



Reducing food insecurity in UK households with infant children

April 2023

1. Increasing infant food insecurity and independent food bank responses:

1.1 Infant food insecurity crisis

As the cost-of-living crisis puts further strain on households and food inflation hits 18.2%, parents/carers on low incomes with infant children (0-12 months) are facing unique challenges to afford food. The rising cost of infant formula as well as rocketing food prices compromising breastfeeding are forcing increasing numbers of parents/carers of infant children to make impossible decisions. Figures from First Steps Nutrition Trust show that Between March 2021 and November 2022 the most prevalent infant formula increased in cost from between 15 to 23% and the cost of the cheapest available formula increased by 33%.¹ There are now an estimated 40,000 babies and 184,000 young children living in food insecure households in the UK.² Data from the Food Foundation for January 2023, show how households with younger children are at higher risk of food insecurity. 15.4% of households with no children were food insecure, this was 23% for households with only school-aged children, and a worrying 27.3% for households with a child under the age of 4.³ How a child feeds in the first year of life has a profound impact on their development and long-term health.⁴ Governments, local authorities and health boards urgently need to recognise the severity of the struggles faced by food insecure parents/carers and immediately act to reduce the impact on young children.

1.2 Independent food bank response

As a result of these pressures, the inadequacy of the social safety net, and lack of effective pathways to access infant formula, many parents/carers are turning to food banks for support. Recent data has shown that independent food banks in IFAN's network have been struggling to cope with a drastic increase in demand with fewer food and financial donations.⁵ In February 2023, IFAN ran a survey of its members and included questions on supporting parents/carers struggling to feed infants. The data collected was from 85 organisations operating 154 food banks in 81 different local authorities.

¹ 'What the Cost of Living Crisis means for the diets of babies and young children and recommended actions.' First Steps Nutrition Trust. <https://www.firststepsnutrition.org/reports>.

² 'What the Cost of Living Crisis means for the diets of babies and young children and recommended actions.' First Steps Nutrition Trust. <https://www.firststepsnutrition.org/reports>.

³ 'Healthy Start needs urgent improvement to tackle food insecurity in the early years.' Food Foundation. <https://www.foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/healthy-start-needs-urgent-improvement-tackle-food-insecurity-early-years>

⁴ 'Feeding in the First Year of Life.' Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition. Available at: SACN report - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

⁵ 'IFAN Data.' Independent Food Aid Network. <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/data>

These figures show that 45% of organisations had seen a rise in the number of parents/carers who had asked for their support to feed their babies from December 2022 - January 2023 compared to the same two-month period a year ago. Food bank managers commented on seeing “a lot more parents with very young children” and having to work on policies to support them where “this was previously never needed.” The number of organisations who had not supported any parents/carers with infant children from December 2022 to January 2023, was just 4%.

2. Existing support pathways:

2.1 Inadequate support pathways bringing parents/carers to the food bank

On top of supporting increasing numbers of parents/carers who are struggling to feed their infant children, independent food bank managers reported that parents/carers arriving at a food bank had missed vital opportunities to increase their incomes. 56% of organisations reported supporting parents/carers who had “self-referred” to their service (without accessing agencies prior to accessing food banks). UNICEF guidance on supporting families with infants under 12 months recommends that food banks “refer families to their Local Authority or Health Board to ensure they receive ongoing, wrap-around support.”⁶ Yet, it is clear that these pathways to support are not working, with 47% of responding organisations supporting parents/carers who had in fact been referred to the food bank by the Local Authority or a health practitioner. 56% of organisations were not even aware of any local authority guidance on supporting people with infant children facing food insecurity.

2.2 How food banks are currently supporting parents/carers

Where food banks have supported parents/carers to access infant formula, this has been done in a variety of ways. In addition to providing formula directly (51%), organisations also reported supporting people through providing cash (4%) or vouchers (14%) to enable the purchase of formula or purchasing formula on their behalf (31%). The diversity of support approaches is testament to the fact that - as demand for their services continues to rise - independent food bank teams are working to support people as best they can under increasingly pressured conditions. Food banks have repeatedly warned of reaching “breaking point” and cannot continue to be relied on as the main source of support for people where the social security system has failed.⁷

