

# LONELY NATION

## Part 4: Loneliness and food banks

December 2024



# Contents

About the CSJ .....	1
Acknowledgements .....	2
Foreword .....	3
Executive Summary .....	5
Introduction .....	8
History and Drivers of Food Banks .....	10
The Financial Drivers of Food Bank Use .....	16
The Non-Financial Drivers of Food Bank Use.....	18
Addressing the Non-Financial Drivers of Food Bank Use .....	21
The People Using Food Banks .....	21
The Loneliness of People Using Food Banks.....	25
Ending the Need for Food Banks in Britain .....	31
Conclusion .....	45
List of Recommendations .....	46

# About the CSJ

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions. The CSJ's vision is to give people in the United Kingdom (UK) who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential.

The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five "pathways to poverty", first identified in our ground-breaking 2007 report *Breakthrough Britain*. These are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the landscape of our political discourse by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in government thinking and policy. For instance, in March 2013, the CSJ report *It Happens Here* shone a light on the horrific reality of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. As a direct result of this report, the government passed the *Modern Slavery Act 2015*, one of the first pieces of legislation in the world to address slavery and trafficking in the 21st century.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners and policymakers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of charities, social enterprises, and other grassroots organisations that have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown across the UK.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2024 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

# Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the individuals and organisations who have generously given their time and experience during our research. Local charities and grassroots organisations demonstrate the best of our communities in the support, love and companionship they provide to those who need it most. Without them, the UK would be a much lonelier place.

In particular, we would like to thank those who attended roundtables and hosted us at their organisations facilitated by the Centre for Social Justice Foundation, including Wesley Hall, Reaching People, Zink, Focus4Hope, Newcastle Food Bank, St Andrews Community Network, Key Community and First Love Foundation.

We would also like to thank the following individuals and organisations who spoke to us and provided evidence during our research: Llanhilleth Miners Institute, Edlington Community Organisation, Family Gateway and Noah's Ark Centre.

We would especially like to thank our supporters who made this work possible, including Dr Robert Easton and the Randal Charitable Foundation.



Disclaimer: Please note that the views, findings and recommendations presented in this report are those of the CSJ alone, and not necessarily those of any organisation or individual who has fed into or enabled our research. Any errors remain our own.

# Foreword

Loneliness is a silent force, an invisible weight that isolates and burdens. It creeps into lives, uninvited and unnoticed, leaving people feeling disconnected and forgotten. Since founding First Love Foundation, I have come to understand loneliness deeply. I have witnessed its effects on the countless individuals who have sought our help.

One story that remains with me is that of a single mother. A professional woman, she suddenly found herself destitute after a life-altering event. Stripped of support and unsure where to turn, she came to us seeking justice rather than food. She wanted help to escape the cycle of poverty that was pulling her deeper into despair. Sadly, her story was far from unique. Many others like her arrived, some with no human contact for years, because they had no one else to turn to, such was the shame of their poverty. In their darkest moments, we were often their first and only source of connection and hope.

When I first established a food bank in Tower Hamlets in 2010, one of the most deprived boroughs in the country, I believed we were addressing the urgent and visible issue of hunger. However, it quickly became evident that hunger was merely a symptom of a far deeper crisis. Many of those who sought our help had endured months, and in some cases years, without income, navigating a system that repeatedly failed to meet their needs. Their challenges extended far beyond material deprivation to include profound social isolation and the erosion of their dignity. It was apparent that food alone could never be the solution.

Love has always been at the heart of what we do. Our mission was no longer just about meeting immediate needs but more about empowering people to rebuild their lives. By 2012 the building blocks were in place.

The pandemic in 2020 helped to reveal the underbelly of real crisis plaguing our communities. In addition, it was during my stint as National Food Strategy Adviser, that the devastating health impacts of ultra processed food, the very foundations upon which UK food banking is built, was revealed.

These factors informed our decision to close the food bank in 2021, and in its place, a social justice response to households facing real, multiple, complex and economic crises. An evolved wraparound model, it now featured a blend of holistic advocacy and specialist legal advice. Like the other examples of good practice cited in this report, I can say, our journey away from emergency food aid has helped First Love Foundation become a place of real and powerful transformation, whilst maintaining its ethos of care, compassion, and restoring dignity.

*Lonely Nation Part 4* powerfully sets out the strong link between food bank use and loneliness. It shows that individuals relying on food banks experience severe loneliness at more than twice the rate of the general population. But it has also revealed an uncomfortable truth, that loneliness is not just a by-product of poverty, but an unseen force that deepens its grip, compounding hopelessness, regardless of social grade.

It further emphasises that to end food bank dependency, we must address not only financial hardship but also its hidden drivers, such as loneliness, social isolation, and systemic failures. Together, these forces create cycles of need that are hard to break. But loneliness and food poverty are challenges we can overcome.

At First Love Foundation, I have seen what is possible when people are met with compassion, when systems are designed to truly support them, and when we refuse to accept the status quo, which is why I believe that *Lonely Nation Part 4* is a powerful call to action.

The recommendations herein should inform the upcoming Food Strategy in 2025. I believe it sets out the essential steps to achieve the Labour government's aim of '*an end to mass dependence on emergency food parcels*', ensuring no citizen is left to face poverty, or loneliness alone.



**Denise Bentley**

Chief Executive, First Love Foundation

# Executive Summary

Food bank use has hit a record high. In 2022/23, 2.3 million people lived in a household that had used a food bank within the last 12 months, equating to 3.4 per cent of the UK population.<sup>1</sup> This is an increase from a total of 2.1 million in 2021/22.<sup>2</sup> CSJ polling can reveal that 59 per cent of people who have used a food bank in the last year expect to access food aid this Christmas.<sup>3</sup>

The government currently spends hundreds of millions of pounds on the provision of food aid. In the fourth round of the Household Support Fund from 2023 to 2024, 24 per cent was spent on food support (non-free school meals support in the holidays).<sup>4</sup> This equates to £202 million over the yearly period.<sup>5</sup> Whilst not all of this funding would have gone directly to food banks, as this funding also includes food vouchers and cash, it indicates the severe nature of food insecurity across Britain today.

Within this challenging context, *Lonely Nation Part 4* considers how the government can fulfil its ambition to end mass dependence on emergency food parcels.<sup>6</sup>

Food bank use increased dramatically from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The Trussell Trust (Trussell), the UK's largest association of food banks, increased their supply of emergency food parcels from 1.9 million in 2019/20 to 2.6 million in 2020/21.<sup>7</sup> However, it appears improbable that the initial rise in food banks at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic can be solely explained by a sudden rise in poverty or drop in household income. CSJ analysis can reveal that household income for the poorest 20 per cent increased by 3.6 per cent from 2019/20 to 2020/21.<sup>8</sup> Absolute and relative low income (before and after housing costs) and food insecurity also fell during the initial year of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup> This begs the question why there was such a significant increase in food bank demand in a period where, supposedly, food insecurity and poverty fell?

This report argues that it is important to recognise other drivers of food bank use in addition to insufficient income. Loneliness and social isolation are prime examples. People who use food banks are significantly more lonely than the general population. Just one in four people who use food banks (26 per cent) say they never feel lonely, compared to two in five adults across the general population (40 per cent).<sup>10</sup> 71 per cent say they feel lonely at least some of the time, compared to 58 per cent of all adults.<sup>11</sup> Over twice as many people who use food banks (19 per cent) feel lonely most of the time or always compared to all adults (9 per cent).<sup>12</sup>

---

1 CSJ analysis of DWP HBAI data.

2 Ibid.

3 Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11th and 15th October 2024.

4 Department for Work and Pensions, Household Support Fund 4 management information for 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, October 2024.

5 24 per cent of £842 million = £202 million.

6 The Labour Party, *Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024*, June 2024, p. 78.

7 House of Commons Library, *Food banks in the UK*, May 2024, p. 4.

8 CSJ analysis of DWP HBAI data.

9 CSJ analysis of DWP HBAI data.

10 Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11th and 15th October 2024 and polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 nationally representative adults between 15th and 16th April 2024.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

Loneliness has been shown to be a significant predictor of food insecure status. A 2021 analysis found that those who felt lonely often were nearly ten times as likely to be food insecure than those who hardly ever or never felt lonely.<sup>13</sup> Whilst the majority of people we surveyed (63 per cent) said that they use a foodbank due to not being able to afford food, we identified a significant minority who report that isolation and lack of support networks are driving their food insecurity.<sup>14</sup>



The relationship between loneliness, food bank use, and poverty is complex. Social isolation can be both an outcome of poverty as well as a driver of hardship.<sup>21</sup> For instance, poverty may lead to isolation because limited resources restrict access to the spaces where people interact or reduce a person’s ability to host family and friends. Conversely, the absence of support networks and relationships can leave an individual more vulnerable to hardship. Without engaging with community, family and relational breakdown, any attempt to end the need for food banks will fail. This crisis is cultural as well as economic.

13 The Trussell Trust, State of Hunger: Building the evidence on poverty, destitution, and food insecurity in the UK, May 2021, p. 78.  
 14 Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11th and 15th October 2024.  
 15 Ibid.  
 16 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Community Life Survey 2023/24: Background and headline findings, December 2024.  
 17 Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11th and 15th October 2024.  
 18 Ibid.  
 19 Ibid.  
 20 Ibid.  
 21 The Trussell Trust, Hunger in the UK, June 2023, p. 86.



Most discussion on ending the need for food banks has focused on addressing the fundamental driver of insufficient income, particularly through the welfare system.<sup>22</sup> This approach does not tackle the wider economic and social drivers, which include loneliness, social isolation, negative interactions with the welfare system, including sanctions and debt repayments, worklessness, insecure housing, family breakdown, domestic abuse, immigration issues, problem debt, addiction, educational failure, and health problems. This report argues that to end dependency on emergency food parcels, the government must address the root causes of poverty, and the non-financial drivers of food bank use.

This report is supported by the evidence and the frontline experience of small and medium grassroots charities across the UK. Nearly all provide short-term emergency food aid but are resolutely focused on addressing the root causes of poverty. Many spoke bluntly about how a sole focus on food redistribution does not necessarily serve the best interests of communities and that a renewed focus on addressing the root causes of food bank use is needed.

The government has stated that they want to end “mass dependence on emergency food parcels, which is a moral scar on our society.”<sup>23</sup> To achieve this, the government must review how it funds emergency food aid, and if this is helping people to move out of poverty. In their traditional format, focused solely on the distribution of free food, food banks can only address the symptoms of failing social and economic life. This is merely managed decline.

*Lonely Nation Part 4* makes a contribution to the growing evidence base on how to end the need for food banks in Britain and outlines five recommendations for government to adopt:

- A new ‘root cause test’ for all public funding that is given to food banks and other organisations whose charitable purpose includes the distribution of free and/or subsidised food. This would ensure that tax payers money is spent on addressing the root causes of food bank use and poverty, instead of just treating the symptoms of dysfunctional economic and social arrangements.
- Ensuring that public money is only given to food banks that operate a referral and registration process for their service users. This would ensure that charities are able to understand and address the drivers of food bank use among those who access their services.
- Whenever a public body refers an individual or household to a food bank, they should also be referred to appropriate agencies and services equipped to help them address and overcome the root cause drivers of their food insecurity. This would help to end the bad practice of referring people to food banks without any attempt to address the underlying crisis.
- A new duty on local authorities to increase the co-location of statutory services with small and medium sized charities and food banks. This would ensure that public services are able to reach vulnerable individuals and families effectively.
- Food banks should be encouraged to identify who is accessing food aid due to reasons of loneliness and social isolation and be supported to help service users access other community settings where they can make social connections.

---

22 Ibid, p. 14.

23 The Labour Party, Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024, June 2024, p. 78.

# Introduction

This report is the final piece in the CSJ's *Lonely Nation* series which has, over the course of 2024, identified solutions to the epidemic of loneliness that exists across communities in Britain. Nearly six in ten adults (58 per cent) feel lonely at least some of the time. Over one in five adults (22 per cent) say they feel existentially lonely, a fundamental separateness from other people and the wider world.<sup>24</sup>

*Lonely Nation Part 4: Loneliness and food banks*, outlines the complex relationship between food banks, loneliness and social isolation. It recommends practical, cost-neutral and easily implementable solutions for government to adopt. This report does not aim to provide all the solutions needed to end food bank use in the UK, but to contribute where the debate is lacking, on the non-financial drivers of food bank demand, through the lens of loneliness and social isolation.

Whilst much of the narrative on the drivers of food bank use are focused on income insufficiency, particularly the claim that the welfare system does not provide enough income for essential food and household goods, this report shows how the government can tackle the root causes of low income, and the non-financial drivers of food bank use, which include loneliness and social isolation. It outlines examples of frontline CSJ Alliance charities who are tackling the root causes of food insecurity in an empowering and dignified way.

## Definitions

Loneliness: The Campaign to End Loneliness defined loneliness as 'a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of the social relationships that we have, and those that we want.'<sup>25</sup>

Social isolation: The Campaign to End Loneliness defined social isolation as 'the level and frequency of one's social interactions.' It is defined as 'having few social relationships or infrequent social contact with others.'<sup>26</sup>

Food bank: A place where food is given to people for free.

Food insecurity: Not having enough reliable access to safe, nutritious, and affordable food.

Household Food Security: A measure of whether households have sufficient food to facilitate an active and healthy lifestyle.<sup>27</sup>

24 Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th and 16th April 2024.

25 Campaign to End Loneliness, Facts and statistics about loneliness, n.d. Accessed: <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/facts-and-statistics/>.

26 Ibid.

27 Department for Work and Pensions, Family Resources Survey: background information and methodology, May 2023.

---

## Methodology

To understand the nature of loneliness and social isolation, as well as the experiences and views of people who use food banks, the CSJ has analysed four data sets. These are as follows:

1. A poll conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used a food bank in the last 12 months, online, between 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024. Whitestone Insight is a member of the British Polling Council.
2. A poll conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults online between 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> April 2024, surveying the state of loneliness in the UK. Data were weighted to be representative of all UK adults.
3. Households below average income (HBAI) statistics and the Community Life Survey.

HBAI data are statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low-income households in the UK. These publications provide statistics and commentary on living standards in UK households. They include statistics on the number and percentage of people living in households that have accessed food banks and experienced food insecurity.

The Community Life Survey is a self-completion and paper mixed method survey and aims to understand more about community engagement, volunteering and social cohesion.

This report is informed by 13 CSJ Alliance charity leaders, service users with lived experience, as well as meetings with sector experts from across the UK.

---

# History and Drivers of Food Banks

Until 2009/10, food banks were not a common feature of life in the UK. Now there is barely a community in the country that does not have access to emergency food aid. 2.3 million people lived in a household which used a food bank in 2022/23.<sup>28</sup> In 2024, the House of Commons Library estimated that there were over 2,871 food banks in operation across the UK.<sup>29</sup> This is a conservative estimate as it does not include foodbanks operated from schools. The National Governance Association has found that 21 per cent of its survey respondents' schools provided emergency food aid through a food bank in 2022.<sup>30</sup>

In 2022/23, 3.4 per cent of all people in the UK lived in a household which had used a food bank in the last 12 months, a rise of 0.2 per cent from the year before. In the same year, 1.5 per cent of all individuals (one million in total) lived in a household which had used a food bank within the last 30 days, an increase of 0.6 per cent from 2021/22 to 2022/23.

