



Eradicating food insecurity while ending the need for food banks and other forms of charitable food aid in the UK – November 2024

- Over the last decade and a half, millions of people have been pushed to the doors of thousands of food banks and other food aid providers because they haven't had enough money to afford food
- DWP data from March 2024 tells us that 7.2 million people reported food insecurity in 2022/23, rising from 4.7 million in 2021/22
- Food insecurity increases the likelihood of poor physical and mental health as well as malnutrition, chronic disease, and shorter life spans
- In March 2024, DWP Family Resources Survey data also revealed that only 14% of households reporting severe food insecurity accessed a food bank
- IFAN data has consistently found that independent food bank teams are being overwhelmed by high demand and lack of resources
- Taking a '**cash first**' or **income-focused approach** to food insecurity and poverty would ultimately result in everyone in our society being able to access adequate social security payments and wages
- The temporary £20 uplift to Universal Credit, a cash first measure, reduced moderate to severe food insecurity in households on Universal Credit by 16%
- As IFAN wrote to the Prime Minister on the 5th of July, the new Government has a once in a generation opportunity to reverse the tide of poverty that has swept the country over the past fourteen years
- IFAN is calling for immediate, **cash first actions to reduce severe food insecurity**:
 - adoption of [an Essentials Guarantee](#) as a first step towards ensuring a [Living Income](#) for all
 - removal of the two-child limit as well as the benefit cap
 - abolition of the sanctions' regime
 - removal of the five-week wait for Universal Credit and any benefit deductions
 - removal of No Recourse to Public Funds status
 - permanent provision of local crisis support funding in England (beyond March 2026) alongside an increase in Local Housing Allowance
 - real Living Wages and job security for all
 - long-term investment in local advice services
 - commencement of section 1 of the Equality Act

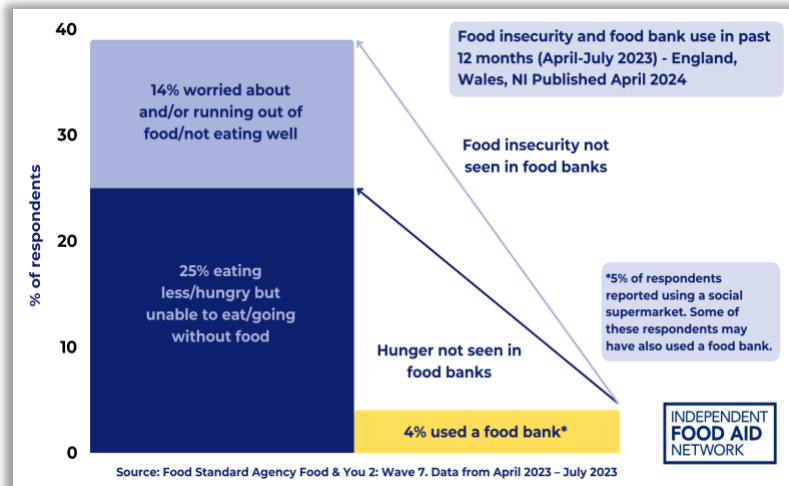
[The Independent Food Aid Network \(IFAN\)](#) supports and advocates on behalf of independent food aid providers operating across the UK including hundreds of independent food banks **outside** of the Trussell Trust network. IFAN campaigns for a 'cash first' or income-focused approach to the drivers of food bank use and wider food insecurity. The network envisions a country without the need for charitable food aid where adequate and nutritious food is affordable for all.

