

Written evidence submitted by the Trussell Trust (FS0085)

The Trussell Trust is a network of more than 1,300 food bank centres across the UK, supported by almost 12,000 churches, as well as many community groups, local businesses, schools and over 30,000 dedicated volunteers. We provide practical support to people who can't afford the essentials, and campaign for a future where none of us need a food bank.

Summary

1. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry into food security. Our evidence focuses on the inquiry question: 'how are the rising cost of living and increasing food prices affecting access to healthy and nutritious food?'
2. The evidence we provide below outlines what we are seeing in our network: that numbers of food parcels given out by our network are increasing, demonstrating how challenging families are finding it to afford the essentials. **The issue we are seeing is not one of food availability, but of income sufficiency.** While the current situation is severe, it is demonstrative of the fact that many people do not have enough income – even in 'easier' economic times to feed their families.
3. New research from the Trussell Trust found that during the past three months, millions of people in receipt of UC have experienced severe financial hardship. Two in five (40%) have needed to skip meals to keep up with other essential living costs. 21% have been unable to cook hot food because they couldn't afford to use the oven or other utilities. Almost two-thirds of Universal Credit claimants had to spend July's first Cost of Living Payment from the UK Government on food.¹

Impact of the rising cost of living and increased food prices

4. **Between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022, food banks in the Trussell Trust network distributed over 2.1 million food parcels to people experiencing financial hardship.** This is an increase of 14% compared to pre-pandemic levels in 2019/20, and an increase of 81% compared to five years ago. **832,000 of the parcels distributed last year were for children.**
5. **We have seen the need for support from the food banks in our network increase further since the cost of living crisis has started to bite,** making it harder for families to afford the essentials. In April and May this year, food banks in the Trussell Trust network provided more than 420,000 emergency food parcels to people facing financial hardship across the UK. This represents a 50% increase compared to the same period in 2019, prior to the pandemic. It also represents a 29% increase when compared to the same period last year.
6. We have seen very significant support from government both through the pandemic and now during this current crisis but we cannot ignore the very real concerns across our network, with food bank managers telling us they are very concerned that this winter will

¹ Tackling the True Cost of Living by Strengthening our Social Security System, The Trussell Trust, 2022
<https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/09/Cost-of-Living-campaign-policy-briefing-Sep-2022.pdf>

see more people pushed into destitution and needing to turn to food banks in order to provide the essentials for their household. Despite the UK Government's cost of living support package, including the Energy Price Guarantee, we still expect to see increased levels of need for food banks in the months ahead. **Looking at our latest data on the levels of need in August and September this year, we are expecting to see our busiest winter ever.**

7. This inquiry takes place at a time of genuine emergency. **People are facing such shortfalls in their income that they are going without a meal to make up other essential costs or are switching to food which doesn't require heating because they can't afford to use the oven or other utilities.**² The situation is likely to worsen during the autumn and winter when people typically need to use more energy to heat and light their homes.
8. However, the provision of emergency food parcels to people facing a shortfall in their income is not a sustainable solution. While people and businesses continue to donate generously to food banks in our network, donations are not keeping pace with the increased need. This means, in many cases, **food banks are having to purchase food where they would normally rely on donated food** This is not sustainable, and nothing can replace the dignity of households having enough income to buy the food they need for their family.
9. People are referred to food banks because their incomes are not enough to cover the cost of essentials. People will always struggle to access healthy and nutritious food if they cannot afford to buy, or cook it. For people using food banks in our network, **the problem is not primarily one of food availability, but of income sufficiency.**
10. That is why we are calling on the UK Government to take action to ensure everyone has enough income, from work and social security, to afford the essentials. As part of this, the Government must maintain their commitment to uprate benefits in line with current inflation. **We would encourage the Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs Committee to ensure that income sufficiency is central to the inquiry into food security.**

People who need support from food banks have extremely low incomes affecting their ability to afford food and other essentials.

11. What we see and hear from our food bank network indicates that the rising cost of living and increasing food prices are not primarily a question of people being able to *access* healthy and nutritious food, but rather one about whether or not people can *afford* food (and other essentials).
12. Similarly, food bank use is a symptom of underlying economic need, more accurately characterised as destitution, rather than it being an issue of accessing food alone. **95% of people referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network in early 2020 were destitute,**

² Tackling the True Cost of Living by Strengthening our Social Security System, The Trussell Trust, 2022 <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/09/Cost-of-Living-campaign-policy-briefing-Sep-2022.pdf>

meaning they were unable to afford to eat or stay warm.³ Destitution is defined as being unable to afford to buy the essentials that we all need, including food, toiletries, heating and lighting.

