

GENERAL SYNOD

Food banks, social security, and the cost-of-living crisis

Summary

This paper focuses on the rising use of food banks and the wider context of hunger, food insecurity and poverty across the country. The Government has made reducing inflation one of its priorities and has introduced some measures to support families and households struggling with the cost-of-living, but food bank use and destitution levels are increasing. Churches are at the forefront of supporting people in their local communities, whilst members of the Lords Spiritual have made the case in the House of Lords for policies that protect the most marginalised in society, ensuring that our social security system supports everyone through difficult times.

The incidence of food bank use and the wider economic picture

1. Food banks have become an increasingly common part of provision to alleviate hunger and food insecurity across the United Kingdom. The Trussell Trust, an anti-poverty charity founded on Christian principles, has been operating UK-based food banks since 2000 and has a network of more than 1,300 food banks. There are more than 1,000 independent food banks which are not affiliated to the Trussell Trust, alongside other kinds of food aid providers. The Trussell Trust advocates and campaigns for policies that will address hunger in the UK, aiming to end the need for food banks.
2. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) publishes annual statistics on food bank use. Its most recent [statistics](#), for the 2022-23 financial year, showed that 3.3% of all households had used a food bank within the previous twelve months, and 1.4% had used a food bank within the previous thirty days. DWP calculates that there were 7.2 million people (including 17% of children) living in [food insecure](#) households in 2022-23.
3. The most recent [statistics](#) from the Trussell Trust, which cover the period 1st April 2023 – 31st March 2024, show that food banks within their networks distributed 3.12 million food parcels to people facing hardship, the highest number of parcels ever distributed in a single year, a 4% increase on the previous year. Over 1.14 million parcels for children were distributed during this period, a largely unchanged number from the record level in the previous year, but a 7% increase for the number of parcels distributed to adults. More than 655,000 people have turned to food banks in the Trussell Trust network for the first time, a slight decrease on the previous year.
4. The Food Foundation has [highlighted](#) the disproportionate impact of the cost-of-living crisis on households with a disabled adult, with nearly 4 in 10 of these experiencing food insecurity in June 2023. The causes are attributed to the comparatively low wages and employment rates of disabled people, and the higher expenditure requirements of disabled people on other essentials.

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5. There has been a sustained period of low growth in the UK since the global financial crisis of 2008. Real wages grew by an average of 33% each decade from 1970-2007, but the Resolution Foundation has [calculated](#) that the subsequent flatlining of wages has cost the average worker £10,700 per year in lost wage growth. In the period since the global financial crisis, nine million young people have never worked in an economy with sustained average wage rises.
6. Food prices have been particularly affected by high inflation since the pandemic, the resulting changes in the labour market, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The annual [rate](#) of UK food and non-alcoholic beverages price inflation reached 19.1% in the year ending March 2023, the highest annual rate since the 1970s. However, this inflation rate in the UK has eased for thirteen consecutive months, reaching 2.9% in April 2024. The Office for National Statistics [notes](#) that food prices have been relatively high but stable since the summer of 2023.

Poverty and the social security system

7. These challenges raise questions about the adequacy of the social security system for people of working age. DWP's most recent [figures](#) from January 2024 showed that 6.4 million people receive Universal Credit, which has been rolled out gradually since April 2013 to replace several income, housing and child-related benefits. Almost 10 million people below State Pension age claim a combination of DWP benefits. Approximately 40% of people claiming Universal Credit are in work.
8. In its 'Economy 2030 inquiry', the Resolution Foundation has [observed](#) that working-age benefits have for many decades risen only in line with prices, rather than keeping pace with (generally faster growing) earnings. Yet in ten of the last fifteen years, benefit levels have not kept pace with prices which, along with wider cuts since 2010, has reduced incomes of the poorest fifth households by just under £3000 a year.
9. In October 2023, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) [published](#) its latest 'Destitution in the UK report', which outlined that approximately 3.8 million people – including one million children – were unable to meet their most basic needs to stay warm, dry, fed and clean in 2022. The proportion of destitute survey respondents who reported visiting a food bank in the previous month had increased from 22% in 2019 to 35% in 2022.
10. The Trussell Trust and JRF [launched](#) the 'Guarantee our Essentials' campaign in February 2023. The Essentials Guarantee would tie the rate of benefits to the cost of essentials for adults in a household, measured annually through an independent process. [Analysis](#) from JRF and the Trussell Trust indicates that this support would need to be at least £120 a week for a single adult and £200 for a couple to guarantee their essentials.