Food bank use is the 'tip of the iceberg'

No one should have to turn to charity to be able to eat. Yet, over the last decade and a half, millions of people have been pushed to the doors of thousands of food banks and other food aid

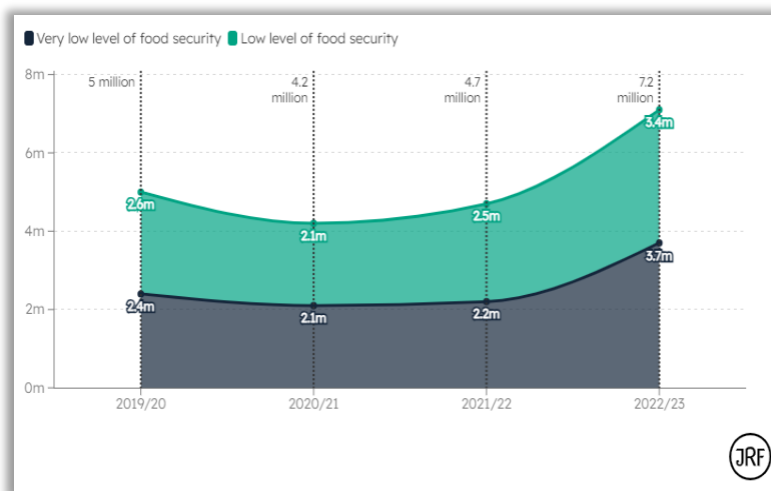
providers, because they haven't got enough money to afford food.¹ However, these devastating figures only tell a fraction of the story. According to recent Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) data **just 14% of households reporting severe food insecurity accessed a food bank.**² Recent Food Standards Agency (FSA) data also showed that most respondents reporting food insecurity did not access a food bank nor a social supermarket.

Figure 1: Food Standards Agency (FSA) Food insecurity and food bank use in past 12 months (April to July 2023)



DWP data also tells us that 7.2 million people reported food insecurity in 2022/23, rising from 4.7 million in 2021/22.³ For 3.7 million people this meant skipping meals or going hungry.⁴

Figure 2: Joseph Rowntree Foundation: Number of individuals in the UK experiencing low or very low food insecurity from 2019/20 to 2022/23



¹ People unable to afford food access food banks but also other forms of charitable food aid including social supermarkets, food pantries, food larders, and soup kitchens.

² Severe food insecurity means that people are skipping meals because they lack income to afford food. [Department for Work and Pensions Family Resources Survey 2022-23](#), March 2024

³ [Joseph Rowntree Foundation: Annual poverty figures showed Government failed to protect most vulnerable from the cost-of-living crisis](#), March 2024

⁴ [House of Commons Library: 'Who is experiencing food insecurity in the UK?', April 2024](#)

Responding to food insecurity with food aid has proved ineffective and unsustainable

Since the emergence of more and more food banks as a response to the impact of austerity policies, millions upon millions of food parcels have been distributed by thousands of food banks.⁵ However, it's clear from data collated by the DWP as well as the FSA that food insecurity has risen just as food aid has been distributed.⁶ ⁷ A food parcel can only ever temporarily alleviate hunger and cannot be effective at reducing food insecurity and poverty.⁸

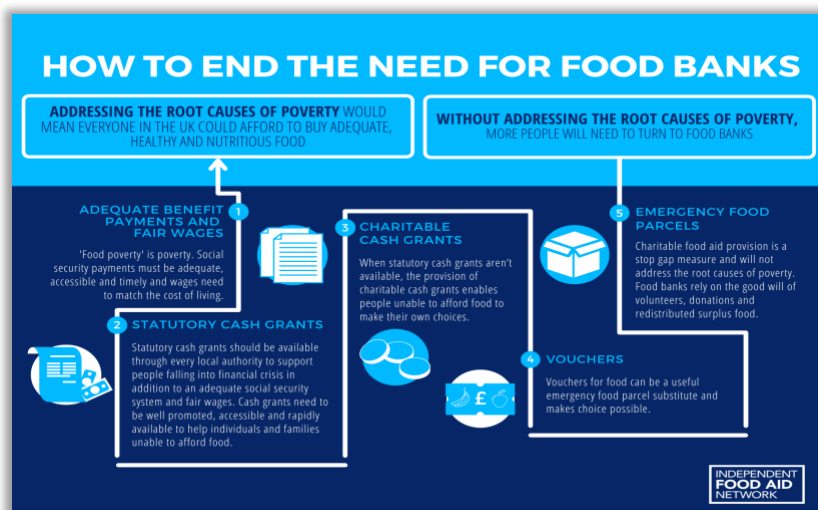
Furthermore, IFAN's most recent data has consistently found that independent food bank teams are being overstretched and overwhelmed by high demand.⁹ ¹⁰ Just as demand has increased, food and financial donations have fallen, and surplus food supplies have dwindled while volunteer burnout has become commonplace.¹¹ Using redistributed surplus food to alleviate hunger has proved itself to be an ineffectual and unsustainable response to food insecurity and poverty.¹²