*Table 1: Percentage of individuals in the UK who live in a household which has used a food bank within the last 12 months and last 30 days, 2021/22 to 2022/23.*

Food bank use	All individuals (%)		All individuals (millions)	
	2021/22	2022/23	2021/22	2022/23
Has used a food bank within the last 12 months	3.2	3.4	2.1	2.3
Has used a food bank within the last 30 days	0.9	1.5	0.6	1.0

Source: CSJ analysis of DWP HBAI data.

Just as the number of people living in households which have used food banks has risen over the last yearly period, there is a similarly concerning trend in the percentage of individuals whose household food security is low or very low (those with low or very low household food security status are classed as food insecure).<sup>31</sup> The percentage of individuals living in households with very low household food security in 2022/23 (six per cent) is twice as many than in 2021/22 (three per cent). In 2022/23, a higher percentage of individuals lived in a household with very low household food security than low.

28 CSJ analysis of DWP HBAI data.

29 House of Commons Library, Food Banks in the UK, May 2024, p. 8.

30 National Governance Association, The priorities and challenges facing our schools, September 2022, p. 21.

31 The government asks a series of questions of the person in the household who knows the most about food purchasing and preparation. There are a range of questions, asking about the household, adults within the household, and the person answering the questions. The questions do not directly ask about the food security status of the children. These answers are used to generate a household food security score. The score is equal to the number of 'positive' answers; 'yes', 'often true', or 'sometimes true', or '3 days or more', depending on the question. Households are then assigned a food security status based on their score:

0 = High food security (food secure)  
 1 - 2 = Marginal food security (food secure)  
 3 - 5 = Low food security (food insecure)  
 6 - 10 = Very low food security (food insecure)

Table 2: Household food security status in the UK, 2019/20 to 2023/24.

Percentage of individuals whose household food security status is:	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
High (%)	86	88	87	82
Marginal (%)	6	6	6	7
Low (%)	4	3	4	5
Very low (%)	4	3	3	6

Source: CSJ analysis of DWP HBAI data.

Figure 1: Percentage of individuals in the UK whose household food security is low and very low, 2019/20 to 2022/23.

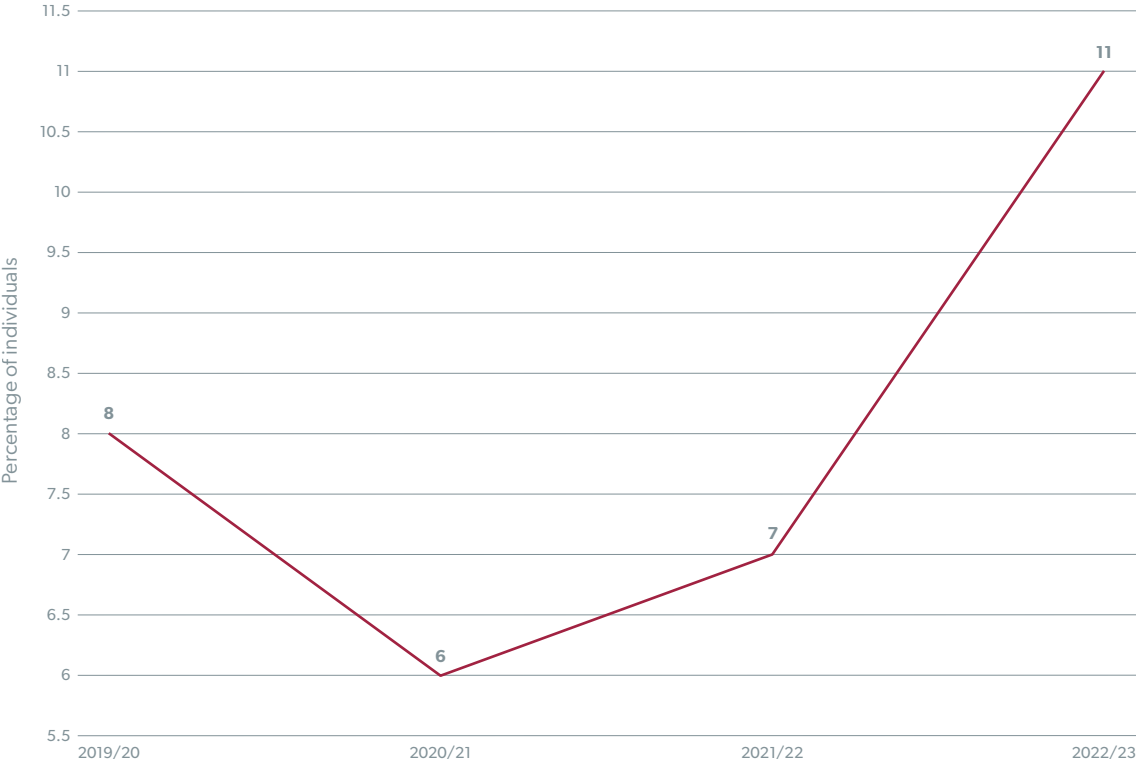


Source: CSJ analysis of DWP HBAI data.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of individuals in the UK who live in a household which is classified as being food insecure (low or very low household food security status). Whilst there was a fall in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a sudden increase since with 11 per cent of individuals living in food insecure households in 2022/23, an increase from six per cent in 2020/21. This equates to 7.2 million adults and children.<sup>32</sup>

32 CSJ analysis of HBAI data.

Figure 2: Percentage of individuals in the UK whose household food security status is insecure, 2019/20 to 2022/23.

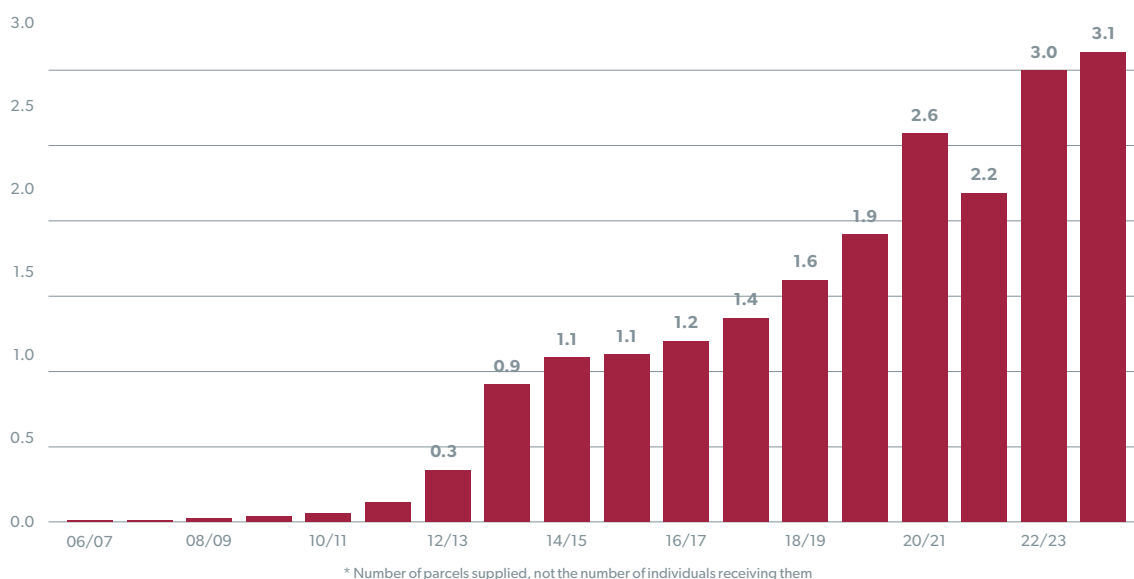


Source: CSJ analysis of DWP HBAI data.

Despite the percentage of individuals who live in food insecure households falling from eight per cent to six per cent during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of Trussell food bank parcels given out increased by 0.7 million during the same period. This begs the question why there was such a significant increase in food bank demand in a period where, supposedly, food insecurity fell.

Over half of all food banks are affiliated to Trussell. Food banks in the Trussell network have increased their food parcel delivery from 0.3 million food parcels a year in 2012/13 to 3.1 million in 2023/24. This is an increase of 2.82 million food parcels over 11 years. The year-on-year increase in food parcels per year can be seen below in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Trussell Trust emergency food supply parcels, 2006/07 to 2023/24.



Source: 'Trussell Trust End of Year Stats April 2023-March 2024' in House of Commons Library, Food banks in the UK, May 2024, p. 4.

Whilst food bank use was already increasing year on year, the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in demand that was unprecedented. Trussell food banks saw an increase of 94 per cent in the number of parcels distributed over five years to 2023/24.<sup>33</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic caused an extraordinary economic and social disruption which has been identified as the cause of why there was a significant increase in demand for food banks.<sup>34</sup>

Due to the economic shutdown, some people experienced reduced hours, redundancy or lower income due to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme or Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (furlough). Insufficient income is widely considered the fundamental driver of food bank demand,<sup>35</sup> so falls in income during the COVID-19 pandemic has been named as one cause of increased demand for food aid. Trussell also named two other drivers of increased food bank use in the first year of the pandemic, which were rising prices and individuals being unable to shop for themselves.<sup>36</sup>

However, an analysis of household income data during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals a more complex picture of financial outcomes across different household quintiles. Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) data shows that households in the bottom 20 per cent of real weekly median household income (quintile one) saw a rise in household income during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic of 3.6 per cent. Indeed, this was the only cohort to see a rise in real weekly household income during the first year of the pandemic.<sup>37</sup> This is most likely a result of government interventions such as the £20 uplift to Universal Credit (UC) and the suspension of the use of sanctions for those claiming benefits.

Figure 4 shows the yearly change in weekly median equivalised disposable household income before housing costs (BHC) for quintile one (the poorest 20 per cent of households) and quintile three (the UK median). Weekly median equivalised disposable household income refers to the total income

33 The Trussell Trust, End of Year Statistics, May 2024.

34 The Trussell Trust, Hunger in the UK, June 2023, p. 19.

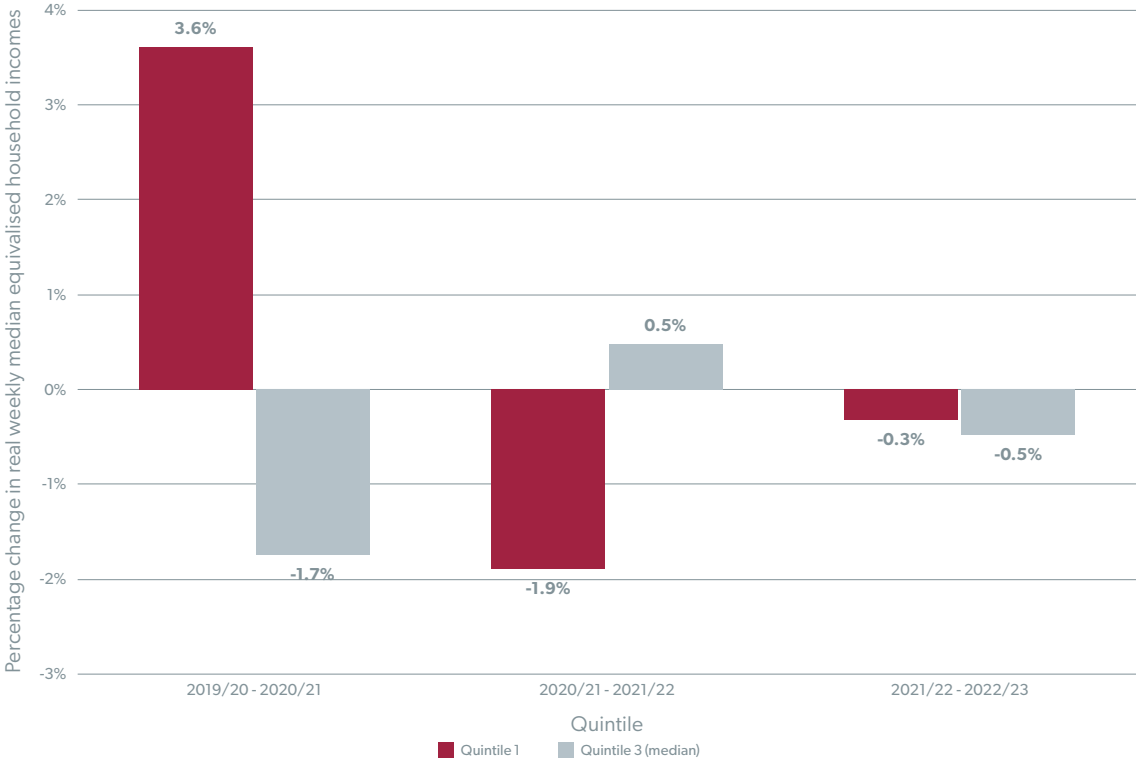
35 Ibid, p. 9.

36 Ibid, p. 20.

37 CSJ analysis of HBAI data.

available to a household after taxes and benefits, adjusted for differences in household size and composition. It paints a varying picture for the poorest households since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Figure 4: Percentage change in real weekly median equivalised household incomes per year, 2022/23 prices (BHC), 2019/20 to 2022/23.



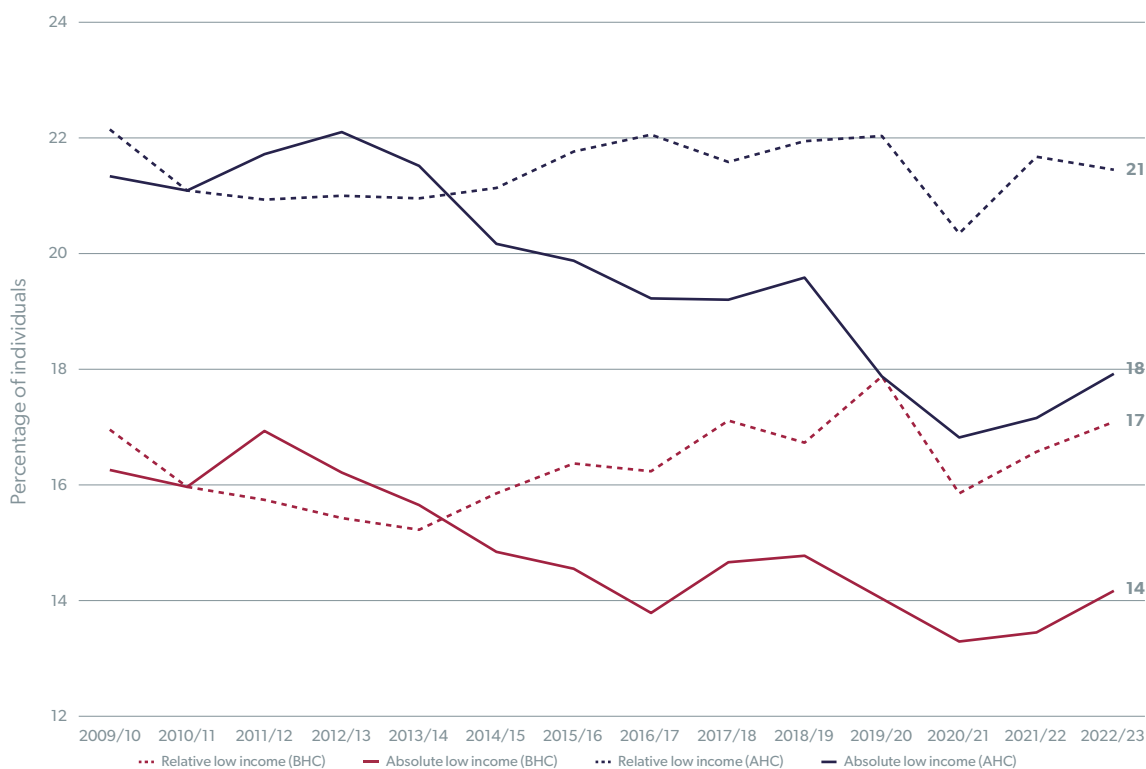
Source: CSJ analysis of DWP HBAI data.

