%20it%20doesn't.&text=When%20life%20events%20such%20as,to%20repay%20debts%20to%20DWP.>

- It is also likely to have medium term scarring effect on people's financial situation and capacity to return to work, which perpetuate someone's likelihood of needing to turn to a food bank beyond the initial period.¹⁹

The redundancy rate (the rate at which people lose their jobs) per 1,000 employees peaked across the UK in October 2020 (14.3) and remained elevated into early 2021. This rate has recovered in recent years, with the latest figures putting this at 4.9 in November 2025.²⁰

Figure 4 Redundancy rate – per 1,000 employees – ONS Labour Force Survey: ILO redundancy rate



Source: ONS – Labour Force Survey

As more time has elapsed from 2020 and 2021, when the largest number of jobs were lost, it is reasonable to suggest that the medium term impacts of job loss have eased. This is likely to have contributed to the reduced use of food banks.

Taken together the decreases in the rate of inflation, and fewer job losses are the main drivers in the reduced use of food banks between 2023 and 2025.

¹⁹ Weekes, T, Ball, E, and Padgett, S, (2025), *The Cost of Hunger and Hardship – final report*, Trussell, https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/cost_of_hunger_and_hardship_june25.pdf

²⁰ ONS, (2026), *LFS: ILO redundancy rate*:

UK:All:SA, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/redundancies/timeseries/beir/lms>

The positive impact of policy change on food bank use has been mitigated by decisions on other areas

We know that policy decisions can have an impact on food bank use. Previously, we have seen positive changes in the use of food banks due to increased income through social security. The £20 uplift to Universal Credit between April 2020 and October 2021 led to reductions in both food insecurity²¹ and child poverty.²² Trussell has also reported on a reduction in the use of food banks during the months in which the UK Government's Cost of Living Payment were made to people in receipt of means tested social security payments.²³

Since 2023 policy change, particularly the uprating by the UK government of Local Housing Allowance (LHA) in line with local rents in April 2024, the introduction of the Fair Repayment Rate from April 2025, and the introduction of the Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme will undoubtedly have had a positive impact on people's ability to afford the essentials. Without the introduction of these policies, we would have seen far more people needing to turn to food banks in 2024 and 2025 respectively. Funding for social supermarkets by the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland will have also displaced some of the use of food banks to these services. This is discussed in more detail [subsequently](#).

Existing support such as Discretionary Support, and the welfare mitigations package will also have prevented more people from needing to turn to food banks. Although there were no changes in 2024 or 2025 which would have increased this impact.

However, the impact of these positive changes to policy has been mitigated by the growth in the impact of the two-child limit in this period, the short-term challenges of migrating to Universal Credit, and the decision by the UK government to freeze LHA from April 2025. Overall, during this period it is most likely that policy related to social security has had a net neutral impact on the change in the use of food banks.

²¹ Welfare at a Social Distance, (2021), *Food insecurity and the welfare state: Food insecurity amongst benefit claimants in the UK*, <https://www.distantwelfare.co.uk/food-insecurity-report>

²² Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University, (2022), *Local indicators of child poverty after housing costs, 2020/21*, <https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/child-poverty/>

²³ Bull, R, et al, (2023), *Hunger in the UK*, Trussell, <https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/wp-assets/2023-The-Trussell-Trust-Hunger-in-the-UK-report-web-updated-10Aug23.pdf>

Food banks and partners have contributed through access to wider support, but operational difficulties are likely to have also been a factor in recent decreases

There is increasing evidence that additional support provided by food banks is playing a role in reducing food bank use

Food banks continue to do all they can to support people in their communities and in recent years provision of additional support has substantively increased. This is particularly the case for the provision of access to some form of financial inclusion support – that is, support or advice on money matters. In Northern Ireland, the number of people supported to access advice has increased from 90 in 2022/23 to 670 in 2024/25.

Trussell's administrative data on the impact of this advice shows that the average financial gain for people supported was £1,000 in 2023/24. An independent evaluation of the advice and support services provided by food banks highlighted that this support was making a tangible difference to people's finances, with over one in four (28%) people using these services saying that it reduced their need to use a food bank.²⁴

The impact of financial inclusion services in reducing referrals was repeatedly mentioned by food banks as a factor in the reduced use of their food banks – particularly when it prevented people from needing to return to a food bank.

“

Our average number of visits to the food bank is 1.43, which I know from speaking with other food banks, that's much lower, but that's because we have the follow-on services. So, our financial inclusion project is very, very strong. It is like it's definitely the most life changing part of the work that we do.

”

Chief Executive of a food bank in the Trussell community, Northern Ireland, 2026

However, current advice provision at food banks does not have the capacity to address financial hardship at scale. The overall use of advice services at food banks in the Trussell community remains low relative to headline food bank use. In 2024/25, 670 people in Northern Ireland were supported to access advice, compared to almost 13,000 households supported with emergency food by food banks in Northern Ireland. There are also concerns from food banks, in the context of

²⁴ 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>

continuing high levels of need and funding challenges, about how sustainable these advice services are.

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 independent evaluation on advice services supports this - 38% of people supported said that their likelihood of needing support from a food bank was about the same after receiving advice.²⁵ Food banks felt that even when they had worked with people to maximise their incomes and receive additional support, this wasn't always enough to stop them needing to use the food bank. This highlights the insufficiency of Universal Credit and the wider social security system.

Alongside directly facilitating the provision of advice services, food banks have also worked with their referral partners to emphasise the importance of additional support and signposting before, or in addition to, a food bank referral. Conversations with food banks who have seen a decrease in the number of emergency food parcels distributed this year often referred to improved relationships with referral partners as being a factor in explaining this change. In practice this will often mean that people referred to food banks are signposted or provided with additional support before they use a food bank or soon after.

Work by food banks in Scotland to develop pathways to cash and advice in eight local authorities across Scotland, is showing an impact – an evaluation of the project reports evidence that some people supported through the project have used food banks less.²⁶

“

We do a bit of proactive work to try to make sure that if people are calling multiple times, we're asking questions and addressing that, and sometimes there's justifiable reasons but generally it's just a conversation with the referral partner.

”

Chief Executive of a food bank in the Trussell community, Northern Ireland, 2026

Successive years of incredibly high need alongside increasing constraints on delivery have led to operational difficulties – with some food banks unable to continue to provide the same levels of support

As discussed above, food banks continue to provide a critical service in their communities and work tirelessly to innovate and find proactive ways of improving access to the right support for people.

²⁵ 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>

²⁶ Rocket Science, (2025), *Trussell: Pathways to Advice and Cash Scotland (PACS)*, Trussell, [trussell_pacs_evaluation.pdf](#)

However, the scale of support they are providing has become overwhelming for food banks – particularly after successive years of incredibly high need for their services.

