South Cotswolds
Foodbank
Together with Trussell

South Cotswolds Food Poverty Report

April 2025 - March 2026

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Foreword

This report on food insecurity in the South Cotswolds (April 2025-March 2026) shows that although demand for emergency food support is declining, significant, persistent challenges remain.

Encouragingly, fewer households are relying on repeat support, and more are accessing help earlier, reflecting improved access to advice, financial support, and community partnerships.

However, the data also shows that need remains widespread, complex, and often hidden.

Food insecurity is still widespread, often affecting working households who struggle with rising living costs, health issues, and financial instability.

For others, hardship is not a short-term crisis but a recurrent or long-term reality, driven by structural issues that are not easily resolved.

This report also highlights inequalities in access, particularly in rural areas where barriers like transport and limited visibility mean some needs may go unmet.

It is in response to this that we have adopted the name South Cotswolds Foodbank, to better reflect the communities we serve and to ensure that people beyond Cirencester recognise that local support is available to them.

Overall, the findings stress that reducing food bank use requires long-term solutions, such as improving income, access to support, and addressing structural issues, not just crisis response.

Progress has been made, but it is fragile. Continued uncertainty around the cost of living—particularly the trajectory of energy prices—has the potential to place renewed pressure on already stretched household budgets, tipping some back into crisis.

Sustaining and building on this progress will require ongoing collaboration across local organisations, services, and communities.

Anton

Anton Wynn
Head of South Cotswolds Foodbank

Key findings:

- 33% of parcels were distributed to households who had some form of income, including from employment. The high cost-of-living is a key factor for houses with income turning to food banks.
- 37% of referrals involved health-related issues, with many clients struggling to access or maintain disability benefits.
- School Holidays continue to put pressure on family households, resulting in Foodbank support. This is despite free school meals being provided for some holidays in 2025/26
- 68% of referrals indicated that unexpected expense and rising costs were a contributing factor, often tipping already working households into hardship.
- The report continues to identify gaps in service provision, particularly in rural areas

Data and methodology

This report draws on multiple data sources to provide a picture of need across the Southern part of the Cotswold District

A combined data is available as a separate sheet on our website.

This ensures transparency and enables further exploration of how geography, housing distribution, and access to services shape the patterns described in this report.

The Year in Numbers

3,257
emergency food parcels provided

from 3,517 in 2024/25

1,441
food parcels provided for children

from 1,580 in 2024/25

93
agencies referring to provide support to their clients

from 89 in 2024/25

2.2
The average number of food vouchers per household

from 2.49 in 2024/25

2.8%
Reduction on previous year's number of households needing food aid

38%
of clients were people needing to use the Foodbank for the first time

from 36% in 2024/25

Over
£850,000
in financial resilience building support to restructure debt, write off debt and provide other financial gains delivered

from £750,000 in 2024/25

Other Local Support Available Includes:

Cirencester Pantry

The Churn Project

Cirencester Roundtable

Cirencester Long Table

Food For Thought

Food poverty in the South Cotswolds: overview

Demand for emergency food has declined over the past year, continuing a downward trend in referrals over the past four years, **but need remains widespread.**

Households are less likely to require repeated support, while **more are accessing help for the first time.**

Fewer referrals, but more households supported

While overall referrals have fallen, the number of households supported has increased compared to the previous year.

This reflects that households are continuing to experience food insecurity but they are less likely to require repeated support.

1,190
referrals

3,257
food parcels

2.2 visits
per household

Increasing number of new households

Despite improvements in reducing repeat use, a substantial proportion of households accessing the Foodbank are doing so for the first time.

38% of households referred during the year had not needed to use a Trussell Foodbank before.

Impact of resilience-building support

Reduced repeat use reflects sustained investment in helping households stabilise their finances and circumstances This resilience building has been supported by:

- Family engagement in early years and schools, identifying issues earlier
- Access to Citizens Advice for debt, benefits and financial guidance
- Ongoing support from Foodbank staff and volunteers

These interventions help households recover more quickly and avoid prolonged crisis. They have contributed to significant financial stability gains (over 1.5 million since April 2024) through improved benefit uptake, debt relief and emergency support.

