

Emergency food parcel distribution in Northern Ireland: April 2022 – March 2023



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 2022 to 31 March 2023 inclusive. During this period food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland distributed parcels from 51 locations.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 other emergency food provision that will be supporting people that is not captured in this parcel data. There are also many people who are food insecure who do not receive support from food banks.²

Key facts from the 2022/23 statistics

- 1. Food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland have seen the highest levels of need ever, with the number of parcels distributed more than double the amount distributed in Northern Ireland 5 years ago**

Food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland distributed 81,084 emergency food parcels between 1 April 2022 to 31st March 2023, including 35,334 parcels for children. This is the most parcels that the network in Northern Ireland has ever distributed in a financial year and represents a 29% increase from the same period in 2021/22.

The need seen in this 12-month period is even greater than that seen by the network in Northern Ireland in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the financial year 2020/21, food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland saw record levels of need as the impact of redundancies, reduction to incomes, and the income shocks of moving from employment to social security that many households experienced took hold. The increases seen in 2022/23, represent a 2% increase in the number of parcels distributed in Northern Ireland, on this turbulent year.

“I have stopped leaving the house as I can no longer afford to go anywhere. I can’t afford fuel or public transport. I have cut down on everything yet still can’t afford to eat every day or pay all of my bills”

– Person claiming Universal Credit³

¹ The 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. For reference there were 50 centres the previous year.

² The latest statistics from the Food and You 2 Survey (Wave 5, conducted between 26 April and 24 July 2022) stated that 20% of respondents were classified as food insecure, and 3% of respondents had used a food bank or other emergency food provider in the last 12 months. This survey covers England, Northern Ireland and Wales only. Food and You 2: Wave 5 (2023), *Food Standards Agency*, <https://www.food.gov.uk/research/food-and-you-2/food-and-you-2-wave-5>

³ All quotes from people claiming Universal Credit in this factsheet are from an online survey by YouGov of 1,846 adults (18+) currently claiming Universal Credit. Fieldwork was carried out online and was undertaken 10-31 August 2022. The quote is from a person claiming Universal Credit who stated that they had gone without essentials or fallen behind on bills in the last three months in order to afford food and answered the follow-up question ‘What have you gone without or what bills have you fallen behind on in the last three months in order to afford food for yourself or your family?’.

If we look back longer term, the level of need seen at food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland this financial year is 80% higher than the pre-pandemic year, 2019/20. Further, the record levels of need seen this year is substantially higher (141%) than the amount distributed by food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland five years ago, in 2017/18. Further, this significant growth in need is even higher for children with the number of parcels provided for children more than doubling (156%) over the five-year period between 2017/18 and 2022/23. Food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland have, therefore, seen the greatest increase in need when we look back longer-term, in comparison to the other regions and constituent countries of the UK.

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 in Northern Ireland. 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, thereby forcing more people to the doors of food banks.

"I've been saying ever since we opened the food bank that austerity has gone on so long that everyone has run out of reserves, well they've more than run out of reserves now"

– Food bank in the Trussell Trust network⁴

We have also heard from food banks that, as we highlighted in our mid-year statistics (covering April – September 2022), more working people are needing to turn to food banks for support.⁵ Food banks across the UK network are reporting changes to opening hours, or operating practices, to ensure people who are working can access support outside of working hours.

"We are taking more and more referrals from working people, who ask if we can deliver [their food parcel] to a neighbour or family member as they are at work during the times we deliver"