Alongside these new services and innovations food banks have made, food banks we spoke to described how they are also having to make difficult decisions to change how they deliver their services. These changes may reduce the amount of support that they are able to provide. In winter 2025, 5 out of 19 food banks (who responded to the survey) in Northern Ireland told us that they currently had voucher or parcel limits in place. The most common limit was six vouchers within a six-month period, although some food banks operate a limit of three vouchers per month. Other food banks have had to reduce the opening hours they are able to provide, and have had to close locations that they operate, to protect their core support provision. Taken together the operational challenges in continuing to meet extremely high levels of use have partially driven the reduced use of food banks in recent years.

These operational changes should be seen in the context of clear financial difficulties for food banks. In conversations with food banks, they described how public food donations have dropped in the last years, and with use still far higher than previous levels this is presenting operational challenges. Food banks highlight that their wider communities have been affected by the cost-of-living crisis, and that donations from their community have fallen, leading to increased food purchasing. These funding challenges are reflected in Trussell's latest survey of food banks - in winter 2025, 7 out of 19 food banks (who responded to the survey) in Northern Ireland were concerned that they wouldn't be able to cover operating costs over the next 12 months.



We did make the decision for Christmas 2024 to not do the big hamper packs that we had done for 10 years up until that point because we just knew we didn't have the stock.



Chief Executive of a food bank in the Trussell community, Northern Ireland, 2026

Food banks who have seen a decrease in their number of referrals over this last year, also told us that it hasn't necessarily felt like there has been a substantial change in the support they were providing or how busy it feels. In some cases, drops in referral numbers only equate to a handful fewer people needing to use the food bank. Also, where referral numbers have dropped as a result of financial inclusion or wraparound support provided by the food bank, the time, energy, and cost of providing this additional support has often stretched food banks even further.



We're quite tentative still... I don't think our demand is going to decrease any in the next year.



Chief Executive of a food bank in the Trussell community, Northern Ireland, 2026

People are referred to food banks in the Trussell community by a range of services, and frequently through advice services. Alongside the challenges food banks are facing there are currently critical capacity issues in the delivery of advice services. This is leaving some people unable to receive advice or to be referred to food banks when they need that support. Evidence from the advice sector highlights recent increases in individuals and families seeking free and independent advice, alongside major recruitment and retention difficulties of staff and volunteers. Evidence from the UK shows that the average advice service needs three more advisers to meet demand and has lost three staff or volunteers in the past year.²⁷ A report looking across the voluntary and community workforce in Northern Ireland found similar issues – 42% of organisations had faced difficulties in retaining staff in the past 12 months.²⁸

These issues came through strongly in our conversations with food banks, who warned about how increasing pressure on the statutory sector and local support services is creating both additional pressure on food banks to support people and meaning some people aren't able to get the support they need.



There's a few referral partners who I'm eager to get meeting up with, particularly health service teams, social workers, and that we're seeing a decline in their numbers, but we also know the pressure that some of those teams are under.



Manager of a food bank in Trussell community, Northern Ireland, 2026

Provision of other forms of charitable food support has rapidly increased, with some use of food banks displaced to these services

There has been significant growth in other charitable food support, particularly through an expansion in the provision of social supermarkets and pantries, over the last 3-5 years. In Northern Ireland this increase in provision has been partially driven by funding from the Department for Communities (DfC). Social supermarkets were first funded in Northern Ireland in 2018, in 2024/45 the DfC allocated £2.75m to the programme, enabling each of the 11 local Councils to commission a range of projects in their boroughs. At a regional level the funding contributed to supporting just over 13,000 households with access to food and wraparound support in 2024/25.

This growth in other forms of charitable food support is likely to have driven some of the reduced use of food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland as use is displaced to these services. Our

²⁷ Advice UK, (2025), *Staff shortages undermine access to life-saving free, independent advice*, <https://www.adviceuk.org.uk/2025/10/20/staff-shortages-undermine-access-to-life-saving-free-independent-advice/#:~:text=Despite%20the%20drastic%20increase%20in,giving%20them%20reasons%20to%20stay>.

²⁸ NICVA, (2024), *Making a difference. Reflections from the challenges facing the Voluntary and Community Sector workforce*, <https://www.nicva.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/Workforce%20Report%20EXECUTIVE%20SUMMARY.pdf>

Hunger in the UK data shows that many people using food banks do co-use other forms of charitable food provision. Of people who had used a food bank in the last 12 months, 50% had also used a social supermarket or food pantry.²⁹

In conversations with food banks, we heard concern that the growth in other forms of charitable food provision may be displacing the use of food banks to these services – with a risk that reduced food bank use is interpreted as a reduction in overall need.



We also understand people maybe don't want to go through the referral process trying to get a voucher that they're just happy enough just to go along and no questions asked, they can get food.



