

Emergency food parcel distribution in Northern Ireland 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024



Background

This factsheet reports on the number of emergency food parcels distributed by food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland during the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 inclusive (2023/24). During this time period, food parcels were distributed from 51 locations across Northern Ireland, as part of the Trussell Trust network.¹

It is important to recognise that data from food banks in the Trussell Trust network is just one part of the picture of need across Northern Ireland. There is a wide range of charitable food aid that will be supporting people that is not captured in this parcel data. There are also many people who are severely food insecure who do not receive support from food banks.²

Key facts from the 2023/24 statistics

1. Record number of food parcels distributed by food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland as people struggle to get by on low incomes

Food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland distributed over 90,300 emergency food parcels in 2023/24. This is the highest number of parcels that the network in Northern Ireland has ever distributed and represents a 11% increase on 2022/23 levels. This percentage increase is higher than the respective figures for England (5%), Scotland (-0.1%), and Wales (1%).

This is also the first time that food banks in the Trussell Trust network provided over 38,000 parcels for children in this period, with record levels of need seen for both children and adults in the last year.

These figures represent more than a doubling (143% increase) in the number of parcels distributed five years ago in 2018/19 and they are far above the levels seen before the rapid increases in the cost of living in 2021/22 (62,600 parcels). This growth in need is higher for children, with the number of parcels provided for them increasing by 151% over the five-year period between 2018/19 and 2023/24.

¹ The locations that food banks distributed parcels from are not counted at a point in time. They are instead counted if they have distributed food parcels at any stage during the time period. Some will have opened, and some will have closed during this period. For reference there were 51 locations in the previous year.

² The Hunger in Northern Ireland research, produced by the Trussell Trust in partnership with Ipsos, reported that in the 12 months to mid-2022 one in seven (16%) people across Northern Ireland had experienced food insecurity, equating to an estimated 354,000. However, more than two thirds (75%) of people experiencing food insecurity in Northern Ireland reported that they have not used any form of food aid in the last year.

See Hunger in Northern Ireland (2023), *The Trussell Trust and Ipsos*, <https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/hunger-in-the-uk/>

“It will only get worse, and eventually it will be normalised and the government will pretend it's normal, and no one will do anything about it.”

–Person claiming Universal Credit in Northern Ireland interviewed in February 2024.³

The significant increases in need seen over the last few years are linked to the soaring cost of living for people across Northern Ireland and the fact that people’s incomes (especially from social security) have failed to keep up with these costs. Inflation as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) started at 8.7% in April 2023 and remained higher than 4% for much of the year until falling to 3.2% in March 2024.

The cost of the essentials has continued to rise in this period. Food inflation was at 19% in April 2023 and remained above 10% for much of the year until falling to 4% as of March 2024. While it is welcome that inflation is slowing, the continued high inflation in the cost of essentials, particularly food, continues to make it harder for families to make ends meet. The cumulative impact of very high levels of food inflation alone over the last few years means food prices are 24% higher in March 2024 than March 2022.⁴

Our most recent evidence collected in February 2024 highlights that despite the fall in inflation far too many people are having to go without the essentials. When surveyed in February more than half (53%) of people receiving Universal Credit in Northern Ireland said that they had run out of food in the last month and couldn’t afford more.⁵

The level of need over the last year has placed a significant strain on food banks across the UK. We are hearing multiple examples of food banks placing temporary limits on the number of referrals a person can access, in order to manage the food bank’s resources and capacity at a time of unprecedented need. The Trussell Trust are doing all we can to support food banks through this, as they strive to respond as fully as they can to the need in front of them. We therefore know that the data reported for this period is likely to be only part of the picture of actual need in communities.

These levels of need are part of a longer-term trend which pre-dates the cost of living crisis, and even the COVID-19 pandemic. While these two events have had a major impact on food bank need, they are not the main cause. Rather, they have exposed and exacerbated a longer-term crisis: that of a weakened social security system that is unable to protect people from the most severe forms of hardship, forcing more people to the doors of food banks.