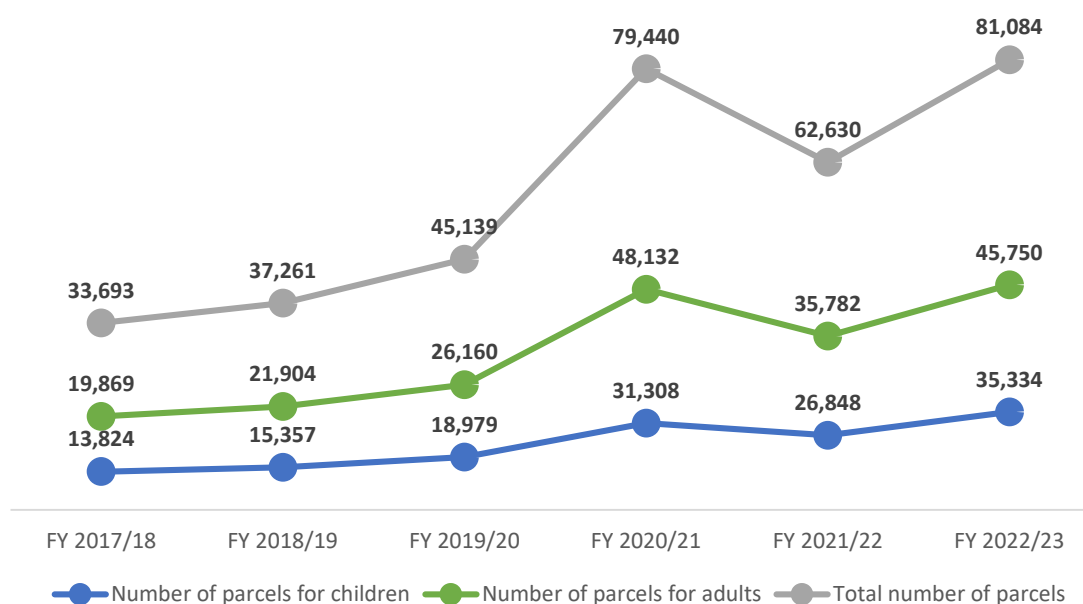
– Food bank in the Trussell Trust network⁶

⁴ Quote from interviews with food banks in the Trussell Trust network in March 2023.

⁵ Our own data shows that one in five (20%) of people referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network in mid-2022 were in working households. These figures are from our ongoing research project 'Hunger in the UK'. Ipsos surveyed, 2,364 UK adults aged 18+ who had been referred to food banks within the Trussell Trust network between 01 April and 15 July 2022. Food banks were sampled across the UK, with questionnaires randomly distributed within food parcels. In total, 99 food banks participated in the study. Data are weighted to match the profile of UK adults referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network. A working household is defined if the survey respondent state any of the following: that their main activity as being in work; they say they have any paid work; they say someone in their household is working.

⁶ Quote from interviews with food banks in the Trussell Trust network in March 2023.

Figure 1: Parcels provided for adults, children, and total in Northern Ireland FY 2017/18 – FY 2022/23⁷



2. Winter was particularly challenging for people, with December seeing record levels of parcel distribution in Northern Ireland

In our [mid-year statistics \(covering April-September 2022\)](#), we reported that food banks in our network were braced for even further significant increases in need as families tried to manage the increasing costs that winter brings amidst a cost of living crisis. Over the last six months we have seen this prediction borne out, with food banks facing their most challenging winter to date.

December 2022 was the busiest month on record at food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland. This month saw 12,262 parcels distributed which is over 3,600 more than in April 2020 when the UK was plunged into lockdown and food banks in Northern Ireland saw a surge in need. Further, this December there has been an 14% increase from December 2021 and an 82% increase from pre-pandemic levels (2019).

“I already have days where there is no gas or electricity in the property, and we already skip meals and go without basic items. I am worried that this is going to happen more often and on a lot more days of the month”

– Person claiming Universal Credit⁸

⁷ For a discussion on the decrease in emergency food parcels distributed from 2020/21 to 2021/22 please see pp 8-11 of Trussell Trust data briefing on end-of-year statistics relating to use of food banks: April 2021 – March 2022 (2022), *The Trussell Trust*, <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/04/EOY-Stats-2022-Data-Briefing.pdf>

⁸ From an online survey by YouGov of 1,846 adults (18+) currently claiming Universal Credit. Fieldwork was carried out online and was undertaken 10-31 August 2022. The quote is in response to the question ‘What are you most worried about with the cost of living crisis this winter?’.

This January has seen a 53% increase since the same month last year, with 7,426 parcels distributed by food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland. This is more than double (118%) the amount distributed from pre-pandemic levels (January 2020).

“This year it has been really hard, you know, we see peaks and troughs of demand but this year, when running our monthly stats, most months I was saying sadly we’ve reached a new level that we never wanted to reach”.

– Food bank in the Trussell Trust network⁹

3. The Northern Ireland Energy Bills Support Scheme may have had an impact on need, but more targeted support for low-income households is needed

Support with the increasing cost of living has varied across councils in Northern Ireland. In October 2022, the Northern Ireland Executive, released a £33million fund to help councils address the impact of the cost-of-living crisis. This was used to varying degrees by local councils for fuel and local hardship funds.