Manager of a food bank in Trussell community, Northern Ireland, 2026

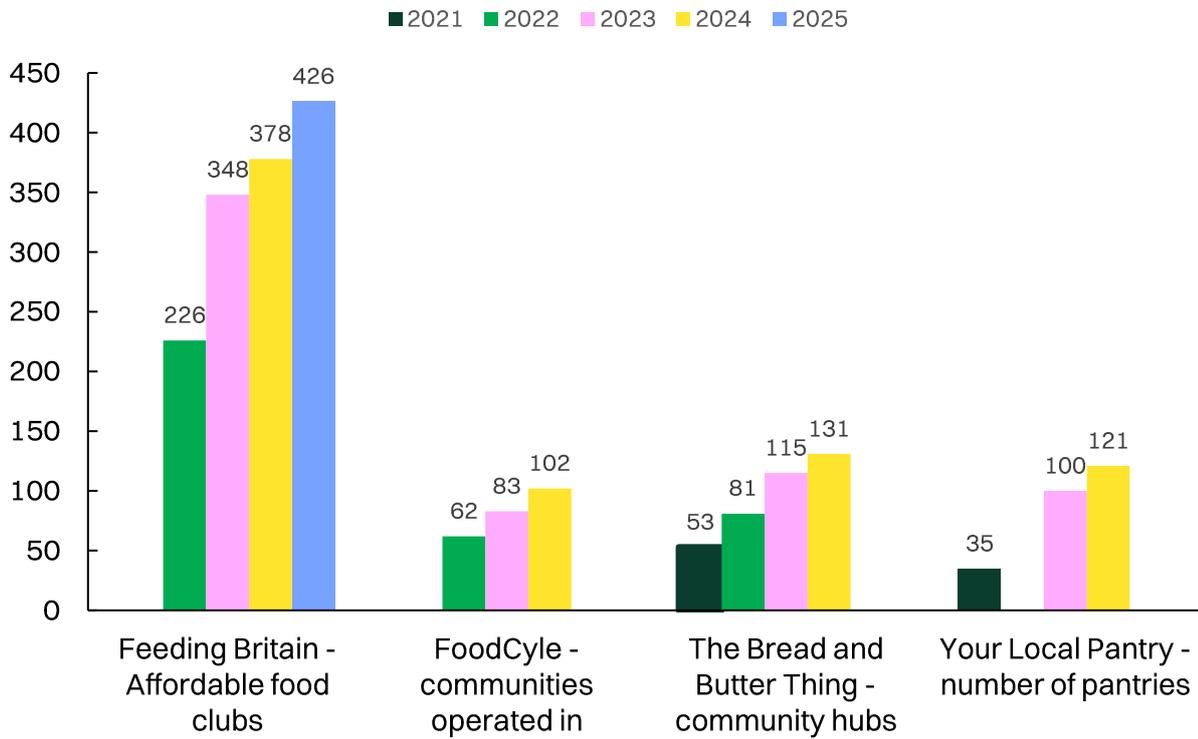
Indeed, there is little evidence that the displacement of use of food banks to other forms of charitable food support will have a significant impact on the actual underlying need for food banks. Evidence shows that most people using other forms of support remain at high risk of needing to turn to a food bank in the future. The use of food banks for people using both food banks and food clubs most commonly stays the same (53%) or increases (17%) after joining a food club.³⁰ Further, the vast majority of people (77%) using Affordable Food Clubs are food insecure.³¹ This indicates that charitable food provision, regardless of the model used, is alleviating some of the impacts of hunger and hardship, rather than solving it.

²⁹ Weekes, T, et al, (2025), *Hunger in the UK 2025*, Trussell, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/hunger-in-the-uk-2025>

³⁰ Blake, M, (2026), *Building Resilience: The role of food clubs in UK food security*, Comic Relief, https://assets.ctfassets.net/zsfivwzfgl3t/5Nkx11c3EiNcw2EwfIDMG/3b835a7cef5fb0f7b7a7bbb6a60c280d/Building_Resilience_The_Role_of_Food_Clubs_in_UK_Food_Security_Full_Report.pdf

³¹ Feeding Britain, (2025), *Feeding Hope - The impact of affordable food clubs on nutrition and wellbeing*, <https://feedingbritain.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Feeding-Hope.pdf>

Figure 5 Change in number of locations operated / communities operated in by social supermarket models across the UK from 2021 to 2025



Source: Feeding Britain, FoodCycle, The Bread and Butter Thing, and Your Local Pantry - impact / annual reports

Use of food banks remains extremely high with some people at higher risk of needing support

- The nature of food bank use has changed in recent years. Food banks are now supporting people with entrenched levels of hardship, who require more frequent support.
- Where improvements in food bank use have been seen it is most likely that these have been for people who are newly experiencing or in shallower forms of hardship. People on the lowest incomes continue to find it difficult to afford essentials and inequality of living standards and income has grown.
- Recent decreases are common across Northern Ireland. But the scale of these changes and the longer term trends vary. Despite an overall decrease in the number of parcels distributed in Northern Ireland in the last year, Lagan Valley and Belfast East recorded an increase. East Londonderry and Belfast South saw similar levels to last year or a very slight decrease
- Children, and particularly young children continue to be disproportionately supported by food banks. Support for families with three or more children makes up a substantive proportion of the parcels provided by food banks – welcome change on the two-child limit will hopefully begin to reverse this.
- Food banks are now providing far more support for pensioners than they previously did. Increased housing costs relative to their income, poor health, and challenges in saving for later life are likely to be driving this.
- Insufficient incomes, particularly through the social security system are the main driver of the use of food banks. Health problems also remain a notable driver, while reasons for use vary by the sources of people's income- particularly for people who do not have any income coming in.

Food banks are supporting people experiencing sustained severe hardship

These positive improvements in people's financial circumstances, and the reduction seen in food bank use in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland are hugely welcomed. However, food banks continue to tell us that they are 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 on them.

There are strong signs that food bank use in Northern Ireland is being increasingly driven by people who need to return to a food bank, rather than people who are using food banks for the first time. Overall, three in five people referred to a food bank in Northern Ireland in 2025 had not used a food bank in the Trussell community before. But this proportion has fallen from 72% to 60% between 2019 and 2025.

This is reflected in the increase in the number of people who are having to return to food banks more frequently between 2019 and 2025. Over that period, the number of people referred to a food bank in Northern Ireland four or more times within that year increased by 99%. This was far higher than the increase for people referred once (30%) and people referred two to three times (48%).

This increase in entrenched hardship, reflected in more frequent need to use food banks, is a core component of the increase in use since 2019 and suggests that provision by food banks in the Trussell community is being driven to a greater extent by people needing to return to a food bank, rather than people needing support for the first time or once in a year.



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, Northern Ireland, 2025

In 2025, almost four in ten (38%) people referred to food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland needed to use a food bank more than once. Almost a quarter (25%) 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.

These figures are supported by data on the average (mean) number of visits between 2019 and 2025 – from 1.8 visits in 2019 to 2.1 visits in 2025 across Northern Ireland.

In conversations with food banks, they detailed how the situations people are presenting for support with are becoming increasingly complex and difficult to unpick. Food banks also highlighted that they are supporting more entrenched severe hardship in their communities. This was particularly seen through people needing to use the food bank repeatedly for long periods of time.