³ An online survey by YouGov of 1,370 adults (16+) including 59 in Northern Ireland currently claiming Universal Credit. Fieldwork was undertaken 18 January – 5 February 2024.

⁴ Consumer price inflation, UK: March 2024 (2024), *Office for National Statistics*, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/bulletins/consumerpriceinflation/march2024#:~:text=The%20core%20CPIH%20annual%20inflation,in%20the%20constructed%20historical%20series.>

⁵ An online survey by YouGov of 1,370 adults (16+) including 59 in Northern Ireland currently claiming Universal Credit. Fieldwork was undertaken 18 January – 5 February 2024.

Table 1: Number of parcels distributed in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland

	2023/24	2022/23	% change from 2022/23	2018/19	% change from 2018/19
For adults	51,791	46,100	12%	21,904	136%
For children	38,584	35,635	8%	15,357	151%
Total	90,375	81,735	11%	37,261	143%

2. Majority of support provided by food banks in Northern Ireland is for families with children

Overall, nearly three quarters (74%) of the support provided by food banks in Northern Ireland in the previous year was for families with children. This is significantly higher than the UK average of 65%. Families with three or more children in Northern Ireland are especially likely to face severe hardship, with 37% of parcels provided by food banks in the last year being distributed to families with three or more children. This is again higher than the UK average (30%).

The change in the scale of need is particularly pronounced for these families. Since 2018/19 the number of parcels provided in Northern Ireland for families with three or more children has increased by 127% compared to an 111% increase for families living without any children.

In total food banks in Northern Ireland supported over 14,500 families with emergency food in 2023/24, including 16,900 children and 22,900 adults.⁶

“We’re seeing, particularly over last summer, we’re seeing families and bigger size families maybe 3 or 4 children.”

– Karen, Foodbank Manager at Foyle Foodbank in the Trussell Trust network

3. Pension age households are increasingly likely to need to use a food bank

The prevalence of poverty among pensioners across Northern Ireland is far lower than the working age population and just 5% of the support provided by food banks in Northern Ireland in the last year was for pension age households. This reflects one of the UK’s most striking success stories in recent decades - which has been the enormous reduction in pensioner poverty. In Northern Ireland 20% of pensioners were living in poverty in 2003/05. By 2017/19 this had fallen to 12%.⁷ This change highlights just how much difference concerted action can make to achieving poverty reduction.

However, this has started to go into reverse, with poverty rates for pensioners in Northern Ireland rising to 14% most recently, and this is likely to worsen in the coming years without action.

⁶ At the Trussell Trust we define any household as a family, this means that when we talk about families they could be individuals living alone, single parents, or multi-generational households.

⁷ Pensioner Poverty (2024), Welsh Government, <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Sustainable-Development/Sustainable-Development-Indicators/Pensioner-poverty>

Our own figures show that food bank support for pensioner households in Northern Ireland is rapidly increasing. Between 2018/19 and 2023/24 food bank support for these households has almost trebled (a 194% increase), compared to an 103% rise amongst households without someone of pension age.

These figures are similar to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s (JRF) recent research which found a sharp increase in the number of pensioners facing destitution across the UK– up by 254% since 2019.⁸ Although as with the proportion of parcels going to pensioner households, pensioners still make up a relatively small part of the total destitute population (6% as compared with being 21% of the general population).

These figures provide an early warning sign that the recent increase in poverty among pensioner households is leading to significant increases in severe hardship amongst this group, forcing them to turn to food banks.

4. Food bank support disproportionately provided for children of all ages

The distribution of support provided to different age groups across Northern Ireland is significantly different from the distribution of people across the general population. The table below highlights that the support provided by food banks is disproportionately for children. One in eight (12%) food parcels were provided for children aged 0-4 in the last year, despite children of this age accounting for just 6% of the Northern Irish population. Similarly, 19% of parcels were provided for children aged 5 to 11, with this age group making up 9% of the Northern Irish population.