In the first full year of the COVID-19 pandemic, only households in quintile one experienced a rise in real median weekly household income. This was a rise of 3.6 per cent from 2019/20 to 2020/21. The median quintile saw a fall of -1.7 per cent. The gains experienced by the bottom 20 per cent during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic were hit hard from 2020/21 to 2021/22 as the cost-of-living crisis started to effect households. Households in quintile one experienced a fall of -1.9 per cent in median household income in this period. From 2021/22 to 2022/23, both quintile one and quintile three experienced a drop in median household income.

In addition to the rise in household income for the poorest households during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the percentage of individuals in absolute and relative low income also fell. Absolute low income is defined as having an income below 60 per cent of 2010/11 median income. Relative low income is defined as having an income below 60 per cent of the contemporary median income.



Figure 5: Estimated percentage of individuals in absolute and relative low income before and after housing costs, 2009/10 to 2022/23.



Source: CSJ analysis of DWP HBAI data.

The percentage of the population in absolute low income (BHC) fell from 14 per cent in 2019/20 to 13 per cent in 2020/21. The percentage of the population in relative low income (BHC) fell from 18 per cent in 2019/20 to 16 per cent in 2020/21. There were similar trends for those in relative and absolute low income after housing costs (AHC). Relative low income (AHC) fell to 20 per cent in 2020/21. Absolute low income (AHC) fell to 17 per cent in 2020/21. The percentage of the population in absolute and relative low income both before and after housing costs rose following 2020/21, the first full year of the COVID-19 pandemic. This most likely reflects cost-of-living pressures due to high-inflation from 2022.

Whilst absolute low income, before and after housing costs, has fallen from 2009/10 to 2022/23, the rise from 17 per cent (AHC) in 2021/22 to 18 per cent in 2022/23 was the most significant increase since 1982.<sup>38</sup> It is also worth noting that when the cost-of-living rises, low-income measures become less helpful as an indicator of poverty as they only take into account one expenditure (housing costs). When costs go up across the economy, more people experience financial difficulties. This may not be shown in the data which categorises the percentage of individuals in low income. This could also partly explain the sustained increase in the number of people accessing food aid, especially from different social grades.

<sup>38</sup> Resolution Foundation, Five takeaways from new living standards data, March 2024. Accessed: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/comment/five-takeaways-from-new-living-standards-data/>.

Whilst the rise in food bank use in the years following the immediate year of the COVID-19 pandemic corresponds with rising rates of low income and falls in household income for the bottom 20 per cent, this was not the case during the initial year of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020/21) where there was a rise in real median household income among the poorest households and a fall in absolute and relative low income across the population. There was also a fall in food insecurity during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite Trussell food parcels increasing by 0.7 million.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, it appears improbable that the initial rise in demand for food banks at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic can be solely explained by a sudden rise in poverty or drop in household income. The rise in food bank demand raises questions about the financial and social resilience of individuals at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the non-financial factors that contribute towards food bank use. Before outlining the non-financial drivers of food bank use, this chapter will consider the financial drivers of food banks.

## The Financial Drivers of Food Bank Use

The majority of research on the drivers of food bank use argue that insufficient income is the fundamental cause of food bank demand. Trussell's data from 2023/24 found that of people referred to their food banks, 71 per cent had income that was insufficient. They conclude in their landmark report, *Hunger in the UK*, on the drivers of food banks: "*while there are many contributing factors, insufficient income is the fundamental driver for almost all people forced to use a food bank.*"<sup>40</sup> A 2014 review of household food security in the UK, commissioned by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs following the sharp increase in food banks in the early 2010s, highlighted that several crises—particularly low household income, rising food prices, and debt—prompted people to seek food aid.<sup>41</sup>

Academic studies have identified benefit related delays, charges and sanctions, low income and unemployment as reasons for referrals to a food bank.<sup>42</sup> One study found that elements of welfare reform partly drove the uptake of food parcels in the UK between 2011/12 and 2019/20.<sup>43</sup> Authors argued that retaining the £20 uplift to UC, suspending the bedroom tax, benefit sanctions and reforming elements of UC such as the five-week wait, debt recovery arrangements and problems with applying for benefits online would result in a reduction in the uptake of food bank use.<sup>44</sup>

However, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic there was a significant cash injection into the welfare system, increasing disposable income for the poorest quintile and a corresponding fall in relative and absolute low income. Food security also rose. Despite this, the number of Trussell food parcels increased by hundreds of thousands. This raises doubts over how effective an increase in the generosity of the welfare system would be in addressing dependence on food banks.

---

39 'Trussell Trust End of Year Stats April 2023-March 2024' in House of Commons Library, Food banks in the UK, May 2024, p. 4.

40 Ibid, p. 14.

41 Food Ethics Council and The University of Warwick, Household Food Security in the UK: A Review of Food Aid Final Report, February 2014, p. 12.

42 Prayogo, E., Et-al., "Who uses foodbanks and why? Exploring the impact of financial strain and adverse life events on food insecurity", *Journal of Public Health*, 40:4 (December 2018), pp. 676-683.

43 Sosenko, F., Et-al., "Understanding the post-2010 increase in food bank use in England: new quasi-experimental analysis of the role of welfare policy", *BMC Public Health*, 22 (July 2022).

44 Ibid.

On the other hand, some frontline charities shared examples of households who didn't feel the benefit of increased welfare generosity due to the benefit cap and frozen local housing allowance. This may also explain the increase in food bank use at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The majority of recommendations that exist with the aim of ending dependency on food banks have been focused on increasing the income of low-income households, particularly through the welfare system. This is because both Trussell and the Independent Food Aid Network reject the continued provision of emergency food aid as a solution to insufficient income and poverty. In *The Cost of Hunger and Hardship*, Trussell state that "we know that the mass distribution of emergency food is not the answer."<sup>45</sup>

There are concerns that government dependency on the charitable sector to provide food aid for households who cannot afford basic survival necessities will lead to food banks being entrenched as an arm of the welfare state. Researchers from City University and Ulster University have discussed the rise of a 'hunger industrial complex', characterised by partnerships between large food companies and food aid networks, facilitated and supported by government policies. Many have critiqued the 'hunger industrial complex' as compromising the government and public will to tackle the root causes of poverty and food bank use.<sup>46</sup>

One contemporary author and campaigner, Andrew Fisher, writing about food banks in the United States (US), says there is an "unholy alliance between food banks and corporate America...Hunger is, after all, good for business." He goes on to write that when conducting research for his book, *Big Hunger*, he found "an almost unanimous refusal on the part of the nation's 200 food banks to advocate for upstream policies, such as higher minimum wages, that would reduce the number of people needing food banks in the first place. These policies would reduce the profitability of the labor-intensive grocery industry, on whom food banks rely for board members, technical expertise, food, and cash. They would also reduce the need for large food banks, some of which have footprints as large as a Home Depot store."<sup>47</sup>

As outlined above, in the UK, there is a different context. Major organisations representing food banks are clear that food aid cannot be the solution to poverty. Instead, Trussell argue that the government should solve the need for food banks, in part through the welfare system, by introducing an Essentials Guarantee.<sup>48</sup> In addition, Trussell argue that supporting more people to claim benefits they are eligible for, scrapping the two-child limit and benefit cap, an uprating and extension of the Scottish Child Payment and the expansion of free school meals would reduce hunger and hardship.<sup>49</sup> Many of these measures are also supported by the Independent Food Aid Network in what it calls a 'cash-first' approach to ending food banks.<sup>50</sup>

Whilst these proposed measures have the potential to greatly increase the disposable income of the poorest households, the costs would be in the billions of pounds, making them unlikely prospects for the foreseeable future. Reversing the two-child limit alone would cost £2.5 billion a year.<sup>51</sup>

---

45 The Trussell Trust, *The Cost of Hunger and Hardship*, October 2024, p. 9.

46 Caraher, M., Furey, S., "The corporate influence on food charity and aid: The "Hunger Industrial Complex" and the death of welfare", *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10 (August 2022).

47 The MIT Press Reader, *The COVID Crisis Is Reinforcing the Hunger Industrial Complex*, April 2020. Accessed: <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/the-covid-crisis-is-reinforcing-the-hunger-industrial-complex/>.

48 An Essentials Guarantee has been defined as enshrining a legal minimum that the standard allowance in Universal Credit must meet.

49 The Trussell Trust, *The Cost of Hunger and Hardship*, October 2024, p. 38.

50 Independent Food Aid Network, *Eradicating food insecurity while ending the need for food banks and other forms of charitable food aid in the UK*, September 2024.

51 Institute for Fiscal Studies, *Abolishing the two-child limit would be a cost-effective way of reducing child poverty but is no silver bullet*, October 2024. Accessed: <https://ifs.org.uk/news/abolishing-two-child-limit-would-be-cost-effective-way-reducing-child-poverty-no-silver-bullet#:~:text=Reversing%20the%20two%2Dchild%20limit%20would%20pull%20540%2C000%20children%20over,child%20brought%20out%20of%20poverty.>

## The Non-Financial Drivers of Food Bank Use

The existing literature on food banks shows that in addition to financial circumstances, there are non-income related drivers of food bank use. It is also important to understand the root causes of why households have insufficient income. Understanding the non-financial drivers of food bank use requires identifying why people have found themselves in a position of income insufficiency.

A briefing published by the Shared Health Foundation in 2023 identified that as (financial) poverty is a key driver of food bank use, the root causes of poverty need to be addressed.<sup>52</sup> This is an important point. For while insufficient income may be the primary driver of food bank use, the best way in which government and other organisations can help people in low income to move to a position of financial sufficiency is contested. Whilst some argue that the welfare system should provide the primary solution to insufficient income and food insecurity, the CSJ believe that this approach is limited in tackling the root causes of poverty.

It must be stated here that there are people for whom the fundamental problem and root cause of their poverty is a lack of sufficient income given via the welfare system. Some people cannot work due to sickness or disability. The welfare system should treat those people with dignity, respect and compassion and provide a sufficient amount of money. People who cannot work should never be pushed towards emergency food aid because of low income.

However, for many others who are using food banks, there are other challenges they face in their lives that may be causing them to remain trapped in a cycle of food bank use, low income and poverty. For example, worklessness, addiction, problem debt, family breakdown and educational failure. Increasing the generosity of the welfare system would not necessarily address the root cause problems that drive poverty and food bank use. This is why it is mistaken to argue that the sufficiency of the welfare system is the foundation on which food bank use can be ended in the UK. There are other factors at play.

Through data collected by its food banks, Trussell have identified what it states are contributing non-financial drivers of food bank use. These are:<sup>53</sup>

- Severe social isolation.
- Digital isolation.
- An experience of an adverse life event like sickness, bereavement or domestic abuse.
- Lack of other support and advice before the point of referral to a food bank.

Other research has considered the impact of problem debt,<sup>54</sup> housing problems,<sup>55</sup> and people not claiming their full welfare entitlement as drivers of food bank use.<sup>56</sup> These are not directly related to the sufficiency of welfare payments. For example, the arrangements in place that determine how housing operates, how debt is collected, where good jobs are, and how much security and pay workers receive are at the root cause of why many lack sufficient income.

---

52 The Health Foundation, Briefing: Food insecurity – what can local government do?, June 2023, p. 11.

53 The Trussell Trust, Hunger in the UK, June 2023, p. 77.

54 The Trussell Trust, Emergency food parcel distribution in the UK 2023/24, n.d. Accessed from: [https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/wp-assets/EYS-UK-Factsheet-2023-24.pdf?\\_gl=1\\*1r95w7o\\*\\_gcl\\_au\\*MTU5MzE0NDUyNC4xNzI4NjM4MTI0](https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/wp-assets/EYS-UK-Factsheet-2023-24.pdf?_gl=1*1r95w7o*_gcl_au*MTU5MzE0NDUyNC4xNzI4NjM4MTI0).

55 Clair, A., Et-al., "The Housing Situations of Food Bank Users in Great Britain", *Social Policy and Society*, 19:1 (January 2020), pp. 55-73.

56 The Trussell Trust, The Cost of Hunger and Hardship, October 2024, p. 46.

For example, work. In 2023/24, 12 per cent of people referred to Trussell food banks earned some or all of their income from work.<sup>57</sup> Using the welfare system as a mechanism for propping up low wages does not address the root cause issue of low pay which exists for many workers. The more the government subsidises low pay, the less urgent economic reform appears.

An approach to alleviating poverty through the welfare system could reduce income insufficiency in the short term, but it does nothing to address dysfunctional economic arrangements such as insecure, low paying, bad quality work. Good work garners a sense of meaning, purpose and pride in a way that the welfare system cannot always replicate.

### *Loneliness and Social Isolation as a Driver of Food Bank Use*

Of particular concern to this report is the severe social isolation felt by many people who use food banks. Trussell argue that social isolation can be both an outcome of poverty and a driver of hardship.<sup>58</sup> For example, the former can be the case as lacking resources means one is less able to travel to and from social events. The latter as lacking a support network and the in-person communities which are important for individual resilience means that when hard times come, a person is made more vulnerable to poverty.

In 2023, Trussell identified that people who were disconnected or isolated from friends and family were at a higher risk of food insecurity, 27 per cent of people who were severely isolated were food insecure, compared to 13 per cent who were not socially isolated.<sup>59</sup> Over one in four people (26 per cent) referred to Trussell food banks were experiencing severe social isolation in 2023.<sup>60</sup>

People who use food banks also had more limited support networks than the general population. 15 per cent said they could only rely on their immediate family, compared to seven per cent across the whole UK.<sup>61</sup> 61 per cent said they couldn't rely on friends, almost twice the rate of the UK population which was 33 per cent.<sup>62</sup>

An earlier Trussell report from 2021, *Hunger in the UK*, found that out of predictors of food insecure status, loneliness was, by some distance, the strongest. Those who said they felt lonely often were nearly ten times more likely to be food insecure than people who said hardly ever or never.<sup>63</sup>

Academic research has also identified loneliness and social isolation as being associated with people who use food banks and people experiencing food insecurity. A 2024 US study found that food insecurity was associated with a 3.1 percentage point increase in social isolation and a 9.7 percentage point increase in loneliness among adults experiencing food insecurity.<sup>64</sup> A study of service users at a UK food bank found a relationship between food poverty and loneliness and that perceived benefits of receiving food at the centre was correlated with perceived social benefits (for example having the opportunity to make friends). The authors conclude that it could be worthwhile for the charity to structure food consumption in a way that promotes social interaction.<sup>65</sup> An earlier US study in 2022

---

57 The Trussell Trust, Emergency food parcel distribution in the UK 2023/24, n.d. Accessed from: [https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/wp-assets/EYS-UK-Factsheet-2023-24.pdf?\\_gl=1\\*1r95w7o\\*\\_gcl\\_au\\*MTU5MzE0NDUyNC4xNzI4NjM4MTI0](https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/wp-assets/EYS-UK-Factsheet-2023-24.pdf?_gl=1*1r95w7o*_gcl_au*MTU5MzE0NDUyNC4xNzI4NjM4MTI0).