3. Recommendations:

3.1 Embed local cash first pathways

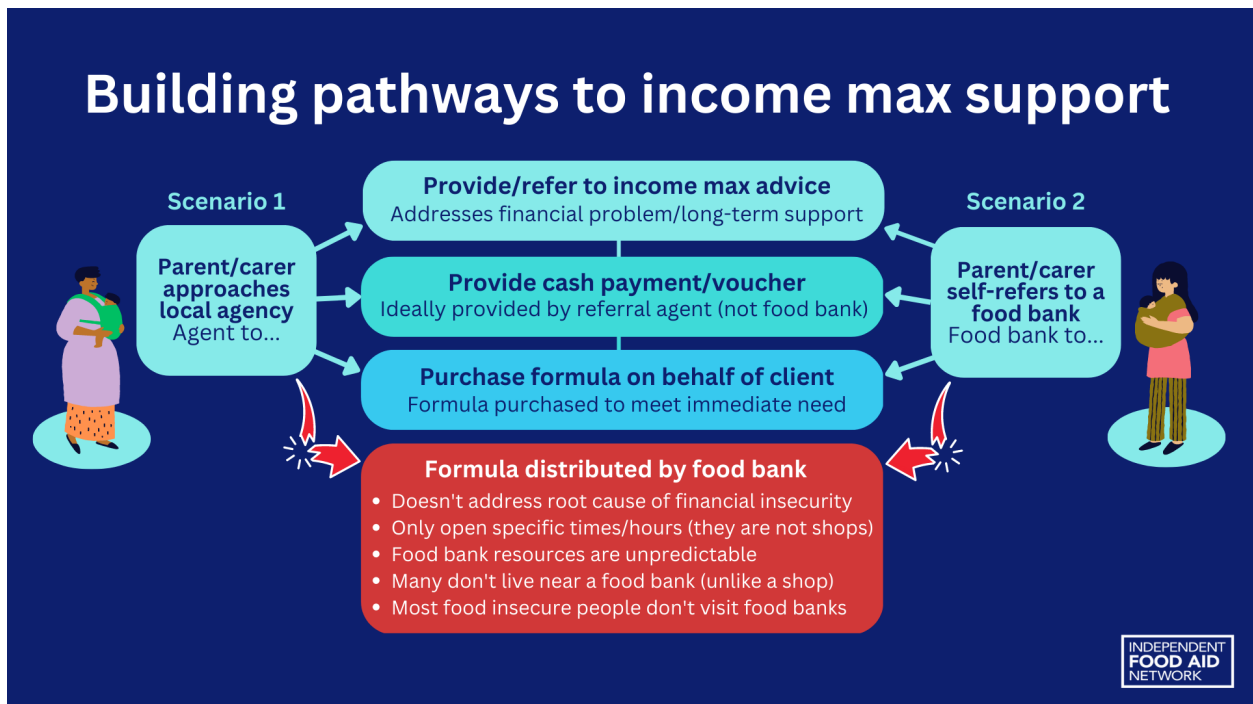
⁶ ‘Supporting families with infants under 12 months experiencing food insecurity: a guide for local authorities and health boards.’ UNICEF UK Baby Friendly Initiative, First Steps Nutrition Trust and the National Infant Feeding Network (NIFN). <https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/local-authorities-guide/>

⁷ ‘Our joint letter to the Prime Minister.’ Independent Food Aid Network. <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/blog/pmjoint-letter>

The provision of charitable food aid is not an effective or sustainable response to the growing food insecurity experienced by many parents/carers with babies. Living on a low income may also mean parents and carers have to compromise on food safety such as ‘ignoring best before dates, switching off fridges/freezers, and cutting corners in the preparation of powdered infant formula.’⁸

IFAN is calling for the strengthening of pathways to income maximisation and a cash first response to help parents/carers with an urgent need to access formula safety. Parents/carers who reach out for support should be provided with advice and support to maximise their income as well as access to cash/vouchers to purchase formula to meet immediate need. IFAN also calls for income maximisation and a cash first response to support parents struggling to breastfeed due inadequate income to buy food.⁹

Fig 1: Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN), *Building pathways to income maximisation support*:



3.2 Investment in advice and support services

Local cash first pathways cannot be effective without impactful investment in advice services. As expressed by one food bank manager responding to IFAN's recent survey: "Advice and

⁸ 'What the Cost of Living Crisis means for the diets of babies and young children and recommended actions.' First Steps Nutrition Trust. <https://www.firststepsnutrition.org/reports>.

⁹ IFAN co-produces 'Worrying About Money?' cash first referral leaflets with local authority teams and other local partners and would be glad to hear from local authorities where leaflets are not yet in circulation. www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk

support services are severely overstretched and often rely on volunteers. Without these, a cash first approach is less effective and will lead to longer term food bank dependency.” Advice and support to maximise income and access cash payments needs to be timely and effective so that parents/carers are not being directed to a food bank by default.

3.3 Bring social security payments in line with the cost of living

42% organisations responding to IFAN’s survey reported supporting parents/carers who had been referred to the food bank by an advice agency. The reason why people who have received income maximisation advice are still needing to use a food bank is either because there is no cash support available to them, or that cash support is not sufficient or timely enough to prevent needing to use a food bank. It is vital that, alongside the strengthening of these pathways and adequate funding of advice and support services, that social security payments are increased in line with the cost of living and crisis payments in cash are easily consistently available and accessible at local authority level.

Where emergency crisis payments in cash are available in some local authorities in England, in Scotland via the Scottish Welfare Fund, in Wales via the Discretionary Assistance Fund and in Northern Ireland via Discretionary Support, they need to be adequate, timely and accessible.