As part of South Cotswolds Foodbanks service, resilience-building was provided through the Family Engagement Worker, funded Citizens Advice team, and the Support Services manager, which combines direct client support with coordinated volunteer signposting.

The role of wider support systems

Foodbank demand has also been influenced by the continued availability of wider community and statutory support.

Programmes such as the Household Support Fund, distributed by organisations such as Citizens Advice, Warm and Well and Age UK, provided direct financial and practical assistance to households, reducing the need for emergency food support in some cases.

The household support fund also funded free school meal provision which resulted in a slowing of referrals to the Foodbank from local schools.

Living on the Edge: Repeated and Returning Use of Foodbank Support

Food banks were originally established to provide short-term support during sudden crisis. However, long-term analysis of South Cotswolds Foodbank data shows a more complex reality that has developed over many years.

While many households need support only briefly, many rely on the foodbank across multiple years. These patterns point to households trapped in poverty or experiencing fragile recovery, where even minor shocks push people back into needing support rather than building resilience.

It is important to note that the Foodbank provides time-limited emergency help in each period of need; repeated use across multiple years reflects recurring crises rather than continuous provision.

11.5% used the Foodbank every year for five consecutive years

29% required support for three consecutive years

2.2% relied on support for seven years

These households represent the clearest example of long-term, unresolved hardship. Their consistent use suggests that underlying drivers of poverty, such as health challenges, disability, or severely constrained incomes, have not been addressed by short-term interventions, and that efforts to build financial resilience have not enabled them to afford essentials.

In these cases, emergency food is not stabilising situations but compensating for persistent structural pressures.

Alongside this group is a larger population of households who return intermittently over multiple years. This pattern shows that many can cope for periods, often through extraordinary effort, informal support, or temporary improvements in circumstances. However, their situation remains precarious.

When new pressures arise, such as worsening health, benefit delays, unexpected costs, or loss of informal care, they are pulled back into hardship and require support again.

These findings challenge the idea that people move quickly from crisis to stability. Instead, many live close to the edge, with little buffer to absorb shocks. They risk being overlooked: not in constant crisis, yet repeatedly falling back into it.

Core Reasons for Long Term Use

Looking specifically at long-term users, health consistently emerges as a key driver.

Households using the foodbank over many years are disproportionately affected by ongoing or worsening physical and mental health conditions, including disability.

These limit the ability to work reliably, increase costs, and entangle families in complex benefit processes. They also slow recovery and increase the likelihood of returning after periods of apparent stability.

While financial pressures, particularly debt and rising costs, remain central, for long-term users these are often driven by underlying health issues rather than separate from them.

Together, these findings suggest that multi-year foodbank use, whether continuous or intermittent, reflects systemic failure rather than individual failure. People are not returning because they have not tried hard enough; they are returning because systems intended to provide security, healthcare, benefits, housing, and work do not reliably support them when life becomes more complex.

Recognising these patterns is essential to designing responses that go beyond short-term relief. Ending the need for food banks requires approaches that address health, income security, and debt together, and that support households not only at the point of crisis but through the long process of recovery.

Who is at Risk of Hunger in the South Cotswolds?

Single Adult Households Require Most Foodbank Support

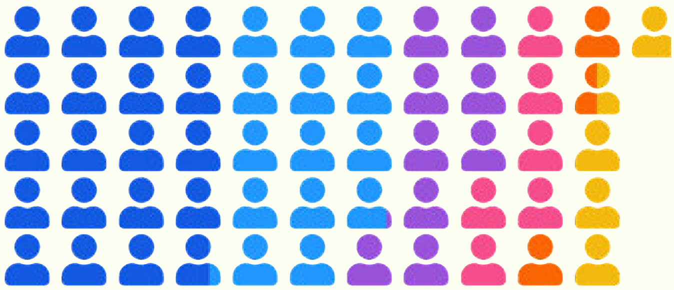
Single-adult households account for 62% of referrals, making them the most vulnerable group. Without a second income or shared costs, even small financial changes can trigger crisis.

In these households there is no opportunity to share housing, energy or food costs, and no second income or source of support to absorb financial shocks.