Actions taken by the Government

11. In response to concerns about the effect of the proposed 80% increase in the energy price gap, the Government [introduced](#) the Energy Price Guarantee (EPG) on 1st

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October 2022. The EPG reduced the extent of price increases for domestic customers, with the Government compensating energy suppliers for selling at lower prices. This measure was in addition to the £400 Energy Bills Support Scheme applying to all domestic energy users between October 2022 and March 2023.

12. The final £900 cost of living payments were paid in three instalments across 2023/24 by DWP to eight million people in receipt of certain benefits and tax credits, and have now been discontinued. Citizens Advice [reported](#) a consistent reduction in the number of food bank referrals they made for their clients immediately after cost of living payments were made, only for those numbers to increase again in the following month. The Work and Pensions Committee has [concluded](#) that cost of living payments were 'not sufficient to meet the scale of the problem and... only offered a short-term reprieve for those who received them'.
13. The Household Support Fund has been made available since October 2021 to local authorities in England to make discretionary payments to people most in need to help with the rising cost of food, energy and water bills. In the 2024 Spring Budget, the Government extended the Household Support Fund until the end of September 2024.
14. In the 2023 Autumn Statement, the Chancellor of the Exchequer [announced](#) plans to uprate benefits in April 2024 in line with the inflation rate of September 2023 (6.7%) rather than October 2023 (4.6%). In April 2024, the National Living Wage rose to £11.44 for workers across the UK aged 21 and over, an increase of 9.8%. The main rate of class 1 employee National Insurance Contributions (NICs) was reduced from 12% to 10% from January 2024, and the main rate of class 4 self-employed NICs was reduced from 9% to 8% in April 2024.

The role of the Church

15. A Trussell Trust report has [outlined](#) the work of churches and Christians in supporting the provision of food banks. Over 800 food bank centres are based in church buildings, whilst 52% of Trussell Trust food bank volunteers identify as active Christians. At least 12,000 churches are involved in donating food and/or providing venues, volunteers, and financial support for food banks.
16. [Polling](#) by Savanta conducted for the Church of England showed that almost four in ten UK adults sought help in 2022 because of difficulties with living costs. 5% of adults, equivalent to approximately 2.6 million people, reported seeking help from churches or other religious organisations. Six in ten of those who sought help from churches or other worshipping communities said they received free food or groceries, whilst half said they received low-cost food or groceries.
17. The Lords Spiritual often refer in their parliamentary contributions to material provision and relational care offered by churches in the context of the wider policy picture. During the Autumn Statement debate in November 2023, the Bishop of Manchester [highlighted](#) work being undertaken in the parish of St Barnabas, Oldham, where in addition to running a large food co-operative the church also offers a free laundry service for local people who cannot afford washing facilities of their own and

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for whom commercial launderettes are difficult to access or too expensive.

18. The Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households, which [published](#) its report in April 2023, cautioned that some people who have traditionally donated food banks are now reliant on using food banks for themselves. The report urged the Government to 'prioritise tackling poverty and reforming the social security system so that it reflects the complex reality of family life'.
19. In his [annual debate](#) in the House of Lords in December 2023, the Archbishop of Canterbury encouraged the Government to address "systems and policy choices which keep families in poverty". He cited as an example the two-child benefit cap, which means that – as of April 2017 – parents can only receive child tax credits or universal credit for their first two children. The End Child Poverty Coalition, of which the Church of England is an active member, has [estimated](#) that removing the two-child limit would lift a quarter of a million children out of poverty.

Conclusion

20. The scale of poverty in the UK requires action. The causes and manifestations of poverty are complex and cannot be solved by government alone. Churches and community groups across the country are working tirelessly to prevent people from experiencing extreme hunger and other forms of need. This is an expression of our calling as Christians to love our neighbour and to care for those in need.
 21. However, it is evident that there are failures within the social security system – as outlined thoughtfully in the Diocesan motion – which prevent some people from being able to afford essential items such as food, electricity and clothing.
 22. Our social security system was established to support everyone experiencing hardship. There is a case to be made for tying the basic rate of Universal Credit with the cost of essentials, and a precedent with Pension Credit in the way government provides a guaranteed level of income for people over the State Pension age, which is worked out by comparing a person's income with the amount on which is needed to live, calculated by government. The maximum weekly amounts for Pension Credit are £218.15 per week for single people, and £332.95 per week for couples.
 23. JRF and the Trussell Trust have estimated that the introduction of an Essentials Guarantee would cost an additional £22bn a year in 2023/24. There is evidence that poverty in childhood leads to poorer mental and physical health in adulthood, lower educational outcomes, and lower paid work, all of which have implications on future public spending.
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