

Emergency food parcel distribution in the UK

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 during the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 inclusive (2023/24). During this time period, food parcels were distributed from 1,699 locations across the UK, 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 the UK. 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 as people struggle to get by on low incomes

Food banks in the Trussell Trust network distributed 3.12 million (3,121,404) emergency food parcels in 2023/24. This is the highest number of parcels that the network has ever distributed in a single year and represents a 4% increase on 2022/23.

Over 1.14 million (1,144,096) parcels for children and almost two million (1,977,308) food parcels for adults were distributed over this period. The number of parcels provided for children is largely unchanged from the record levels seen in the previous year,³ however parcels for adults saw a 7% increase on the previous year.

These figures represent an almost doubling (94% 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 (2.18 million parcels).

“It feels like since COVID we haven't stopped. It's been like go, go go, go, go, go, go, go, go. And it's been getting busier and busier with the cost of living crisis increasing, increasing people's need.”

– Project Manager, Swale Foodbank in the Trussell Trust network

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 1,636 locations in the same period in the previous year.

² The Hunger in the UK research, produced by the Trussell Trust in partnership with Ipsos, reported that in the 12 months to mid-2022 one in seven (14%) people across the UK had experienced food insecurity, equating to an estimated 11.3 million people. However, more than two thirds (71%) of people experiencing food insecurity reported that they have not used any form of food aid in the last year. Hunger in the UK (2022), *The Trussell Trust*, <https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/hunger-in-the-uk/>

³ An increase of 0.04% on the previous year (2022/23).

Table 1: Percentage change in number of parcels distributed in the Trussell Trust network by Nation and Region

	Percentage change from previous year (2022/23)	Percentage change from five years ago (2018/19)
United Kingdom	4%	94%
England	5%	109%
Scotland	-0.1%	21%
Northern Ireland	11%	143%
Wales	1%	61%

The significant increases in need seen over the last few years are linked to the soaring cost of living for people across the UK and the fact that people’s incomes (especially from social security) have failed to keep up with these costs. Inflation 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 19.1% 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 (55%) of people receiving Universal Credit said that they had run out of food in the last month and couldn’t afford more.⁵

“I skip meals and eat once a day, in the evening. I cannot afford personal grooming items. I’m constantly cold & hungry. I get ill with colds & headaches etc. I run out of money 2 weeks before pay day. I exist day to day, and hope I can continue to be able to work to stay afloat. Life is a constant struggle, that I’m starting to give up on the daily battle.”

– Person claiming Universal Credit interviewed in February 2024⁶

The level of need over the last year has placed a significant strain on food banks across the country. 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

⁴ Consumer price index, 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>.

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

⁶IBID

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.

The scale of need is part of a longer-term trend which pre-dates the cost of living crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. While these two events have had a major impact on food bank need, they are not the main cause - 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 bank.

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

Overall, nearly two thirds (65%) of the support provided by food banks in the previous year was for families with children. Families with three or more children are especially likely to face severe hardship, with 30% of parcels provided by food banks in the last year being distributed to families with three or more children.

The change in the scale of need is particularly pronounced for these families. Since 2018/19 the number of parcels provided for families with three or more children has more than doubled (106% increase) compared to an 86% increase for families living without any children.

In total, food banks supported almost half a million families with emergency food in 2023/24, including 453,000 children and 745,000 adults.⁷

“It makes me feel awful that I can’t provide basic things for my kids. It’s just degrading as a parent.”

– Person claiming Universal Credit interviewed in February 2024⁸

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

The prevalence of poverty among pensioners across the UK is far lower than the working-age population and just 6% of the support provided by food banks 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, from a high of 29% in 1998, falling to 13% in 2012.⁹ 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 rising to 18% most recently, and this is likely to worsen in the coming years without action.

Our own figures show that food bank support for pensioner households is rapidly increasing. Between 2018/19 and 2023/24 food bank support for these households has more than quadrupled – (an increase of 345%), compared to an 81% rise amongst households without someone of pension age. This mismatched increase in food parcel provision continued from 2022/23 to 2023/24 (27% vs 1%).

⁷ 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.

⁸ An online survey by YouGov of 1,370 adults (16+) currently claiming Universal Credit. Fieldwork was undertaken 18 January – 5 February 2024.

⁹ How do we defuse the pensioner poverty time bomb (2023), *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/savings-debt-and-assets/how-do-we-defuse-the-pensioner-poverty-time-bomb>

These findings are similar to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s recent research which found a sharp increase in the number of pensioners facing destitution – up by 254% since 2019.¹⁰ Although as with the proportion of parcels going to pensioner households, pensioners facing destitution still make up a relatively small part of the total destitute population (6% as compared with being 21% of the general population).

