



Independent Food Aid Network and Feeding Britain Briefing October 2020

'What am I supposed to do? Is it destitution or prostitution?' Hunger and the need for food banks between March and September 2020



In September 2020, the [Independent Food Aid Network](#) (IFAN) and [Feeding Britain](#) called for evidence on the changing extent and drivers of the need for food banks in the six months that followed the introduction of the COVID-19 national lockdown. Through a combination of written and verbal submissions as part of a joint webinar, we heard from multiple food banks and other food aid organisations that had been active during the COVID-19 pandemic, and often long before. The findings of this short exercise are given below.

1. What impact has COVID-19 had on the numbers of people who are hungry?

The increased need for food banks providing evidence for the six months between March and September was truly staggering!:

- Coventry Foodbank (Trussell Trust) saw a 95% increase in food parcels given out overall, and a 106% increase in food parcels given out to children comparing April 2020 with April 2019.
- Bonny Downs Community Association (Trussell Trust) in East Ham, London, saw a 15-fold increase in levels of need. We were told that, 'lengthy queues would form [...] well over an hour before opening'. In the first quarter enough food was given out for 622 people, whereas between March and June this increased to 3889 people.
- The independently run Beaumont Leys Food Bank went from providing food to 40 families per week to 500 per week since the beginning of COVID-19.
- Demand for food banks in Bradford and Keighley increased by 400% since the beginning of COVID-19
- NewStarts food bank (IFAN) in Bromsgrove saw an increase in need of more than 700%
- IFAN's Hambleton Foodshare's monthly total of food parcels increased from 70 to 312.
- Kirkcaldy Food Bank (IFAN) has never experienced such a rapid rise in demand. Its normal increase is 1% a month but April, May, and June saw a 70% rise.
- By the end of July, one food bank in Hounslow had already provided food to more people in the area than it did in the whole of 2019.
- Readifood (IFAN), in Reading, recorded a year-on-year increase in need of 53% in May.
- A 600% increase in need over the six-month period was registered at Granville Community Kitchen (IFAN)

2. Who is hungry?

Since the arrival of COVID-19, food banks have served individuals and families across the entire age spectrum, from cradle to grave, and of all cultures and backgrounds. We have all been in the same storm, but with lifeboats of different shapes and sizes.

¹ IFAN's latest UK-wide report based on figures collated from 191 independent food banks found that the number of emergency 3-day food parcels distributed had risen by 177% comparing May 2020 with May 2020 –

https://uploads.strikinglycdn.com/files/9c7292e6-4bea-410e-9e9b-f9de7e22f3d1/IFAN_Emergency_Food_Distribution_Report_Feb_-_May_1920_Published_09.07.20.pdf

For families with new-born babies, food parcels were often accompanied by nappies and wet wipes. For older people, often of equal importance to a food parcel was the warm companionship which accompanied the collection or delivery of their parcel.

The main groups of people most likely to seek help from a food bank were:

- a) Families with children whose incomes did not keep up with the costs of living, and who may have struggled to access or redeem free school meal vouchers, as well as people living alone with fragile physical or mental health whose low income was compounded by isolation. They were already vulnerable prior to the pandemic, and had been made even more so by its social consequences.
- b) Working households – comprising employees as well as the self-employed – who either lost their jobs, were furloughed, or had been offered fewer shifts as a result of the economic consequences of the pandemic.
- c) People with no recourse to public funds (NRPF)²

a. People living in poverty whose vulnerability has been exacerbated by COVID-19

People living in poverty entered the pandemic in a severely disadvantaged position, in that they were less likely to be able to absorb the financial and personal shocks triggered by a national lockdown. For this group of our fellow citizens, the principal causes of food insecurity were those that had been present for a long time. Food banks often took on the role of a shock absorber allowing them to survive from one day to the next.

Mary McGinley of Helensburgh Food Bank told us that, ‘COVID-19 was just another burden on top of the burdens the poor already carry’. Jen Coleman of the Black Country Food Bank (IFAN) added that, ‘COVID-19 has put a spotlight on the extreme problems people have been putting up with for a long time’. The poorest families in our country were, for example, the least able to stockpile food and, in the absence of schools, also might have needed to make up for the loss of each child’s daily school-provided breakfast and lunch.