There is a concurrent under-representation of support for people aged 65 and over. Just 3% of the support provided by food banks is for people aged 65 and over, despite pensioners making up 18% of the Northern Irish population. However, as highlighted above, this proportion is likely to shift with the significant growth in need from pension age households in recent years.

Table 2: Comparison of Food Bank Support and Population Proportions by Age Group in Northern Ireland

	Proportion of all parcels by age group (2023/24)	Comparative population proportions (June 2022 estimates for Northern Ireland)
0-4	12%	6%
5 to 11	19%	9%
12 to 16	12%	7%
17 to 24	10%	9%
25 to 64	45%	52%
65+	3%	18%

Population data source: ONS Mid-Year Population Estimates, June 2022⁹

⁸ Destitution in the UK (2023), Joseph Rowntree Foundation, <https://www.irf.org.uk/deep-poverty-and-destitution>

⁹ Population estimates for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: Mid-2022 (2024), Office for National Statistics, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/population-estimates-for-the-uk-england-wales-scotland-and-northern-ireland-mid-2022>

5. People most commonly need support from a food bank because their income is insufficient to meet the cost of essentials

In the last year people who have needed to turn to a food bank in Northern Ireland have most commonly (65%) been referred because their income is insufficient - leaving them unable to afford the cost of essentials and / or driving them into unmanageable debt.

This has been clear in our operational data for many years. It was also reflected in our landmark Hunger in Northern Ireland research published in 2023, which found that the vast majority of people referred to food banks were destitute, meaning they had an income so low that they couldn't afford essential items.¹⁰

“This is down to low incomes, poorly paid jobs and a benefits system that's not fit for purpose.”

– Karen, Foodbank Manager at Foyle Foodbank when asked what messages they would like to see communicated

Problems with health are reported in one in five (21%) referrals to food banks - with health conditions driving up costs for households and making it difficult to find or sustain employment. Our recent research found that the design of the disability benefits system was putting disabled people in impossible situations and leaving them with too little income to cover the essentials.¹¹ The majority (61%) of people referred to food banks in Northern Ireland are disabled, this is almost double the proportion of people who are disabled across the general population in Northern Ireland (30%).¹²

Issues with benefits such as long waits, delays, or sanctions affect a significant minority of referrals to food banks (15%). This is illustrative of significant problems with the design and delivery of the social security system which far too often leaves people waiting for payments and unable to afford essentials.

The impact of life events is also evidenced in the data with 5% of people being referred due to being insecurely housed (including being made homeless), and others seeing changes to their personal circumstance (6%) such as splitting from a partner.

People in Northern Ireland are nearly twice as likely to be referred to food banks due their immigration status (9%) than the average across the whole of the UK (5%).

¹⁰ Hunger in Northern Ireland (2023), *The Trussell Trust and Ipsos*, <https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/hunger-in-the-uk/>

¹¹ Disability and financial hardship: How disability benefits contribute to the need for food banks in the UK (2023), *Biggs H, Wildman J, Hamid A and MacGregor A (Scottish Centre for Social Research)*, <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/10/Disability-Benefits-Research-Report.pdf>

¹² Hunger in Northern Ireland (2023), *The Trussell Trust and Ipsos*, <https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/hunger-in-the-uk/>

Table 3: Reasons for referral for people supported by food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland.

Reason for referral	% of referrals with reason selected
Income or debt	65%
Health	21%
Issue with benefits	15%
Immigration status	9%
Change in work hours or unemployment	8%
Change in personal circumstances	6%
Insecure housing	5%
Domestic abuse	2%

This data was multiple choice – referral partners could select up to four responses. Data has been recoded to combine categories.

Our data highlights that different types of families in Northern Ireland need to turn to food banks for different reasons. In the last year people living without children were far more likely to be referred due to health reasons (26% vs. 15% for households with children), or because they were insecurely housed (7% vs. 3%).