A key point of analysis when looking at food parcel distribution in Northern Ireland in 2022/23 is the [Northern Ireland Energy Bills Support Scheme](#). This £600 payment was distributed by the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, in the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive, between 16 January and 28 February 2023. All households were eligible for the payment.

Analysis of food parcel distribution by food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland across this period, and after, shows that there was a drop in need between January and February of 17% (albeit, the number of parcels distributed in February was still 5% higher than the same month in 2021). This is even more notable when comparing to the last five years where, on average, there has been a 16% rise in need from January to February. However, the impact appears to be short-term, with levels of need rising by 25% between February and March, and March witnessing a 34% increase in need in comparison to the same month in 2021.

4. The November Cost of Living Payment appears to have offered some short-term protection for people on low incomes, however levels of need increased shortly after

This financial year the UK government has provided two Cost of Living Payments to people in receipt of means tested benefits owing to low income. These were distributed in July 2022 and November 2022. Our data shows that at the time each of these Cost of Living Payments were distributed, there was a short-term reduction in need in the Trussell Trust network.

As noted in our mid-year statistics, in the month the first Cost of Living payment was paid out, food banks in our network in Northern Ireland distributed 4,102 parcels – significantly lower than any previous month in that year (albeit still 12% higher than the same month in 2021). The impact of this was short-term however, with levels of need quickly rising again with food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland recording their busiest ever August.

⁹ Quote from interviews with food banks in the Trussell Trust network in March 2023.

The second Cost of Living payment was distributed 8-30 November 2022. Winter months are generally when the highest level of need is seen at our network of food banks in Northern Ireland. In the last five years we have seen a month by month rise from October to December (when the number of parcels distributed peaks), with levels remaining high throughout January. Analysing the data, we can see that whilst the Cost-of-Living Payment has not managed to entirely change this trend, the rise in November was less marked than we would normally expect.

This year there was a 10% increase from October (7,489) to November (8,245). Which is lower than any other October to November increase since 2017/18. However, as in July when need dipped and then surged in August the same pattern was seen in the winter with need rising after the payments in November with December 2022 being the busiest month on record in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland.

These findings are in line with patterns seen in demand for other services across the UK, with Citizens Advice reporting a dip in the number of referrals they made to food banks in England and Wales in July 2022, which was shortly followed by increases and reached record levels in January 2023.¹⁰

The fact that these periods of respite from the Cost-of-Living payments were short lived shows that one-off payments are unable to make a lasting difference when people's regular income (from social security and from work) is just too low to enable people to afford the essentials.

5. More than 26,000 people used a food bank in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland for the first time in the last 12 months

Over the last 12 months, more than 9,600 families¹¹ have been forced to turn to food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland for the first time. This represents a 25% increase in the number of families using food bank in the network in Northern Ireland for the first time compared to the same period in 2021/22. These families include over 26,000 people.

This is representative of the increasing numbers of people experiencing financial hardship due to the cost of living crisis and supports wider sector research into the impact of the crisis on families in Northern Ireland. Research conducted by Which in December 2022 found that nearly half (44%) of people in Northern Ireland were cutting back on essentials to make ends meet. Further, a fifth (18%) had been eating fewer cooked meals to save on energy costs, and over one in ten (13%) had skipped a meal due to rising food costs.¹² Further, research conducted by a range of NI youth organisations during the month of December 2022, found that 61% of respondents (aged 11-25) reported that they were financially worse off at the end of 2022, than during the summer of 2022.¹³

¹⁰ Citizens Advice cost of living data dashboard, 21.03.2023, *Citizens Advice*, <https://public.flourish.studio/story/1775087/>

¹¹ At the Trussell Trust we define any household as a family, This means that when we talk about families here they could be individuals living alone, single parents, or multi-generational households.