Ed Hodson of Coventry Citizens Advice added that, ‘the actual drivers [of need] have remained largely the same. Recipients are not in receipt of regular and sufficient employment income; recipients cannot access welfare benefits they are entitled to quickly, efficiently, or reliably; recipients cannot access welfare benefits that are sufficient to cover essential household bills; and recipients are subject to debt recovery practices that make it impossible to manage accumulating debts in a way that leaves sufficient income to cover food and other vital expenses’.

Financial struggles were often accompanied by isolation and, according to Black Country Food Bank, ‘fear and loneliness, especially for the elderly and those with mental health issues. People who due to physical disabilities or mental illnesses have not left their home for weeks, their support system whether that be through families and friends/social services has gone and they are left calling us’.

We were informed by Ludlow Food Bank (IFAN) of one woman who has had several strokes and is living in a caravan (out of necessity, not choice). She has not had a benefit assessment because it has been delayed due to the pandemic. The Dartmoor Community Kitchen Hub (IFAN) shared with us a similarly appalling example, in which a vulnerable person had been, ‘fearful of going out and, with family who couldn’t get to her, eventually phoned in terrible distress as she had not eaten in three days and had eked out what little food she had over a period of weeks’.

² Section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 states that a person will have ‘no recourse to public funds’ if they are ‘subject to immigration control’. This means they have no entitlement to the majority of welfare benefits, including income support, housing benefit and a range of allowances and tax credits.

Several food banks reported that they helped more single men than any other household type, with Wirral Foodbank noting that 60% of people seeking help were single men. Elsewhere, in Sandbach, families with children were the largest single group.

EATS Rosyth (IFAN) summarised the need among ‘already vulnerable’ groups as being, ‘from people already experiencing long-term issues with their income and benefits, further compounded by being unable to access support services or people becoming isolated from their social networks. [The] long-term unemployed still make up a large group of those we support but now we have seen some self-employed people having to come to us for food too’.

Jen Coleman of Black Country Food Bank reminded us that, ‘having to seek help from food bank is the most soul-destroying experience someone can go through’.

b. People experiencing poverty for the first time

The plight of the ‘newly hungry’ was summarised in the following terms by Ed Hodson of Coventry Citizens Advice: ‘A new and multi-faceted cohort, not previously concerned with putting food on the table, have been drawn into the world of food banks, food hubs and social supermarkets. This cohort, in Coventry, consists of younger clients, with more couples without children, who were fully employed on a ‘middle income’ and who are either property owners, mortgage payers or who rent privately’.

The West Yorkshire Food Poverty Network concurred that, ‘there were emerging groups needing support such as people who had never claimed benefits before now needing help navigating the systems and managing reduced incomes. This was notable seen in people who were self-employed’.

Alison Grainger of Hambleton Foodshare was particularly struck by the, ‘number of furloughed staff [who] were looking for food help. [Our area is] reliant on hospitality and tourism. 80% of not very much from a low-paid job doesn’t stretch too far’. Among this group was a lone parent with two children who had been due to open a new business in April – her stock had been purchased and she was looking to generate revenue. But she immediately had to close and, as a new business, struggled to qualify for any taxpayer-funded support schemes. She could not believe that she was in the position of needing to seek help from a food bank.

Similarly, South Liverpool Foodbank (Trussell Trust), a member of the Feeding Liverpool network, had been helping a transport worker who was getting on top of his debts prior to lockdown but, once furloughed, needed two food parcels ‘when there was simply not enough cash left to buy food’. The food bank also helped a household where the three adults were all self-employed taxi drivers and had seen their incomes dry up over a three-month period.

Added to this group were, ‘people applying for benefits for the first time. They had nothing behind them. No buffer. So, they came to the food bank’. Likewise, at Black Country Food Bank, ‘more people [were] coming to us who’ve never used food banks before. They are used to a certain lifestyle – more outgoings, credit card, car finance etc., and have always worked.’

