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The Food
Foundation



ROADMAP TO REDUCING FOOD INSECURITY IN THE UK

ABOUT THE FOOD FOUNDATION



The Food Foundation is an independent charity working to address challenges in the food system in the interests of the UK public. Working at the interface between academia and policymakers (parliamentarians, civil servants, local authorities, business leaders) we use a wide range of approaches to make change happen including events, publications, media stories, social media campaigns and multi-stakeholder partnerships. We also receive extensive direct input from the public to ensure their lived experience is reflected in our policy proposals. We collaborate with many partners on a range of different thematic areas, liaising with academics to generate evidence and campaigners who can drive change. We are independent of all political parties and businesses, and are not limited by a single issue or special interest.

Visit: foodfoundation.org.uk

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With thanks to our funders



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About this report: Since the start of the pandemic, we have been conducting nationally representative surveys to monitor levels of food insecurity in the UK. The aim of this is to understand the scale of the problem, the extent to which people are struggling, and identify who is at most at risk to most effectively target support.

In 2021, we published a report “*A Crisis within a Crisis: the impact of the pandemic on household food insecurity*” summarising the trends in food insecurity from the first seven surveys. This new report looks at what happened next and what government needs to do to establish long term, systemic solutions that reduce the levels and protect people from future unforeseen crises.

All food insecurity data presented is from surveys conducted by YouGov and analysed by The Food Foundation and LSHTM between March 2020 and June 2025. Data referring to the current situation are from June 2025.

For the full results of our food insecurity surveys, visit our Food Insecurity Tracker:
<https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

State of play of food insecurity in the UK

- Food insecurity is affecting **1 in 10 households** (11.3%) – while levels have fallen slowly since the peak of the cost-of-living crisis, they remain incredibly high.
- Households with **children, disabled people** and those in **receipt of benefits** are consistently at even **greater risk of food insecurity** than the general population.
- Analysis of the past five years shows policy interventions to support low-income families have resulted in **rapid improvements in food insecurity levels**. Equally, when support has been taken away, this has had **substantial negative impacts**.
- Food insecurity is not inevitable; it is **political choice**. The government's food strategy must set out a **long-term strategy** to minimise levels of food insecurity in the UK.

Roadmap to reduce food insecurity in the UK



1. Ensure wage and benefit levels factor in the cost of a healthy diet



2. Strengthen nutritional safety net schemes that support low-income children



3. Rebalance the cost of the food basket to make healthy food the more affordable option



4. Support local authorities to address food insecurity in their communities through monitoring and social infrastructure



5. Establish a threshold for levels of household food insecurity that triggers emergency measures when crossed

STATE OF PLAY OF FOOD INSECURITY IN THE UK

Food insecurity trends over the past five years

Food insecurity is one of the major challenges facing the UK today. Currently, over 1 in 10 households (11.3%) are food insecure, often having to cut back food or skip meals entirely ([The Food Foundation, 2025](#)). Food insecurity has a deeply damaging impact on individuals and society. Beyond being a social justice issue, food insecurity seriously harms physical and mental health - undermining people's wellbeing, straining the NHS, reducing productivity, and ultimately weakening the economy.

The Food Foundation began tracking food insecurity at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic to provide timely data on its scale and drivers, and to inform targeted interventions. At the time, there was not up to date government data that could be used to do this.

WHAT IS FOOD INSECURITY?