¹² "Money is on my mind everyday": Nearly half of Northern Irish consumers cutting back on essentials to make ends meet (2023), *Which?*, <https://press.which.co.uk/whichpressreleases/money-is-on-my-mind-everyday-nearly-half-of-northern-irish-consumers-cutting-back-on-essentials-to-make-ends-meet/>

¹³ Cost of Living: Views from Young People (2023), *Bytes and Youth Network NI*, <https://www.bytes.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Cost-of-Living.pdf>

6. The increase in need for emergency food parcels in 2022/23, in comparison to last year, has been seen across the UK

Looking across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, all areas of the UK experienced an increase in the distribution of emergency food parcels during this financial year (2022/23). Wales experienced the largest percentage increase (41%), followed by England (37%), Scotland (30%) and Northern Ireland (29%). Looking back longer term, Northern Ireland has experienced the largest percentage increases in the distribution of emergency food parcels since the pre-pandemic year of 2019/20 (80%) and in comparison, to five years ago (2017/18, 141%).

Table 1: Percentage change in number of parcels distributed in the Trussell Trust network by nation and region 2017/18 – 2022/23

Nations and Regions	Increase from last year (2021/22)	Increase from first year of pandemic (2020/21)	Increase from pre-pandemic year (2019/20)	Increase from five years ago (2017/18)
United Kingdom	37%	16%	56%	120%
England	37%	16%	65%	135%
Scotland	30%	16%	9%	50%
Wales	41%	26%	36%	85%
Northern Ireland	29%	2%	80%	141%

7. Need is particularly high in certain regions and nations of the UK

Across the UK there has been an increase in the number of parcels distributed since the same period last year; however, this increase is greater in some areas than others.

When we adjust for population size¹⁴, Wales is the largest distributor of parcels across the regions and constituent countries of the UK (see map below) in 2022/23. Wales has distributed the most or second most parcels per 100,000 since 2018/19.¹⁵ This finding supports wider sector data on the level of poverty¹⁶ and the child poverty rate in these areas.¹⁷

¹⁴ These population adjusted figures have been calculated using Census 2021 data for [England, Wales](#) and [Northern Ireland](#). For Scotland, [mid-2021 population estimates](#) were used. The distribution of parcels per 100,000 has been calculated by dividing the total number of parcels distributed by the population and multiplying by 100,000. When interpreting rate per 100,000 it is important to keep in mind parcel stats represent the volume of parcels distributed not the number of unique people that have received a parcel. It is important to note that the prevalence of other emergency food provision in a region will impact on the number of Trussell Trust food banks in these areas and the number of parcels distributed by these food banks.

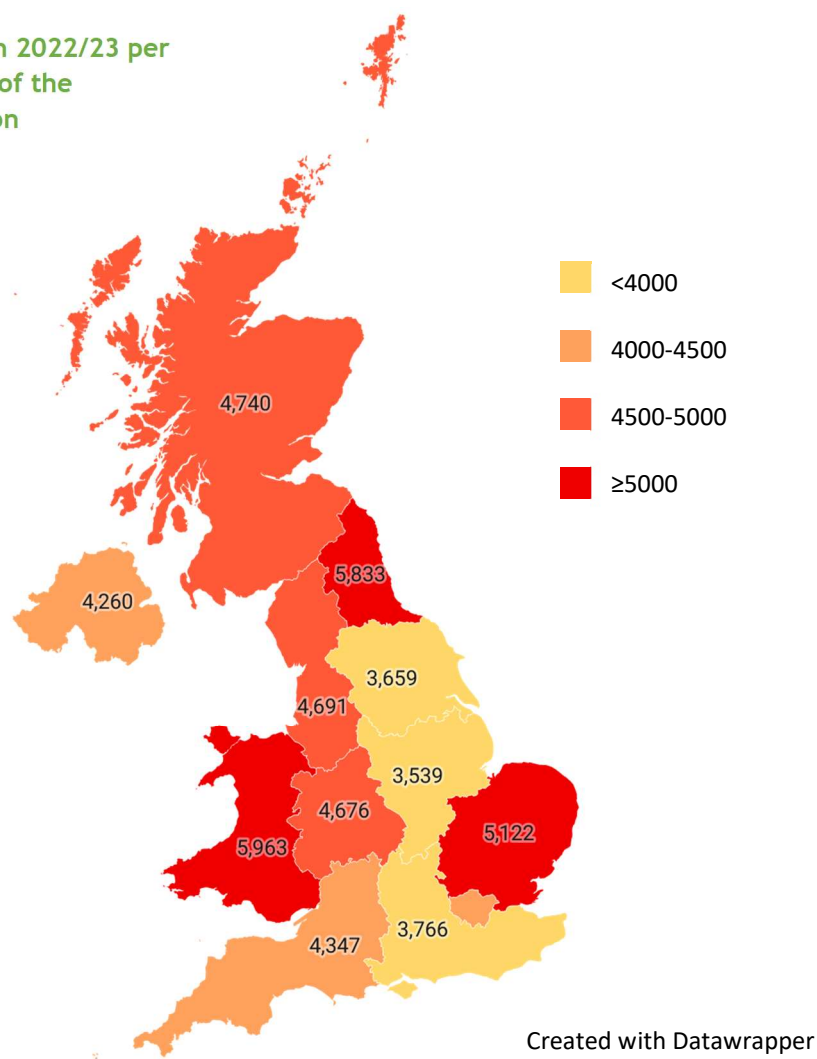
¹⁵ This information is calculated using the relevant ONS population estimates for the corresponding year from mid-2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021 to look at the distribution of parcels per 100,000 population.