This evidence should 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 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 ten (10%) food parcels were provided for children aged 0-4 in the last year, despite children of this age accounting for just 5% of the UK population. Similarly, 16% of parcels were provided for children aged 5 to 11, with this age group making up 8% of the UK 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 19% of the UK 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 the UK

Age Bands	Proportion of all parcels by age group (2023/24)	Comparative population proportions (June 2022 estimates, UK)
0-4	10%	5%
5 to 11	16%	8%
12 to 16	11%	6%
17 to 24	9%	9%
25 to 64	51%	52%
65+	3%	19%

Population data source: ONS Mid-Year Population Estimates, June 2022¹¹

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 have most commonly (71%) 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 the UK research published in 2023, which found that the vast majority of people referred

¹⁰ Destitution in the UK (2023), Joseph Rowntree Foundation, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/deep-poverty-and-destitution>

¹¹ 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>

to food banks were destitute, meaning they had an income so low that they couldn't afford essential items.¹²

“We are seeing an increasing number of people struggling with debt. Benefits are failing to meet the basic cost of living and there are less financial help options available to help people, so underlying issues are taking longer to address.”

– Food bank in the Trussell Trust network¹³

Problems with health are reported in over one in five (22%) 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.¹⁴ The majority (69%) of people referred to food banks are disabled.¹⁵

Issues with benefits such as long waits, delays, or sanctions affect a significant minority of referrals to food banks (18%). 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 7% of people being referred due to being insecurely housed (including being made homeless), and others seeing changes to their personal circumstance (5%) such as splitting from a partner.

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

Reason for referral	% of referrals with reason selected
Income or debt	71%
Health	22%
Issue with benefits	18%
Change in work hours or unemployment	8%
Insecure housing	7%
Change in personal circumstances	5%
Immigration status	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 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. 16% for households with children), or because they were insecurely housed (9% vs. 4%).

¹² Hunger in the UK (2022), *The Trussell Trust*, <https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/hunger-in-the-uk/>

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Disability and financial hardship: How disability benefits contribute to the need for food banks in the UK (20232), *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>

¹⁵ Hunger in the UK (2022), *The Trussell Trust*, <https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/hunger-in-the-uk/>

People living with children were more likely to be referred due to issues with their income or their levels of debt (76% vs. 68% 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 (28% vs. 22% of non-pensioner households) and for issues with their income or debt levels (77% vs. 71%).

Table 4: Reason for referral amongst different households

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	68%	76%	70%	78%	71%	77%
Health	26%	16%	23%	14%	22%	28%
Issue with benefits	20%	15%	18%	15%	18%	12%
Change in work hours or unemployment	7%	9%	8%	8%	8%	4%
Insecure housing	9%	4%	7%	3%	7%	3%
Change in personal circumstances	4%	6%	5%	7%	5%	4%
Immigration status	4%	6%	5%	6%	5%	2%
Domestic abuse	2%	4%	2%	3%	3%	1%

Across all households 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 (78%) of people referred to food banks were reported to solely have income from the social security system, with a further 8% having earned income as well as income from social security.

A minority of referred people (10%) 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

Source of income	% of referrals
Benefits, not earning	78%
Earnings and benefits	8%
Earning, no benefits	4%
No income or insufficient access to it	10%

There is some variation in the income sources for particular households. With people living with children being more likely to report earned income (19% vs. 8% for people not living with children). Seven in ten (71%) people living in households with one or more children rely solely on benefits for their income compared to 82% 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 (19%) or solely earned income (17%) 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 (38%) which is far higher than average (5%).

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	75%	82%	75%	38%
Health	24%	19%	17%	14%
Issue with benefits	18%	14%	11%	21%
Change in work hours or unemployment	6%	19%	17%	11%
Insecure housing	7%	4%	5%	9%
Change in personal circumstances	5%	6%	6%	5%
Immigration status	1%	<1%	9%	38%
Domestic abuse	2%	2%	2%	3%

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, 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.

“We do see that dip when the cost of living payments come in and then it starts to rise very quickly...Obviously people are still in debt regardless of those payments. It does help for a short time, but then of course it gets back to normal living and they can’t live on the budget [income which hasn’t been boosted by COL payments]”

– Project and Warehouse Manager, Bexley Foodbank in the Trussell Trust network

During the period when the Spring 2023 £301 Cost of Living Payment was paid out, food banks in our network distributed 52,000 parcels on average per week to people facing financial hardship. This

represented a 16% decrease from the three previous weeks when 62,000 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 11% to 57,600 on average per week.