Food banks and other food aid teams are being asked to do the impossible as they do their utmost to support growing numbers of people unable to afford food. These include both people in work whose wages are not enough to cover the cost of living as well as people who are already receiving all their social security entitlements but are still not able to make ends meet.¹³

Taking a cash first or income-focused approach to food insecurity

Ultimately, a cash first or income-focused approach to food insecurity and poverty would result in everyone in our society being able to access a Living Income through adequate social security payments and wages. If times of crisis do strike, local authority support should be available through cash payments.

Image 1: IFAN infographic *How to end the need for food banks*



⁵ [The Trussell Trust food network](#) represents some UK food banks and doesn't operate in a quarter of all local authorities.

⁶ [Department for Work and Pensions: Family Resources Survey](#), March 2024

⁷ [Food Standards Agency: Food and You 2, Wave 7](#), April 2023-July 2023

⁸ [Poverty Research and Advocacy Network blog: Latest DWP poverty statistics must surely provide the ultimate wake-up call](#), By Sabine Goodwin, April 2024

⁹ [Independent Food Aid Network: Data](#)

¹⁰ [The BMJ: Food banks are running out of resources – there's no time to lose](#), By Sabine Goodwin, November 2023

¹¹ [The Big Issue: Food banks near 'breaking point' as poverty soars, PM told](#), April 2022

¹² [The Big Issue: UK's poverty crisis is spiralling out of control - and there's only one way to fix it](#), By Sabine Goodwin, November 2023

¹³ [Trussell Trust: Hunger in the UK](#), June 2023

While we work towards the goal of everyone being able to access a Living Income, it's vital to take a cash first approach in terms of how people who are facing financial hardship are supported. Responding to food insecurity and poverty through a cash first approach means prioritising advice and support to maximise income at a local level over 'sticking plaster' food aid responses. Where charitable support is needed, cash payments, shopping vouchers or gift cards can provide more dignity and choice than the provision of food aid enabling incomes to be increased while reducing poverty.

Image 2: IFAN infographic: *Cash First: Ending the need for charitable food aid*



A cash first approach to food insecurity works

At a national level, food banks in IFAN's network have reported that recent UK Government cost-of-living payments saw food bank demand temporarily drop. In Scotland, the Scottish Child Payment, which was raised to £25 per week per child in November 2022 and to £26.70 in April 2024, is a direct cash payment to low-income families with children under 16 and is bringing child poverty rates down.^{14 15} DWP data tells us that the temporary £20 uplift to Universal Credit reduced moderate to severe food insecurity in households on Universal Credit by 16%.¹⁶

Taking a cash first approach to food insecurity at a local level is vital. Cash payments made to people in a crisis allow dignity and choice for the recipient, boost the local economy, reduce pressure on food banks and help to increase incomes. Accompanied by advice to maximise income, local cash payments have been proved to significantly reduce financial precarity and the need for charitable food aid.¹⁷

What's the cost of doing nothing?