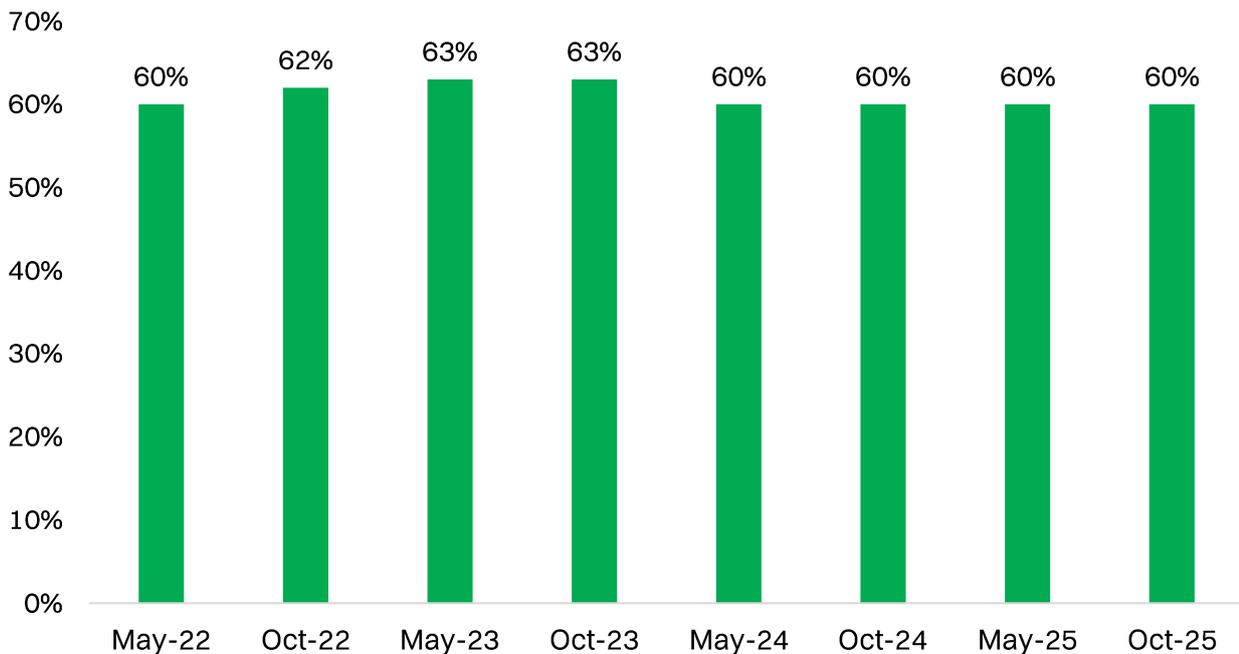
Food banks also told us how the stories they hear are becoming increasingly difficult, and the impact that this is having on their staff and volunteers.

Wider evidence also suggests that people facing the most severe levels of hardship have not seen any improvements in their living standards over the last few years, with situations worsening for many people. The evidence suggests that the improvements in both food bank use and the wider underlying need for food banks discussed [previously](#) have been primarily for people in shallower forms of hardship and/or people newly facing hardship due to the cost of living crisis.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (JRF) cost of living tracker captures the experiences of households with incomes in the bottom 40% across the UK. As [Figure 6](#) highlights there has been little progress in the proportion of low-income households going without essentials over the last three years. In late 2025 60% of low-income households were going without essential items, only a slight decrease from the 2023 peak of 63%. This represents just a 5% decrease in the number of low income households going without essentials between 2023 and 2025. This is far smaller than the

19% reduction in the number of adults going without food across the whole population reported [previously](#). This suggests that reductions in food insecurity are likely taking place among households in shallower or more recent forms of hardship, whilst the underlying position of many on low incomes and their ability to afford a range of essential items, is not improving to any great extent.

Figure 6 Proportion of low-income households in the UK going without essentials, May 2022 – October 2025



Source: JRF - Cost of living tracker

This is likely due to increasing income inequality since 2023.

Figure 7 shows that since 2023 real disposable income for households in the bottom 20% of incomes has fallen far faster than other households higher up the income distribution. This has been driven by rising housing costs, which reduce disposable incomes across the distribution, but the impact is felt most by the poorest households as they spend the highest share of income on housing costs.

The Resolution Foundation have also highlighted how living standards for the poorest families have fallen faster than richer families between 2019 and 2025 – perpetuating existing inequality in living standards. This is particularly through the disproportionate impact of inflation – annualised inflation experienced by the poorest families ran at a rate that was 0.7 percentage points faster than for the richest families, serving to ensure already stretched incomes were able to cover even less of a household's essential costs.³²

³² Resolution Foundation (2026), *Unsung Britain: A portrait of the country's poorer half*, <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/unsung-britain/>

Figure 7 Real percentage change in household disposable income after housing costs by population quintiles, April 2019 - April 2025



Source: JRF analysis using the IPPR tax and benefit microsimulation model. Modelling from October 2024 onwards based on OBR forecast data rather than outturns.

With people more commonly needing to repeatedly use food banks and increasing inequality in income and living standards, it is clear that unacceptable levels of severe hardship are becoming entrenched in our communities. Where improvements have been seen, they are most likely for people in shallower or more recent forms of hardship, and it is likely that we have not made significant progress on pre-pandemic levels of food bank need.

Recent decreases are common across Northern Ireland, but the scale of change and long term trends vary

Food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland operate in a range of regional and local contexts that have an impact on the number of parcels distributed. The factors that we identified earlier as driving recent changes in food bank use may scale up or down depending on the local context. This may include regional and local variations in policy, changes to local employment or demographics, provision of advice services, as well as funding for the provision of alternative charitable food provision in an area.

The picture of provision across Northern Ireland Assembly constituencies is mixed. Despite an overall decrease in the number of parcels distributed in Northern Ireland in the last year, Lagan

Valley and Belfast East recorded increases between 2024 and 2025 (15% and 5% respectively). East Londonderry and Belfast South saw similar levels to 2024 or a very slight decrease (0% and -3% respectively) ([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. The number of parcels provided in 2024-25 more than tripled in Fermanagh and South Tyrone and Belfast East, and more than doubled in Belfast North and North Down.

Table 2: Number of parcels for adults, children, and total distributed – Northern Ireland Assembly constituency breakdown: 2025, compared to 2019 and 2024

	2025			Percentage change from 2019			Percentage change from 2024		
	Adult	Children	Total	Adult	Children	Total	Adults	Children	Total
Belfast East	2,686	1,829	4,515	283%	168%	226%	8%	2%	5%
Belfast North	4,022	2,562	6,584	135%	94%	117%	-2%	-7%	-4%
Belfast South	5,152	2,558	7,710	49%	1%	29%	1%	-10%	-3%
Belfast West	2,339	1,236	3,575	34%	-19%	9%	-2%	-31%	-14%
East Antrim	1,836	1,100	2,936	33%	18%	27%	-24%	-34%	-28%
East Londonderry	1,666	997	2,663	63%	44%	55%	-7%	16%	0%
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	3,787	2,480	6,267	294%	241%	271%	-34%	-43%	-38%
Foyle	3,849	2,698	6,547	70%	62%	67%	-23%	-34%	-28%
Lagan Valley	1,945	1,291	3,236	50%	40%	46%	13%	19%	15%
Mid Ulster	462	276	738	65%	53%	60%	-16%	-18%	-17%
Newry and Armagh	943	516	1,459	74%	11%	45%	-4%	-17%	-9%
North Antrim	3,035	1,798	4,833	42%	38%	40%	-22%	-21%	-22%
North Down	1,300	1,015	2,315	120%	209%	152%	-15%	-20%	-17%
South Antrim	4,037	2,866	6,903	73%	85%	78%	-19%	-28%	-23%
Strangford	1,220	893	2,113	-7%	-8%	-7%	-23%	-29%	-26%
Upper Bann	2,969	2,223	5,192	16%	35%	23%	-5%	-12%	-8%
West Tyrone	144	121	265	-62%	-51%	-58%	-69%	-77%	-73%

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

Children, and particularly young children, continue to be disproportionately supported by food banks

Despite decreases across Northern Ireland in the number of parcels provided for children last year (-22%), the distribution of support provided by the Trussell community continues to be heavily weighted towards children and their families.