58 The Trussell Trust, *Hunger in the UK*, June 2023, p. 86.

59 Ibid, p. 86.

60 Ibid, p. 87.

61 Ibid, p. 89.

62 Ibid, p. 89.

63 The Trussell Trust, *State of Hunger: Building the evidence on poverty, destitution, and food insecurity in the UK*, May 2021, p. 78.

64 Park, S., Berkowitz, S.A., "Social Isolation, Loneliness, and Quality of Life Among Food-Insecure Adults!", *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 67:1 (July 2024), pp. 120-123.

65 Rotenburg, K., Et-al., "Loneliness, Food Poverty, and Perceived Benefits of Communal Food Consumption from a Charity Service", *Journal of Poverty*, 25:5 (January 2021), pp. 465-479.

found that loneliness, poor health and food access were intertwined issues. Across their participant group, loneliness increased the odds of food insecurity.<sup>66</sup>

This report is concerned with how government can engage holistically with the needs of people who use food banks, moving beyond an approach that is primarily focused on addressing insufficient income through the welfare system. This is not to say that sufficiency of income is not a driver of food bank use. For many, this is the case. Indeed, CSJ polling which will be outlined in the next chapter shows that the majority of people say they use a food bank because they cannot afford food.

This report does not aim to provide all the solutions needed to end food bank use in the UK, but to contribute where the debate is lacking, on the non-financial drivers of food bank demand, through the lens of loneliness and social isolation. This report will now outline the findings of the CSJ's bespoke polling of people who use food banks to show how government can tackle the non-financial drivers of food bank use, particularly loneliness and social isolation.

---

<sup>66</sup> Gonyea, J., Et-al., "Food insecurity and loneliness amongst older urban subsidised housing residents: The importance of social connectedness", *Health and Social Care*, 30 (September 2022), pp. 5959-5967.

# Addressing the Non-Financial Drivers of Food Bank Use

## The People Using Food Banks

The CSJ commissioned Whitestone Insight to poll 517 people who had used a food bank at least once in the last 12 months, surveying online between 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024. Our polling reveals the demographics, attitudes and beliefs held by people who use food banks across the UK. Our findings show that the lives of people who use food banks are marked by poverty, loneliness and a lack of hope about the immediate and long-term future. Over half (59 per cent) expect to remain dependent on food aid in the coming year. Food bank use is not limited to those out of work. Nearly two in five surveyed are in either full time or part time work, and over one in four are in the highest social grade (AB).<sup>67</sup>

All respondents to our survey used a food bank at least once in the last year. If our sample was converted into a group of ten people and rounded to the nearest whole:

- Three used a food bank in the last month.
- Two used a food bank at least once in the last three months.
- Two used a food bank at least once in the last six months.
- Three used a food bank at least once in the last 12 months.

*Table 3: When was the last time you used a food bank?*

	In the last month (%)	At least once in the last 3 months (%)	At least once in the last 6 months (%)	At least once in the last 12 months (%)
People who use food banks	34	20	17	29
People who use food banks who are lonely often/most of the time or always	34	20	21	25

Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024.

<sup>67</sup> Social Grade is a socio-economic classification. This is a way of grouping people by type, which is mainly based on their social and financial situation. The grades include higher and intermediate managerial, administrative and professional occupations (AB), supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative and professional occupations (C1), skilled manual occupations (C2), and semi-skilled and unskilled manual and lowest grade occupations (DE).

Our hypothesis was that most people who use food banks would be classified as part of the DE social grade. Whilst social grade is not determined by income, there is usually a strong correlation between income and occupation type. However, our polling painted a varied picture of food bank use with over one in four respondents belonging to the AB social grade.

- Over one in four (26 per cent) belong to the AB social grade.
- 33 per cent belong to the C1/C2 social grade.
- Over two in five (41 per cent) belong to the DE social grade.

People who use food banks who responded to our survey were dispersed across different social grades. This is despite our hypothesis that higher social grades would correspond with greater financial security and less food bank use.

The diverse nature of people using food banks was confirmed through discussions with St Andrew's Community Network in Liverpool, which helps run North Liverpool Food Bank, one of the largest in the Trussell network. The charity leader was unsurprised that polling had identified people who use food banks from higher social grades.

CSJ Interviewer: *"Are you noticing that there may be people from more traditionally middle-class professions using the foodbank."*

Charity leader: *"Yeah, absolutely. And when I first started, we had someone we were working with who was a nurse."*

Media from 2020,<sup>68</sup> 2022,<sup>69</sup> and 2024<sup>70</sup> has also highlighted that there are people from all social grades using food banks, even those whose professions or backgrounds could be considered 'middle-class'.

Seven per cent of poll respondents were between the ages of 18 and 34. Nearly half (48 per cent) were between the age of 35 and 54. 45 per cent were aged 55 and over. There were significantly more women than men who responded to our poll. 32 per cent of respondents were men, 64 per cent were women.<sup>71</sup> Other research has also shown that women are more likely to access food aid than men.<sup>72</sup>

### *Living Situation*

CSJ polling also identified the living situation of people who use food banks. People who use food banks were nearly twice as likely to live on their own compared to all adults in the population. 22 per cent of all adults surveyed told the CSJ they live on their own, compared to 39 per cent of people who use food banks. There was also a 15-percentage point difference between all adults who said they live with a spouse and people who use food banks. 42 per cent of all adults told the CSJ they live with a spouse, compared to 27 per cent of people who use food banks. The percentage of each cohort cohabiting is the same.

---

68 The Standard, Food for London Now: Hunger crisis deepens as middle class graduates now join queues at food banks, December 2020. Accessed from: <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/foodforlondon/food-for-london-now-middle-class-graduates-b242987.html>.

69 Independent, Britain's 'desperate' middle-class are turning to food banks, March 2022. Accessed: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/rishi-sunak-food-banks-middle-class-b2042958.html>

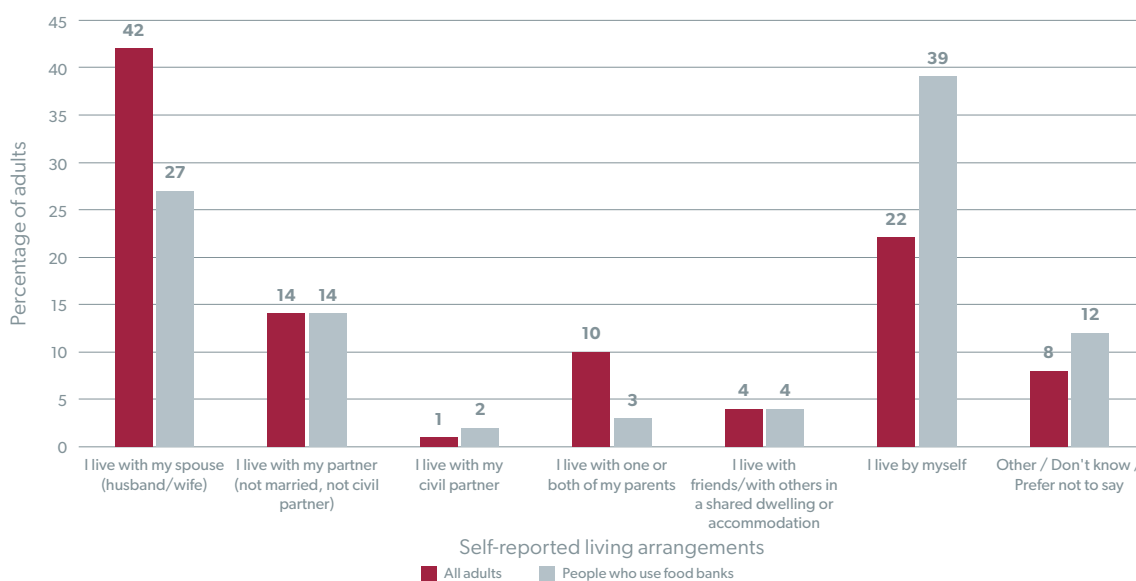
70 SW Londoner, Food bank use in London's wealthier boroughs higher than national average, January 2024. Accessed: <https://www.swlondoner.co.uk/news/12012024-food-bank-use-in-londons-wealthier-boroughs-higher-than-national-average>.

71 Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11th and 15th October 2024.

72 FareShare, Cost of Living Crisis Continues to Hit Women Hardest, December 2023. Accessed from: <https://fareshare.org.uk/news-media/press-releases/cost-of-living-crisis-continues-to-hitwomenhardest/#:~:text=Whether%20they%20are%20older%20women,from%20charities%20and%20community%20groups>.



Figure 6: Who do you currently live with in your main home?



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 nationally representative adults between 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> April 2024. Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024.

The percentage of people who use food banks living alone is cause for concern. Firstly, single person households can experience greater per person essential living costs than those who are living in a couple. For example, a couple or friends can split their living costs. A person living alone is responsible for the full total of their housing costs and other living expenses. It has been estimated that on average, people who live alone pay £266.26 more per month than those who split their living costs.<sup>73</sup> Increased costs for people living alone may be driving some people on low incomes towards food banks.

Secondly, it may indicate that people living alone who use food banks lack the support networks that are important for wellbeing, resilience and health.<sup>74</sup> Research has shown that living alone corresponds with higher feelings of depression (observed across sex, age, income and ethnicity),<sup>75</sup> and loneliness.<sup>76</sup> Our polling also shows a correlation between loneliness in people who use food banks and living alone. Out of all people who use food banks who said they felt lonely often, most of the time or always, 43 per cent live alone. This compares to 22 per cent of all adults and 39 per cent of all people who use food banks. Lonely people who use food banks are more likely to live alone than people who use food banks as a whole.<sup>77</sup>

Systemic problems within the welfare system can also incentivise living alone instead of in a couple. Despite the benefits afforded by living with a partner, there is evidence to suggest that the way the welfare system interacts with the poorest actively incentivises living apart, meaning many feel financially pressured to not live with their partner. This has been referred to as the 'couple penalty', meaning that individuals are making decisions on living arrangements based on the way benefit entitlements interact with them. If a couple chooses to not live together, so as to be assessed

73 Ocean Finance, Revealed: The true cost of being single, September 2023. Accessed: <https://www.oceanfinance.co.uk/blog/cost-of-being-single/>.

74 See the importance of support networks and face to face contact in Pinker, Susan, *The Village Effect: Why Face-To-Face Contact Matters* (Great Britain, Atlantic Books), 2015.

75 Mykyta, L., "Living Alone and Feelings of Depression Among Adults Age 18 and Older", *National Health Statistics Reports*, 199 (February 2024).

76 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Investigating factors associated with loneliness in adults in England, June 2022.

77 Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024.

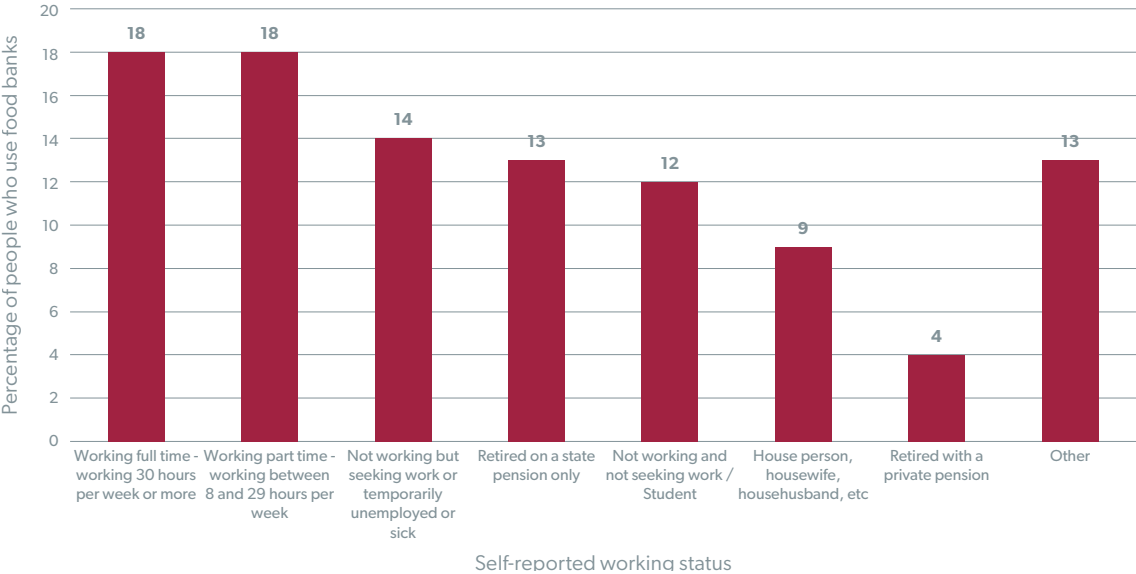
individually for benefits, they may be able to receive thousands of pounds more a year living apart, than they would receive together as a couple after means testing.<sup>78</sup> Evidence has shown that the way the welfare system interacts with families has meant that there are deterrents to living as a couple, particularly when the mother loses access to an independent income.<sup>79</sup> By incentivising living alone, rather than in a couple, there is evidence to suggest that the state could be inadvertently fostering family breakdown and loneliness. In *Lonely Nation Part 1*, the CSJ outlined a suite of solutions to the government which would address the couple penalty within the welfare system.<sup>80</sup>

Lower rates of marriage among people who use food banks may also contribute to a lack of support networks over time. Marital status is associated with loneliness. In *Lonely Nation Part 1*, the CSJ showed a statistically significant relationship between marriage and lower levels of loneliness,<sup>81</sup> that marriage has been shown to be relatively more secure when compared to cohabitation,<sup>82</sup> and is associated with unique health and wellbeing advantages when compared to other forms of couple relationships.<sup>83</sup> *Lonely Nation Part 1* recommended that the government remove administrative and legal costs associated with getting married for low-income couples.<sup>84</sup>

**Working Status**

36 per cent of people we surveyed said they are either in full time or part time work. This is much higher than Trussell’s end of year statistics published for 2023/24 which found that only 12 per cent of people referred to a food bank in their network had earnings from work.<sup>85</sup>

Figure 7: What is your current working status?



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024.