The impact of food insecurity on physical and mental health and well-being is clear. Malnutrition cases and mental health problems linked to financial precarity have been on the rise for years.¹⁸ ¹⁹ Food insecurity increases the likelihood of chronic disease and other adverse health

¹⁴ [Action for Children: Where is child poverty increasing in the UK?](#), March 2023

¹⁵ [The David Hume Institute: Why aren't more people talking about the Scottish Child Payment?](#), September 2023

¹⁶ [Department for Work and Pensions: Family Resources Survey](#), March 2021

¹⁷ [Policy in Practice: Evaluation of Local Welfare Assistance: Final framework and research findings](#), January 2023

¹⁸ [The Guardian: Britain's hunger and malnutrition crisis could be easily solved – yet politicians choose not to](#), By Professor Michael Marmot, December 2023

¹⁹ [IFAN, JRF: Pushed to the Edge: Poverty, Food Banks and Mental Health](#), By Tom Pollard, March 2022

outcomes.²⁰ The number of children turning up to school hungry has been dramatically on the rise - 4.3 million children now live in poverty.²¹ Living in one part of the UK or another will affect your longevity and life chances.²² Disabled people have borne the brunt of cruel DWP policies and have been consistently overrepresented at food banks.²³ The cost to society and our economy, the NHS and individuals directly impacted by food insecurity and poverty is enormous.

Immediate actions to reduce food insecurity

As IFAN wrote to the Prime Minister on the 5th of July, our new Government has a once in a generation opportunity to reverse the tide of poverty that has swept the country over the past fourteen years.²⁴

IFAN is calling for **immediate actions** to reduce food insecurity and poverty through a cash first or income-focused approach. These are commitments which, both in the short and long term, will reduce and have the potential to eliminate severe food insecurity:

- adoption of [an Essentials Guarantee](#) as a first step towards ensuring a [Living Income](#) for all
- removal of the two-child limit as well as the benefit cap
- abolition of the sanctions' regime
- removal of the five-week wait for Universal Credit and any benefit deductions
- removal of No Recourse to Public Funds status
- permanent provision of local crisis support funding in England (beyond March 2026) alongside an increase in Local Housing Allowance
- real Living Wages and job security for all
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To measure the impact of these actions, it's vital to continue to expand the DWP Family Resources Survey (FRS) and to ensure FRS food insecurity questions are asked of households at local authority level.

Adoption of an Essentials Guarantee as a first step towards providing a Living Income

It's vital that social security claimants can afford essentials through Universal Credit. The adoption of the Essentials Guarantee would ensure a legal minimum for Universal Credit payments based on the cost of living.²⁵ The Work and Pensions Select Committee recently recommended that the previous government embed this benchmark within the system.²⁶

Adopting an Essential Guarantee would represent a critical first step towards providing a Living Income for all. Everyone should be able to afford the basics to, crucially, have a decent quality of life. Ending the need for charitable food aid and addressing the UK's food insecurity epidemic would require the adoption of not only an Essentials Guarantee but a Living Income as well.²⁷

Removal of the two-child limit

²⁰ [PROOF: What are the implications of food insecurity for health and health care?](#)

²¹ [Child Poverty Action Group \(CPAG\): Ending child poverty is urgent, and it is possible](#), May 2024

²² [Institute of Health Equity: Marmot Review 10 Years On](#), February 2020

²³ [Scottish Centre for Social Research: Disability and Financial Hardship: How disability benefits contribute to the need for food banks in the UK](#), October 2023

²⁴ [IFAN's letter to our new Prime Minister](#), July 2024

²⁵ [JRF and Trussell Trust alongside many other charities including IFAN: Guarantee our Essentials](#)

²⁶ [Work and Pensions Select Committee: Benefit levels in the UK](#), March 2024

²⁷ [New Economics Foundation: Living Income](#)

The body of evidence in favour of abolishing the limit on the number of children eligible for social security payment support is impossible to ignore.²⁸ Seven years after the introduction of the two-child limit, there are almost 1.6 million children in 440,000 families affected by the policy. These families are missing out on up to £3,455 a year per child.²⁹ A record 4.3 million children are now living in poverty and scrapping the two-child limit would undoubtedly be the single most effective action that could be taken to reduce child poverty by the newly established Child Poverty Strategy Taskforce. According to Turn2Us, scrapping the limit would lift 300,000 children out of poverty and mean 800,000 fewer children were in deep poverty.³⁰ It is essential that the two-child limit is urgently abandoned.

