

Emergency food parcel distribution in Northern Ireland April– September 2023



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 to 30 September 2023 inclusive. During this time period, food parcels were distributed from 49 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 April-September 2023 statistics

1. Food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland have seen the highest levels of need for this period, even superseding the level reached during the pandemic

Food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland distributed over 39,000 (39,344) emergency food parcels between 1 April to 30 September 2023. This is the most parcels that the network in Northern Ireland has ever distributed at this point in the year and represents a 23% increase from the same period in 2022.

This is also the first time that food banks in the Trussell Trust network have provided over 16,000 (16,659) parcels for children in this period, with record levels of need seen for both children and adults so far this year.

People who have been "managing" now not being able to manage. Those that regularly weren't managing before - needing to come more frequently.

– Food bank in the Trussell Trust network when asked about what they have seen so far this year³

The increases seen in this period 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

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 45 locations in the same period 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*. The Trussell Trust and Ipsos; 2023. Available at: <https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/hunger-in-the-uk/>

³ 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.

with these costs. Consumer Price Inflation (CPI) started at 8.7% in April 2023 and has fallen slightly across the six month period to 6.7% in September. However, food inflation began at 19.1% in April and remained at 12.1% by September, and energy bills this Autumn will remain about 50% higher than was the case in winter 2021/22. 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. Families with children are also likely to have been affected by the ending of the School Holiday Food Grant scheme from April 2023, which provided a payment during school holiday periods to support the provision of nutritious meals to children and young people who are entitled to free school meals. Food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland provided more support to people facing financial hardship in August and September than ever before for those months.

We are hearing multiple examples of food banks across the UK 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 the tip of the iceberg of actual need in communities.

"I am concerned about the increased demands that we will have placed on us over the next six months. We have seen significantly more people needing to use our food bank over the summer than in previous years, and I expect this to continue over the winter...I'm worried."

Food bank in the Trussell Trust network⁴

The rising cost of living has pushed figures even higher this year, but the scale of need seen in the first half of this year reflects the significant year on year growth we have seen in the last five years and beyond. If we look back longer term, the record level of need seen so far this year is more than double (176%) the number of parcels distributed by food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland compared to the same period five years ago in 2018. This significant growth in need is higher for children, with the number of parcels provided for them increasing by 192% over the five-year period between 2018 and 2023.

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.

⁴ IBID

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

Northern Ireland	2023	2022	2020	2018
For adults	22,685	18,418	20,588	8,562
For children	16,659	13,480	11,972	5,707
Total	39,344	31,898	32,560	14,269

2. Families with children continue to be most likely to need support from food banks in Northern Ireland

In total food banks in Northern Ireland supported almost 7,200 families with emergency food in the first six months of this year, including over 19,800 individual people.⁵ This included 3,600 families with children, and a total of 8,400 children - a 11% increase from 2022 and a 50% increase since 2021.

Families with children were significantly over-represented among those who had to turn to food banks. Half (50%) of the families supported by food banks included children, whilst they make up only 34% of the population in Northern Ireland.⁶ Overall, nearly three quarters (73%) of all the parcels provided by food banks go to families with children.

Families with three or more children are especially likely to face severe hardship. Shockingly, 55% of all food parcels provided by food banks in Northern Ireland go to families with three or more children. In the first six months of this year almost 21,800 emergency food parcels were provided for families with three or more children.

“We have had an increasing number of families coming from schools and support services especially over the summer.”

– Food bank in the Trussell Trust network⁷

3. There are emerging signs that people of pension age are increasingly likely to need support from food banks

Poverty rates among pensioners are far lower than is the case for the working age population, reflected in the small proportion (5%) of the support provided by food banks in Northern Ireland for households with someone of pension age (65+). However, in the last six months over 2,100 parcels were provided for these households, a 28% increase from the previous year (compared to an average increase of 23%) and higher than the rate of increase for households without someone of

⁵ 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.

⁶ *Hunger in Northern Ireland*. The Trussell Trust and Ipsos; 2023. Available at: <https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/hunger-in-the-uk/>

⁷ 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.

pension age (23%). This suggests that the increase in poverty among pensioner households in recent years may be starting to lead to rises in severe hardship, with an increase in people of pension age being forced to turn to food banks.

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

The majority (64%) of people referred to food banks in Northern Ireland have incomes that leave them unable to afford the cost of essentials or which drive 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 earlier this year, 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.⁸

“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 network⁹

Problems with health are reported in one in four (25%) 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 too often leaving them with too little income to cover the essentials.¹⁰ The majority (61%) of people referred to food banks in Northern Ireland are disabled, this is almost double the prevalence of disability across the general population (30%).¹¹

Issues with benefits such as long waits, delays, or sanctions affect a significant minority of referrals to food banks (17%). This is illustrative of the 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 whilst they wait.