3.4 Improve Healthy Start and Best Start schemes

IFAN supports the policy positions of the Healthy Start Working Group on improving the Healthy Start scheme by widening access, expanding eligibility¹⁰, increasing uptake and payment levels.¹¹ A crucial part of this improvement would be auto-enrolment which would address low take-up due to lack of awareness, barriers to application, and stigma for both Healthy Start and Best Start Schemes.¹² Payment levels are falling behind food inflation, and in December 2022, research from First Steps Nutrition Trust showed that there were no infant formulas affordable with the Healthy Start allowance.¹³ These payments need to urgently be bought in line with the cost of living to achieve their purpose of enabling families to access adequate nutrition during pregnancy and first years of life. IFAN welcomes the Scottish Government’s actions to increase Best Starts Food and Best Start Grant payments including the doubling of the payment for infants under 12 months (from April 2023).¹⁴

¹⁰ The eligibility criteria for Healthy Start requiring families to earning under £408 a month excludes some families on Universal Credit from applying. Healthy Start is also not open to families with no recourse to public funds (unless their children are British Citizens). <https://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/how-to-apply/>.

¹¹ ‘Healthy Start Working Group Policy Positions.’ Food Foundation.

<https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-04/Healthy%20Start%20Working%20Group%20Policy%20Positions.pdf>.

¹² ‘Auto-enrollment is the key to fixing our broken welfare system.’ Andrew Forsey.

<https://www.brightblue.org.uk/andrew-forsey-auto-enrollment-is-the-key-to-fixing-our-broken-welfare-system/>.

¹³ ‘What the Cost of Living Crisis means for the diets of babies and young children and recommended actions.’ First Steps Nutrition Trust. <https://www.firststepsnutrition.org/reports>.

¹⁴ ‘What the Cost of Living Crisis means for the diets of babies and young children and recommended actions.’ First Steps Nutrition Trust. <https://www.firststepsnutrition.org/reports>.

4. Conclusion:

With a growing number people both in-work and accessing charitable food aid¹⁵, it is vital that the UK Government works to ensure fair wages and secure work are sufficient to afford food. Drivers of food bank demand including the 5-week wait for Universal Credit, benefit deductions, the benefit cap, the two-child limit, sanctions system, and No Recourse to Public Funds status must be eliminated.

As expressed by a food bank responding to IFAN's survey, "parents of babies can face a double stigma when seeking formula food...parents and guardians need dignified, open, warm and respectful support.' It is not acceptable that anyone's income should fall so low as to struggle to afford to feed themselves and their children. Structural changes need to be made to ensure nobody is put in this situation in the first place. In the meantime, parents/carers who are struggling to afford food for their infant children should be supported with maximum choice and dignity through a cash first approach alongside effective wraparound support to helping the long term.

Background:

- The Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) supports and advocates on behalf of charitable food aid providers operating across the UK including over 550 independent food banks.
- IFAN's vision is of a country without the need for charitable food aid where adequate and nutritious food is affordable to all.
- IFAN calls for a cash first approach to food insecurity has co-produced 'Worrying About Money?' cash first referral leaflets in 100 local authority areas. The resources help people struggling to afford food and support workers to find local advice and cash first support to maximise income and reduce the need for charitable food aid - www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/cash-first-leaflets
- February's survey includes data from 85 organisations operating 154 independent food banks (in 81 Local Authorities).
- In March 2023, IFAN released a briefing on infant food insecurity using the Scotland breakdown of this data. This can be found at: <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/briefings-reports>

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¹⁵ 'Nurses among rising numbers of workers using food banks, research shows.' The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/nov/10/nurses-among-rising-numbers-of-workers-using-food-banks-research-shows#:~:text=Examples%20of%20people%20in%20in.delivery%20drivers%20and%20hospitality%20workers.>

Breakdown of Survey - February 2023

Table 1: Level of parents/carers asking for support to feed their babies (0-12 month olds) in December 2022 - January 2023 compared with December 2021 - January 2022 as reported by 85 organisations operating 154 independent food banks.

Level of need	Number of organisations
Need for support has increased	38
The need for support has stayed approximately the same	32
The need for support has decreased	2
Not sure	10
Other	3

Table 2: The number of parents/carers asking for support to feed their babies (0-12 month olds) in December 2022-January 2023 as reported by 85 organisations operating 154 independent food banks.

Number of parents/carers who have asked for support	Organisations
0	3
1-5	23
6-10	16
11-15	6
16-20	5
More than 20	12
Not sure	20

Table 3: How parents/carers with babies (0-12 month olds) have accessed support as reported by 85 organisations operating 154 independent food banks

Accessed support by	Organisation
Referral via advice agency	36
Referral via local authority	31

Referral via health practitioner (GP, health visitor)	40
Referral via school	32
Referral from another agency	23
Self-referred	48
Other	14

Table 4: Method of supporting parents/carers with babies (0-12 months) as reported by 85 organisations operating 154 independent food banks.

Method of support	Organisations
Referred people to a health visitor	8
Provided donated infant formula	43
Provided a voucher to purchase required infant formula	12
Provided cash to purchase required infant formula	3
Purchased required infant formula on behalf of person seeking support	26
Other	42

Table 5: Number of independent food banks aware of local authority guidance regarding supporting food insecure families with babies (UNICEF guide for local authorities) as reported by 85 organisations operating 154 independent food banks.

Awareness of local guidance	Organisations
Aware of local authority guidance	37
Not aware of local authority guidance	48