78 Centre for Social Justice, *Lonely Nation Part 1: How family can help to end the loneliness crisis*, May 2024, p. 63.  
 79 Griffiths, R., "No Love on the Dole: The Influence of the UK Means-tested Welfare System on Partnering and Family Structure," *Journal of Social Policy*, 46:3 (February 2017), pp. 543-561.  
 80 Centre for Social Justice, *Lonely Nation Part 1: How family can help to end the loneliness crisis*, May 2024, p. 63.  
 81 *Ibid*, p. 37.  
 82 Marriage Foundation, *Married poor more stable than unmarried rich*, May 2022, p. 1.  
 83 Susan Pinker, *The Village Effect: Why Face-To-Face Contact Matters* (Great Britain: Atlantic Books, 2015), p. 221  
 84 Centre for Social Justice, *Lonely Nation Part 1: How family can help to end the loneliness crisis*, May 2024, p. 60.  
 85 The Trussell Trust, *Emergency food parcel distribution in the UK 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024*, n.d. Accessed from: [https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/wp-assets/EYS-UK-Factsheet-2023-24.pdf?\\_gl=1\\*wgpt63\\*\\_gcl\\_au\\*MTU5MzE0NDUyNC4xNzI4NjM4MTI0](https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/wp-assets/EYS-UK-Factsheet-2023-24.pdf?_gl=1*wgpt63*_gcl_au*MTU5MzE0NDUyNC4xNzI4NjM4MTI0).

There are two reasons as to why there could be a variation between our survey and Trussell’s data. Firstly, Trussell food banks require a referral which may explain why our polling had a higher number of in-work people who use food banks. Some food banks do not require a referral, which may explain the higher number of working people captured in our polling, which made no distinction between the type of food bank that someone said they used (e.g a respondent to our poll may be accessing a food bank which required no referral, meaning the sample population is potentially less deprived than the Trussell sample). Furthermore, differences in data collection and survey type may explain the variation.

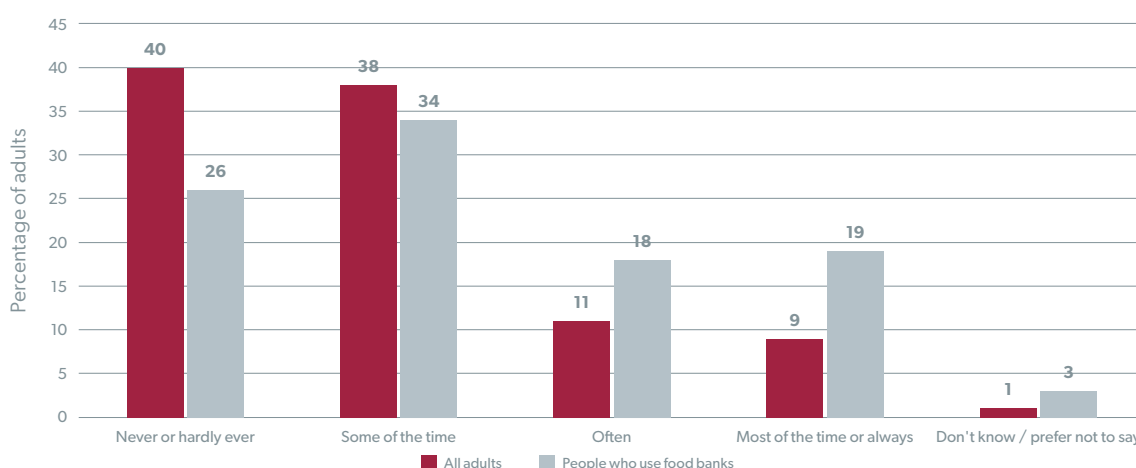
Secondly, there is also considerable evidence from recent years which suggests that more working people are using food banks. In October 2024, the Living Wage Foundation published findings which showed that over half (51 per cent) of low paid Londoners had used a food bank in the past year, with about a quarter (23 per cent) visiting a food bank once a week or more.<sup>86</sup> In *Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK*, the CSJ exposed, after comprehensive consultation with the most economically deprived, how the nature of work is often poor quality, offering little opportunity for progression, low paying (especially in regard to weekly earnings), and insecure.<sup>87</sup> Whilst work is the best pathway out of poverty, not all work is providing the route out it should be.

Over a quarter (26 per cent) of our poll respondents said they were not working. Nearly one in five (17 per cent) respondents were retired. Nine per cent said they were a homemaker and 13 per cent chose other as an option. People in full time and part time work made up the two largest groups by working status. These findings raise serious concerns about the nature of economic arrangements in Britain today, particularly for the 18 per cent of respondents who said they work full time.

## The Loneliness of People Using Food Banks

Our polling shows high levels of loneliness among people who use food banks. Particularly when compared to all adults. Only about one in four people who use food banks (26 per cent) say they never or hardly ever feel lonely, compared to 40 per cent of the adult population. Nearly three in four people who use food banks (71 per cent) say they feel lonely at least some of the time, compared to 58 per cent of the adult population. Over twice as many people who use food banks (19 per cent) feel lonely most of the time or always compared to all adults (9 per cent).

Figure 8: How often do you feel lonely?



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 nationally representative adults between 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> April 2024. Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024.

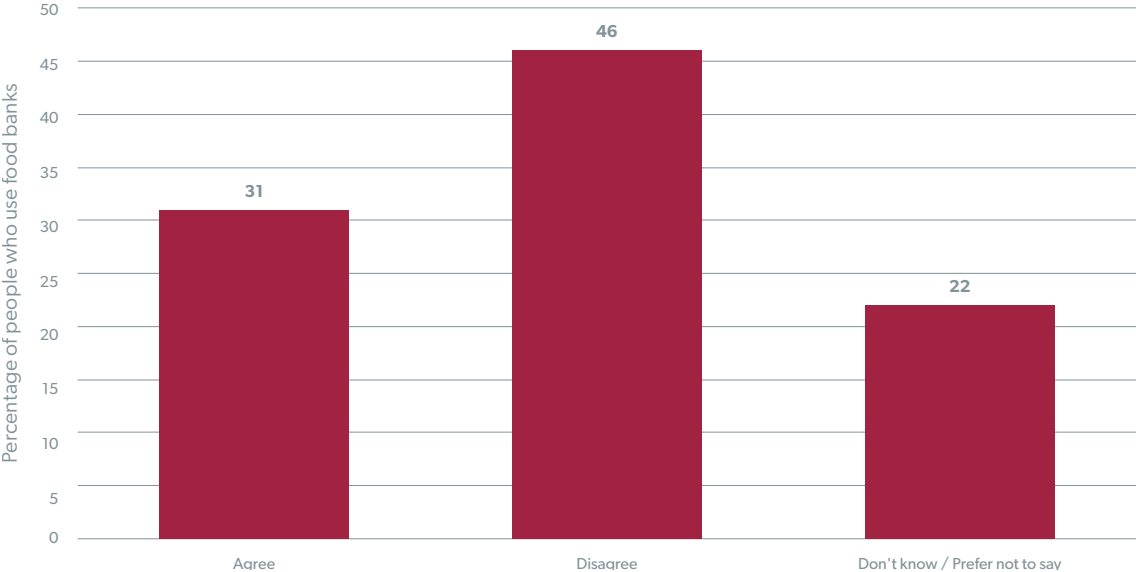
86 Living Wage Foundation, London’s Low Pay Landscape, October 2024, p. 21.

87 Centre for Social Justice, *Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK*, December 2023, p. 46.

Loneliness among people who use food banks is more severe than the adult population as a whole. A smaller percentage of people who use food banks say they feel lonely some of the time, compared to all adults. But a greater percentage of people who use food banks say they feel lonely often, or most of the time/always when compared to all adults.

To understand views on loneliness and isolation as a driver of food bank use from the perspective of those accessing food aid, we asked people to agree or disagree with the question, 'most people use food banks because they are isolated'. A sizeable minority (31 per cent) agree with the statement. The results are shown below in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about food banks. Most people use food banks because they are isolated?



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024.

Nearly one in three (31 per cent) people who use food banks agree with the statement that most people use food banks because they are isolated. Nearly half disagree (46 per cent). This question was structured to allow respondents to select only one option regarding the drivers of food bank use, rather than choosing multiple options. With this in mind, 31 per cent is not a small number. From the perspective of people who use food banks, it is clear that whilst isolation is not considered the primary cause, a large minority consider it to be a driver of why most people use food banks.

Service users of frontline charities spoke of how loneliness and isolation was a driver of food insecurity and poverty. At St Andrew's Community Network in Liverpool, Emma, a volunteer who previously used the food bank and debt advice service, shared her story with the CSJ. Looking back, she spoke about lacking community support, and how this meant she was much more vulnerable to food insecurity.

## Case Study: Emma from Liverpool

Emma's story is a powerful testament to the transformative power of community and faith. After struggling with addiction for 27 years, she found herself in a desperate financial situation with a large amount of debt. This resulted in her having to rely on a local food bank. However, this moment of crisis became the catalyst for a remarkable journey of recovery and purpose.

Emma recounts her experience of accessing the food bank, feeling ashamed and like she had "hit rock bottom." She explains, "for me, for someone who had worked, who'd never been in that position, I just felt I'd hit rock bottom...Through accessing the food bank up the road, they suggested that I come here for debt advice."

Emma spoke of the loneliness that accompanied her position of financial insecurity. She describes, "I used to sit on the couch, scroll on Facebook, look out the window and think 'there has to be more to life than this'...I didn't have any social life, and my active addiction was all done at home...there was no fun side to it, I was just lost in my world where I didn't have connections to other people."

Emma spoke powerfully about the "love and support" that St Andrew's showed her. She said, "the love, compassion and support I was given here, it gave me a space to actually really look at what was going on in my life." Initially, Emma didn't open up in full to the debt advisors but after she was able to overcome her addiction, she began to work honestly with the team at St Andrew's to tackle her debts.

As Emma's recovery progressed, she felt a calling to give back to the community that had supported her. She began volunteering at the food bank and applying for jobs in the charity sector, driven by a desire to help others in similar situations. Her perseverance paid off, as she received multiple job offers, ultimately accepting a role in community money advice at St. Andrew's. She spoke about the privilege of sitting on the other side of the table, "the experience I've got from being sat there, I can be really open and tell them that the reason I do this job is because I've been exactly where you are." The programme St Andrew's run is called 'Money Angels'. Emma told us: "The Money Angels Programme allows us to connect with people in places we normally couldn't get to."

Emma speaks about the transformative impact that relationships in the community have made to her life. She said that "life is just completely different, I've got strong friends who would support me through anything...my Mum is now one of my best mates now and she goes to my church as well."

Emma's story highlights the profound impact that community can have on an individual's life. She emphasises that if she were to find herself in a similar position today, she would not need to rely on a food bank, as she now has a strong network of support and connection. As she explains, "if I ended up in that same position again, I wouldn't end up resorting to using a food bank voucher, because I've got a community around me that would support and help me."

Other charity leaders from across the UK explained how they had noticed significant non-financial drivers of food bank use, including loneliness and social isolation.

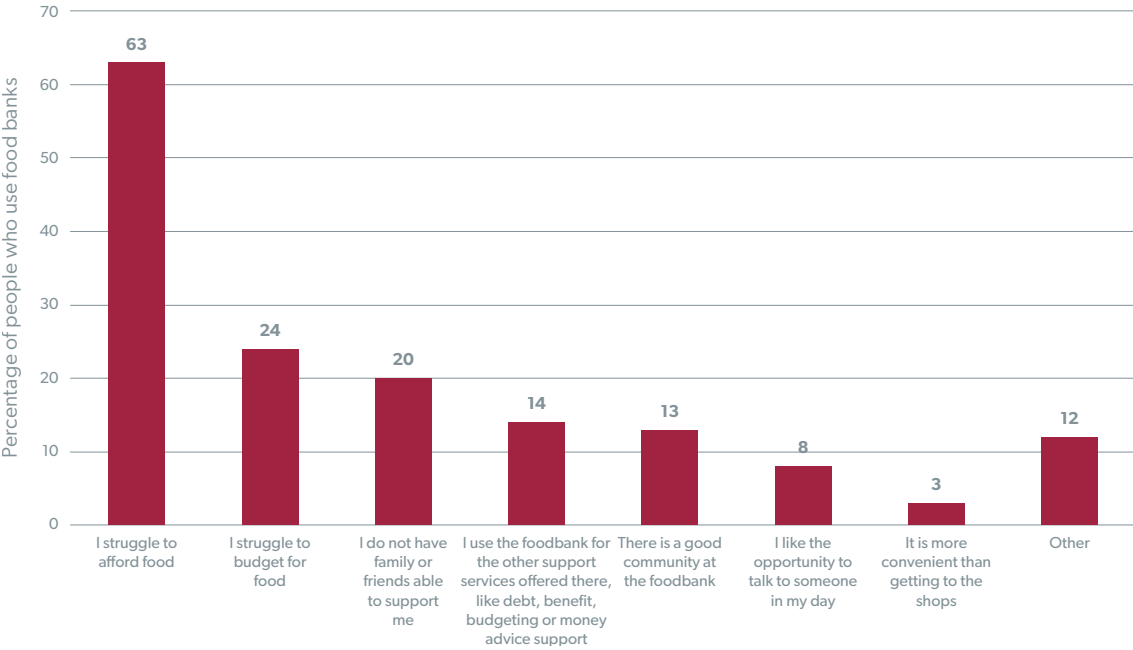
*“The service [food bank] was serving much more than we realised, it was serving a need of human contact.”*  
**Charity Leader, Llanhilleth Miners Institute, Welsh Valleys.**

*“[The food pantry] It’s a reason to come out, to talk to people, friendly people, the things are not expensive as well, things that people can afford.”*  
**Charity Leader, Wesley Hall, Leicester.**

*“There is definitely a link between food bank use and loneliness. In COVID this became an issue. You can see in the home that they don’t have family and friends, they don’t have a phone.”*  
**Charity Leader, Edlington Community Organisation.**

Our poll sought to understand the reasons behind food bank use by asking people directly about their reasons for accessing support. The survey allowed respondents to select up to four options from a list of seven possible reasons.

Figure 10: What are the reasons you use a food bank? Select up to four options.



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024.

Our findings reinforce the predominant view that insufficient income is the primary driver of food bank use. 63 per cent of people who use food banks say that this is because they struggle to afford food. However, it is notable that this option didn't garner a larger response. Our hypothesis was that nearly 100 per cent of respondents would have selected this option, as having insufficient income to afford food is recognised as the fundamental reason as to why food banks exist. Another financial driver of food bank use was selected as the second most popular response; nearly one in four (24 per cent) respondents say they struggle to budget for food. This could indicate both a struggle to budget effectively due to lacking ability, as well as insufficient income which means that budgeting is difficult.

The other options were non-financial. Instead, they related to relationships, community, advice and support. One related to convenience, which only three per cent chose. 12 per cent selected other.

The third most popular option related to family and friend support networks. One in five food bank users (20 per cent) say they access support because they do not have family or friends able to support them. This is notably higher than similar surveys of the general public. In 2023/24, just six per cent of adults disagreed that if they needed help, there were people who would be there to help.<sup>88</sup>

This could be a statement about the resources of friends and family, as well as a lack of support networks. Firstly, respondents to our poll may have family and friends in their life, but they may be unable to support them due to insufficient income. Secondly, the difference in perceived support networks could show that among users of food banks, there are relatively high levels of isolation and a lack of social networks when compared to the population as a whole. This means that when crisis hits, turning to a food bank as the first port of call might be the only option for a significant number of people.