Single parents form a further significant group. Like single-adult households without children, they are reliant on a single income but face the additional costs of raising children. Together, these groups highlight that the absence of a second adult, and therefore a lack of financial and practical buffering, is a defining feature of food insecurity locally. Women make up the majority of people supported in this group.

However, this pattern reverses when focusing specifically on people living alone. Among single-adult households, men are slightly more likely to require food bank support than women, accounting for around 56% of households.

Household Composition



Single Adult, Single Adult with Children
Two or more Adult with 2 or less Children
Two or more Adults with 3 or more Children
Couple Household with no Children
Multi Adult Household with no Children

Trussell Data Collection System defines children as being 16 years of age or under

Emma's Story

When life changed suddenly, it didn't take away Emma's determination to keep moving forward.
In summer 2024, her life shifted overnight following a serious brain injury. Until then, she had been working, raising her son, and living independently.

> I had worked all my adult life and had a well paid job," she says. "I had my own company car, holidays abroad, a good social life. I was enjoying my best life, and so was my son

In the months that followed, Emma spent weeks in hospital, her son living with his father while she recovered. While still regaining her strength, she was made redundant. Financial pressure quickly mounted, and like many facing sudden crisis, she relied on credit to get by.
As her health improved, Emma began rebuilding, forming a new blended family. But beneath the surface, financial pressures grew:

> "I was very broken financially and in debt up to my eyeballs... hoping it would go away. Of course it didn't. "

Eventually, the situation became acute with baliffs at the door. At this point, South Cotswolds Foodbank became vital. With support from Sharon, its Family Engagement Worker, Emma received help not only with food, but with debt, benefits, and navigating complex systems.

> "Sharon was really good at prompting me... What might take someone two weeks can take me four—but she understands that."

Following a successful tribunal, Emma reflected

> "This is life-changing for us... We can finally breathe."

Today, the family is rebuilding.

> "We will manage, we will keep going, and we will succeed."

This case study is drawn from a diary account written by the individual, shared with permission. Names and identifying details have been changed to protect anonymity.

Who is at Risk of Hunger in the South Cotswolds? cont...

Families and number of children

Two-adult families make up 25% of referred households, with most families accessing support having one or two children rather than larger family sizes.

This shows that even relatively small families struggle to meet basic needs, particularly during periods of higher costs such as school holidays. It highlights that the costs of raising children, including food, energy, childcare and transport, are a key driver of need.

Whilst larger families are often recognised as having a higher poverty risk, this shows that families with fewer children are also increasingly unable to meet essential living costs.

The Working Poor

Food insecurity is not limited to those out of work. 33% of parcels were distributed to households who had some form of income, either through employment alone or alongside benefits.

These households are more likely to cite rising costs of essentials and unexpected expenses as drivers of crisis, rather than benefit-related issues. Overall, 68% reported increased costs or unexpected expenses as a contributing factor, making this the most widespread issue.

It highlights a growing gap between earnings and the cost of living, leaving many working households unable to meet basic needs. This is particularly evident in rural areas such as the South Cotswolds, where transport, housing and energy costs are high and often unavoidable.

For some households that are earning while receiving means-tested benefits, recent increases in the living wage, though welcome, do not necessarily improve living standards. As income rises, benefit entitlement is reduced, offsetting gains and often leaving households no better off, especially alongside rising essential costs.

Where and when does Food Insecurity Peak?

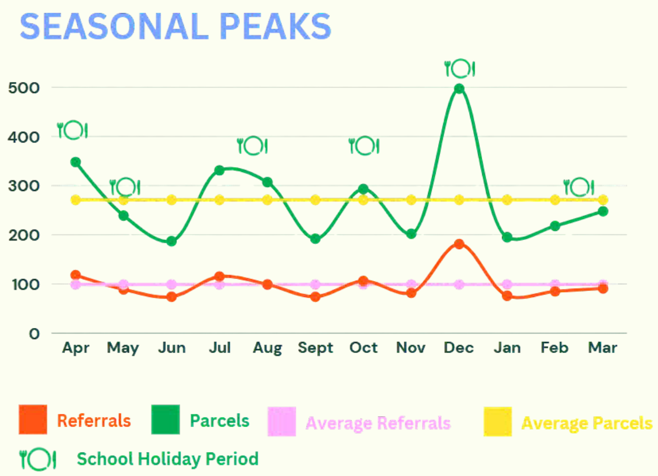
Seasonal pressures drive food insecurity

Food bank demand varies across the year, with clear peaks linked to periods of increased household expenditure, the most pronounced occurring in December.