¹⁶ JRF's analysis of official poverty statistics (from the Household Below Average Income series 2020/21), shows that the North East has the highest poverty rate out of all the nations and regions (26%) and that Wales has the highest poverty rate among the four constituent countries of the UK (24%). UK Poverty 2023: The essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK (2023), *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2023>

¹⁷ The North East had the highest rate of child poverty of anywhere in the country (38%) in 2020/21. The child poverty rate has also increased markedly in Wales between 2018/19 and 2020/21, whereas the headline rate of child poverty across the UK fell during 2020/21 (primarily as a result of the temporary £20 a week uplift to Universal Credit). Local indicators of child poverty after housing costs, 2020/21 (2022), *Centre for Research in Social Policy Loughborough University*, <https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/child-poverty/>

The population adjusted statistics for Northern Ireland since 2018/19 place NI towards the middle of the distribution scale in comparison to other regions and constituent countries of the UK.

Parcels in 2022/23 per 100,000 of the population



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8. Food banks are not just facing a change to operations due to an increase in food parcel distribution, they are also supporting people facing deepening hardship and distress

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.

As we reported in our mid-year statistics, food banks, which historically have primarily relied upon donated food, had to spend almost twice as much on food as they did the previous year April – September 2022 to meet the need they are seeing amongst people facing financial hardship. Further, almost a third (29%) of food banks in the Trussell Trust network reported in our September Survey that they have accessed or rented additional warehouse space to store both food or other items between September 2021 and August 2022 in order to meet increasing demand.¹⁸

¹⁸ The research is based on an online survey by the Trussell Trust of 171 food banks in the Trussell Trust network across the UK. Fieldwork was undertaken from the 8th September – 14th October 2022 and the survey was distributed through multiple methods across the Trussell Trust food bank network.

“This year we’ve spent nearly £7000 on food...two years ago we spent nothing”.

– Food bank in the Trussell Trust network¹⁹

Food banks in the Trussell Trust network are not solely providing emergency food on an increasing scale, they are also providing additional support to address the root causes of financial hardship, with many food banks offering, or signposting to, debt advice and benefits advice. These services are essential in supporting people to maximise their income and ensure people are receiving their correct benefit entitlement. However, despite this support, food banks have told us that for many people coming to their doors, their incomes remain insufficient to meet the cost of essentials.

“Since the start of 2022, we have seen a steady increase in people both in work and out of work who are simply unable to manage on the money they have. Unfortunately, we are seeing an increase in people who have exhausted the traditional routes of increasing income etc. but are simply just not getting enough to get by.” – Food bank in the Trussell Trust network²⁰

We have also heard from food banks that they are not only supporting more people, but that the people they are supporting are facing deepening hardship and distress. The depth of hardship experienced by people on the lowest incomes this year (bottom 20% of the income distribution) has been highlighted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF). Their survey found that more than half of households on the lowest incomes in the UK (55%) reported in November 2022 that they had gone without three or more types of essentials over the past 6 months.²¹ Other research has highlighted the negative impact the cost-of-living crisis has had on mental and emotional health and wellbeing, particularly for households living on a low-income.²²

Food banks have expressed deep concern over the depth of hardship experienced by people they have been supporting, particularly over the winter months:

“Especially over the winter people [referred to the food bank] were starving, they were freezing, they had no heating, they didn’t have access to a kettle or a microwave. We had to work out whether or not some people could receive a standard food parcel or whether we needed to give a no cook or a low cook [parcel]”.

