

Emergency food parcel distribution in the United Kingdom: April 2023 – 31 March 2024 methodology note.

Introduction

These statistics cover the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 inclusive and are comparable to the same periods between April and March for 2017/18, 2018/19, 2019/20, 2020/21, and 2021/22. Data was collected up until 15 April 2024.

Number of individual locations distributing support

Across 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 food parcels were distributed from 1,699 individual locations across the UK. Individual locations 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. Most locations can be classed as food bank centres, but some operate as delivery warehouses.

Data collected for, 2017/18, 2018/19, 2019/20, 2020/21, 2021/22, and 2022/23 including on the number of individual locations in operation, has been revised from its original publication to account for additional data processing.

Data collection

Data from food banks in the Trussell Trust network is collected via vouchers that are issued by referral agencies, such as health visitors, schools, social workers, and organisations such as Citizens Advice. These agencies assess people for financial hardship before referring them to a food bank. This means that the overwhelming majority of people receiving support via a food bank in the Trussell Trust network do so because they are experiencing financial hardship.¹

This voucher contains information such as the age of the person being referred to the food bank and how many adults and children are contained within their household, allowing the food bank to package up the number of parcels suitable for the household size. Each voucher therefore supports not only the referred person but all the people in their household.

For reporting purposes if a single voucher records two adults and two children in a household when the data is uploaded to the system this would be described as the food bank providing four parcels and fulfilling one voucher. If that household were to return to the food bank again that would be recorded as the food bank providing eight parcels to a single household and fulfilling two vouchers. Most vouchers are digital, ensuring data processing is complete as soon as the voucher is fulfilled. However, a minority of vouchers continue to be issued on paper. These vouchers must be manually uploaded by food bank staff. This can often lead to significant lags in the data collection.

Following a period to allow food banks to complete their data entry, the data sent out as part of this release acts as a census of the total number of parcels distributed in the Trussell Trust network during the stated period. Food banks are included regardless of whether they have confirmed their data is up to date, or whether they closed for periods during the previous year. Food banks that left the network during the year are also included in these statistics.

Due to the significant need many food banks have experienced in the last year, it has not been possible for all food banks to input their data in time for this statistical release. In some areas, therefore, the number of emergency food parcels distributed is not up to date and if there are significant drops in the number of parcels in a certain area, this needs to be viewed with caution. Once food banks have inputted this data it will be included in the relevant year's numbers in subsequent releases i.e. if a voucher is fulfilled in August 2023 but not added to the system until November 2023 in a subsequent release that data will be included in the number of parcels distributed in August 2023.

Data at regional and local authority level

We would recommend not comparing directly between local authority statistics and note that there are significant issues with looking at differences in percentage changes since previous years, and with calculating a number of parcels distributed per head of population at the local level.

Primarily this is because food banks in the Trussell Trust are just one part of the picture of local delivery of emergency food aid, and this changes over time. This means that – depending on how many additional food aid providers open or close in areas – Trussell Trust food banks could be fulfilling a different proportion of overall need in an area year-on-year.

Beyond this there are other factors that could drive variations in the data such as the local economic climate, the policies of the local government, and the opening or closing of individual locations by food banks in the Trussell Trust network. These factors make comparisons, and the identification of drivers of change and difference between areas, difficult.

Data at the local level has been analysed based on the location from which the parcel was collected or delivered, rather than where the household receiving each parcel is living. This means that there might be some changes to local authority statistics that are heavily influenced by the opening or closing, or other operational changes of the individual locations based in those local authorities. As an example, the South London Warehouse is a new food bank based in Lambeth. Due to operational efficiencies this food bank now distributes all parcels referred via the pre-existing Vauxhall, Waterloo, Norwood & Brixton, and Clapham Park food banks. The Waterloo food bank was based in Southwark, so this will have the effect of increasing Lambeth's numbers, while decreasing Southwark's.

Individual locations are matched to local authorities using postcodes provided by the food bank which are cross-referenced to the national statistic postal lookup file (NSPL).