Emphasising the extent of need emerging from the ‘newly hungry’, the Dartmoor Community Kitchen Hub informed us that, ‘only 20 out of the 130 [people] had accessed food bank support previously. Mostly [this was among] people going without food to pay rent, bills, and debts. Furlough not topped up and one of a couple losing their job, leading to loss of normal income level’.

Kirkcaldy Food Bank suggested that this demonstrated, ‘how close to the cliff so many families live from day to day’.

3. Why are people hungry?

a. Changes in the labour market

In St Albans, people were exposed to hunger while waiting for furlough payments, following redundancies, or when work had dried up for self-employed people. Sufra (IFAN) based in North

West London added that working people were facing destitution as, ‘many guests who were on precarious zero-hours contracts have lost their jobs due to the pandemic, and didn’t have access to the furlough scheme [...] with many people falling through the gaps of the furlough scheme, unplanned redundancies being made, and limited access to a long waiting list for Universal Credit for a range of reasons (waiting lists, busy phonelines, no access to public computers and internet access) many low-income working families have found themselves in food poverty’. The loss of part-time work hit particularly hard in Haringey, London, while in Winchester it was the area’s high cost of living which made life especially difficult for people who had been furloughed.

Dee Woods of the Granville Community Kitchen, in Kilburn, London, noted how people were ‘turning up having been made redundant – the fastest growing group at an alarming rate’. Similarly, at Black Country Food Bank, people were hungry after turning up for work and being told to go home – ‘their jobs didn’t exist now’.

A knock-on effect of these developments in the labour market, according to Marion Kenyon of NewStarts, was that, ‘those who took out loans or borrowed on credit whilst employed/on furlough during the summer may now find themselves unemployed and unable to furnish those loans. This may cause a second wave of access to the food banks’.

b. Higher costs of living

Coupled with a loss of employment, living costs have increased for all too many people on low incomes. This is due to the need to shop in a local convenience store, for example, where essential items tend to be much more expensive; travel on public transport has also been restricted, so taxis have been used; people have had to borrow money to survive from one day to the next; people have needed more cleaning items and masks; washing machines have been used more, or additional trips have been taken to the laundrette, which is expensive; utility bills have increased because of more people being at home; and where accessible or affordable families have had to make sure that broadband has worked for their children to access online schooling.

c. Additional strain on families

These two factors have stretched so many families to breaking point and beyond, with some relationships unable to withstand this pressure or grown sons and daughters needing to return to live with their parents.

Alison Peyton of Readifood added that numerous families in need of food parcels had been affected by domestic violence, with women fleeing abusive relationships. In other cases, parents had not been receiving child maintenance payments and there were concerns around a lack of enforcement in respect of these entitlements.

The personal tragedies represented by each such development are troubling enough. But for people on low incomes they can also trigger new interactions with the benefits system, or stoppages of existing benefits and the need to reapply from scratch. Mary McGinley of Helensburgh Food Bank noted how, ‘with a loss of a job came a loss of accommodation. Somebody on a basic pension or benefit struggles to keep an adult child’.

d. Gaps in statutory support for those who were already living in poverty

What has changed for those already living in poverty, according to Ed Hodson of Coventry Citizens Advice, ‘is that they have fallen to the bottom of the queue in terms of resolving the drivers of their difficulties: ongoing benefit issues; access to social and health support (closure of health facilities, suspension of non-emergency medical procedures; ‘easement’ of local authority responsibilities)’. Jen Coleman of Black Country Food Bank agreed that the, ‘loss of support services, especially those needing face to face contact, such as social workers and family centres,’ exacerbated people’s existing vulnerabilities during lockdown.

e. Gaps in statutory support for the newly impacted

A summary of the drivers of need among the newly impacted was offered by Ed Hodson of Coventry Citizens Advice:

- those who lost employment income as self-employed workers but were excluded from the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) by design (e.g. those who were new to self-employment and unable to provide records of business activity for a sufficient period)
- those who lost employment income, weren't eligible for support via the 'furlough' scheme or through the SEISS but were then excluded from claiming Universal Credit because of savings levels above Universal Credit limits
- those who lost employment, weren't furloughed, but couldn't claim Universal Credit (or any legacy benefit) because they were considered to have NRPF
- those whose benefits (or reduced furlough income) didn't cover essential expenses (potentially high pre-existing financial liabilities for many) and did not have family and friends to help them out materially
- those who were entitled to claim Universal Credit but were hit by any combination of the two-child limit, Benefit Cap etc.
- those mixed age couples where one partner was of working age forcing both partners to claim Universal Credit instead of the more generous and less onerous Pension Credit

Looking at the circumstances of people moving onto Universal Credit for the first time, West Yorkshire Food Poverty Network noted how, 'the five-week delay and deductions to the payment rates in Universal Credit has meant there is not enough money to survive with basic needs such as food and pay bills. It's either eat or heat and not paying bills and therefore getting into a cycle of debt as a result of claiming. Families also have high repayments for advance loans and finding that they had no money when they received their first payment and were then again having to approach food banks'.

This theme was picked up by Mary Collier of Reaching People, which administers Feeding Leicester's Food Bank Plus project: 'deductions being made for repayment of advance payment has a further very significant impact on the already very low benefit income that people are expected to live on'.

4. How can our country reverse these trends?

The generosity shown by the public has given food banks a fighting chance of meeting the need we have described above. But the increasing reliance on food banks to meet that need is unsustainable and unacceptable, especially in the context of the public being less able to donate. As the West Yorkshire Food Poverty Network told us, 'it is not realistic to expect charities to provide food for all hungry people'.

One clear lesson from our evidence-gathering is that UK Government policy really can, and does, make a crucial difference to people's ability to feed themselves and their families. Temporary protections on debt recoveries, evictions, and benefit sanctions, for example, prevented an even bigger crisis from occurring.

Of particular importance was the UK Government's decision to increase the weekly standard allowance within Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit by £20. Food bank teams were adamant that this uplift had protected large numbers of our fellow citizens from hunger and destitution.

Indeed, when we invited food bank teams to make recommendations for UK Government policy, keeping this increase in place beyond its planned expiry in March 2021 was deemed to be the most urgent priority.

Jen Coleman of Black Country Food Bank told us that, 'the £20-a-week UC increase was the lifeline that people needed to keep their head above water. This increase should be extended to legacy benefits. The majority of people claiming these benefits are sick or disabled and carers who have a much greater risk of poverty and who have become the people food banks are helping regularly. The

£20 increase has not meant that those in poverty have suddenly become better off, it has meant that they have been able to survive. Pulling this increase now would plunge people in poverty back into a much bleaker place’.

This proposal is given added urgency by the Government’s plan to announce benefit rates for 2021-22, by the middle of November 2020.

1. **We recommend that the House of Commons holds an emergency debate, under Standing Order 24, on a motion calling on the Government to keep the higher rate of Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit, and to extend this lifeline to people claiming legacy benefits such as Jobseeker’s Allowance and Employment & Support Allowance.**
2. **We recommend also that legislation be presented which bestows on the Government a duty to publish official calculations, on an annual basis, of the minimum rates of benefit that are required to afford every citizen a reasonable household budget which covers essential items of expenditure, and to explain any difference that exists between these calculations and the rates that are actually paid.**

Food banks also shared with us their concern around the likelihood of people, in a depressed labour market, being sanctioned once the temporary protections came to an end. One woman, following the loss of her benefits, remarked to food bank staff, ‘what am I supposed to do? Is it destitution or prostitution?’

3. **Justice requires a new approach to benefit sanctions. We recommend the immediate nationwide introduction of a ‘Yellow Card’ warning system in place of sanctions for people in receipt of benefits who are deemed for the first time not to have stuck to the terms of their Claimant Commitment.**

Moreover, food bank teams suggested that greater recognition is required within the benefits system of people who have strong contributory records and are only now seeking help following a loss of earnings.