In comparison, people living with children were more likely to be referred due to issues with their income or their levels of debt (72% vs. 58% of people not living with children).

The experiences of pensioner households are somewhat distinct. They are more likely to be referred due to issues with their health (30% vs. 20% of non-pensioner households) and are less likely to be referred due to issues with their benefits (9% vs. 15%) and due to their immigration status (3% vs. 10%).

Table 4: Reason for referral amongst different households types in Northern Ireland

Reason for referral	One or more children		Three or more children		One or more pension aged person	
	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Income or debt	58%	72%	63%	73%	64%	66%
Health	26%	15%	22%	14%	20%	30%
Issues with benefits	16%	14%	15%	15%	15%	9%
Immigration status	11%	7%	9%	9%	10%	3%
Insecure housing	7%	3%	5%	4%	5%	2%
Change in Personal Circumstances	6%	7%	6%	7%	7%	6%
Change in work hours or unemployment	6%	10%	8%	9%	8%	4%
Domestic abuse	1%	2%	2%	2%	2%	0%

Across all households in Northern Ireland, the most common reason for referral was due to issues with income and debt levels. The vital role of the social security system in driving these trends is clear from the fact that the majority (77%) of people referred to food banks were reported to solely

have income from the social security system, with a further 7% having earned income as well as income from social security.

A minority of referred people (12%) have no income at all or do not have sufficient access to any income.

Table 5: Source of income for people referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland

Source of income	% of referrals
Benefits, not earning	77%
Earnings and benefits	7%
Earning, no benefits	4%
No income or insufficient access to it	12%

There is some variation in the income sources for particular households in Northern Ireland. People living with children are more likely to report earned income (16% vs. 6% for people not living with children). Seven in ten (74%) people living in households with one or more children rely solely on benefits for their income compared to 80% of households without children.

The reasons why someone was referred to a food bank also vary depending on the household's source of income. Households who report that they were receiving earned income and benefits (22%) or solely earned income (20%) are correspondingly more likely (than households solely receiving benefits – 6%) to be referred due to a change in their work hours or unemployment. Highlighting the impact of work-related experiences for a significant number of households.

Households who report that they have no income or limited access to it have distinct reasons for referral. The most common of these is issues with their immigration status (49%) which is far higher than the average across Northern Ireland (9%).

Table 6: Reason for referral amongst households with different income sources

Reason for referral	Source of income			
	Benefits, not earning	Earning and benefits	Earning, no benefits	No income or insufficient access to it
Income or debt	66%	83%	78%	36%
Health	23%	18%	19%	11%
Issue with benefits	14%	14%	13%	20%
Immigration status	5%	1%	8%	49%
Change in work hours or unemployment	6%	22%	20%	9%
Change in personal circumstances	6%	9%	8%	5%
Insecure housing	5%	2%	4%	9%
Domestic abuse	2%	2%	1%	1%

6. There is consistent evidence that boosting people's incomes through the Cost of Living Payments has offered some short-term respite for people on low incomes in Northern Ireland, however levels of need quickly increased again

Through 2023/24, the UK government provided a series Cost of Living Payments to people. The highest value payments were issued to people claiming means tested benefits and people claiming Tax Credits in Spring 2023 (£301 between 25th April and 17th May), Autumn 2023 (£300 between 31st October and 19th November) and Winter 2024 (£299 between 6th – 22nd February). On reviewing these payments our data shows a consistent trend of a short significant reduction in the need for food banks in the Trussell Trust network across Northern Ireland.

I am worried as the gov has said this next payment is the last one don't know how am going to (cope) the rest of the year knowing there is no more help and things not likely to improve any

–Person claiming Universal Credit in Northern Ireland interviewed in February 2024.¹³

During the period when the Spring 2023 £301 Cost of Living Payment was paid out, food banks in our network in Northern Ireland distributed 1,300 parcels on average per week to people facing financial hardship. This represented a 17% decrease from the three previous weeks when 1,600 parcels were distributed on average per week.