Removal of the benefit cap

The number of people negatively impacted by the benefit cap has risen as benefits have increased while the benefit cap has remained frozen. Estimates for 2024/25 indicate that over 100,000 households could be affected by the cap this year.³¹ Such an intervention could clearly be transformative for any household impacted by the two-child limit and the benefit cap.³²

Abolition of the sanctions' regime

There is a long-established link between increased sanctions and demand for food banks.³³ Independent food banks have recently reported supporting increasing numbers of claimants impacted by harsher and more frequent sanctions.³⁴ This is the case despite the previous government's own research having been published last year that shows the ineffectiveness of sanctions in helping people into work as intended.³⁵ Moreover, sanctions can cause people depending on, already inadequate, Universal Credit payments significant anxiety and distress while potentially making looking for work or budgeting with reduced income even more challenging.³⁶ The incoming government needs to immediately remove this punitive regime and work to change the overall culture of hostility that is embedded within DWP systems.³⁷

Removal of the five-week wait for Universal Credit and any benefit deductions

Every Universal Credit applicant must wait at least five weeks for a first payment. This leaves huge numbers of people without enough money to cover the basics and potentially needing to turn to food banks. The five-week wait has been shown to lead to acute and immediate financial hardship and removing it, or significantly reducing the system's built-in delay, could make all the difference to people who find themselves having to claim Universal Credit.³⁸

Recent research from the New Economics Foundation (NEF) showed that the DWP are taking £1.6bn a year from low-income households for debt repayments.³⁹ This includes the 'advance loan' that covers the five-week wait between applying for Universal Credit and the arrival of a first payment. Over half of people referred to Trussell Trust food banks and in receipt of Universal Credit have a deduction in place.⁴⁰ Deductions cause debt, anxiety and increased financial precarity and must be removed from the system.

²⁸ [The two-child limit: poverty, incentives and cost, Institute for Fiscal Studies](#), June 2024

²⁹ [Child Poverty Action Group: Things will only get worse: Why the two-child limit must go](#), July 2024

³⁰ [Child Poverty Action Group: Universal Credit: A three-step plan](#), June 2024

³¹ [Child Poverty Action Group: Universal Credit: A three-step plan](#), June 2024

³² [The Resolution Foundation: Catastrophic caps: An analysis of the impact of the two-child limit and benefit cap](#), January 2024

³³ [The Guardian: Benefit sanctions forcing people to use food banks](#), By Patrick Butler, October 2016

³⁴ [The Big Issue: DWP benefit sanctions have gotten tougher amid cost-of-living crisis, data shows](#), February 2024

³⁵ [Department for Work and Pensions: The Impact of Benefit Sanctions on Employment Outcomes: draft report](#), April 2023

³⁶ [Money and Mental Health Policy Institute: Universal Credit and sanctions: the toll on people's mental health](#), January 2024

³⁷ [The Big Issue: DWP could be 'fantastic' under Labour, says ex-minister Stephen Timms: 'Don't write the DWP off'](#), March 2024

³⁸ [Trussell Trust: #5weekstoolong: Why We Need to End the Wait for Universal Credit](#), September 2022

³⁹ [New Economics Foundation: Benefit Deductions Trapping People in Poverty and Debt](#), June 2024

⁴⁰ [Trussell Trust: Debt and Deductions Fact Sheet](#), December 2022

Removal of No Recourse to Public Funds status (NRPF)

Food banks have increasingly been compensating for the failure of the government to adequately support the 175,000 people stuck in asylum limbo.⁴¹ Many migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) status live with no access to cooking facilities and rely on no-cook parcels provided by food banks. For all their other needs, people are expected to live off an allowance of just £9.58 a week.⁴² NRPF status causes poverty, destitution and significant distress.⁴³ It's vital that NRPF status is abolished to allow all migrants the dignity to work and support themselves and their families.