13 per cent told us that a reason for using a food bank was to do with the community they found there. Despite not wanting to be delivering emergency food aid, in many cases, food banks have become vital hubs for their community in the absence of other civil society institutions. The CSJ was told by charity leaders that food banks and food pantries<sup>89</sup> have become the means by which lonely and isolated people in the community build relationships and find support.

Despite many food banks not wanting to exist in their traditional format, charities have recognised the vital role that they play as civil society institutions that mediate between isolated individuals and a collective, stable, community. The challenge for charities is how they can evolve their model into one which helps empower local communities and which they are content with delivering. Llanhilleth Miners Institute, situated in the heart of the Welsh Valleys, shared with the CSJ their story of transition from a traditional food bank to a food hub.

---

88 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Community Life Survey 2023/24: Background and headline findings, December 2024.

89 Food pantries are community-based food networks, typically operated by local charities, that provide individuals with access to food at a reduced cost, often through a membership programme. These services offer support by allowing members to obtain food at prices well below retail value.

### Case Study: Llanhilleth Miners Institute

Llanhilleth Miners Institute transformed their food bank into a food hub that now offers cookery sessions and workshops for a small fee. This change was driven by two key issues: the traditional food bank model did not address the root causes of food insecurity in their community, and the quality of food provided by distribution networks was inadequate. They said that when they closed the food bank down, they noticed that it was a substitute for community in people's lives.

*"Whilst [the food bank] it was free, the quality was getting worse [of food], but people still kept coming even with chaotic lives, I think it was social connection, that was the primary thing."*

Charity Leader, Llanhilleth Miners Institute, Welsh Valleys.

The experience of Llanhilleth Miners Institute is archetypal for the challenge facing food banks who have become important hubs for the community in their area. Many charities want to maintain their position as the mediating link between vulnerable individuals and the wider community whilst evolving the model from distributing food aid to one that is inherently more dignified and empowering.

Despite the challenge, there are benefits for the community if charities do this. The Institute are now seeing a real change for the better in the community after launching their Food Hub. It is a model which empowers people and builds sustainable relationships. They said:

*"In terms of getting people who are isolated and alone, and who are not ready to join clubs or societies, the cooking club is a great stepping stone. You are only coming once a week for two hours. It is an engagement tool. A halfway house towards coming in more regularly and having contact time."*

Charity Leader, Llanhilleth Miners Institute, Welsh Valleys.

Eight per cent of respondents told us that they use a food bank because they like the opportunity to talk to someone in their day. On one hand, it could be considered a damning indictment on British culture, the social fabric and government policy that potentially tens of thousands of people may be accessing emergency food aid to fulfil such basic human needs like friendship, community and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, like Llanhilleth Miners Institute discovered, it is rational for individuals to utilise physical community spaces to satisfy a desire for community and relationships. However, as the Institute showed, social needs can be met in an empowering way by evolving the food bank model to one which addresses the root causes of people's problems.

Interventions to maximise the income of people who use food banks, whilst part of the solution, cannot solely rebuild community life and support networks where they are lacking. Instead, Britain's communities must be rebuilt from the bottom up, through capacity building and mutual support. To do this, government policy should be focused on strengthening the civil society institutions that build community and tackle the root causes of poverty.

This has implications for how emergency food aid services should be structured to take account of the holistic needs of service users. An approach to tackling food insecurity that just considers maximising income as a solution to food insecurity risks deprioritising important factors such as community and personal relationships.



Food banks should make a conscious effort to try and understand who is using their service for reasons of loneliness and social isolation. Engaging those people in social opportunities in the wider community, such as through Family Hubs, community cafés, cooking classes, shared meals and group activities would help address issues of loneliness and social isolation that could be pushing people towards accessing food aid. Whilst food banks could run social events themselves, building partnerships within the wider community could be a more sustainable way of meeting the social needs of service users.

### Recommendation

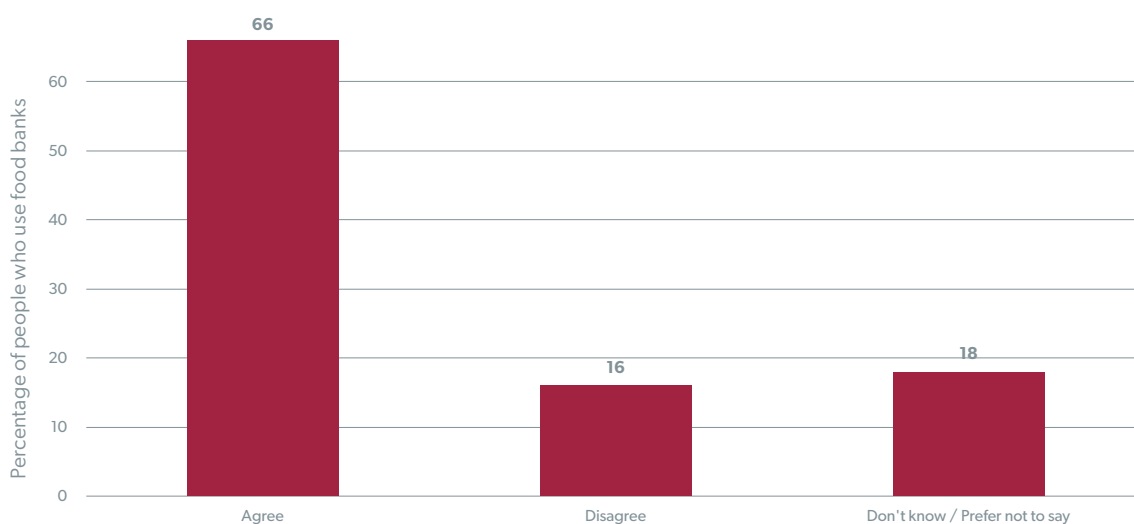
Food banks should work with charities in their area that organise social opportunities like Family Hubs, community cafés, shared meals and group activities that promote social interaction. Food banks should attempt to identify who is accessing food aid due to reasons of loneliness and social isolation and then help service users to access other community settings where they can make social connections.

## Ending the Need for Food Banks in Britain

There is a consensus that food banks should not exist in Britain today. Trussell believes that no one in the UK should need a food bank to survive.<sup>90</sup> The vision of the Independent Food Aid Network is “a country without the need for charitable food aid where adequate and nutritious food is affordable to all.”<sup>91</sup>

However, despite consensus on a future where there is no need for food aid, little progress is being made towards this goal. Instead, our survey identified a high level of long-term dependency on food aid. We surveyed respondents in October, ahead of the Christmas period. The vast majority of people who use food banks (66 per cent) agree they are more likely to use a food bank during the Christmas period, as shown below in Figure 11.

Figure 11: Increased financial pressures during the Christmas period mean that I am more likely to use a food bank during this time.



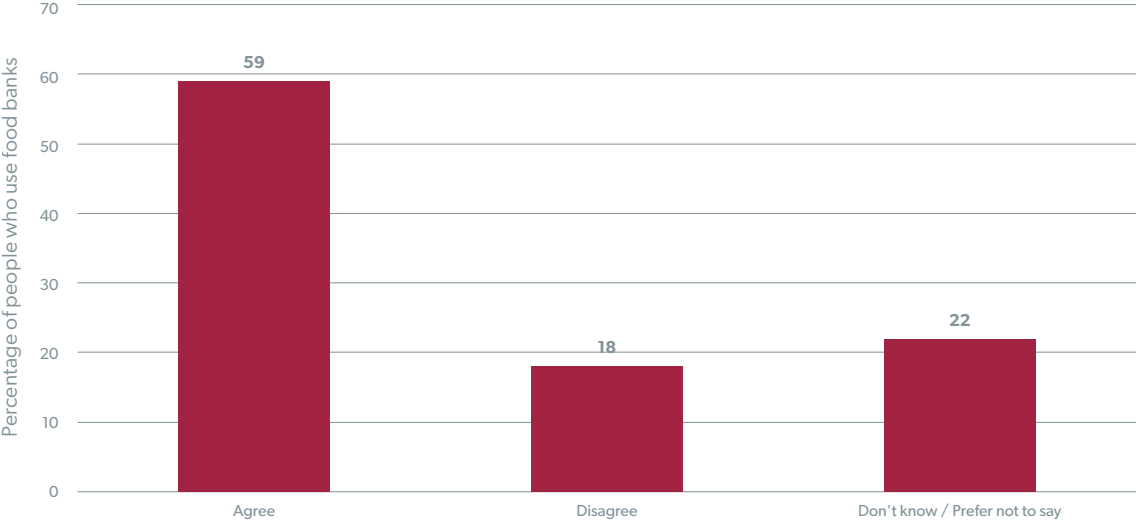
Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024.

90 The Trussell Trust, Winter appeal, n.d. Accessed from: <https://www.trussell.org.uk/>.

91 Independent Food Aid Network, Home, n.d. Accessed from: <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/>.

Two in three people who use food banks (66 per cent) agree with the statement, saying that financial pressures as a result of Christmas mean they are more likely to use a food bank. Less than one in five disagree (16 per cent). We also captured respondents' views on if they will definitely need to use a food bank during the Christmas period.

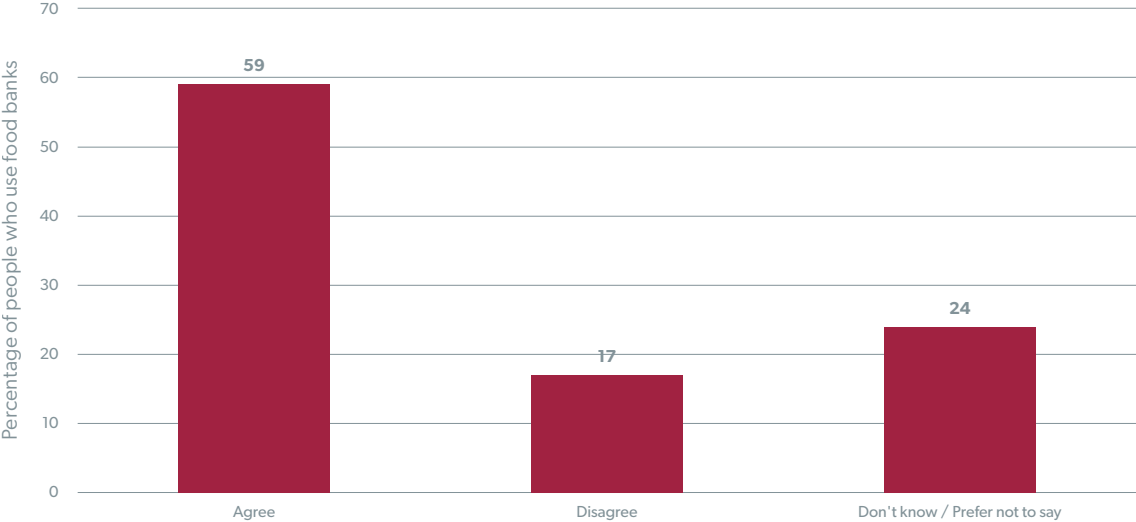
Figure 12: I will need to use a food bank during the Christmas period.



Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024.

Over half of people who use food banks (59 per cent) agree they will need to use a food bank in the Christmas period. Under one in five (18 per cent) disagree. To gauge the long-term expectations of how long people who use food banks expect to be dependent on food aid, our polling asked if people still expect to need to use a food bank in a year's time. 59 per cent agree with this statement.

Figure 13: I expect to still need to use the food bank in a year's time.



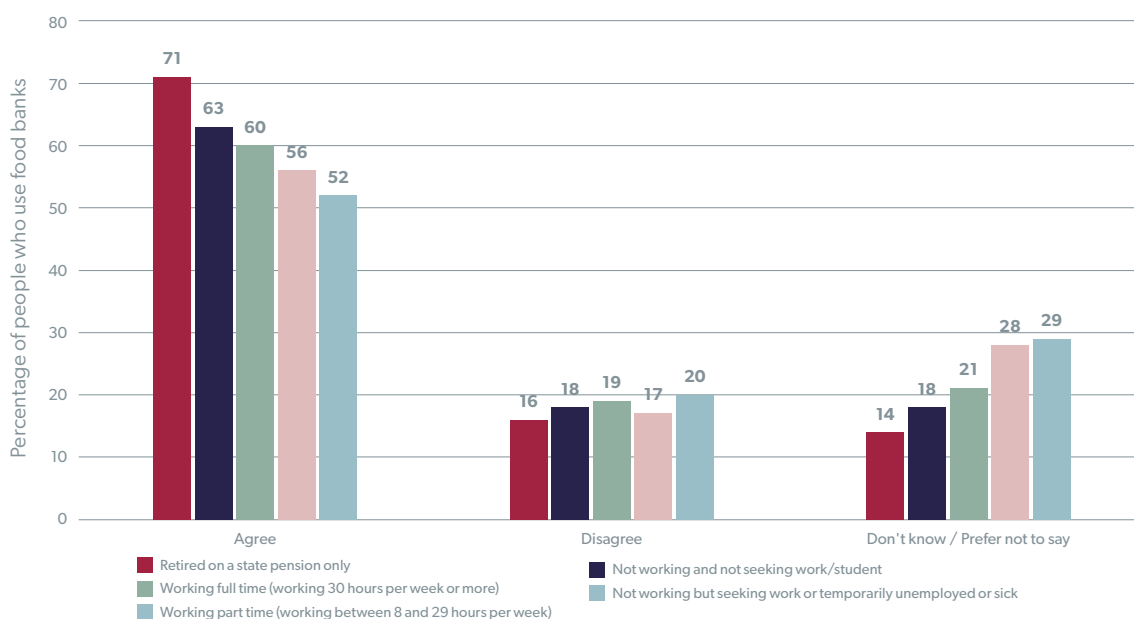
Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024.

It is concerning that, despite the requirement to be referred to many food banks, and many food banks operating rules which limit the number of times a person can access food parcels, that such a

high percentage of people who used food banks in the last year expect to still need to access food aid in a year from now.

Perceived long term dependency on food aid is higher among certain demographics of people who use food banks, with retirees feeling particularly confident that they will continue to need to use a food bank in a years' time. Results broken down by working status can be seen below.

Figure 14: I expect to still need to use the food bank in a year's time. By working status.



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024.

People who were retired on a state pension only were the most likely to say that they expect to still need to use a food bank in a years' time (71 per cent), followed by those not working and not seeking work (63 per cent).

Respondents who were lonely were more likely to say they will need to use a food bank in future. Out of adults who were lonely often/most of the time:<sup>92</sup>

- 72 per cent agree with the statement 'Increased financial pressures during the Christmas period mean that I am more likely to use a foodbank during this time'. This compares to 66 per cent of all people who use food banks.
- 64 per cent agree with the statement 'I will need to use a foodbank during the Christmas period'. This compares to 59 per cent of all people who use food banks.
- 63 per cent agree with the statement 'I expect to still need to use the foodbank in a year's time.' This compares to 59 per cent of all people who use food banks.

To explore why some individuals and households remain reliant on food aid for extended periods, the CSJ consulted charities across the UK to seek insights on what successfully helps people overcome food bank dependency and what challenges prevent people breaking the cycle.

92 Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024.