This respite was short-lived, however, lasting only between one and three weeks. The number of parcels distributed in the following four weeks after the payments increased by 12% to 1,500 on average per week.

The impact of the Autumn 2023 payment was smaller seeing a 2% decrease in the average weekly number of parcels while the payment was paid out - compared to the previous three weeks. As people went into the winter there was also a more pronounced bounce back in need. In the three weeks after the payment was distributed food banks provided 2,200 parcels on average per week to people facing financial hardship. This represented a 28% increase on the period the payments were distributed.

The final late Winter 2024 payment saw the biggest percentage decrease – this may, in part, be due to it coinciding with the easing off of the rate of inflation. Food banks distributed 1,400 parcels on average per week in the period the payments were being distributed, a 19% decrease compared to the average of the preceding three weeks. As with the other payments there was still an increase following the payment – of 6% in the three weeks following the period the payment was in place.

¹³ An online survey by YouGov of 1,370 adults (16+) including 59 in Northern Ireland currently claiming Universal Credit. Fieldwork was undertaken 18 January – 5 February 2024.

7. 23,700 people were forced to use a food bank in Northern Ireland for the first time in 2023/24

“Last summer was busy for us, we had people using us for the first time, particularly families. There was a holiday payment support removed from families before last summer so we were prepared for that...but it was busier than what I expected.”

Karen, Foodbank Manager at Foyle Foodbank in the Trussell Trust network

In 2023/24, 9,200 families¹⁴ have been forced to turn to food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland for the first time, including 23,700 people. This represents a slight (2%) increase on the number of families having to turn to food banks for the first time in the same period last year. It is a 50% increase in the number of families using a food bank in the network for the first time compared to the same period in 2018/19.¹⁵

This reflects the long-term rise in levels of deep poverty, compounded by increasing numbers of people experiencing financial hardship due to the cost of living crisis. The latest study on destitution (the most severe form of hardship) by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) finds that destitution was intensifying in the UK in the years running up to the pandemic, with the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis then compounding existing problems linked to a decade of cuts and freezes to social security. In 2022, approximately 3.8 million people experienced destitution in the UK, including around one million children. This is a 61% increase since 2019, and an increase of almost two-and-a-half-times (148%) compared to 2017.¹⁶

The incomes of people referred to a food bank for the first time in Northern Ireland differ from people who have been referred to a food bank previously. This potentially highlights slight differences in experiences and drivers of need for food banks. People referred to food banks for the first time are slightly more likely to report that they have no income or limited access to it (14% vs. 10% for people returning to a food bank). They are also less likely to report solely receiving benefits (72% vs. 80%).

Table 7: Income comparison between people with prior experience of using a food bank and people who used food bank for the first time in 2023/24

Source of income	First Time referral	People returning to a food bank
Benefits, not earning	72%	80%
Earning and benefits	8%	7%
Earning, no benefits	6%	4%
No income or insufficient access to it	14%	10%

¹⁴ At the Trussell Trust we define any household as a family, this means that when we talk about families they could be individuals living alone, single parents, or multi-generational households.

¹⁵ In 2018/19 6,100 families were forced to turn to a food bank for the first time, these families included 15,700 people.

¹⁶ Destitution in the UK 2023 (2023), *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/destitution-uk-2023>

People needing to turn to a food bank for the first time were more likely to be referred due to an issue with their benefits than people returning to a food bank (18% vs. 13%). This could highlight the initial impact of issues such as the wait for benefits, or a change in eligibility.

People were also more likely to be referred for reasons which could be classified as life events or shocks. For instance, people were also twice as likely to be referred due to issues relating to insecure housing (8% vs. 4%), due to domestic violence (3% vs. 1%), and due to changes to their personal circumstances (9% vs. 5%).