4. **We recommend that the erosion in the coverage and value of contributory benefits, which has taken place over several decades, is put into reverse through a revitalisation of the National Insurance fund for working-age social security provision that extends to the lowest paid and self-employed workers.**

We were horrified by the reports we received of people with no recourse to public funds who had no food. Here were people who, through no fault of their own, found themselves without work (often having previously been self-sufficient) and therefore without an income.

5. **We recommend that the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee joins forces with the Work and Pensions Select Committee to conduct a short inquiry into the plight of people with no recourse to public funds, as well as the quickest, most effective means of protecting them from hunger and destitution.**

In an additional sign of the importance of Government policy, several food banks reported that the need for their help did not increase as expected, and in some cases it declined, during the summer holiday when there were numerous Government programmes in operation.

6. **Above all else, families require an adequate income to meet their essential living costs during school holidays. However, as a complementary measure, we see merit in expanding the Holiday Activities and Food programme which is a valued source of nutritious food, enriching activities, and childcare arrangements that boost children’s life chances and enhance parents’ ability to stay in work and earn more money.**

The continued impact on household food budgets of deductions from Universal Credit, to repay advance payments and historic debt, was raised by several food banks.

- 7. We recommend that the Government introduces with immediate effect its stated policy of halving the rate of deductions from Universal Credit, which is not currently due to be enforced for at least another year. We believe the Government should set itself a target of making a first payment within five days, not five weeks, of a new benefit claim being made. Historic debt should be limited to a maximum of two years.**

The evidence we received also laid bare the need for a new labour code to protect workers from poverty, hunger, and destitution.

- 8. We endorse the Resolution Foundation's recommendations for further increases in the minimum wage, such that low pay will be abolished from the UK; stronger rights to a more predictable contract that reflects the actual hours worked (in place of zero-hours contracts) and provides compensation for shifts that are cancelled or changed without reasonable notice; the extension of sick pay to lower earners; protection against unfair dismissal after one year in post; and more robust enforcement of existing labour regulations.**

Upon the provision of food parcels, food bank staff and volunteers often became aware of households lacking basic cooking facilities in their home, and other families facing similar problems in hostels and similar forms of emergency accommodation, with some properties described as being like 'Victorian slums with damp walls'.

- 9. We recommend that local authorities across the UK are given the powers and financial resources they require to take a proactive approach to enforcing the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act, namely in respect of tenants being able to prepare and cook food. This new enforcement regime should be financed, at least in part, by fines levied on landlords failing to provide basic cooking facilities.**

By the time people use food banks, they are at their lowest point and have run out of money for everything else.

- 10. We recommend that the allocation of £63 million to local authorities in England to support people unable to afford food and other essentials be extended to a total of £250 million each year to bring funding for local welfare assistance schemes in line with similar schemes in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We would also recommend that guidelines to Local Authorities stipulate that this funding should wherever possible involve cash grants being paid directly to people unable to food and other essentials, via local welfare assistance schemes, including to people with no recourse to public funds.**

We heard from Black Country Food Bank that, 'things have become much more desperate, the problems have become bigger and more urgent, the calls have been more emotional and we have spoken to so many people who are so embarrassed to have had to use a food bank. Phrases like 'it's the last resort', 'I didn't know what else to do', 'I haven't eaten in the last few days', 'My kids are hungry and I don't know what to do' have been common phrases that we are hearing every day'.

Unless the recommendations above are quickly put into action, we fear that already shockingly high levels of need for charitable food aid will continue to rise and will be with our country for an unacceptably long period of time to come.

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Mary McGinley of the Helensburgh and Lomond Foodbank

Jen Coleman of the Black Country Food Bank

Alison Grainger of Hambleton FoodShare

Alison Peyton of Readifood

Deirdre Woods of the Granville Community Kitchen

We'd also like to thank all those who contributed critical written evidence.

Andrew Forsey, Director, Feeding Britain

Sabine Goodwin, Coordinator, Independent Food Aid Network

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