This peak is 67% higher than the monthly average and over double the level seen in January. It shows that demand around Christmas rises disproportionately compared to other winter months and is likely driven by seasonal financial pressures rather than general winter conditions.

There is also clear evidence of increased demand during school holiday periods, with referrals rising at the start of holidays and remaining elevated compared to surrounding months.

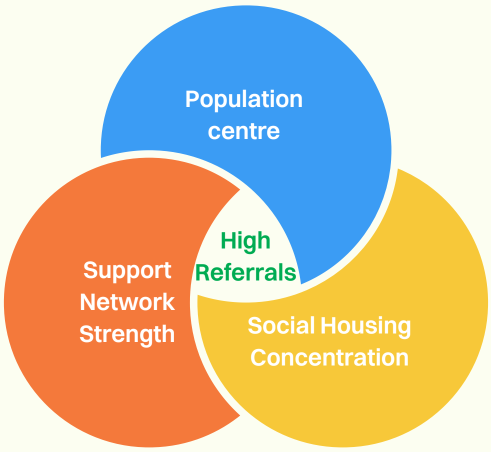
These peaks occur despite additional free school meal holiday support being provided through supermarket vouchers.



Geographic distribution of demand

Demand for food bank support is not evenly distributed, with a clear concentration in certain urban centres. This reflects not only higher population density, but greater access to referral agencies and support networks.

Census data shows a link between social rented housing and food bank referrals. However, this relationship is shaped by access to services as much as by need itself. Therefore, referrals are highest where social housing, population centres, and strong referral networks coincide.



In these areas, support is more visible and accessible, increasing the likelihood that existing need results in a referral.

In contrast, rural wards can mask this relationship. For example, Lechlade, Kempsford & Fairford South has a substantial number of social rented households, but relatively lower referrals.

This reflects dispersed geography, fewer embedded referral partners, and greater transport barriers. When adjusted for housing levels, this suggests underrepresentation rather than lower need.

Overall, the evidence indicates that social housing signals where need is likely to exist, while access to referral pathways determines whether that need is expressed.

It should be noted that the foodbank does not collect data on housing tenure. While there is a clear correlation at ward level, it is not possible to confirm that referred households are themselves in social housing. Pressures in the private rented sector may therefore be underrepresented.

This highlights the risk of hidden need in less accessible rural areas, even where underlying vulnerability is similar.

What are the drivers of hunger in the South Cotswolds?

People reaching tipping points due to unexpected expenses and financial fragility

Food insecurity is typically driven by overlapping pressures rather than a single issue. Financial strain, health, debt, housing costs and access to transport combine to increase vulnerability.

Five key drivers emerge consistently across the data*:

- Rising living costs & earnings-related issues
- Health and disability
- Debt
- Housing costs
- Transport and rural access

Financial pressure and the cost of essentials

The most widely reported driver of food insecurity is the rising cost of essential living expenses.

- 68% of households cited increased costs or unexpected expenses as a contributing factor.
- 33% of households had some form of income, indicating that earnings alone do not protect against severe food insecurity.

Health and disability

Health conditions are a significant and consistent factor. Foodbank data shows health issues were cited as affecting 37% of households, while Citizens Advice reports that 62% of supported clients have a disability or long-term condition.

This consistency suggests that health-related challenges are a major contributor to financial vulnerability. They can:

- reduce the ability to earn
- increase day-to-day living costs
- increase reliance on support services
- make recovery slower and less stable

*Referrers can select more than one reason for referral

What are the drivers of hunger in the South Cotswolds? cont...

For many households, these challenges coincide with financial pressures, increasing the likelihood of crisis and repeat need.

Debt and financial resilience

Debt is widespread and often marks the point at which financial pressure becomes unmanageable. 34% of referrals reported debt as a contributing factor.

These debts are primarily linked to essential costs such as energy, council tax and rent. This indicates that households are prioritising core expenditure but still cannot meet ongoing costs, leading to arrears and instability.