Comparing the distribution of parcels to the distribution of people by age in Northern Ireland (**Figure 8**) we see a notable difference for children aged 0-16. The proportion of parcels distributed for children aged 0-16 (39%) was almost double their population share (21%).³³ In 2025, one in four (28%) parcels provided by food banks were for younger children aged 0-11 - despite them making up just 15% of people across Northern Ireland.

These figures show that, at a crucial time in a child's development, far too many children are needing support from a food bank. The experience of growing up in a household experiencing severe hardship can have profound impacts on children's health, wellbeing, education and future economic opportunities.³⁴ It also puts unmanageable pressure on parents, who often have to make decisions on whether to take on debt or leave bills unpaid, or let their child go without something like a school trip - which would isolate them from their peers.³⁵



How can you then tell your child that they're sitting in [a] different class because you can't afford to send them swimming?



Person taking part in the Cost of Hunger and Hardship, Northern Ireland, 2025³⁶

³³ ONS, (2024), *Estimates of the population for UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland*, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesscotlandandnorthernireland>

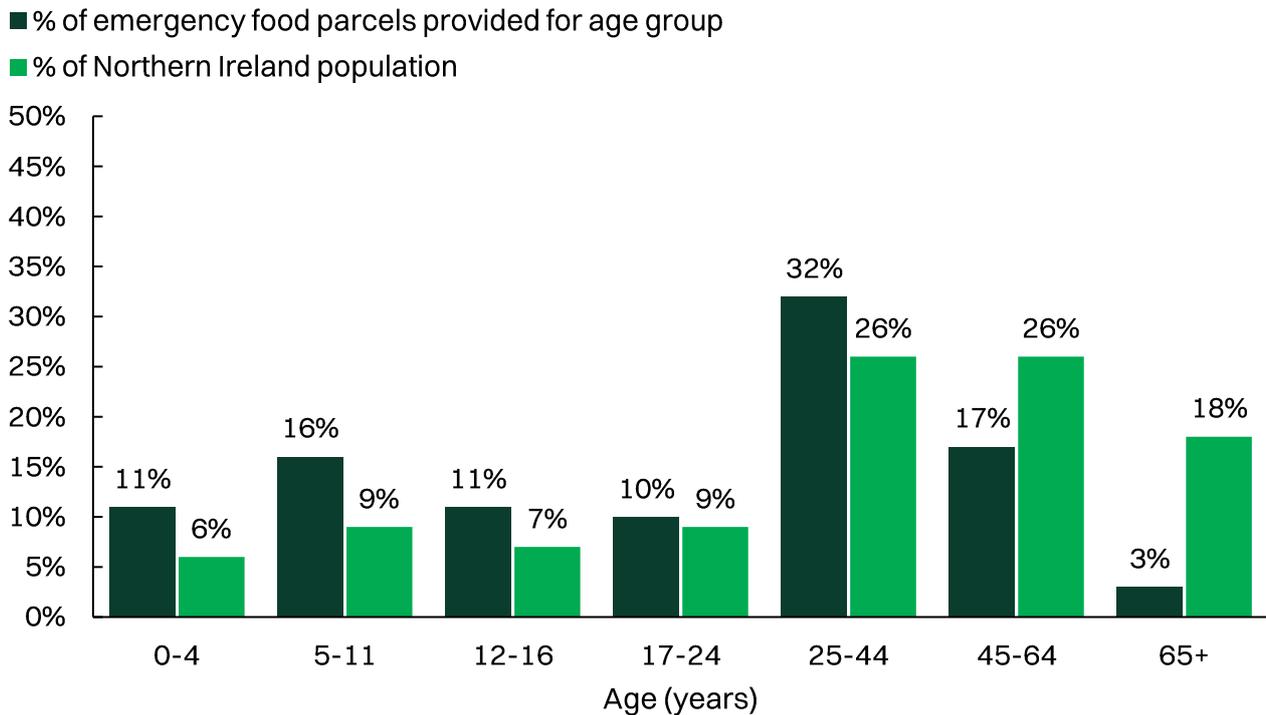
³⁴ Weekes, T, Ball, E, and Padgett, S, (2025), *The Cost of Hunger and Hardship - final report*, Trussell, https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/cost_of_hunger_and_hardship_june25.pdf

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2026), *UK Poverty 2026*, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-2026-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk>

³⁵ Weekes, T, et al, (2025), *Hunger in the UK 2025*, Trussell, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/hunger-in-the-uk-2025>

³⁶ Weekes, T, Ball, E, and Padgett, S, (2025), *The Cost of Hunger and Hardship - final report*, Trussell, https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/cost_of_hunger_and_hardship_june25.pdf

Figure 8 Percentage of emergency food parcels distributed for different age groups compared to population distribution, Northern Ireland: 2025



Source: Trussell administrative data and ONS population estimates.

Unlike the pre-pandemic period, growth in parcels for children no longer outstrips or matches the growth in parcels for adults. The latest six-year trend (2019-2025) shows a 68% increase for adults and a 49% increase for children in parcels provided in Northern Ireland. This is a trend we will continue to monitor over the next year.

When taking a whole household view, the majority (69%) of support provided by food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland was for families with children (Figure 9). This is despite people living in these families making up just 46% of the population in Northern Ireland. This over-representation is mainly driven by support provided to families with three or more children at food banks in the Trussell community. A substantive minority (32%) of parcels were provided in 2025 to families with three or more children. The proportion of parcels distributed for families with three or more children was well over double their population share (13%). For families with one to two children the proportion is similar, with 37% of parcels distributed to families of this size and 33% of people living in families of this size in the Northern Ireland population.