– Food bank in the Trussell Trust network²³

¹⁹ Quote from interviews with food banks in the Trussell Trust network in March 2023.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Going under and without: JRF’s cost of living tracker, winter 2022/23 (2022), *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/going-under-and-without-jrfs-cost-living-tracker-winter-202223>

²² The ‘Cost of Living Crisis’ and its effects on health: A qualitative study from the UK (2022), *Williams, S.N, & Dienes, K*, <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/tr4xf>

²³ Quote from interviews with food banks in the Trussell Trust network in March 2023.

“The food options people have been cooking have been more limited, whereas before people would have in their pantries items that make things tastier like stock cubes or mixed herbs.... now people have nothing left in their cupboards”.

– Food bank in the Trussell Trust network²⁴

Food bank staff and volunteers have had to make adaptations and operational changes this year to meet significant increases in need. They also are both witnessing and supporting people through increasingly distressing circumstances. The resilience, strength, and persistence of food banks in supporting their communities to access emergency food, signposting people to further support, and providing a warm and welcoming space for people to be heard will continue, but they are exhausted.

“Saying it’s been really hard doesn’t seem to quite do it justice...It has always been an emotional place to work you know with highs and lows, you see two sides, you see our amazing volunteers and such a great wealth of community support and it really buoys you up to see how the community comes together to support people. But then on the other side when people come to us, they are often coming at the lowest points of their lives, or they’re working through something really challenging”.

– Food bank in the Trussell Trust network²⁵

9. The majority of people in Northern Ireland think that food banks should not be needed in the UK

Food banks are stepping in to provide food to 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 the general public agree with. Polling by YouGov on behalf of the Trussell Trust suggests that the public are increasingly concerned with issues related to poverty and hunger in Northern Ireland. The majority of people in Northern Ireland (76%) think that food banks should not be needed in the UK, with a strong majority agreeing (95%) that everyone should be able to buy enough food for themselves and their family.²⁶

When it comes to how poverty and hunger can be solved in, people in NI are largely in agreement that food banks do not solve the root causes of poverty (85%), with a strong assertion that responsibility for keeping people out of poverty lies with the Northern Ireland Executive (69%).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Polling undertaken by YouGov Plc. The total sample size in Northern Ireland was 518 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 24 August and 13 September 2022. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults in Northern Ireland.

What this means for policy

Rising food bank need demonstrates more and more people are going without the essentials

The level of benefits, especially benefits for people who are sick and disabled, needs to be high enough for people to live...at the moment they're not high enough for people to even exist and there is an enormous difference between existing and living".

– Food bank in the Trussell Trust network²⁷

Food bank need is driven by acute poverty, known as destitution. People are forced to turn to food banks when they cannot afford the essentials, we all need to stay warm, dry, and to feed ourselves.

Inadequate social security is the main driver of food bank need and there is a known link between issues with the social security system and food bank use.²⁸ This was the case prior to the pandemic, with the erosion of our social security system being a key driver in the alarming rise in destitution and increasing numbers of people going without the essentials prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2017-2019 destitution levels increased by 54% in the UK.²⁹ Since then, the pandemic and the rising cost of living have pushed overstretched budgets to breaking point. Without a precedent for what social security should be pegged to, the value of Universal Credit has been allowed to erode over time and is now at its lowest ever level as a proportion of average earnings, with almost half of households seeing their payments reduced even further due to a range of deductions and caps.³⁰

"We spoke to a man last week who has been living off £90 a month for the last 6 months due to deductions on his Universal Credit. He actually said I am really struggling; I don't know what to do. How can a benefits system that is supposed to be there to support people when they are in need, and make them feel safe and secure, be so extreme to leave somebody with £90 a month to live on?"

– Food bank in the Trussell Trust network³¹

In 2022/23 food banks in the Trussell Trust UK network have distributed more emergency food parcels than ever before. This has built upon both long-term increases in levels of need and the substantial increase in need seen in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the number of

²⁷ Quote from interviews with food banks in the Trussell Trust network in March 2023.