On the other hand, people with prior experience of using a food bank were more likely to be referred due to issues around income or debt than people who had used a food bank for the first time in 2023/24 (66% vs. 62%) – perhaps better reflecting the more chronic nature of their income situations.

Table 8: Reason for referral comparison between people with prior experience of using a food bank and people who used food bank for the first time in Northern Ireland in 2023/24

Reasons for referral	First Time referral	People returning to a food bank
Income or debt	62%	66%
Health	20%	21%
Issues with benefits	18%	13%
Immigration status	11%	8%
Change in work hours or unemployment	10%	7%
Change in Personal Circumstances	9%	5%
Insecure housing	8%	4%
Domestic abuse	3%	1%

8. Increases seen across England, Northern Ireland, and Wales since last year with a small decrease in Scotland

England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, all experienced increases in the distribution of emergency food parcels in 2023/24, when compared to the previous year. Northern Ireland experienced the largest percentage increase (11%), followed by England (5%), and Wales (1%). Food parcel distribution remained largely unchanged in Scotland on the previous year with a slight (0.1%) decrease. Looking over the last five years, Northern Ireland has experienced the largest percentage increases in the distribution of emergency food parcels since the same period five years ago (143%) with Scotland seeing the smallest increase (21%).

Table 9: Percentage change in number of parcels distributed in the Trussell Trust network by nation and region.

Nations and Regions	Percentage change from previous year (2022/23)	Percentage change from five years ago (2018/19)
Northern Ireland	11%	143%
United Kingdom	4%	94%
England	5%	109%
Scotland	-0.13%	21%
Wales	1%	61%

9. Food banks are doing everything possible to keep providing desperately needed support for people in their communities

Food bank staff and volunteers are providing a critical service supporting their communities and have repeatedly adapted their operational practices to meet the level and nature of need for food aid in their local areas.

Between April and September 2023, food banks across the UK, who historically have primarily relied upon donated food, had to spend an additional third as much on food as they did the previous year to meet the need they are seeing amongst people facing financial hardship. This follows on from the existing growth in purchasing food which was reported last year; when food banks were already spending twice as much as they did on food in 2021.¹⁷ So far this year donations have remained at similar levels to the previous year – however, because of the significant growth in need for food banks they are having to purchase more food than ever before. Some food banks in the network, as seen in the below quote, are facing the twin pressures of increasing unaffordability of food when purchasing it and decreasing donations.

Food banks in the Trussell Trust network provide additional support beyond emergency food provision to address the root causes of financial hardship in their communities. The growing majority of food banks are offering, or signposting to, debt advice and benefits advice. In total 290 food banks in the UK wide network offer financial inclusion services representing about 70% of the network. These services work alongside people to support them to maximise their income and ensure that people are receiving the correct benefit entitlement and are supported with managing debt. Despite this work across the food bank network to maximise people’s incomes, food banks continue to report that people across their communities do not have enough to afford the essentials.

¹⁷ The research is based on an online survey by the Trussell Trust of 184 food banks in the Trussell Trust network across the UK. Fieldwork was undertaken from the 30th of August – 1st October 2023 and the survey was distributed through multiple methods across the Trussell Trust food bank network.

“We also work in partnership with others to [support people], so we make referrals to quite a number of organisations...we provide longer term support...to address the reasons why they've come to the food bank and hopefully get them to a stage where they're back on their feet and they don't have to use us again in the future.”

– Karen, Foodbank Manager at Foyle Foodbank in the Trussell Trust network

Food banks continue to express grave concern about the levels of need and hardship across the communities that they are supporting. Both staff and volunteers continue to adapt, develop, and negotiate the challenges that have been thrown at their organisations over the last few years. With resilience, strength and compassion they continue to strive to support all people in need but there are fears that the long-term problem of social security payments being too low to cover essentials, and continued high levels of need will push some food banks to their limit and they may not be able to meet all of the need in their communities.

