



IFAN SURVEY August 2023

Overburdened food bank teams fear a devastating winter as unprecedented demand soars through the summer

Independent food banks are reporting a bleak picture of more and more people facing financial hardship and in need of their help. The latest survey from the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) finds food bank managers deeply concerned about the growing number of people with nowhere else to turn and a calamitous winter to come. As one food bank manager said: "It can't go on like this."

- 84% of survey respondents reported increased need comparing April to July 2023 with last summer
- All contributing organisations said they were supporting households seeking help for the first time including elderly and working people
- Most organisations said people are now seeking their help in the long-term because of inadequate wages and financial entitlements
- Donations have fallen and if demand increases further, over half of the contributing organisations said they would need to reduce the support they offer or would have to turn people away
- Nearly half of contributing organisations reported a rise in the number of parents and carers struggling to feed babies

A cohort of nearly 200 independent food banks operating across the UK have revealed an ever-alarming picture of charitable food aid demand continuing to soar as frontline teams struggle to cope. Food and energy prices, inadequate benefit payments, low wages, sanctions, the two-child limit, No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) status, benefit deductions, housing problems and Universal Credit waiting times are all driving more and more people into poverty and hardship. An increasing number of working people unable to afford food as well as other costs continues to push up demand for food banks. The pressure on volunteers and food charity staff is unrelenting and unsustainable.

People struggling to afford food often need a referral to access charitable food aid support. Of all agencies, local authority teams are most likely to refer people to IFAN member organisations for help with NHS services also frequently doing so. Despite benefit levels, benefit deductions, the two-child limit, Universal Credit waiting time and sanctions driving severe food insecurity, job centres also commonly refer or signpost people to food banks.

Food bank workers and volunteers are overstretched, overworked and under-resourced. One food bank manager said: “Our biggest challenge is volunteering. Our organisation's size and structure mean that it can be challenging to recruit, train and retain sufficient volunteers, especially as our largest volunteering demographic is retired volunteers who often struggle with the physical requirements of the role.”

And the scale and complexity of the cases volunteers and staff are trying to help with are extremely distressing. One food bank manager revealed the toil this is taking on her team: “Some of our volunteers are struggling to hear some of the current reasons for needing help. Some of the circumstances that clients are finding themselves in are heart-breaking”.

Another food bank manager put it this way: “Our volunteers are amazingly resilient but with the increase in numbers of people in need and reduced amount of food, we're struggling to cope. After three hours, volunteers are exhausted and feeling overwhelmed and emotionally drained.”

And donations have fallen while surplus food is dwindling. One food bank manager explained the supply crisis: “We have struggled a lot with donations recently as we think that people are struggling themselves with the cost of living, so they are unable to donate themselves.” While another explained: “Surplus food is down. Our collections are under 50% of what they were. It just doesn't work.”

Food bank staff and volunteers are being forced to make impossible decisions about cutting back on support and deciding to limit the number of food parcels provided.

IFAN is calling on the Government to take immediate action to increase social security payments. Adopting [an Essentials Guarantee](#) would be a critical step towards providing an adequate safety net for all.

It's also vital that key drivers behind household food insecurity are addressed including the 5-week wait for Universal Credit, the benefit cap, the two-child limit, sanctions, No Recourse to Public Funds status, and benefit deductions.

Local authorities must be provided with a permanent extension to the Household Support Fund to enable local welfare provision to be distributed via cash payments in every area.

And it's also critical that the Government ensures employers pay adequate wages and provide job security.

A cash first approach to food insecurity, including investment in local advice services, would reduce the need for food banks and other forms of charitable food aid support and consequently the devastating impact of poverty on people's physical and mental health. Ultimately this approach would pave the way for everyone to be able to access [a Living Income](#) and [a Healthy Standard of Living for All](#).

Sabine Goodwin, Coordinator of the Independent Food Aid Network said:

"The Government must urgently take heed of increasingly widespread and alarming reports of unprecedented financial hardship from across the UK. The impact of rising poverty levels is being felt across generations. Food bank staff and volunteers will continue to do their utmost to provide support but the weight of responsibility on their shoulders is too large. The charitable food aid sector is being pushed past breaking point. The solution is to reduce pressure on people struggling to afford the essentials, as well as food banks, by ensuring incomes are adequate and support is provided through a cash first approach."