One charity who wished to remain anonymous told the CSJ that the priority for all food banks should be to help their service users overcome the root causes of why they need to access food aid. They spoke passionately about how any attempt to normalise emergency food aid in society would be misguided and would fail to grasp the root causes of why people need to use food banks. They said:

*“Just giving someone a food parcel doesn’t help to understand the causes, there are multiple causes, these are the things we are keen to address.”*

*“So, if maybe more money went into tackling the cause of the addiction [an example of why someone might need to access emergency food aid], because they are presenting to the food bank because they don’t have enough money, but they are using the food bank because they have a drug addiction.”*

*“The volunteers on the phones [at the charity] are well trained, they will ask the person calling, ‘is it because of benefits, is it because of debt, do you mind me asking?’ It’s so important you do this. It’s really more important [helping people to address their root cause need] than the food you give.”*

They affirmed the importance of getting to the root cause of why a person or family is accessing emergency food aid and helping them to work through the drivers of their food insecurity. This work was considered the most effective at ending dependency on food parcels.

The same charity also noted concerns about a sense of reliance on assistance and highlighted that some food banks may struggle to address the underlying causes of the challenges faced by their service users.

*“I have had conversations with people, they say they are entitled to it [using the food bank], I say we help at our discretion. Because we think you need help. If your personal actions are directly responsible for the situation you find yourself in, then we are part of the problem by just giving you the food because you’re never going to get out of this problem. As long as we are feeding you the free food, what is the incentive to sort out your issue.”*

*“As a charity you don’t want to do harm, but we are [doing harm] if we are worsening that person’s reliance on it [food banks]. But lots of food banks are happy to do this because some very large food banks have an empire built on the back of food insecurity.”*

*“It is not bloody dignified coming to the food bank, we should not be striving to make it dignified, we should be striving to eradicate it. The more you dignify it the more normal it gets and the worse it gets. It’s not dignified, there is no dignity in food poverty.”*

With this in mind, it is concerning that approaches to tackling food insecurity continue to be focused on scaling up food redistribution. In November 2024, it was announced that the major supermarkets had partnered together to form a new national organisation, Alliance Food Sourcing, to redistribute thousands more tonnes of food.<sup>93</sup>

The Executive Director of the Food Ethics Council questioned this initiative on LinkedIn, writing:

*“Yes, there will always be some food surplus in industrial food systems, but we’re only entrenching food redistribution with this new Alliance, and not addressing what’s driving food waste...”*

---

<sup>93</sup> The Grocer, Supermarket Bosses Announce Food Redistribution Body That Will Transform Fight Against Hunger, November 2024. Accessed: <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/supermarket-bosses-announce-food-redistribution-body-that-will-transform-fight-against-hunger/697857.article>.

*...And - separately - let's address the root causes of poverty and household food insecurity, much of which go way beyond what you might think of as food systems. Let's have affordable rents, a properly functioning social security systems, real living wages, a proper right to food and more besides.*"<sup>94</sup>

To end the need for food banks across Britain requires engaging with the root cause problems faced by service users. Some charities spoke of how food banks too often served the needs of volunteers rather than those accessing food aid. This can happen as well-intentioned volunteers feel a difference is being made, whilst long-term service users remain in a constant state of dependence and lack advice, support and advocacy to be able to overcome the root cause of their need for food aid.

These causes will vary according to the different people that use emergency food aid. They are often complex and interwoven. They include issues like low income, loneliness, social isolation, negative interactions with the welfare system, including sanctions and debt repayments, worklessness, insecure housing, family breakdown, domestic abuse, immigration issues, problem debt, addiction, educational failure, and health problems.

This is why it is important that food banks operate referral and registration processes, including self-referral in some cases. The majority of food banks already require a referral to be able to use their services. Food banks in the Trussell network all require a referral and are estimated to provide over half of all food banks in the UK.<sup>95</sup>

However, there are some food banks which do not operate a registration and referral system. This is problematic as without identifying the root causes of why people are needing to access food aid, then the underlying issues in an individual's life cannot be addressed.

The CSJ spoke to Noah's Ark Centre who operate a database which holds the data on who has used their food bank. They told the CSJ why operating a referral system and collecting data on the needs of their service users was so important to their delivery model.

*"We know their household composition, when they last came, what income (benefits usually) they get, when they get paid. We know if they've had benefits advice, debt advice and been on a budgeting course or simply refused to engage with us. We know if they've had a fuel voucher from us, carpets or a small grant. We know a lot about them because we want to understand why they want food, what they're doing with their money and what we can do to help them out of food poverty. If someone got paid yesterday, it's unlikely we'd give them food today for example. Our food support is all about need not want."*

To ensure that food banks are aware of and can act on the root cause needs of their service users, the CSJ recommends that public funding for food banks, including through arm's length bodies like the National Lottery Community Fund, should be contingent on charities operating a referral and registration process.

---

<sup>94</sup> Accessed: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7264730568905388033/>.

<sup>95</sup> House of Commons Library, Food banks in the UK, May 2024, p. 8.

## Recommendation

To receive public funding (by central and/or local government and arm's length bodies), food banks and other organisations whose charitable purpose includes the distribution of free and/or subsidised food should be able to demonstrate they have a referral and registration process for service users, so charities are able to effectively identify who is receiving emergency food aid and for what reason.

By understanding and acting on the root cause needs of those who are accessing food aid, charities can help their service users overcome challenges in their lives. This begins with good data collection but should translate into positive action. One example of this is the Angels Connect service pioneered by St Andrew's Community Network in Liverpool.

## Case Study: Angels Connect

The unique Angels Connect model is built on 20 years' experience delivering community-based money advice to those going through a tough time with their finances.

Money Angels are trained members of any community who can give specified guidance and connect people to free, impartial, relational face-to-face money advice. The Money Angels at St Andrews are all from the community, with many having been recipients of support in the past who now choose to give back. This gives the Money Angels the ability to strike up a relationship and rapport with service users who otherwise would distrust statutory services.

Money Angels are not trained professionals but open the gate to that advice and professional help in future. St Andrews' pioneered the model after noticing that service users were reluctant to engage with statutory services outright, even when they were co-located within the food bank. The Money Angels access a referral system, can connect to others in the network and access resources to share best practice.

Programmes like Angels Connect are engaging with the root causes of why people need to use food banks. Using the power of personal relationships, the Money Angels are able to build trusted relationships with service users and help them get the support they need to deal with the underlying cause of their financial problems. For some, this might be debt, for others, a lack of personal relationships and support networks. For many, it is recurrent experiences of low income. St Andrew's Community Network told the CSJ that with 1.4 advisors on average, in the first quarter of 2024, they had been able to maximise people's benefits to the tune of £600,000 due to people not claiming all they were entitled to.

The CSJ also spoke to Noah's Ark Centre in Halifax who operate primarily as a money and advice charity, but also started a food bank to meet need in the area. The charity leader affirmed the importance of delivering food aid from a money advice service perspective. The end goal is to engage with the service users' money problems. Noah's Ark told the CSJ, bluntly, about how a focus just on the provision of emergency food aid could not tackle the root causes of poverty and food insecurity.

*"One of the problems with food banks, some trustees don't want to ask the questions, some people are lacking the confidence. Food banks need to get more confident asking questions about money."*

*"Whenever we give a food parcel out to someone we always ask 'why' are you needing to use this food parcel, so we can help people and wean them off it."*

*"Food banks are not addressing the true need, the true need is not a food parcel, its money advice...In the last eight years we have helped 2,000 families out of debt."*

**Charity Leader, Noah's Ark Centre, Halifax.**

One charity leader at Noah's Ark, when questioned as to why there was such a dramatic increase in food bank use during the pandemic, pointed to a charitable culture that failed to help people overcome the challenges in their lives.

*"There is a greater reliance on hand-outs vs hand-ups. There was a massive sea change during COVID. Arguably people were better off in COVID, so why was there an explosion in food banks?"*

The CSJ was told about the need for greater reporting requirements for food banks, as well as restrictions on what funding can be used for. Noah's Ark spoke about the importance of not making the provision of emergency food aid the sole aim of charities.

*"If food banks are receiving funding from government sources, it should come with caveats to show what you are doing. Even if its signposting as a bare minimum to engage with their projects and money support."*

*"There should be legal requirements for setting up a foodbank, there needs to be more data sharing, people need to register. You are letting people down if you are just giving food away."*

**Charity Leader, Noah's Ark Centre, Halifax.**

Noah's Ark is committed to doing much more than giving food away. They shared with the CSJ the story of Kelly, who began her journey with the charity in February 2019, when she started to address issues around money and debt.

### **Case Study: Kelly's Story**

When I was younger my finances got out of control and I started getting into debt with things like mobile phones, catalogues, rent and worst of all, council tax. I was just rubbish with money. I've always worked but things got worse when I moved on to Universal Credit and they overpaid me. They started to take money out of my benefits (nearly £200 a month) at the same as council tax started taking money (13% or £100 p/m) from my wages.

Losing £300 per month from my income just made my situation worse, I was stressed all the time, very low and anxious. I stopped opening my mail, answering the phone and I was dreading a knock on the door from the council's bailiffs. I couldn't see a way out and I ended up having to take a month off work because it was making me so ill.

A friend told me about Noah's Ark and I contacted them. I spoke with Andrew and he explained what they could do to help me work things out. Andrew made me feel that he understood and was on my side. He helped me through the debt advice process and arranged something for me called a Debt Relief Order (DRO) which I hadn't heard of even though I had engaged previously with another debt advice charity.

The DRO brought instant relief to me, and it felt like a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I was finally debt and stress free and could concentrate on my life and my young daughter. I told my family and friends all about Noah's Ark and was able to introduce people to the centre who were in the same situation as I was.

In July 2019, I was interviewed on BBC Radio 4 and told the whole of the UK my story! Since I did the DRO in February 2019, I've managed to stay completely debt free and I've never missed a payment on any of my bills, I've finally started to save and I'm thinking towards the future and one day buying my own home. I finally bought myself a car a couple of months ago.

There are people out there who can help you. Noah's Ark have experienced people who can guide you through the challenges that you face. And I know, as I am now one of the qualified debt advisors at Noah's Ark and every day, I take pride in knowing that I can do for others what Noah's Ark did for me.

Kelly's financial crisis was able to be addressed by Noah's Ark as they had the capacity to address the root cause of her crisis. This would not have been the case in a traditional food bank setting which would have only treated the symptoms of Kelly's problems.

The success of Noah's Ark Centre has come from them operating primarily as a money advice service. To understand more about how organisations who were founded originally as food banks have evolved their model over time, the CSJ visited First Love Foundation in Tower Hamlets. First Love Foundation took the radical step of completely shutting down their food bank operation which they set up in 2010. Since 2012, First Love Foundation has pioneered a wraparound support service which is dedicated to getting individuals out of the crisis they are facing.<sup>96</sup> The work of First Love Foundation has made national news in The Guardian, under the headline: *Food banks are not the answer': charities search for new way to help UK families.*<sup>97</sup>

*"We launched a food bank in one of the most deprived boroughs in the country, Tower Hamlets, to respond to the increasing hunger and crisis that communities were experiencing. However, we realised that we also needed to understand what the root causes of the problem were when accessing food and collate the information to see if there were any certain trends."*

**First Love Foundation, Tower Hamlets.**

First Love spoke about the initial period of their food bank delivery in 2010. They said that "food was not the issue in 2010, there were a range of crises we were seeing." The charity saw people walk through their doors who hadn't had income for a year, who were signposted to benefits they were not eligible for, and who were isolated.

<sup>96</sup> First Love Foundation, Our Model, n.d. Accessed: <https://www.firstlovefoundation.org.uk/ourmodel>.

<sup>97</sup> The Guardian, 'Food banks are not the answer': charities search for new way to help UK families, June 2023. Accessed from: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/jun/29/food-banks-are-not-the-answer-charities-search-for-new-way-to-help-uk-families>.



Similarly to other charities, First Love Foundation cited issues with government welfare policy, that have contributed to increased levels of poverty, whilst local authorities, with already stretched resources, are having to resort to funding surplus food aid distribution, missing key opportunities to help low-income households overcome the root causes of poverty. They also highlighted the often-unsatisfactory quality of surplus food (which includes ultra processed foods) delivered through food banks. This problem has also been highlighted in academic literature.<sup>98</sup>

*"In the absence of a joined up holistic whole household approach to tackling household poverty, local authorities are resigned to funding the delivery of low-cost food, missing the opportunity to address the root causes. In addition, we have seen how long-term dependency on food bank food, mostly ultra processed foods, can lead to diet related diseases, placing a further strain on the NHS, and the public purse."*

*First Love Foundation, Tower Hamlets*

First Love outlined four steps to building a better model for food banks. The starting point is to understand and accept the fact that "food banking doesn't work" as a solution to poverty. The following conditions should then be met by food banks.

1. Emergency food aid should consist of fresh and healthy food.
2. Food banks in their offer should seek to avoid long term dependency, as emergency food aid should be no more than a short-term solution.
3. Food banks should use every opportunity to engage with service users to gain a better understanding of their issue, help arrest any further decline into crisis and actively work to reduce reliance on emergency food aid.
4. A whole-household, holistic approach to tackling poverty consistently proves effective in breaking the cycle of crisis – mapping the household need is the critical first step in doing so.

Overall, First Love emphasised that government should prioritise investment in the advice sector instead of the provision of emergency food aid, given the ever-increasing demand for advice. Other charities the CSJ visited reported the same. To tackle poverty effectively, food banks must help their service users overcome the root cause of whatever crisis has caused them to turn to emergency food aid. In the case of First Love Foundation, this took the form of specialised advice and advocacy.

First Love believe systemic failures in the way that government and statutory services are heavily reliant on food banks as a delivery arm to relieve the symptoms of poverty have resulted in deepening complexities of crisis plaguing households.

Failures within government services range from the DWP failing to accurately determine benefit claims, whilst at the same time, other services refer those same claimants to food banks. Again, other charities in different parts of the country said similar. Key Community in South Shields told the CSJ that local DWP services were unofficially signposting people to food banks in the area. In this case, sanctions and deductions from benefits meant people lacked income to be able to afford food.

Currently, a range of organisations, including Citizens Advice, GP surgeries, social workers, and children's centres, can refer individuals to food banks. However, relying on food bank referrals without addressing the underlying causes of food insecurity is negligent on the part of statutory services. The

<sup>98</sup> Oldroyd, L., Et-al., "The nutritional quality of food parcels provided by food banks and the effectiveness of food banks at reducing food insecurity in developed countries: a mixed-method systematic review", *Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics*, 35:6 (December 2022), pp. 1202-1229.

CSJ recommends that all statutory services take a proactive approach by identifying the root causes behind an individual's need for food bank support. Alongside food bank referrals, individuals and families should also be connected to appropriate agencies and services equipped to help them address and overcome the factors driving their food insecurity.

### Recommendation

Whenever a public body refers an individual or household to a food bank, they should also be referred to appropriate agencies and services equipped to help them address and overcome the root cause drivers of their food insecurity.