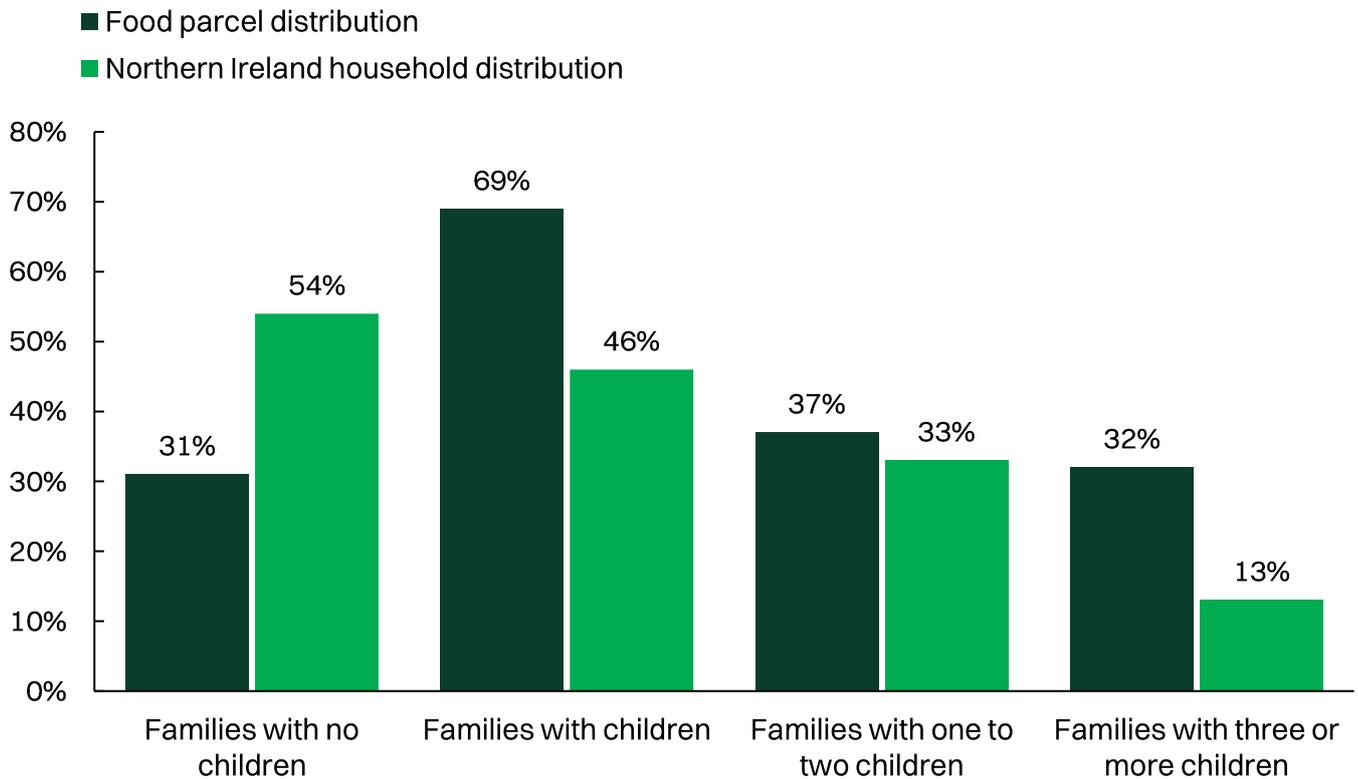
“

We would still have out of the 14 primary schools that are in the kind of central area of Lisburn, there would be six of them that would have at least 50% of their kids on free school meals. And we do have a high number of either single parent or single person households, which is very much reflected in our food bank figures as well, because they're always our highest two users.

”

Chief Executive at a food bank in the Trussell community, Northern Ireland, 2026

Figure 9 Percentage of emergency food parcels distributed by family type, Northern Ireland, compared to percentage of Northern Ireland population living within each family type: 2025



Source: Trussell administrative data and Households Below Average Income dataset.

Our Hunger in Northern Ireland research also outlines how the number of children in a household matters to their risk of food insecurity and needing to turn to a charitable food provider for support. One in seven (13%) people referred to food banks report that they were living with three or more children, compared to just 6% of the Northern Ireland population.³⁷ The experience of families with three or more children is driven in part by the continued implementation of the two-child limit in this period.³⁸

We warmly welcome the decision to remove the two-child limit from April 2026, which is projected to protect tens of thousands of people from experiencing severe hardship in Northern Ireland.³⁹ We will be monitoring the impact the change to this policy has on emergency food parcel distribution over the coming year.

³⁷ Weekes, T, et al, (2025), *Hunger in the UK 2025*, Trussell, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/hunger-in-the-uk-2025>

³⁸ This is a policy introduced in 2017 which prevents families from claiming Child Tax Credit or Universal Credit for more than two children (depending on the age of the third child), and affects families who are in work as well as families where no adult is working.

³⁹ Weekes, T, Ball, E, and Padgett, S, (2025), *Cost of Hunger and Hardship – final report*, Trussell, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/cost-of-hunger-and-hardship-final-report>

Food banks now providing far more support for pensioners



We would have actually a fair few who will maybe be like older gentlemen who maybe their wife has passed away.



Chief Executive of a food bank in the Trussell community, Northern Ireland, 2026

Pensioners remain far less likely to experience severe hardship, or to have needed to use a food bank than children or working age adults.⁴⁰ However, there are concerning signs of a resurgence in pensioner hardship in the support provided by food banks.

While it is from a low base, and they are still significantly under-represented relative to their share of the population in Northern Ireland (see [Figure 8](#)), there has been a rapid increase in emergency food provision for people 56 and over since 2019. In 2025, over 1,600 parcels were distributed for someone aged 65 and over in Northern Ireland. This is double the number provided in 2019, when 850 parcels were distributed.

As seen in [Table 3](#), the rate of growth for pension aged adults is by far the highest growth rate for any age group across this period.⁴¹

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	32%
5-11	39%
12-16	69%
17-24	54%
25-64	60%
65+	94%

Source: Trussell administrative data.

Our Hunger in the UK research highlighted some of the differences between pensioners referred to food banks and pensioners across the UK. Pensioners referred to a food bank were more likely to be renting, and less likely to own their home in comparison to pensioners in the general population (18%

⁴⁰ Weekes, T, et al, (2024), *The cost of hunger and hardship – interim report*, Trussell, https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/Cost%20of%20hunger%20and%20hardship_Interim%20report%202024_4.pdf

⁴¹ 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 2025 have been recoded to the pre-2023 codes.

owned their homes outright, compared to 79% of pensioners in the general population). The majority of pensioners referred to food banks were disabled (69%), twice the rate for pensioners in the general population (34%). In addition, pensioners referred to a food bank were more likely to live alone (73% vs 32%), lack family support (23% vs 8%) and to be socially isolated (25% vs 4%) than pensioners across the UK.⁴²

These patterns chime with wider evidence which suggests that people facing hardship earlier in life limits their ability to save, and compounds hardship into older age.⁴³ The data likely also reflects established findings highlighting how the lack of affordable housing, increasing risk of being disabled, and inadequacies in social security for pensioners are increasing the financial strain faced by older people.⁴⁴

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 the main reason people need to use a food bank is because their incomes are too low and are insufficient to cover the cost of essentials and often drives people into unmanageable debt (64% of referrals).