Mark Lister of Ledbury Food Bank in Herefordshire said:

"The perfect storm of inadequate benefits, sanctions, inadequate wage increases, and soaring food prices have contributed to an almost 50% increase in demand."

Su Parrish, The Easter Team in Crawley said:

"Our fastest growing group of clients are those who are working in low paid jobs, especially those with children."

"Everyone is feeling the strain of struggling to support clients with increasingly complex needs. Most of our volunteers signed up to give out food parcels and be a friendly face spreading some love. They didn't

anticipate the level of stress that our clients now exhibit because of the situations they find themselves in. I have needed to put some pastoral support in place for them."

Gerrie Messer of Kingsbridge Area Foodbank in South Hams said:

"We are seeing more elderly clients asking for help and more working families – sometimes up to three jobs in the household are not covering outgoings."

Chelly Sturgess of The Pantry at Tintagel in Cornwall said:

"A definite rise in single employed people needing support, rising rent, food costs and energy bills are making it impossible to survive on low stagnant wages."

"So far summer has been tough, so we can only imagine what winter will be like."

Anne McCormack of Broke Not Broken in Perth and Kinross said:

"It is now very unusual to support someone for 2-3 weeks and for that not to repeat over and over. We keep a log of how many referrals people get. Only 15% are referred once and don't access support again. But looking at that 15%, 90% of those go on to get referrals from other referral agents and are passed on from one to another."

Kathy Bland of Leominster Food Bank in Herefordshire:

"We desperately need the government to take responsibility for reducing the numbers of food insecure people (by increasing their benefits and wages) as we cannot manage the rate of increase in need."

Paul O'Brien of Micah Liverpool in Liverpool said:

"Eventually we will need to compromise our service, we can no longer spend our way out of the problem."

"The cost of living is affecting donations of food and finance which will eventually take its toll. Reserves of food built up during the pandemic have gone and finance is dwindling. Food banks cannot sustain this level of poverty for much longer."

Jen Coleman of Black Country Food Bank in Dudley said:

"Volunteers are struggling because of the number of people accessing our services, the weight of responsibility is huge."

Ryan Legg of Storehouse Foodbank in Babergh said:

"We are very concerned about the increase in demand once heating is required. I'm not sure how people will cope again this winter."

Alison Peyton of Readifood in Reading said:

“I am concerned about what the next couple of months holds for us. We are already thinking we may need to have more fixed rules around how many times people are able to utilise the food bank. This is something we have not done previously in our history.”

Liam Waghorn of Canterbury Food Bank in Canterbury said:

“We are hearing more and more from families being affected by mortgage rate rises due at the end of the fixed term agreements. Some people are having to find many hundreds of pounds extra and are suddenly left unable to afford food as they did before. We are anticipating this continuing as more and more people reach the end of fixed term deals and face the reality of the current much higher rates of interest. “

Andi Hofbauer of St Aidan’s FoodShare in Leeds said:

“The amount of food from surplus food providers has dropped significantly as well as supermarket donations.”

"Speaking to our guests, more and more people are driven to the brink of what they can bear and how they can cope. Too many people only barely manage to 'exist.' People are not able to 'live' life, however modest, anymore. It is shameful."

Background:

- The [Independent Food Aid Network \(IFAN\)](#) supports and advocates on behalf of charitable food aid providers operating across the UK including hundreds of 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.
- 96 organisations running 197 independent food banks and some other charitable food aid venues responded to IFAN’s August 2023 survey between the 1st and the 15th of August 2023. Questions related to April to July 2023 as compared to April to July 2022. Contributing organisations operate in 89 local authorities in England, Scotland, and Wales. 17 of the 96 organisations also contributed to IFAN’s April 2023 survey while 38 of the 96 organisations also contributed to IFAN’s January 2023 survey. All of IFAN’s recent surveys can be accessed at www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/data
- IFAN has identified at least 1,172 independent food banks operating across the UK including those run by multiple faith groups in addition to over 1,300 Trussell Trust food banks as well

as hundreds of food banks run by schools, universities, hospitals, and the Salvation Army. There are also thousands of other charitable food aid providers including food pantries, social supermarkets, and soup kitchens.

