



Cite this as: *BMJ* 2022;379:o2919
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o2919>
 Published: 2 December 2022

Ending the food bank paradox

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Britain's food insecurity crisis was worsening before we'd heard of covid-19. In the year up to March 2020, Trussell Trust food banks had distributed 1 909 156 emergency food parcels across the UK.¹ This accounted for a fraction of wider food insecurity—according to the Department for Work and Pensions Family Resources Survey, 43% of households on Universal Credit reported severe or moderate food insecurity in that same year.² In January 2020, the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) revealed that food banks in Scotland had distributed 1,000 emergency food parcels a day over the previous 18 months.³

Following a huge spike in need for support at the start of the pandemic, food banks saw continued, unprecedented demand through to 2021 despite a 16% reduction in food insecurity in households relying on Universal Credit because of the £20 uplift.⁴ And then came the cut to Universal Credit in October 2021 resulting in increasing and relentless pressure building on households and, in turn, food banks. This pressure continues unabated as the winter sets in, and costs rise. Especially so after the recent Autumn Statement and the announcement of the chancellor's delayed approach to the bare minimum of uprating benefits in line with inflation.

However, there's a new and potentially game-changing twist to latest reports on the growing need for food banks. Since May, independent food banks reported, in survey after survey, on the growing need for their services pushing their teams to "breaking point." Food and financial donations were falling, financial reserves were being used, and depleted frontline teams were struggling to cope.⁵ IFAN's October survey found 82% of contributing organisations had been impacted by supply issues and more than one in four had needed to reduce the size of their food parcels over the previous three months. Surplus food supply has been drying up, volunteers are having to work to pay for the cost of living and people who used to donate are needing food banks themselves. Independent food banks are having to compromise on the diversity and scale of the support they can give.

Similar reports were heard from food aid providers working with other networks like Feeding Liverpool and the Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance.⁶ By the summer even Trussell Trust food banks were reporting the strain.

In these uncharted waters, Feeding Britain, the Trussell Trust, and IFAN started to gather signatures for a letter to the prime minister calling for an end for the need for their services. Over 3,000 volunteers and staff signed a plea for concerted action to increase people's income that was delivered to 10 Downing Street on the 17 October.⁷ This critical call from the food aid frontline voiced concern not only

for the legions of people struggling to afford food, but for the wellbeing of "exhausted" and "overstretched" staff and volunteers.⁸

Recent months have clearly demonstrated that the charitable food aid status quo is both unsustainable and unacceptable. Relying on dwindling surplus food supplies, the public's ability to donate and the willingness of volunteers is clearly not the answer. It's become more obvious than ever that ensuring adequacy of income through social security payments and wages is the real solution. The chancellor's decision to uprate benefit payments in line with inflation alongside further energy support and a rise in the benefit cap in April are welcome, but there are still the winter months to get through. With debts building up and costs rising, the Autumn Statement is unlikely to make a substantial difference to levels of food insecurity while huge damage is being inflicted.

Food banks feel compelled to call for donations to fill an ever-widening chasm, but they know only too well that the food aid approach isn't working. If funding is available, independent food banks will distribute shopping vouchers instead of food parcels or even cash grants. These are steps in the right direction, taking a cash first approach to food insecurity, but they're acts of unsustainable charity all the same.⁹

Food bank teams are caught in a brutal paradox and there's a feeling of endlessly treading water as poverty levels continue to soar. Meanwhile the catastrophic impact of worsening food insecurity is blighting the lives and mental and physical health of more and more people across different age groups. The health, and ultimately wealth, of our society is being compromised by policy decisions that ignore the devastating reality being witnessed on the ground.

The Trussell Trust's recently published data are the tip of the food insecurity iceberg and do not represent the food support given by thousands of other food aid providers including at 1,172 independent food banks.¹⁰ Food banks have collectively distributed tens of millions of emergency food parcels since 2010 yet food insecurity is currently soaring to heights not yet recorded and food banks can't keep up.¹¹

However, the scale of the cost-of-living crisis and precarity of charitable food aid provision are potentially pushing the food bank paradox to its tipping point. Mixed with enough will to resist the normalisation of food banking there's hope we can turn this ship around.

With this in mind, IFAN is calling on donors to food banks to also remonstrate and implore MPs to take action to reduce poverty. IFAN is also urging funders to help support cash first approaches to food

insecurity and governments to do all in their powers to increase the incomes of all who can shoulder the burden of soaring essential costs the least. The chancellor has demonstrated that he can act to limit damage let's hope there are bolder cash first interventions to come.

Readers of The BMJ raised more than £60 000 on behalf of IFAN during the BMJ 2020-21 Annual Appeal. IFAN supports and advocates on behalf of a range of food aid providers including over 550 independent food banks. BMJ readers' donations went directly to frontline member organisations and supported IFAN's work to co-develop cash first referral leaflets now rolled out in over 90 local authorities across the UK.

Competing interests: none declared.

Provenance and peer review: not commissioned, not peer reviewed.

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