Food banks are supporting people managing incredibly tight budgets, where often there is nothing left to cut back on. A lack of income was the biggest driver of people to the food bank amongst the food banks we spoke to, who frequently referenced how income sources have not kept up with the cost of living.

Table 4 Reasons for referral for people supported, Northern Ireland: 2025

Reason for referral	% of referrals with reason selected
Income or debt	64%
Health	26%
Issue with benefits	13%
Immigration status	12%
Insecure housing	6%

⁴² Weekes, T, et al, (2025), *Hunger in the UK 2025*, Trussell, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/hunger-in-the-uk-2025>

⁴³ Independent Age, (2022), *Poverty in later life*, <https://www.independentage.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/IA%20Poverty%20in%20later%20life%20report%20Jan2022.pdf>

⁴⁴ Independent Age, (2025), *Too little, too late*, https://www.independentage.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/Too_little_too_late_report_Independent_Age.pdf

Change in personal circumstances	6%
Change in work hours or unemployment	5%
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.

Most people referred to food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland are in receipt of some form of income from social security, with the level of these payments being a major contributor to people being unable to afford essentials.⁴⁵ Food banks commonly described how income from social security payments was too often insufficient to meet people's basic needs. Food banks are seeing families whose social security payments are just not enough to cover their day-to-day costs, leaving them trapped and unable to move out of hardship.

Inadequate income, particularly through the social security system, was often coupled with issues with social security payments such as long waits, delays or sanctions which affect a significant minority of referrals to food banks (13%). Ongoing issues with the design of the social security system were frequently mentioned by the food banks we spoke to. In particular, the five-week wait for the first Universal Credit payment, which for some people is stretching to as long as eight weeks. This is often leaving people with huge gaps in income, often at times of hardship and acute need.

“

One of the common things was just benefits, waiting five or six weeks for benefits.

”

Manager of a food bank in Trussell community, Northern Ireland, 2026

Changes in work hours or unemployment affected 6% of referrals to food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland in 2025. Our Hunger in Northern Ireland data shows that a significant minority of people referred to food banks are in working households. Over three in 10 (32%) people referred to food banks in Northern Ireland in 2024 were in working households. This shows how work is not providing reliable protection from, or a route out of, severe hardship.⁴⁶

Poor quality and insecure work can push people into severe hardship for a range of reasons, including low pay, unpredictable hours and wages, and inadequate protection from hardship when workers become sick or disabled.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Trussell, (2025), *Hunger in the Northern Ireland 2025*, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/hunger-in-the-uk-2025>

⁴⁶ Trussell, (2025), *Hunger in the Northern Ireland 2025*, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/hunger-in-the-uk-2025>

⁴⁷ Weekes, T, et al, (2025), *Hunger in the UK 2025*, Trussell, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/hunger-in-the-uk-2025>

Low pay and insecure work were key issues raised by food banks we spoke to, with many citing an increase in people referred this year who are in-work. People supported by food banks are often working multiple jobs to make ends meet and navigating the insecurity of zero-hour contracts. Food banks also commented that they are seeing people from a range of professions need the support of the food bank, with many people in-work living on the edge of hardship where any small income disruption or unexpected cost can lead to the need for a food parcel.

“

We're definitely seeing more people coming through with, who have earnings. Yeah, so either they're all earnings or, you know, they are, there is someone in the household who's working, they're not solely reliant on benefits.

”

Chief Executive of a food bank in the Trussell community, Northern Ireland, 2026

Health is a notable trigger for referrals to food banks

Beyond issues with income, problems with health were reported as one of the most common reasons for referral – affecting over one in four (26%) referrals to food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland (**Table 4**). 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.⁴⁸

An absence of statutory mental health support and the impact of people's health conditions were issues raised by food banks, with insufficient support in the community for people to recover from ongoing mental health issues.

“

What we would see with disabilities, it would be a lot of people who... It's like a new condition. So, they're coming in, they've had to come out of work.

”

Chief Executive of a food bank in the Trussell community, Northern Ireland, 2026

⁴⁸ Weekes, T, Ball, E, and Padgett, S, (2025), *The Cost of Hunger and Hardship – final report*, Trussell, https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/cost_of_hunger_and_hardship_june25.pdf

Reasons for needing support can vary depending on people's income sources

Some drivers of people's use of food banks in Northern Ireland are more or less prevalent depending on people's income sources. Issues with work such as unemployment were more common for people who were in receipt of earned income than people who were solely in receipt of social security payments. Nearly one in five people only in receipt of earned income (19%) and one in six people with earned income alongside social security payments (15%) reported issues with work when they were referred – compared to 4% of people only in receipt of social security payments. Challenging experiences at work such as a pay cut, being offered fewer working hours, and unpaid sick leave have previously been shown to significantly increase the likelihood someone will need to use a food bank.⁴⁹

Issues with health were higher for people solely in receipt of social security payments (29%), compared to people with other forms of income. This potentially reflects how health conditions are either preventing people from being able to work or making it more difficult for them to find and sustain work. Our Hunger in Northern Ireland research found that most (74%) working-age disabled people referred to food banks, who were out of work, were not in work because their impairment or condition meant they were unable to work.⁵⁰

Households who report that they have no income or limited access to it have distinct reasons for referral. The most common of these was issues with their immigration status (69%), which was far higher than average (12%). The majority of people moving to the UK to join family, work or study, have 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF), meaning they are unable to access many mainstream social security payments and are at high risk of experiencing severe hardship.⁵¹ JRF report that since 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.⁵²

⁴⁹ Bull, T, et al, (2023), *Hunger in the UK*, Trussell, <https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/wp-assets/2023-The-Trussell-Trust-Hunger-in-the-UK-report-web-updated-10Aug23.pdf>

⁵⁰ Weekes, T, et al, (2025), *Hunger in Northern Ireland 2025*, Trussell, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/hunger-in-the-uk-2025>

⁵¹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023), *Protection for everyone in our communities*, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/neighbourhoods-and-communities/protection-for-everyone-in-our-communities>

⁵² 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>

Table 5 Reason for referral amongst households, by income sources, Northern Ireland: 2025

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	69%	83%	75%	26%	64%
Health	29%	20%	19%	23%	26%
Issue with social security payments	15%	10%	8%	11%	13%
Immigration status	1%	*	9%	69%	12%
Insecure housing	6%	3%	3%	6%	6%
Change in personal circumstances	6%	8%	10%	3%	6%
Change in work hours or unemployment	4%	15%	19%	6%	5%
Domestic abuse	2%	2%	4%	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. *Represents less than 1% of referral reasons by source of income.