10. People across Northern Ireland are united in belief that food banks should not be needed

Food banks are stepping in to support people who can't afford to buy food, and other essentials for themselves. However, food banks are neither the right nor sustainable response to people going without essentials because their incomes are too low.

The Trussell Trust's long-term goal to end the need for food banks is one that has the support of the public. Polling by YouGov on behalf of the Trussell Trust suggests that the public are particularly concerned with issues related to poverty and hunger in the UK and the majority of people in Northern Ireland (79%) think that food banks should not be needed in the UK.¹⁸

When it comes to how poverty and hunger can be solved in the UK, polling suggests that the vast majority (87%) of people in Northern Ireland believe ensuring everyone has enough money for basic needs should be a high priority for the UK Government and that more action needs to be taken to better protect people from being unable to afford the essentials (81%). In addition, there is strong assertion from people in Northern Ireland that the Northern Ireland Executive are responsible for keeping people out of poverty in Northern Ireland (62%).

¹⁸ Polling undertaken by YouGov Plc. The total sample size in Northern Ireland was 139 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 5th and 19th of July 2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults in the UK.

What this means for policy at Stormont

The Northern Ireland Executive must choose to prioritise support for people facing financial hardship. **We urgently need the Northern Ireland Executive to:**

1. Deliver a budgeted anti-poverty strategy with clear interventions that will end the rising need for emergency food in Northern Ireland.

The NI Executive must implement recommendations¹⁹ for a fully-resourced Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland and also implement the wider suite of social inclusion strategies in line with commitments made under the “New Decade, New Approach” agreement²⁰.

2. Prioritise policies that will protect people from poverty and destitution, including the full implementation of recommendations from the reviews of welfare mitigations and discretionary support.

The Northern Ireland Executive should implement reforms that improve the adequacy and dignity offered by social security, including the full implementation of recommendations from the review of welfare mitigations²¹ - particularly resolving the five-week wait in universal credit and mitigating the two child limit.²² The Executive should also implement the recommendations from the review of Discretionary Support²³, and ensure this fund is adequately resourced

3. Ensure that free school meal payments during holiday periods are restored ahead of the summer

Since July 2020, families of 96,000 children eligible for free school meals in NI received £27 per child each fortnight during school holidays. The school holiday food payment scheme was ended by the Department for Education in March 2023.

4. Call on the UK Government to implement an Essentials Guarantee, to protect people in receipt of Universal Credit from going without essentials.

It is not right that anyone should need to use a food bank because they can't afford to eat and pay bills. However, our statistics show that food bank need is at an historic high.

This is a record to be ashamed of, and the public will judge the next government on whether it succeeds in reversing this tide. The majority (79%) of the UK public agree that poverty in the UK

¹⁹ Recommendations on the development of an Anti-Poverty Strategy (2022), *Members of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group*, https://www.nicva.org/sites/default/files/d7content/attachments-articles/recommendations_for_an_ni_anti-poverty_strategy_-_a_paper_from_members_of_the_aps_co_design_group_september_2022.pdf

²⁰ New Decade, New Approach (2020), *Julian Smith and Simon Coveney*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade_a_new_approach.pdf

²¹ Welfare Mitigations Review – Independent Advisory Panel Report (2022), *Department for Communities*, <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/welfare-mitigations-review-independent-advisory-panel-report>

²² Member Briefing (2023), *Cliff Edge Coalition NI*, <https://www.lawcentreni.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CEC-Full-Member-Briefing-May-2023-.pdf>

²³ Independent Review of Discretionary Support (2022), *Department for Communities*, <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-independent-review-of-discretionary-support-22.pdf>

is a big problem and a similar proportion (74%) believe that it is the UK government's responsibility to change this.²⁴

Such high levels of hardship are damaging our nation's health, holding back our economy, and harming the prospects of our young people. It is only through building a society where everyone can afford the essentials that we can unlock the potential in our communities.