The impact of the Autumn 2023 payment was initially similar seeing a 14% decrease in the average weekly number of parcels while the payment was paid out - compared to the previous three weeks. However, as people went into the winter there was a more pronounced bounce back in need. In the three weeks after the payment was distributed food banks distributed 69,300 parcels on average per week to people facing financial hardship. This represented a 31% increase on the period the payments were distributed.

The final late Winter 2024 payment saw the biggest percentage decrease – potentially due to it coinciding with the easing off of the rate of inflation. Food banks distributed 52,300 parcels on average per week in the period the payments were being distributed, a 24% decrease compared to the average of the preceding three weeks. As with the other payments there was still an increase following the payment – of 15% in the three weeks following the period the payment was in place.

In February we carried out a survey with YouGov of people receiving Universal Credit, which painted a similar picture.¹⁶ Respondents were asked about their views on the impact of the Autumn 2023 cost of living payment. It is clear that the payment had some positive impact in the short-term for people receiving it, with a third (34%) of people stating it had prevented them from falling into arrears on bills and around two in five (41%) stating it had prevented them from needing to borrow money to get by.

However, the majority of people (68%) who received the Cost of Living Payment in Autumn 2023 reported that the payment had made just a little or no difference to improving their current financial situation when surveyed in January / February. Further, over half (56%) said that the payment made just a little or no difference to their current ability to afford essentials.

Table 7: Impact of the Cost of Living Payment Autumn 2023

Question	A great deal/A fair amount	Just a little/Not at all
Improved current financial situation	29%	68%
Prevented you from falling into arrears on bills	34%	61%
Prevented from needing to borrow money to get by	41%	53%
Improved current ability to afford essentials	40%	56%

The majority (87%) of people who had received the Cost of Living Payment in Autumn 2023 said they had already spent all of it when surveyed in January / February 2024. The limitations of a flat payment for different households were also highlighted with the rate higher for households with children (90%) than without (84%). Similarly, for people who had spent all of the payment the length of time it took to spend the payment was almost double for people without benefit deductions (21.6 days on average) compared to people facing deductions from their benefits (11.5 days on average).

When asked how they had spent the payment, people most commonly said it had been spent on covering the cost of essential items. Almost two thirds (61%) of people stated that they had bought

¹⁶ Polling undertaken by YouGov Plc. The total sample size was 1,370 adults (16+) currently claiming Universal Credit. Fieldwork was undertaken 18 January – 5 February 2024. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults claiming Universal Credit.

food with the payment, over a third (36%) to buy basic toiletries such as soap, shampoo, toothbrush, toothpaste or sanitary items, and over two in five (43%) had used the money to heat their home.

Many (34%) also used the money to pay off existing debts and arrears on bills. We know many people have accumulated debt and arrears in between the Cost of Living Payments. Our survey found 37% of people claiming Universal Credit in January / February had fallen into debt in the last three months because they couldn't keep up with essential bills. These levels of debt and the money spent on paying them off may have limited the overall impact of the payments on reducing the need for food banks and highlights a limitation of one-off payments in supporting households' financial situation when their regular income is so far below what they need to cover essentials and avoid debt.

7. Over 655,000 people were forced to use a food bank for the first time in 2023/24

In 2023/24, 291,000 families¹⁷ have been forced to turn to food banks in the Trussell Trust network for the first time, representing over 655,000 people. This is a slight (-5%) decrease on the number of families having to turn to food banks for the first time in the same period last year. This perhaps reflects the significant number of people who have had to use a food bank for the first time in the previous few years. However, it is a 34% increase in the number of families using a food bank in the network for the first time compared to the same period in 2018/19.¹⁸

"The general cost of living has caused people from all walks of life to have to use our services as nobody's money goes as far."

"People in work struggling with the cost of living has meant more people are coming forward for help."

"The cost of living which has propelled many first time users into getting help with food."

– Food banks in the Trussell Trust network¹⁹

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 2017.²⁰

The incomes of people referred to a food bank for the first time differ from people who have been referred to a food bank previously. This potentially highlights slight differences in experiences and

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ In 2018/19 218,000 families were forced to turn to a food bank for the first time, these families included 467,000 people.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ Destitution in the UK 2023 (2023), Joseph Rowntree Foundation, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/destitution-uk-2023>

drivers of need for food banks. People referred to food banks for the first time are more likely to report that they have no income or limited access to it (16% vs. 9% for repeat users). They are also less likely to report solely receiving benefits (70% vs. 80%).

Table 8: 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	70%	80%
Earning and benefits	9%	7%
Earning, no benefits	6%	4%
No income or insufficient access to it	16%	9%

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 (22% vs. 16%). This could highlight the initial impact of issues such as the wait for benefits, or a change in eligibility.

They were also more likely to be referred for reasons which could be classified as life events or shocks. For instance, they were also almost twice as likely to be referred due to issues relating to insecure housing (10% vs. 6%), due to domestic violence (4% vs. 2%), and due to changes to their personal circumstances (8% vs. 4%).