Housing costs

Housing costs are a key driver of both financial pressure and debt. While Citizens Advice supported 11% of clients with direct housing issues, housing pressures are also reflected indirectly through rent and council tax arrears.

This shows the central role housing plays in household finances, often limiting flexibility to manage other essential costs.

Transport and rural access

In a rural area such as the South Cotswolds, transport is a key structural factor.

Whilst not tracked as a referral reason, Foodbank surveys highlight the importance of access to a vehicle.

The barrier is not simply driving, but the cost of learning, purchasing and maintaining a car.

Without access to a vehicle, households face:

- reduced access to employment
- higher travel costs where alternatives are limited
- greater difficulty accessing support

This adds financial pressure and increases isolation, particularly in rural areas.

Bethany has two young children and lives in Kemble, 6 miles from Cirencester. The local store is great for food "top-ups", but expensive. Supermarket home deliveries are costly and a once a week food drop impractical when you are eking out a tight budget.

She doesn't drive, and the logistics of food shopping, preschool care and NHS appointments are exhausting. Booking a return taxi to Aldi would eat up most of her weekly food budget.

"I book the [dial-a-ride] bus two weeks in advance. My main focus is: can I get a bus? Then: how long have I got in town?"

(Source: The Guardian, 18 May 2026)

Priorities to Address Risks

While demand for emergency food has reduced in recent years, the evidence in this report highlights a number of risks that may limit further progress.

Addressing these risks will be critical to sustaining reductions in food bank use and supporting households to remain financially stable.

Affordability and income security

The cost of essential living expenses remains a key driver of food insecurity, cited by 68% of households.

Ongoing uncertainty around the continuation of targeted or subsidised tariffs, particularly for energy, creates a risk that households on low incomes will face rising costs without corresponding increases in income.

We therefore ask for:

- continued access to affordable or protected tariffs for low-income households
- support that recognises ongoing financial pressure, not just short-term crisis
- regular review of provision to ensure households with repeated or persistent need are not excluded

Aligning crisis response with long-term need

The introduction of the Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF), with its focus on reducing reliance on emergency provision and improving long-term outcomes, is strongly welcomed.

However, the evidence in this report shows that food insecurity is often persistent rather than short term, reflecting structural gaps between income and essential costs. This creates a risk that households experiencing ongoing hardship may fall outside a strict "crisis" definition.

We therefore ask for:

- collaboration with local delivery organisations, especially existing crisis and resilience organisations, in shaping and delivering the CRF
- design of support that responds to ongoing financial pressure, not only short-term shocks
- regular review to ensure repeated or persistent need is effectively supported

Priorities to Address Risks

Preparing for predictable periods of increased pressure

Demand shows clear seasonal variation, with consistent increases during predictable periods such as December and school holidays. These peaks are driven by known periods of higher expenditure, not unexpected events alone.

This highlights the importance of supporting households to prepare for recurring pressure points.

There is also a strong case for reviewing holiday provision in rural areas, especially with the removal of free school meal holiday vouchers

Current funding and delivery of the Holiday Activity and Food Programme (HAF) can fall short in accessibility and reach, particularly in dispersed communities. In addition, provision is limited to school-aged children, leaving pre-school families without equivalent support despite facing similar seasonal cost pressures.

We recommend

- provision of early engagement and budgeting support ahead of known high-cost periods
- household support to plan for both essential costs and participation in key social and cultural events
- explore sustainable approaches to holiday support, alongside engagement with families on what works
- review and strengthen holiday support provision to ensure it is accessible in rural areas and inclusive of both school-aged and pre-school children

Working together to sustain progress

Reductions in repeat food bank use reflect the impact of coordinated support, early intervention, and investment in resilience.

Sustaining this progress will depend on strong collaboration between local authorities, advice services, and community organisations, alongside better integration between crisis response and longer-term support.

Find out more & support our work

South Cotswolds Foodbank is committed in working towards a community without the need for a food bank, where everyone has the essentials to live and the support they need to thrive.

We can't do this alone.

If you would like to find out more about our work, partner with us, or support what we do, we would love to hear from you.

Get in touch

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