People need to access food banks because they don't have enough money for the essentials. But all of this can change. We know what's needed to end the need for food banks, and we know that it is achievable if we make the right decisions.

What this means for policy at Westminster

Building a future without the need for food banks will require a UK-wide effort across all levels of government and society, but the UK Government has many of the powers to turn the tide of hardship facing our communities. [Our General Election manifesto](#) sets out the actions we urge all political parties to support, and our priorities for the next UK Government. These priorities are:

Establishing an Essentials Guarantee in the social security system, ensuring that people's incomes cover the cost of living, while supporting the wellbeing of everyone who needs its help. We can do this by:

- 1. establishing an Essentials Guarantee legal minimum in Universal Credit.** This would embed in legislation the principle that, at a minimum, Universal Credit should protect people from going without essentials, such as food and bills. This should be based on an independent process to regularly determine the Essentials Guarantee level, based on the cost of essentials. This proposal enjoys widespread support, with 72% of the general public in favour.³⁰
- 2. taking swift action to dramatically reduce the amount that the UK Government can claw back from people's Universal Credit payments through deductions.** Delivering an Essentials Guarantee should begin by introducing a protected minimum amount in the system at a starting level which would limit the amount that the Universal Credit standard allowance can be reduced by from the current 25% to 15%. Alongside this, debt repayments to central government should be capped at a maximum of 5%.

Everyone should be able to get the right support at the right time, especially when times are tough, through:

- 3. a long-term and cash-first approach to local crisis support,** to help councils deliver joined-up local support targeted at people lacking a financial buffer to manage unexpected costs..
- 4. a UK financial inclusion strategy that prioritises people facing destitution,** by ensuring that people on low incomes can access the advice and support they need on money matters, including social security eligibility and debt.

²⁴ Polling undertaken by YouGov Plc. The total sample size was 5,393 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 5th and 19th of July 2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults.

People must be supported in a way that reflects the reality of their lives, especially if they're facing the higher costs and barriers that may affect – for example – parents, carers, and disabled people, through:

- 5. delivering swift and accurate decisions about disability social security support for all applicants**, through increased operational capacity and expertise to conduct accurate, compassionate, and person-centred assessments.
- 6. an overhauled employment support offer**, underpinned by a new strengths-based approach to engagement supported by long-term funding to expand voluntary, specialist employment support, and a new framework for Jobcentre Plus outcomes that incentivise tailored support and effective job matching, rather than box-ticking.
- 7. removal of the caps and limits that have reduced the value of children's social security support**, by introducing a protected minimum amount in the system at a starting level which would mitigate the impact of the benefit cap, and by scrapping the two-child limit – helping to ensure that all members of a family are protected from going without essentials.

Everyone should have the security we all need to access opportunities and have hope for the future, through:

- 8. new workers' rights legislation** to ensure new rights to job security, effective enforcement of existing rights, predictable working hours, and flexible working from day one.
- 9. empowering communities by designing places, spaces, and public transport services which build connection** – and drawing on people's own expertise to do so. This should include a new community right to shape public services and social infrastructure, and resources to ensure people on the lowest incomes can participate.

Our statistics show that hardship is at record highs, and underline the risk that food banks are becoming a 'new normal' in communities the length and breadth of the UK. This is damaging our health, harming the prospects of young people, holding back our economy.

That is why we are calling on all party leaders to commit to building a future where no one needs a food bank, because we have a social security system that is fit for purpose and cross government action to ensure everyone has enough for the essentials.

Achieving this goal will require a UK-wide effort across all levels of government and society. UK Government action should be delivered alongside urgent action from governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and from local authorities, employers, charities and community organisations.

Because we know what's pushing people to food banks, we know the building blocks that are needed to end hunger for good. Putting these building blocks in place will lead us into a more hopeful future where everyone has the security of being able to afford the essentials, and we consign the need for food banks to history.