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 (73% vs. 65%) – perhaps better reflecting the more chronic nature of their income situations.

Table 9: 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 2023/24

Reasons for referral	First Time referral	People returning to a food bank
Income or debt	65%	73%
Health	21%	22%
Issues with benefits	22%	16%
Change in work hours or unemployment	10%	7%
Insecure housing	10%	6%
Change in Personal Circumstances	8%	4%
No access to financial support due to Immigration status	6%	4%
Domestic abuse	4%	2%

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

	Percentage change from previous year (2022/23)	Percentage change from five years ago (2018/19)
United Kingdom	4%	94%
England	5%	109%
Scotland	-0.1%	21%
Wales	1%	61%
Northern Ireland	11%	143%

9. Food banks in most English regions are now distributing more than twice as much support as the same period five years ago

Five of the nine regions of England saw an increase in food parcel provision between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024. Yorkshire and the Humber and London saw the biggest percentage increases (15% and 17%), followed by the East of England (8%), the South West (2%), and the North West (2%).

Four regions of England saw a slight decrease in the number of food parcels provided, the East Midlands (-4%), the North East (-3%), the South East (-1%) and the West Midlands (-3%) compared to the previous year.

Even when we factor in these slight decreases, the number of food parcels provided across these four regions is still twice as high in the last year (100% increase) as 2018/19.

It is concerning that the three regions which have seen the biggest long-term increases have also continued to see an increase between 2022/23 and 2023/24. London, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the East of England experienced significant increases over the previous five years of 171%, 157% and 129% respectively. Between 2022/23 and 2023/24, these regions saw continued increases of 17%, 15% and 8%.

Table 11: Percentage change in number of parcels distributed in the Trussell Trust network by region

Regions	Percentage change from previous year (2022/23)	Percentage change from five years ago (2018/19)
East Midlands	-4%	113%
East of England	8%	129%
London	17%	171%
North East	-3%	68%
North West	2%	58%
South East	-1%	123%
South West	2%	90%
West Midlands	-3%	89%
Yorkshire and the Humber	15%	157%

10. 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 emergency food in their local areas.

Between April and September 2023, food banks, 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 2021.²¹ So far this year donations of food 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.

“I never had to buy anything until about two years ago. Never. It was all via donations. I can’t honestly say that the donations have vastly fallen, but we are giving out more food. So, we are in a deficit and it’s a constant deficit every month.”

– Project and Warehouse Manager, Bexley Foodbank in the Trussell Trust network

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 vast and growing majority of food banks are offering, or signposting to, debt advice and benefits advice. 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

²¹ 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.

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.

When asked about main obstacles to their food bank making progress in the coming year: "Income maximization not achieving sufficient gains to overcome cost of living increase."

– Food banks in the Trussell Trust network²²

"Another knock on rise is people claiming that their issues are impacting their mental health. [Sometimes] this is recorded on their vouchers, but often not."

When asked what factor, if any, has had the biggest impact on the number of people referred to your food bank in the last 6 months (since April 2023): *"Cost of living and ongoing impact of long term physical or mental health condition."*

– Food banks in the Trussell Trust network²³

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.

11. People across the UK are united in belief that food banks should not be needed in the UK

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 increasingly concerned with issues related to poverty and hunger in the UK and the majority (79%) think that food banks should not be needed in the UK.²⁴

This level has increased over time, with more people agreeing that food banks should not exist in a modern society this year (78%) compared to last year (74%).

When it comes to how poverty and hunger can be solved in the UK, the vast majority (84%) of the UK public 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 (78%).

²² IBID

²³ IBID

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.

What this means for policy

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.

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.

As we approach the next UK general election, we urgently need to hear how parties will build a future where no one needs a food bank to survive. Urgent reform of our social security system, which currently isn't even providing enough support for people to afford the essentials, is critical. Introducing an 'Essentials Guarantee' into Universal Credit would ensure everyone has a protected minimum amount of support to afford the essentials.

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 most important 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.²⁵
- 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%.

²⁵ Guarantee our Essentials: Reforming Universal Credit to ensure we can all afford the essentials in hard times (2024), *Trussell Trust; JRF* <https://www.jrf.org.uk/social-security/guarantee-our-essentials-reforming-universal-credit-to-ensure-we-can-all-afford-the>

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 already struggling councils deliver joined-up local support targeted at people lacking a financial buffer to manage unexpected costs. Multi-year funding should at least match the level of investment in the Household Support Fund.
- 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.

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. building 90,000 new social homes** every year in England, to provide the dignity of a safe, secure, and affordable place to live.
- 10. 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.