13. People who need to use food banks have extremely low incomes. On average, people referred to food banks across our UK-wide network are managing on £57 a week after housing costs.⁴
14. The best, and most dignified way to ensure that people have access to healthy and nutritious food is to make sure that they have enough money to be able to purchase the food for themselves – whether this is through employment or the social security system.
15. While emergency food aid provides immediate respite, it might not always be tailored to the diets and tastes of everyone. Furthermore, a food parcel cannot pay the energy bills or provide the bus fare to a hospital appointment. Being able to eat healthy and nutritious food requires someone to have enough income to afford the essentials.
16. Evidence from across our network of food banks has shown that the cost of living crisis has deeply impacted the ability of households on the lowest incomes to afford the essentials, and that the ongoing increases in the cost of food, rent, energy and other essentials, coupled with the insufficiency of the social security system, risk continuing to push people into destitution
17. In April and May this year, food banks in the Trussell Trust network provided more than 420,000 emergency food parcels to people facing financial hardship across the UK. This represents a 50% increase compared to the same period in 2019, prior to the pandemic. It also represents a 29% increase when compared to the same period last year. **We also know our network of food banks have experienced their busiest ever August and we will be publishing further detailed data on the need for emergency food aid next month, which we will be happy to share with the Committee.**
18. The number of emergency food parcels distributed by food banks in the Trussell Trust network only represent a snapshot of existing need. There are large numbers of independent food banks and other forms of charitable food aid in addition to the food banks in the Trussell Trust network. In a recent [letter](#) to the Prime Minister, staff and volunteers from charitable food aid providers across the UK raised concerns that “increasing numbers of people have been pushed to the doors of food banks and other charitable food aid providers because they haven’t got enough money to buy food and other essentials.”

³ State of Hunger, Building the Evidence on Poverty, destitution and food insecurity in the UK, The Trussell Trust, 2021 <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/05/State-of-Hunger-2021-Report-Final.pdf>

⁴ Ibid

Further research from the Trussell Trust shows the impact of rising energy prices and food bills on households with low incomes, as well as the major limitations of current government support and the urgent need to uprate benefits in line with inflation.⁵

19. The Trussell Trust warmly welcomed the UK Government's £15bn cost of living support package announced in May aimed at helping people pay for essentials. We also recognise the significant investment the UK Government is making through the Energy Price Guarantee. However, for families on the lowest incomes there is still significant hardship ahead as high inflation means an increase in the cost of living. According to the Bank of England inflation is set to rise further, reaching 11% in October, and average energy bills will be almost double what they were one year ago.
20. Our research surveyed a representative sample of more than 1,800 people in receipt of Universal Credit during August 2022, which we compared to a general population survey during the same month and a survey of people in receipt of Universal Credit in August last year.
21. **The research found that the rising cost of living (including food prices) is a problem for millions of people, and that this number is growing.**
 - a. One fifth (19%) of people in receipt of Universal Credit say they face real financial problems and have fallen behind with bills and credit commitments, up from 15% last August.
 - b. A further 34% said keeping up with bills and credit commitments was a constant struggle, up from 28% last August.
 - c. Furthermore, there has been a significant increase in the number of people in the general population who are facing financial problems or finding it a constant struggle to keep up with bills, up to 19% compared to 10% in August last year.
22. **It also identified that people on Universal Credit need urgent support. 38% of people in receipt of UC said they'd gone a whole day with no food at all, or just one meal, in the last month because there wasn't enough money for food, compared to 11% in the general population.**
23. During the past three months, millions of people in receipt of UC have experienced severe financial hardship. **Two in five (40%) have needed to skip meals to keep up with other essential living costs. 21% have been unable to cook hot food because they couldn't afford to use the oven or other utilities.** Food banks in our network have also shared that as people feel the impact of the cost of living crisis and try to make savings, there is an increase in need for 'cold food packs'. This is food which can be eaten without the need for high-energy or high-cost appliances.
24. The survey also asked what people were most worried about with the cost of living crisis this winter and the ability to afford food was a common theme. Responses included "being able

⁵ Tackling the True Cost of Living by Strengthening our Social Security System, The Trussell Trust, 2022
<https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/09/Cost-of-Living-campaign-policy-briefing-Sep-2022.pdf>

to stay warm and having the ability to cook a hot meal”, “paying for all my bills, paying for food along with everything else”, and “heating the house and ensuring food is covered for my daughter.”