Note that some food banks provide emergency food boxes. These are pre-prepared food parcels that are given to frontline organisations such as firefighters, or police to give immediately to people in need. These parcels are not tagged to any distribution centre. Where a food bank distributed emergency food boxes these have been proportionally distributed across the local authorities in which the distribution centres of that food bank operate.

Parcel size statistics

The Trussell Trust has previously reported parcels as “three-day emergency food parcels”. In response to the operational challenges that many food banks were facing, particularly over the

pandemic, some took the decision to distribute larger seven-day parcels. These were more practical to deliver, and it was felt that they may reduce the incidence of repeat support being needed. For this release and all since April 2020, the Trussell Trust has simply combined both three-day and seven-day parcels together to report the total number of emergency food parcels that were distributed.

Number of individuals supported by food banks for the first time

As part of this release of data the Trussell Trust have reported on the number of people supported by food banks in the Trussell Trust network. Because of its data collection system, the Trussell Trust can record when a particular individual first needs support from a food bank in the network. This is because every person using a food bank in the network is provided with a unique identification code. This code allows the food bank to understand how many times that person is referred to their food bank so they can offer further support if needed.

This unique identifier can be tracked to the first use of a food bank in the network. The total number of people first supported over the last 12 months is calculated by selecting all of the unique identifiers that first appeared over the 12 month period – and looking at how many people the voucher associated with that first appearance supported. If for example, the first time someone was referred to a food bank, they reported that there were four adults and four children in the household we would report that as eight people used a food bank in the Trussell Trust network for the first time, including four adults and four children.

This unique identifier also allows us to track when a id is first used. An id is generated when a household is first supported by a food bank. As with the above reporting we would report the total household size when reporting on how many people have used a food bank for the first time.

Reasons for referral and source of income statistics

As part of this release of data the Trussell Trust have reported on new statistics on the reasons why someone is referred to a food bank and the source of income. This data has been collected from the 4th April 2023 as part of the Trussell Trust’s Data collection system. Our referral partners such as local Citizen’s Advice of Benefit Advisors collect this information every time a referral is made to someone. Referral partners can select up to four reasons for referral and a single source of income. For this release we have solely reported on percentages as not everyone has been able to be asked these questions.

For the reasons for referral data we have recoded the response options to collate them into larger categories. The recoding list can be found below:

Code	Sub code
Work	Change in work hours
Work	Unemployment following permanent work
Work	Unemployment following temporary work
Issues with benefits	Benefit delay
Issues with benefits	Benefit reduction due to overpayment or benefit advance

Issues with benefits	Benefit reduction due to change in eligibility
Issues with benefits	Benefit reduction due to sanction
Issues with benefits	Awaiting first benefit payment for less than a month
Issues with benefits	Awaiting first benefit payment for more than a month
Income or debt	Delay in or awaiting other income
Income or debt	Priority debt
Income or debt	Non-priority Debt
Income or debt	Cost of dependants has increased
Income or debt	Rising costs of essentials
Income or debt	Other unexpected expense
Housing	Insecurely housed
Immigration status	No access to financial support due to immigration status
Change in personal circumstances	Loss of support from friends or family
Change in personal circumstances	Change in relationship status
Change in personal circumstances	Change in dependents
Domestic Abuse	Domestic abuse
Health	New physical or mental health condition
Health	Ongoing impact of physical or mental health condition
Health	Change in existing physical or mental health condition
None Applicable	None applicable

Source of income
Benefits, not earning
Earnings and benefits
Earning, no benefits
No income or insufficient access to it

Within the source of income question the fields containing 'earnings' should not be interpreted as solely being from working households. This is because referral partners are instructed to select this when people are also claiming the State Pension or they have income from friends or family.

Public Attitudes Survey data

The data on public attitudes is from Polling undertaken by YouGov Plc on behalf of Trussell Trust. The total sample size was 5,393 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 5th and 19th July 2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults.

Contact details

If you want support in using these data please contact: Research@TrussellTrust.org