Permanent provision of local crisis support funding in England (beyond March 2026) including an increase in Local Housing Allowance

The Household Support Fund (HSF) has enabled local authorities in England to continue to run or reinstate vital local welfare assistance schemes. Recent data from End Furniture Poverty found that 62% of all local welfare assistance spending was from the HSF.⁴⁴ Its threatened removal at the end of September, would have inevitably resulted in more people falling into food insecurity and poverty.⁴⁵

It is vital that the government provides long-term funding so that every local authority in England can run a scheme where people in crisis can receive cash first support alongside wrap-around advice. Such help is available in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland but in England access to local authority support has proved to be a postcode lottery since 2013. IFAN has mapped the availability of local crisis support through cash payments via local welfare assistance schemes and recent tranches of the HSF as opposed to in-kind support.⁴⁶

As of November 2024, Local Housing Allowance remains frozen. It's critical that this invaluable tool is unlocked and increased in line with housing costs.

Real Living Wages and job security

The principles of cash first apply to work as well as to the social security system. The Trussell Trust's recent Hunger in the UK report found that among people referred to their food banks, one in five were from working households.⁴⁷ The majority of these working people were on incomes low enough that they were also in receipt of Universal Credit.⁴⁸ IFAN is calling for the Government to make long-term commitments to a real Living Wage for all employees.⁴⁹ IFAN welcomes the Labour Party's manifesto commitments on zero-hour contracts as the network has long called for their abandonment.

Long-term investment in local advice services

The recent cost-of-living pressures have left local advice services at breaking point. IFAN is calling for urgent investment in these services which provide people with critical support to

⁴¹ [Institute for Public Policy Research: The asylum backlog: Job done?](#), February 2024

⁴² [UK Government: Asylum support](#)

⁴³ [The Food Foundation: Immigration, Policy and Food Insecurity in the UK](#), December 2022

⁴⁴ [End Furniture Poverty: On the Cliff Edge: The State of Crisis Support 2022/2023](#)

⁴⁵ [IFAN, End Furniture Poverty, Greater Manchester Poverty Action and Cash Perks: Is there a future for crisis support in England?](#) February 2024

⁴⁶ [IFAN: Can you get cash in a crisis?](#)

⁴⁷ [The Trussell Trust: Hunger in the UK](#), June 2023

⁴⁸ [The Trussell Trust: Hunger in the UK](#), June 2023

⁴⁹ [The Living Wage Foundation: What is the real Living Wage?](#)

maximise income or access any existing financial entitlements. Policy in Practice has found that the total amount of unclaimed income-related benefits and social tariffs is now £22.7 billion a year.⁵⁰ It is crucial that local and national advice services are available to bridge this gap while reducing the unsustainable pressure put on charitable food aid providers.

Commencement of section of the Equality Act

It's critical Labour's manifesto commitment to enact the 2010 Equality Act's socio-economic duty comes to fruition given its capacity to reduce food insecurity and poverty, and to provide the framework for the adoption of the Right to Food into UK law.

For further information, please contact Sabine Goodwin at sabine@foodaidnetwork.org.uk or Abby Preston at abby@foodaidnetwork.org.uk.

Further reading from IFAN's website:

IFAN website: www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk

IFAN briefings: www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/briefings-reports

IFAN data: www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/data

References to IFAN's work: www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/references-to-ifan-s-work

IFAN infographics: www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/infographics

IFAN 'Worrying About Money?' resources: www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/cash-first-leaflets

IFAN 'Why Cash First?': www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/why-cash-first

IFAN in the news: www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/ifan-in-the-news

IFAN blog page: www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/blog

⁵⁰ [Policy in Practice: Missing out 2024](#), April 2024