25. One survey respondent told us “[I am worried] that I’m going to be cold and hungry, even though I work 40 hours a week. Christmas might be a luxury but I think we deserve something to look forward to. Not much of a celebration when you can’t even afford a roast.”
26. **Almost two-thirds of Universal Credit claimants had to spend July’s first Cost of Living Payment from the government on food.** In July this year, the UK government delivered the first Cost of Living Payment of £326 to people in receipt of means tested benefits who were on low incomes. Most (70%) of people who received their first payment said they had already spent all of it when surveyed in August, less than a month after receiving it. Almost two in three (64%) who had spent some of the payment said they used the payment to buy food, and half who had received the payment said they were not very, or not at all, likely to be able to manage their household budget over the next three months without looking for additional help.
27. The Cost of Living Payment has been welcome, however given rising inflation and higher energy use during the winter months, it is clear that more support is needed to help people afford the essentials.

The rising cost of living and increasing food prices are likely to fall hardest on particular groups.

28. Far too many people are placed on an unstable foundation because the income they receive from work, or the social security system, does not cover the essential costs they need. Living on an extremely low income is frequently compounded by many other challenges, including insecure work, high levels and multiple kinds of debt, inadequate housing, and poor mental and physical health. It exposes people much more to shocks and increases in prices.
29. Work is of course a vital part of the solution, but we know working, or working longer hours, is not an option for some people. Ill health and caring for family can prevent people from increasing their income through work. Our research shows that people with disabilities and those with caring responsibilities are over-represented in the people seeking support from food banks.
30. Our State of Hunger (2021) research⁶ identified that over three in five (62%) working age people referred to food banks in our network in early 2020 were disabled. This is over three times as many as the general population.
31. It also found that single parent families and families with three or more children were also over represented among the type of households seeking support from our food banks. Almost two in five households (19%) referred to a food bank in the Trussell Trust network were single parents with a child under 16, compared to 8% of households in the UK

⁶ State of Hunger, Building the Evidence on Poverty, destitution and food insecurity in the UK, The Trussell Trust, 2021 <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/05/State-of-Hunger-2021-Report-Final.pdf>

population. Similarly, one in seven families with children have three or more children, whereas among people referred to food banks, the equivalent share was nearly two in five (39%).

32. These groups are more likely to face difficulties accessing healthy and nutritious food as the rising cost of living impacts on their ability to afford the essentials.

The UK Government should invest in a strong social security system that lifts people out of hardship, and not just in times of crisis.

33. In mid-2020, over four in five people who attended a food bank in the Trussell Trust network reported that their household were receiving income from social security. It is clear, therefore, that the social security system is not providing enough income to people to afford the essentials – and this has a direct impact on people’s ability to buy healthy and nutritious food.
34. If people were already struggling to pay their bills in the summer, when traditionally the cost of heating your home is less, then come winter, there is a real risk that many more people will face having to turn to a food bank for support.
35. **To ensure that we do not see an explosion in the numbers of people needing to use a food bank over the next year, action must be taken at all levels of government. This action should include:**
 - a. **Introducing a commitment in the social security system that ensures benefit rates will always be enough to protect people from destitution.**
 - b. **Uprating social security benefits in line with inflation.** The UK Government must keep its commitment to raise benefits in line with at least the September rate of inflation to help prevent more people from going without the essentials.
 - c. **Making debt deduction rates from benefits more affordable and introducing a more tailored system.** Specifically, we would urge the UK Government to lower the cap on total deductions from the Standard Allowance of Universal Credit from 25% to 15% and deductions to repay debt to central Government should be capped at 5% of the Standard Allowance. Government debt management processes should also consistently embody the principles of clarity, flexibility and respect.
 - d. **Agreeing a new settlement for integrated local crisis support in England to help people cover unexpected costs.** The UK Government should provide sufficient, long-term funding to local authorities in England for local crisis support. This will allow local authorities to have the certainty to plan support, and to move towards a cash-first, coordinated, and person-centred local system.
36. **We would strongly encourage the Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs Committee to ensure income sufficiency is central to this and future inquiries into food security.**