- Food bank data represent the tip of the iceberg when it comes to wider food insecurity. Recent Food Standards Agency data show that a fraction of people reporting food insecurity have accessed a food bank or other emergency food aid provider while 25% of respondents were classified as food insecure.
https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/Food%20and%20You%202_Wave%206%20Key%20Findings_Final.pdf
- IFAN calls for a cash first approach to food insecurity and has co-produced ‘Worrying About Money?’ cash first referral leaflets in over 110 local authorities in Scotland, England, and Wales. These 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
- IFAN’s infographics on a cash first approach to food insecurity:
<https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/infographics>
- The Department for Work and Pensions’ Family Resources Survey (FRS) found that in the year before the onset of the pandemic, 43% of UK households on Universal Credit were food insecure. Thanks to the £20 weekly increase to Universal Credit, there was a 16% reduction in severe and moderate food insecurity levels for those households relying on this benefit, but the uplift was removed in October 2021.
www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2019-to-2020

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IFAN’s website: www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk

Breakdown of August 2023 IFAN survey:

Table 1 – Agencies referring people to food aid providers as reported by 79 organisations. Participants could choose all options that applied.

Referral agencies	No of organisations
Local authority teams (social services, housing, welfare/benefits advice etc.)	78
Third sector (mental health support agencies, agencies supporting people with NRPF, etc.)	77
NHS services (GP surgeries, health visitors, hospitals etc.)	74
Advice agencies (including Citizens Advice)	70
Jobcentres	42
Schools	63
Other	19

Table 2 – Levels of need in April-July 2023 compared to April-July 2022 as reported by 96 organisations.

Levels of need	No of organisations
Yes, we've seen a significant increase	52
Yes, we've seen a slight increase	29
Stayed the same	7
Decrease in need	5
Other	3

Table 3 – Reasons behind increases in need in April-July 2023 as reported by 81 organisations. Organisations could report any number of reasons.

Reasons for use	No of organisations
Increases in the cost of living	77
Housing problems	47
Inadequate wages	46
Universal Credit wait times	42
Insecure work	40
Low Social Security payments	36
No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)	32

Sanctions	31
Benefit deductions	29
Two-child limit	20
Disability related costs	20
Benefit cap	16
Transport costs	13
Other	13
Not sure	3

Table 4 – Organisations supporting people who have not needed support before during April-July 2023 as reported by 96 organisations.

Seeing people who have not needed help before	No of organisations
Yes	96
No	0

Table 5 – Increased number of people needing regular support in April-July 2023 compared to April-July 2022 as reported by 95 organisations.

Seeing more people needing regular support	No or organisations
Yes	80
No	15

Table 6 – 96 organisations reported on the impact reduced resources on their ability to support people in April-July 2023.

Impact of lacking resources	No of organisation
Yes – but we are managing to operate as per usual	40
No, we have been able to support everyone	40
Yes – we'd need to reduce the level of support we provide	16

Table 7 – 92 organisations reported on access to surplus food in April-July 2023.

Experienced difficulties accessing surplus food	No of organisation
No	49

Yes	43

Table 8 – 89 organisations reported on the quality of surplus food in April-July 2023.

Experienced issues with the quality of surplus food	No of organisation
No	49
Yes	40

Table 9 – 95 organisations reported on food donation levels in April-July 2023.

Food donation levels	No of organisation
Donations levels have dropped	77
Donation levels have stayed the same	12
Donation levels have increased	6

Table 10 – 94 organisations reported on financial donation levels in April-July 2023.

Financial donation levels	No of organisation
Donation levels have dropped	38
Donation levels have stayed the same	38
Donation levels have increased	18

Table 11 – Concerns about capacity to provide support if need continues to increase as reported by 96 organisations.

Level of concern about capacity to provide support	No of organisation
No - confident about being able to access supply to meet demand	46
Yes - may need to reduce parcel size/voucher support	27
Yes - may not be able to support everyone seeking our help	23