



Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN)

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Food banks are running out of resources—there's no time to lose

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The latest figures from the Trussell Trust showing the number of emergency food supplies given by its food banks to people in the UK are devastating.¹ Nearly 1.5 million food parcels were distributed by the Trussell Trust to people in crisis and unable to afford food from April 2023 to September 2023. But this represents just a fraction of Britain's charitable food maze. What's more, we know that most people living with food insecurity don't seek out food support at all.

The summer months can be quieter for some food banks. But this has not been the case in 2023. Trussell Trust and Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) food banks have seen spiralling demand as everyday costs continue to overwhelm household budgets.² From April to July 2023, every single organisation responding to IFAN's most recent survey reported that they had supported people who previously hadn't ever reached out for help.² And there's been an alarming trend in the number of people seeking regular support because, even with help and advice to maximise their income, social security payments and wages could not cover essential costs.

Meanwhile, independent food banks have continued to report that they're overstretched and under-resourced.³ Donation levels have fallen, and food banks have found themselves buying in food to try to fill standard parcels.

Surplus supplies have also dwindled, and IFAN member organisations report receiving poor quality food that can't be distributed. Food disposal is then added to their growing lists of tasks. Using redistributed surplus food to tackle hunger has long been an ineffective response to rising food insecurity while aiding and abetting supermarkets to dispose of their waste under the guise of providing community support. Recent months have demonstrated just how illogical, and unsustainable, this approach is. However well intended, King Charles's new plan to help people through the cost-of-living crisis by channelling food surplus in their direction will simply further entrench a charitable food aid response to poverty.⁴

Some food banks have responded to this new climate by diversifying operations. They've used financial donations or grants to buy and distribute gift cards or shopping vouchers instead of food parcels. Some have targeted referral agents with gift cards, taking food banks out the equation. Using vouchers has meant more choice and dignity for people needing support. It has also meant that food bank teams have fewer food supplies to sort and package, which requires less physical labour. Other food banks have set up food pantries selling reduced priced food to stretch resources a bit further.

But some independent food banks have needed to reduce the number of times that people can be supported or supply smaller and less varied parcels. Their teams have faced impossible decisions as to how and when to cut back support. Unlike Trussell Trust food banks, independent providers often do not depend on referral agencies such as GPs, advice agencies, or schools to act as gatekeepers. This can leave volunteers in the unthinkable position of having to decide how emergency food support is rationed.

Meanwhile food bank workers and volunteers are trying to support people facing increasingly complex situations and, in many cases, no amount of time and goodwill can make a difference.

Independent food banks have responded by setting up support systems to help their volunteers and workers cope, hoping to bolster mental health resilience. The Trussell Trust network has funded a package of health and wellbeing support for its frontline staff and volunteers. Several independent food banks closed their doors over the summer so volunteers could rest and recuperate ahead of an inevitably tough winter.

However, for now, food banks are yet again faced with a winter of unrelenting demand with little light at the end of the tunnel. There are some reports that cost-of-living payments are temporarily reducing the need for support, but food bank teams know that any respite is likely to be short lived. At the heart of this reality is a government that is turning a blind eye to cross sector pleas to increase social security payments and ensure people are paid a fair wage.

Volunteers wonder if they should go on strike. But, they know, only too well, that the buck stops at the doors of food banks, however fragile their operations have become.

It's incumbent on the government to take heed of an impending human catastrophe as more and more people fall into food insecurity and resulting ill health.

The government must remove the burden of responsibility from the shoulders of volunteers and food aid charities. The duty to ensure everyone can access adequate incomes and a healthy standard of living lies with the government alone.

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 hundreds of independent food aid providers. BMJ readers' donations went directly to frontline member organisations and supported IFAN's work to co-develop 'Worrying About Money?' cash first referral leaflets now available in nearly 120 local authorities across the UK.

Competing interests: none further declared

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1 The Trussell Trust. Latest statistics. <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/>

- 2 *Independent Food Aid Network*. www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/data
- 3 Goodwin S. Ending the food bank paradox. *BMJ* 2022;379:. doi: 10.1136/bmj.o2919. pmid: 36460316
- 4 King Charles charitable fund. Coronation Food Project launched to support communities in the UK <https://www.kccf.org.uk/coronation-food-project-launched-to-support-communities-in-the-uk/>