⁸ *Hunger in Northern Ireland*. The Trussell Trust and Ipsos; 2023. Available at: <https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/hunger-in-the-uk/>

⁹ 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.

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

¹¹ *Hunger in Northern Ireland*. The Trussell Trust and Ipsos; 2023. Available at: <https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/hunger-in-the-uk/>

Table 2: Reasons for referral for people supported by food banks in the Trussell Trust’s network in Northern Ireland.

Reason for referral	% of people referred
Income or debt	64%
Health	25%
Issue with benefits	17%
Immigration status	9%
Change in personal circumstances	7%
Housing	5%
Domestic abuse	2%
None Applicable	12%

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

The vital role of the social security system in driving these trends is clear from the fact that the majority (75%) of people referred to food banks in Northern Ireland are 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 (13%) have no income at all or do not have sufficient access to any income.

Table 3: Source of income for people referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust’s network in Northern Ireland.

Source of income	% of referrals
Benefits, not earning	75%
Earnings and benefits	7%
Earning, no benefits	4%
No income or insufficient access to it	13%

5. The Cost of Living Payments in April and June appear to have offered some short-term respite for people on low incomes, however levels of need quickly increased again

In the first six months of this year the UK government provided two Cost of Living Payments to people. This included a £301 payment in April to all people in receipt of means tested benefits. The second payment was £150 and was for disabled people in receipt of qualifying disability benefits. Our data shows that at the time each of these Cost of Living Payments were distributed, there was a short-term reduction in need at food banks in the Trussell Trust network.

“Cost of living payments have reduced people referred to the food bank. We noticed a reduction in referrals at the time of each payment being made.”

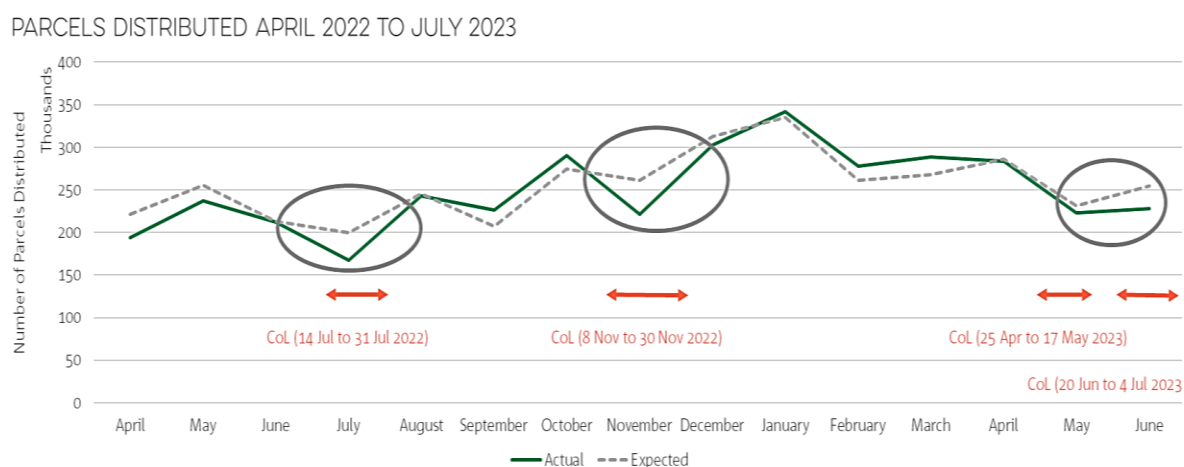
– Food bank in the Trussell Trust network¹²

¹² 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.

During the period when the first £301 Cost of Living Payment was paid out (25th April – 17th May)¹³, food banks in our network in Northern Ireland distributed 1,333 parcels on average per week to people facing financial hardship. This represented a 17% decrease from the three previous weeks when 1,612 parcels were distributed on average per week. Over the previous two years food banks in Northern Ireland had experienced a small (2%) increase in this period – indicating that this change was most likely due to the Cost of Living Payment and not a seasonal effect.

This respite was short-lived, however, lasting only between one and three weeks. The number of parcels distributed increased again by 12% to 1,500 in the two weeks after it was distributed and the figures were similar in the two weeks after that.

Figure 1: Parcels distributed across the UK April 2022 – July 2023



In August we carried out a survey with YouGov of people receiving Universal Credit across the UK, which painted a similar picture.¹⁴ It is clear that the payment had some positive impact in the short-term for people receiving, with a third (32%) of people stating it had prevented them from falling into arrears on bills and over a third (35%) stating it had prevented them from needing to borrow money to get buy.

However, the majority of people (73%) who received the Cost of Living Payment in Spring 2023 reported that the payment had made just a little or no difference to improving their current financial situation when surveyed in August. Further, for just under two thirds of people (62%) the payment made just a little or no difference to their current ability to afford essentials.