Food bank use is expected to continue to decline, but more urgency is needed to make meaningful inroads on entrenched hardship

We expect to see further decreases in the distribution of emergency food parcels by food banks in the Trussell community over the next year.⁵³ This will likely be driven by the introduction of welcome policy changes to address child poverty such as the scrapping of the two-child limit.

“

Obviously, the policy change around the two-child limit will be interesting to see how that works out, because obviously the two-child limit is removed, but the benefits cap is still there. So, it's not like people will suddenly get loads extra.

”

Chief Executive of a food bank in the Trussell community, Northern Ireland, 2026

However, it is unlikely that these interventions alone will be enough to reverse levels of emergency food parcel distribution back to pre-pandemic levels, as they do not address the full picture of food bank need. Support for families with children is hugely welcome. However, our evidence shows that food bank need is not only disproportionately experienced by working-age families with children, but also people living on their own, people who face discrimination and other challenges (e.g. because of their race, sexuality, or gender), and people who rent rather than own their own home.⁵⁴ Disability was the most common factor underpinning food bank use in Northern Ireland in 2024⁵⁵, and planned changes to the health element of Universal Credit by the UK government from April 2026 mean that people who fall ill will be more likely to experience hardship. We are also seeing persistent increases in food parcels for pensioners.

A more ambitious strategy to end the need for food banks is needed, therefore, to ensure we don't continue to see extraordinarily high levels of severe financial hardship in our communities and truly end the need for emergency food in Northern Ireland.

We will be closely monitoring the impact of global instability on the prices of essentials in Northern Ireland. The OBR suggest that this instability could have a 'significant impact' on the UK economy. Recent improvements in people's financial positions are likely to be fragile and far too many people are still experiencing hardship. If prices rise significantly there is a real risk of food bank use rapidly increasing again in Northern Ireland.

⁵³ This is the case if we do not see significant increases in the cost of essentials due to global instability.

⁵⁴ Trussell, (2025), *Hunger in Northern Ireland 2025*, Trussell, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/hunger-in-the-uk-2025>

⁵⁵ Disability was one of the most common factors underpinning hunger in Northern Ireland in 2024. The majority (79%) of people referred to food banks in the Trussell community in Northern Ireland in 2024 were disabled. In comparison, 34% of people across Northern Ireland were disabled. Trussell, (2025), *Hunger in Northern Ireland 2025*, Trussell, <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/hunger-in-the-uk-2025>

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

Northern Ireland's Anti-Poverty Strategy should be a guiding light in ending the need for food banks. Achieving change demands a collaborative effort, and we need leadership to drive sustained and cross-party efforts to prioritise eradicating poverty in Northern Ireland.

Recent analysis by Trussell shows that taking the following actions would not only fulfil political commitments and moral obligations but also deliver economic gains. Northern Ireland, [Trussell's economic analysis](#) estimates that public finances and the economy could benefit by over £2 billion each year if people were protected from hunger and hardship; it could also save up to £360 million in public service costs.

While we have seen a decrease in parcels over the past year, we know that this is only the tip of the iceberg. In communities across Northern Ireland, too many people continue to be supported by food banks and wider charitable food provision because they are unable to afford the essentials.

With just over a year to go until the next elections to Stormont, we are calling on both Westminster and Stormont governments to work together and take urgent action to end hunger and hardship in Northern Ireland.

Our key asks of the UK Government

- **Update Universal Credit with further steps towards an Essentials Guarantee**, which, if implemented in full, would drive around £795 million in annual economic and fiscal benefits by lifting 57,300 people out of severe hardship in Northern Ireland by 2026/27.
- **Uprating and maintaining Local Housing Allowance rates** would bring £65 million in benefits annually and lift 11,200 people out of severe hardship in Northern Ireland by 2026/27.

Our key asks of the Northern Ireland Executive

1. **Take action to ensure everyone receives the support they are eligible for.** Currently, one in four people referred to food banks receive no support or advice before they receive support from the food banks. Ensuring that everyone receives the social security income they are eligible for in Northern Ireland would drive [£110 million in annual economic and fiscal benefits and lift 7,100 people out of severe hardship by 2026/27.](#)
2. **Develop a pathway to end the need for food banks in Northern Ireland.** Food banks are a vital emergency response — but they should never be a permanent feature of our social safety net. We urge the NI Executive to work with Trussell to develop a pathway to end the need for food banks and transition Northern Ireland from emergency food provision to long-term prevention. In developing [Trussell's Building Blocks](#) (2024) and *Hunger in Northern Ireland* (2025), Trussell understands the structural inequalities and drivers of food bank usage; we have the solutions to

end the need for food banks in Northern Ireland. By prioritising families experiencing hunger and hardship, the pathway must accept the principles that everyone in Northern Ireland is afforded access to a warm, safe, sustainable home; nutritious food for themselves and their families; and enough money to afford the essentials.

3. **Call on the UK Government to take further steps towards an Essentials Guarantee.** Ending the need for food banks begins with ensuring people have enough income to meet their essential costs. Insufficient income is the primary driver of food bank use, so we urge the NI Executive to endorse an Essentials Guarantee to ensure Universal Credit always covers the cost of life's essentials and can never be pulled below this level.
4. **Put income adequacy at the centre of Northern Ireland's Anti-Poverty Strategy,** including committing to the long-term continuation of Welfare Supplementary Payments beyond 2028 and taking action to ensure cash first support is the first response wherever possible, linked directly to high-quality advice and support.
5. **Invest in holistic advice, debt and benefits support, housing and employment pathways, targeting key life transitions that increase risk of hardship.**
6. **Put accountability systems in place to end the need for food banks.** The NI Executive should map hunger and hardship across Northern Ireland, set measurable targets to reduce repeat food bank use, and embed cross-departmental accountability within the Programme for Government.

Unit 9, Ashfield Trading Estate,
Ashfield Road, Salisbury SP2 7HL

enquiries@trussell.org.uk

trussell.org.uk

Trussell is the operating name of The Trussell Trust a registered charity in England & Wales (1110522) and Scotland (SC044246).
Registered Limited Company in England & Wales (5434524).