²⁸ The proportion of working age claimants in receipt of Universal Credit is statistically associated with an increase in levels of need for food banks. State of Hunger (2021), *The Trussell Trust*, <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/05/State-of-Hunger-2021-Report-Final.pdf>

²⁹ Destitution in the UK (2020), *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/destitution-uk-2020>

³⁰ Response to written Parliamentary Question UIN117529 by Rt Hon. Stephen Crabb MP, answered 16 January 2023 (2023), *Opperman, G MP*, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-01-06/117529/>

³¹ Quote from interviews with food banks in the Trussell Trust network in March 2023.

people supported through Universal Credit doubled.³² The statistics set out in this report provide further evidence of the cost of an eroded and inadequate social security system as more and more people are being forced to turn to emergency food as they are unable to afford the essentials.

That this situation is continuing to worsen is alarming. Turning the tide on destitution must be a priority for the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive over the coming years through the actions we set out below.

This can change: we're calling for the UK government to Guarantee our Essentials

The Trussell Trust is calling on the UK government to embed in our social security system the widely supported principle that, **at a minimum, Universal Credit should protect people from going without essentials**. Developed in line with public attitude insights and focus groups, this policy would enshrine in legislation:

- a. an independent process to regularly determine the **Essentials Guarantee** level, based on the cost of essentials (such as food, utilities and vital household goods) for the adults in a household (excluding rent and council tax);
- b. that Universal Credit's standard allowance must at least meet this level; and
- c. that deductions (such as debt repayments to government, or as a result of the benefit cap) can never pull support below this level.

The UK Government would be required to set the level of the Essentials Guarantee at least annually, based on the recommendation of the independent process. However, our analysis indicates that it would need to be at least £120 a week for a single adult and £200 for a couple.

For more information on the Essentials Guarantee see our policy report [here](#).

We know the journey towards a UK without the need for food banks will involve change in other areas including work, housing, mental health and more. We will have more to say on this – and the action that can be taken by governments, employers, communities and individuals to help bring about the changes needed – over the coming year.

The Northern Ireland Executive can do more to support people facing financial hardship

1. Urgent restoration of the Executive and Assembly should be a priority.

Government intervention is urgently required to release the pressure people, families and communities are under. We need a Northern Ireland Executive in place to provide the policies that will protect communities. Continued political inaction helps no one.

A functioning Northern Ireland Executive should implement the following urgent measures to help ensure that thousands more households do not fall into destitution:

³² The number of people supported through social security, a key indicator of underlying need, doubled from 3 million in March 2020 to more than 6 million in March 2021. Source: People on Universal Credit (2022), DWP, Stat-Xplore.

2. Support food banks to deliver on their commitment to end the need for their services.

Recommendations for an Anti-Poverty Strategy were produced by an expert advisory panel, and a co-design group was established to advise the Department for Communities on the development and drafting of a new Anti-Poverty Strategy which is evidence-based and targeted to address objective need. These recommendations were not signed off by the previous NI Executive. While short-term measures to address the cost of living are important, we need a functioning NI Executive to prioritise a long-term plan.

3. Ensure everyone can buy the food and essentials they need.

Although legislation was passed to close the loopholes in the bedroom tax and benefit cap mitigations, the need for social security mitigations to go towards keeping people out of poverty remains more important than ever. Parties can play an important role in using existing social security powers to increase incomes and move away from a focus on short-term solutions. Solutions which are focused on raising incomes and reducing costs are always preferable to solutions involving the provision of food, as they ensure dignity by allowing people to make their own choices. Cash-based approaches are preferred by families with low-incomes because of their flexibility, dignity, safety, and convenience.

4. Local services are supported to ensure people get the right support at the right time.

Ensuring funding for effective and integrated support services is vital because households with low incomes face significant barriers when they try and access support. We need a “no wrong door” approach, enabling people to access the support they need in one place rather than being passed from one agency to the next. As Stormont departments face large cuts this year it is vital that local support services which prevent people needing to use a food bank are prioritised.

5. Involve people with direct experience of poverty in shaping the services they need and use

In order to tackle complex issues of poverty and destitution, the NI Executive should work directly with people affected by poverty to learn from their experiences and co-design better policy solutions. Food banks also know and serve their communities and can support transformation to address the underlying drivers of food bank use. Food banks can drive initiatives (such as financial inclusion projects), or work with existing services, that can help end the need for their services.

6. Support the introduction of an Essentials Guarantee by the UK Government.