Table 4: Impact of the Cost of Living Payment Spring 2023

Question	A great deal/A fair amount	Just a little/Not at all
Improved current financial situation	25%	73%
Prevented you from falling into arrears on bills	32%	63%
Prevented from needing to borrow money to get buy	35%	58%
Improved current ability to afford essentials	35%	62%

¹³ These have been best matched to the weeks of the 24th April – 21st May to allow for analysis across years based on weeks.

¹⁴ Polling undertaken by YouGov Plc. The total sample size was 2,017 adults (16+) currently claiming Universal Credit. Fieldwork was undertaken 11 August – 5 September 2023. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults claiming Universal Credit.

Four in five (80%) people who had received the Cost of Living Payment in Spring 2023 said they had already spent all of it when surveyed in August 2023. The limitations of a flat payment for different households were also highlighted with the rate even higher for households with children (84%), and higher still for households with three or more children (89%). It was also higher for people with deductions taken from their Universal Credit payment (87%).

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 (62%) of people stated that they had bought food with the payment, over a third (37%) to buy basic toiletries such as soap, shampoo, toothbrush, toothpaste or sanitary items, and a third (33%) had used the money to heat their home.

Many (40%) 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 40% of people claiming Universal Credit in August had fallen into debt in the last three months because they couldn't keep up with essential bills – an increase from 34% in the previous year. 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.

The second Cost of Living Payment was distributed to disabled people with qualifying benefits from 20th June to the 4th July.¹⁵ During this period food banks in Northern Ireland distributed 1,257 parcels per week on average – lower than the previous two weeks (1,507), which represented a 17% decrease in comparison to those previous weeks. Over the last two years food banks in Northern Ireland have normally seen a slight decrease (-2%) during this period.

The limited impact of this second payment on the need for food banks (despite the fact that 67% of people referred to food banks in Northern Ireland are disabled themselves or live with someone who is)¹⁶ may be in part connected to the difficulties many people have in accessing disability benefits.

Our evidence suggests a significant underclaiming of benefits related to disability, meaning many disabled people would have missed out on this much needed additional support. The majority (59%) of people from disabled households referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland are not receiving any benefits specifically related to their disability.¹⁷

The low level of this payment to disabled people is also likely to have limited its impact. This is particularly the case since many people find that disability benefits are not sufficient to cover the costs of their disability, and others have to use their disability benefits to cover costs like rent, or food because the overall level of social security payments is too low.¹⁸ It is therefore likely that disabled people who received the payment had to use it to cover the shortfalls in their existing benefits rather than being able to cover the higher costs they were facing.

6. Almost 10,000 people were forced to use a food bank in Northern Ireland for the first time in the last six months

¹⁵ These have been best matched to the period 19th June – 2nd July to allow for comparisons between years.

¹⁶ The Trussell Trust. (2023). Hunger in the UK, 2022. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 9110 <https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/studies/study?id=9110>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Biggs H, Wildman J, Hamid A and MacGregor A (Scottish Centre for Social Research). *Disability and financial hardship: How disability benefits contribute to the need for food banks in the UK*. The Trussell Trust, 2023. Available at: <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/10/Disability-Benefits-Research-Report.pdf>

Over the last six months, over 3,800 families have been forced to turn to food banks in the Trussell Trust's network in Northern Ireland for the first time, including nearly 10,000 people. This represents a 10% 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 10% increase in the number of families using a food bank in the network for the first time compared to the same period in 2022 and a 37% increase compared to 2021.

"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.²⁰ 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 2017.²¹

7. Increases seen across Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales since last year

Looking across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, all areas of the UK experienced an increase in the distribution of emergency food parcels during the first six months of this financial year, when compared to the same period last year. Northern Ireland experienced the largest percentage increase (23%), followed by England (16%), Wales (15%) and Scotland (9%). 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 (176%) with Scotland seeing the smallest increase (39%).

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 To look into deeper poverty, households with an equivalised household income after housing costs that is below 50% of the median are considered to be in deep poverty. UK Poverty 2023: The essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK, *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*, (2023), <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2023>

²¹ Destitution in the UK 2023 (2023), *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/destitution-uk-2023>

Table 5: Percentage change in number of parcels distributed in the Trussell Trust network by nation and region.

Nations and Regions	Increase from last year (2022)	Increase from first year of pandemic (2020)	Increase from five years ago (2018)
United Kingdom	16%	17%	116%
England	16%	17%	132%
Scotland	9%	14%	39%
Wales	15%	24%	77%
Northern Ireland	23%	21%	176%

8. 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 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 2021.²² 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.