Advice and advocacy run by charities in addition to the provision of emergency food aid is making a transformational difference in the lives of service users. The CSJ visited the charity Focus4Hope in Brighthouse who run a fortnightly Friday food bank, with every alternate Friday reserved as a one-to-one advice service for individuals to discuss the root cause of their difficulties with the charity. Similarly, on Tyneside, Newcastle Food Bank set up a Pathways Out of Hunger Initiative in 2020, with the aim of addressing the issues that were driving their clients into food insecurity. Four years later, Newcastle Food Bank operate five sessions across the city region and work with 60 referral agencies.<sup>99</sup>

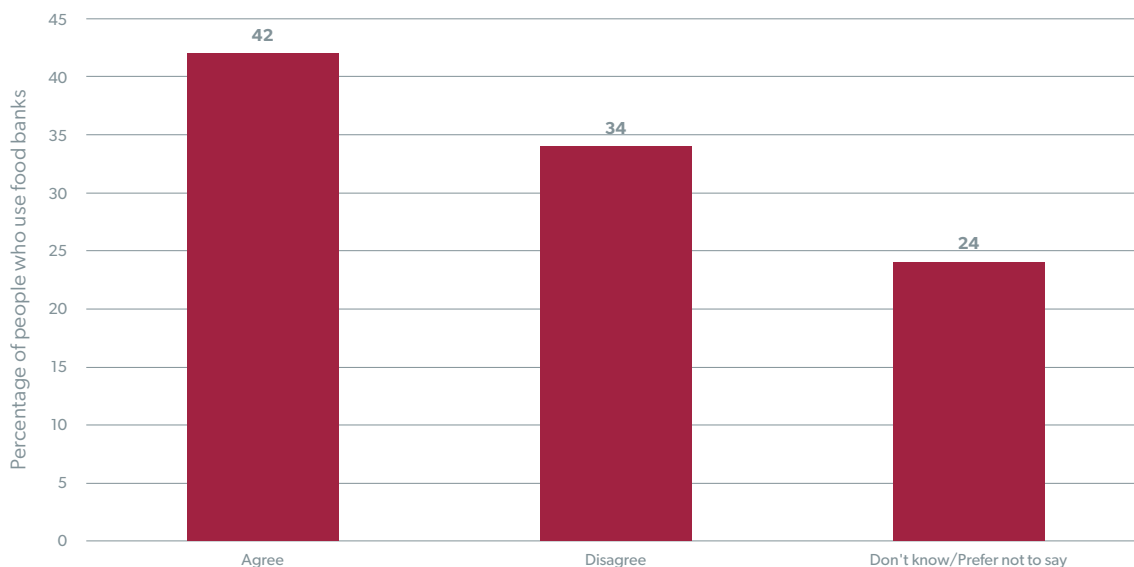
*"So, we've got the specialist debt advisors and welfare advisors. We also host a variety of other organisations as well, so anything from Age UK to the NHS and breast cancer awareness. A variety of different organisations. And that's been a growing trend. To kind of grow just beyond being a food bank."*

**Charity Leader, Newcastle Food Bank.**

By addressing the root cause of a person's crisis, food banks and other charities can make a transformational difference in the lives of people in their community. The experience of the charities referenced in this report testify to the transformative impact that can be made by treating cause rather than alleviating symptom. Yet our polling identified that fewer than half of people who use food banks say that the food bank they use has helped them to address other problems in their life, like family breakdown, debt, addiction, unemployment or unclaimed benefits. While 42 per cent of people who use food banks agree that their food bank had helped them address other problems, 34 per cent disagree.

<sup>99</sup> Newcastle West End Foodbank, Our Pathways Out of Hunger Initiative, September 2023. Accessed from: <https://newcastlewestend.foodbank.org.uk/2023/09/06/our-pathways-out-of-hunger-initiative/#:~:text=Pathways%20Out%20of%20Hunger%20was,deal%20with%2060%20referral%20agencies.>

Figure 15: The food bank I use has helped me to deal with other problems in my life like family breakdown, debt, addiction, unemployment or unclaimed benefits.



Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024.

This report has shown the powerful impact of small and medium sized charities working across communities in Britain that are changing lives by addressing the root causes of poverty and food insecurity. More of existing government funding should be targeted at organisations like these instead of funding food distribution. The government should strive to ensure that everyone accessing a publicly funded food bank receives support to address the underlying causes of their food insecurity.

Central and local government can give up to hundreds of millions of pounds in funding for emergency food aid every year. For example, over 2024, 1,500 charities have been in receipt of funding from the Community Organisations Cost of Living Fund, a £76 million funding pot. Many of the grant recipients are food banks.<sup>100</sup> From October 2024 to March 2025, £421 million has been allocated via the Household Support Fund for local authorities to use at their discretion to support those most in need.<sup>101</sup> For example, it was reported that Hull City Council awarded £50,000 to food redistribution network, Fareshare.<sup>102</sup>

In the fourth round of the Household Support Fund from 2023 to 2024, 24 per cent was spent on food support (non-free school meals support in the holidays).<sup>103</sup> This equates to £202 million over the yearly period.<sup>104</sup> Whilst not all of this funding would have gone directly to food banks, as this funding also includes food vouchers and cash, it indicates the severe nature of food insecurity across Britain today. Other local authorities are also able to make funding available to food banks. In Summer 2024, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council launched a Food Aid Fund for projects that provide food and personal hygiene products.

<sup>100</sup> Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Community Organisations Cost of Living Fund, July 2023. Accessed: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/the-community-organisations-cost-of-living-fund>.

<sup>101</sup> Department for Work and Pensions, 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025: Household Support Fund guidance for county councils and unitary authorities in England, September 2024.

<sup>102</sup> BBC News, Cash for food bank charity 'will help feed 10,000', May 2024. Accessed from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/crgg3m0x-297o#:~:text=Hull%20City%20Council%20has%20awarded,Local%20Democracy%20Reporting%20Service%20said>.

<sup>103</sup> Department for Work and Pensions, Household Support Fund 4 management information for 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, October 2024.

<sup>104</sup> 24 per cent of £842 million = £202 million.

Central and local government should be more strategic with funding decisions and make it a priority to address the root causes of food bank use through relevant grants. Continuing to paper over the cracks of dysfunctional economic and social arrangements cannot tackle the root causes of food insecurity. Therefore, the CSJ recommends that all government departments and local authorities cease to fund the provision of emergency food aid without that aid being tied to holistic support and advocacy that tackles the root cause of an individual or households financial and/or personal crisis.

Furthermore, reporting requirements set by government should not measure success based on the amount of food distributed, nor number of meals or food parcels provided, but by the number of people successfully helped to overcome food insecurity. One charity told the CSJ that some food banks regularly will increase the amount of food given to individuals to inflate their statistics. This is not an accurate measure of success. Success should be measured by the number of people helped to overcome the root cause of their crisis.

### **Recommendation**

Public funding (by central and/or local government and arm's length bodies) for food banks and other organisations whose charitable purpose includes the distribution of free and/or subsidised food and other household items should meet a new 'root cause test'. To receive funding, charities and other not for profits should demonstrate that they are addressing the root causes of food insecurity among their service users, either themselves, or through proven referral pathways to other agencies and/or services. The root causes of food insecurity are wide ranging but include: problems regarding loneliness, social isolation, negative interactions with the welfare system, including sanctions and debt repayments, worklessness, insecure housing, family breakdown, domestic abuse, immigration issues, problem debt, addiction, educational failure, and health problems. Furthermore, reporting requirements should not measure success by the amount of food distributed, but by the number of service users who have been supported to become food secure. All relevant government departments should adopt this principle in funding decisions and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should issue guidance for local authorities to follow. This guidance should also be followed by arm's length bodies such as the National Lottery and Mayor's Fund for London. Private giving via grant making organisations, including supermarket foundations, should also consider adopting this principle in funding decisions.

By adopting this recommendation, central and local government would be able to use existing funds in a more efficient way that continues to meet the short-term needs of people who need to access food aid but which channels funding into services which are able to address the root cause.

It would also encourage more food banks to re-focus their delivery model on addressing the underlying causes of food bank demand. One charity who wished to remain anonymous spoke to the CSJ about how some food banks are reluctant to change their delivery model unless funding is contingent on other services being provided. To demonstrate this, they gave two examples of food banks they had worked with.

### Example One

We have worked with a food bank where we were asked to take a very passive approach to engaging with their clients. When we visited, we had to wait for service users to come to us for advice, rather than being able to actively reach out to them. From our experience, we know this approach is not very effective, and we tried to explain this to them, but their trustees seemed reluctant to make changes. One trustee even told us that their primary focus was simply on distributing food, not extending their work beyond that.

On one occasion, the manager of the project pointed out a woman and child who, according to her, had been attending every week for several years. It made us wonder whether there were deeper, unmet needs that weren't being addressed. That particular food bank is very fortunate to have plenty of donations, so they do not face the same financial pressures as others we have worked with, and that may contribute to the lack of urgency to explore other ways of operating.

### Example Two

We also partnered with another food bank that was eager to try a new approach. They had been struggling with the cost of keeping up with demand and wanted to find ways to reduce the number of people relying on their services. We introduced some of our courses and started visiting regularly to engage with their service users directly.

The changes did bring some challenges, and there was a bit of conflict at times as we worked to identify users who might not truly need the service. However, we were really pleased with the outcomes we achieved together. The food bank's team found it eye-opening to see how their resources could be better focused on those in genuine need. Recently, they were granted substantial funding, potentially alleviating their financial woes: it will be interesting to see how things progress in the future.

Reflecting on these examples the charity leader said:

*"There is a relationship between money and change. Charities and clients don't want to change when they have money. The only solution is to link money to change. Five years ago, the region had less than ten food support projects, there are now over 20. Is that really needed? Advice charities like ours are the answer to creating that change."*

Alongside more targeted government funding, to ensure that food banks are able to partner effectively with statutory services and other agencies, the CSJ recommends that the government place local authorities under a new duty to increase in-person co-location of statutory services within small and medium sized local charities, including food banks.

---

### **Recommendation**

Local authorities should be placed under a duty to pro-actively engage with local charities to increase the in-person co-location of statutory services with successful small and medium sized local charities, including food banks.

---

An example of successful co-location has been pioneered by Key Community and South Tyneside Council. Key Community purchased a double decker bus, with the bottom deck a subsidised food shop, and the top deck welcoming people to chat, access advice, or take part in organised activities. Statutory services have co-located themselves on the bus to better reach people who need their help. This is a trailblazing model that could be adopted by other local authorities and charities.

For co-location to work effectively, local authorities must have positive relationships with local charities. However, small charities are often underused, undervalued and insufficiently supported by local authorities. The CSJ has previously recommended that local authorities introduce a council-level role for Local Charities Representative, whose sole focus is on building relationships with small community charities.<sup>105</sup> We reiterate this recommendation and ask that local authorities make positive engagement with local charities a priority in their work with communities.

---

<sup>105</sup> Centre for Social Justice, *Pillars of Community: Why communities matter and what matters to them*, June 2021, p. 34.

# Conclusion

Food banks have become a common feature of life in the UK. In the last yearly statistics for 2022/23, 2.3 million people lived in a household that had used a food bank across the country, 3.4 per cent of the population.<sup>106</sup> A further six per cent of all individuals live in a household with very low food security.<sup>107</sup> Rising dependence on food aid has begged the question: How do we end the need for food banks in Britain?

The CSJ has taken a new approach to this question. Whilst much discussion has been focused on addressing insufficient income through the welfare system, the CSJ argue that the government needs to address the root causes of dependence on emergency food aid, which whilst including insufficient income and dysfunctional economic arrangements, also includes loneliness and social isolation.

People who use food banks are extremely lonely. 71 per cent said they felt lonely at least some of the time.<sup>108</sup> Over twice as many people who use food banks (19 per cent) feel lonely most of the time or always compared to all adults (9 per cent).<sup>109</sup> One in five (20 per cent) say that one reason they use a food bank is because they have no family or friends able to support them.<sup>110</sup> Without engaging with community, family and relational breakdown, any attempt to end the need for food banks will fail.

Despite these challenges, the grassroots charities referenced in this report are addressing the root causes of poverty and food insecurity. The CSJ highlights the profound impact of charities who go way beyond simply distributing food parcels. These charities are helping people address the underlying issues in their lives, including fostering relationships and rebuilding community life.

In light of this, the CSJ propose a 'root cause test' for central and local government grants. Funding for food banks and other organisations providing food aid should be contingent on addressing the root causes of food insecurity among their service users in addition to food aid, either in house or through proven referral pathways to other agencies and services. Furthermore, food banks should operate a referral and registration process for those using their service to identify what further help and support people need. More must also be done by local authorities and statutory services to end public services offloading vulnerable people onto food banks without giving them the help they need to overcome their crisis.

The first Labour government in 14 years has an opportunity to tangibly improve the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our society. The solutions are already there, demonstrated by the charities showcased in this report. Now is the time for a renewed effort to end the need for food banks in Britain.

---

<sup>106</sup> CSJ analysis of DWP HBAI data.

<sup>107</sup> CSJ analysis of DWP HBAI data.

<sup>108</sup> Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 517 people who used food banks in the last 12 months between 11th and 15th October 2024.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

# List of Recommendations

---

## **Recommendation 1**

Public funding (by central and/or local government and arm's length bodies) for food banks and other organisations whose charitable purpose includes the distribution of free and/or subsidised food and other household items should meet a new 'root cause test'. To receive funding, charities and other not for profits should demonstrate that they are addressing the root causes of food insecurity among their service users, either themselves, or through proven referral pathways to other agencies and/or services. The root causes of food insecurity are wide ranging but include: loneliness, social isolation, negative interactions with the welfare system, including sanctions and debt repayments, worklessness, insecure housing, family breakdown, domestic abuse, immigration issues, problem debt, addiction, educational failure, and health problems. Furthermore, reporting requirements should not measure success by the amount of food distributed, but by the number of service users who have been supported to become food secure. All relevant government departments should adopt this principle in funding decisions and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should issue guidance for local authorities to follow. This guidance should also be followed by arm's length bodies such as the National Lottery and Mayor's Fund for London. Private giving via grant making organisations, including supermarket foundations, should also consider adopting this principle in funding decisions.

---

## **Recommendation 2**

To receive public funding (by central and/or local government and arm's length bodies), food banks and other organisations whose charitable purpose includes the distribution of free and/or subsidised food should be able to demonstrate they have a referral and registration process for service users, so charities are able to effectively identify who is receiving emergency food aid and for what reason.

---

## **Recommendation 3**

Whenever a public body refers an individual or household to a food bank, they should also be referred to appropriate agencies and services equipped to help them address and overcome the root cause drivers of their food insecurity.

---



---

**Recommendation 4**

Local authorities should be placed under a duty to pro-actively engage with local charities to increase the in-person co-location of statutory services with successful small and medium sized local charities, including food banks.

---

**Recommendation 5**

Food banks should work with charities in their area that organise social opportunities like Family Hubs, community cafés, shared meals and group activities that promote social interaction. Food banks should attempt to identify who is accessing food aid due to reasons of loneliness and social isolation and then help service users to access other community settings where they can make social connections.

---



The Centre for Social Justice  
Kings Buildings  
16 Smith Square  
Westminster, SW1P 3HQ

[www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk](http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk)  
@csjthinktank