“With the lack of donations this means we are spending so much more money on items for the food bank...The cost of items are also extremely high and people who are on a low income just simply cannot afford to eat”

– Food banks in the Trussell Trust network²³

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

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²³ IBID

report that people across their communities do not have enough to afford the essentials, with the cost of living crisis most commonly mentioned as having the biggest impact on the number of people referred to their food bank.

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 network²⁴

“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 network²⁵

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 heart 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, plus the ongoing cost of living crisis, and the coming winter will push some food banks to their limit and they may not be able to meet all of the need in their communities.

9. 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.²⁶

When it comes to how poverty and hunger can be solved in the UK, 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

²⁴ IBID

²⁵ IBID

²⁶ 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 Northern Ireland.

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%).

What this means for policy

We welcome the action taken by the UK Government during the last two years to help mitigate the impact of the cost of living crisis, particularly the decision last Autumn to uprate benefits with inflation and the provision of Cost of Living Payments. However, our data shows that these steps have not been sufficient to protect people on the lowest incomes from severe and damaging hardship.

In particular, the limitations of what can be achieved through one-off cost of living payments are now clear. We know people are using these payments to buy essentials, including food, and to pay bills or reduce debts and our evidence shows the powerful impact of increasing people's incomes on reducing the need for food banks. However, we have seen that one off, flat payments are not a sufficient solution when people's regular monthly incomes are just too low to meet essential costs.

Rising hunger and hardship have devastating consequences for individuals, damaging health and holding back our economy. People in work, as well as people who cannot work, are increasingly being pushed into debt and forced to turn to a food bank to survive. That's why the UK Government must build on its work to protect people from increasingly severe hardship with a clear plan in this year's Autumn Statement to ensure everyone can afford the essentials, not just for a few weeks of the year, but all year round.

The UK Government should commit to putting an Essentials Guarantee into legislation, to embed in our social security system the widely supported principle that, at a minimum, Universal Credit should protect people from going without essentials. An Essentials Guarantee would embed for the first time a protected, minimum level of support based on an objective assessment of essential costs, directly addressing material hardship. The proposal is widely supported by the public and over 100 leading charities and health organisations.

Given the severity of the crisis we are seeing across the UK, we are also calling on the UK Government to take the following urgent steps in the Autumn Statement:

Confirming benefits will rise in line with inflation next April - A real-terms cut to benefits would pull people into even deeper debt and hardship and must be avoided.

Reducing the burden of debt deductions - Nearly two in five (39%) of people referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland in receipt of UC were facing a deduction.²⁷ These deductions are usually made to repay a DWP advance or overpayment and there is no requirement on the UK Government to check whether the repayments are affordable. There is stark evidence that deductions drive severe hardship and an urgent case for reducing the total amount that can be taken from someone's benefit income each month.

Uprating Local Housing Allowance (LHA) in line with rents - Increasing rental prices during the cost of living crisis have deepened an existing affordability crisis, pushing many households into serious hardship. The growing gap between rents and LHA has fuelled homelessness and hunger, with

²⁷ *Hunger in Northern Ireland*. The Trussell Trust and Ipsos; 2023. Available at: <https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/hunger-in-the-uk/>

households having to use income intended for food and other essentials in an attempt to avoid eviction.

Scrap planned reforms to the Work Capability Assessment which risk reducing the limited safeguards disabled people currently have. As a society we should be providing dignified support for disabled people and people with health conditions. We believe the aim of supporting more disabled people to work when they are able to is right, but we do not believe that the proposed reforms to the WCA will achieve this goal, and we are concerned that they will lead to even higher levels of severe hardship and destitution. Evidence shows that living on extremely low levels of income worsens people's health and makes it harder to take up new opportunities, and that using punitive financial sanctions that drive destitution is not an effective way of driving effective long-term engagement.

The Northern Ireland Executive must be urgently restored so more can be done to support people facing financial hardship

We need the Executive in place to:

1. Use all its devolved powers to 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, and the delivery of an anti-poverty strategy.
2. Immediately reverse budget cuts, including the ending of free school meal payments during holiday periods and the 50% reduction in the budget available for discretionary support grants.
3. Call on the UK Government to implement an Essentials Guarantee, to protect people in receipt of Universal Credit from going without essentials - as the final phase of universal credit implementation in Northern Ireland is underway this month for those in receipt of tax credits.

This will be the busiest winter ever at food banks, but next winter does not have to be more of the same. We know the factors which force people to the doors of food banks, so we know what needs to change so everyone can afford the essentials. The building blocks to a better future must include a reformed social security system; the opportunity for all who are able to work to have decent, secure and rewarding work; and dignified and accessible support for disabled people and people with health conditions. We need all levels of government to act together with employers, businesses, people who've needed a food bank, individuals and communities to put the right systems, policies and practices in place to end hunger in the UK.