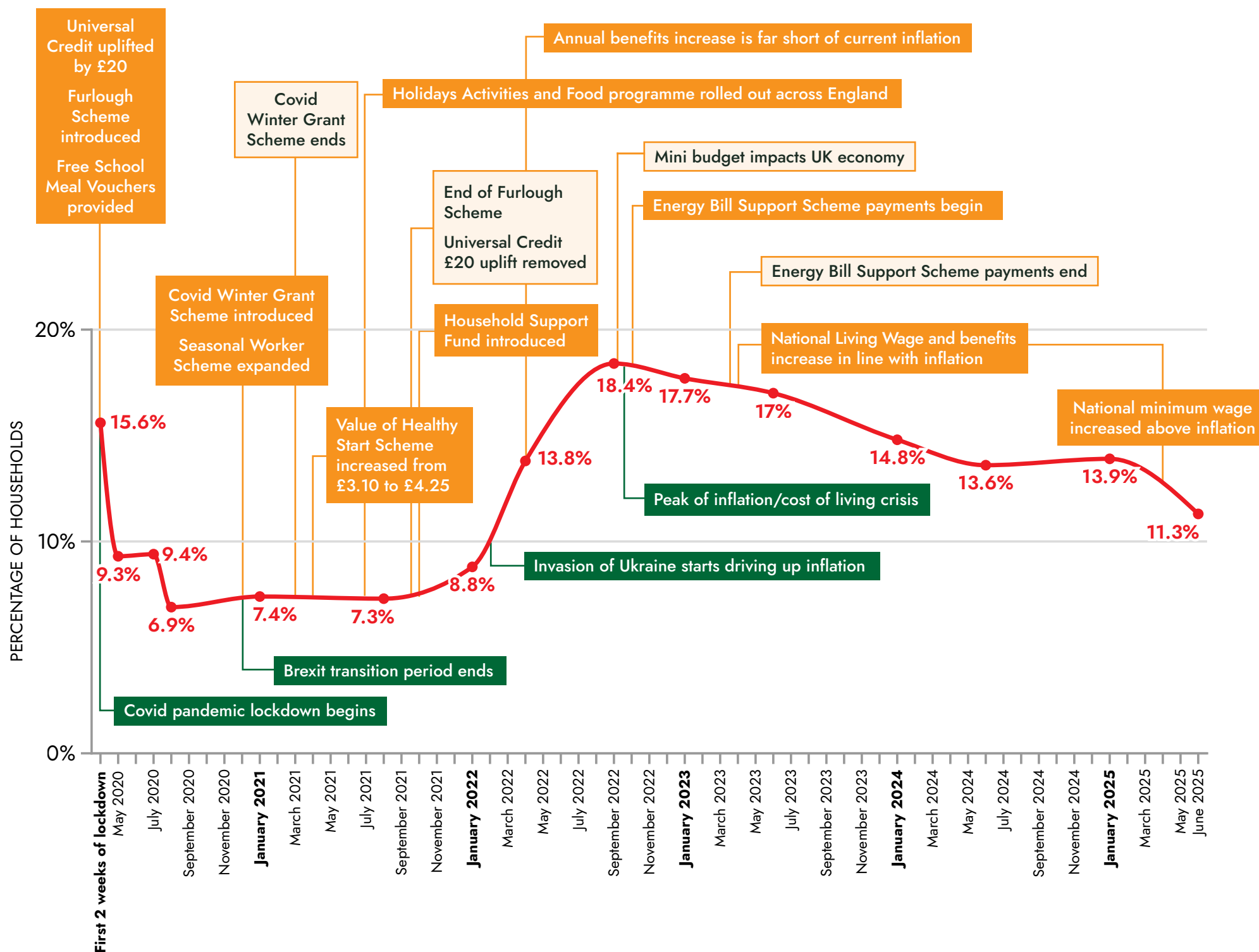
Food insecurity is "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways"



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Food insecurity trends, 2020-2025

■ EXTERNAL EVENTS ■ INCREASED GOVERNMENT SUPPORT ■ REDUCED GOVERNMENT SUPPORT ■ % OF HOUSEHOLDS EXPERIENCING FOOD INSECURITY



MEASURING FOOD INSECURITY



As part of the Food Foundation's regular food insecurity tracking, we ask three questions to assess whether people are food insecure. If they answer yes to any of the three questions, they are classified as moderately or severely food insecure:

In the past month, have you/anyone else in your household:

- 1. had smaller meals than usual or skip meals because you couldn't afford or get access to food?**
- 2. ever been hungry but not eaten because you couldn't afford or get access to food?**
- 3. not eaten for a whole day because you couldn't afford or get access to food?**

Since tracking began, overall levels of food insecurity have remained persistently high, but have fluctuated over time and demonstrate how rapidly conditions can change — either for the better or worse. These fluctuations have occurred reflect **external events** and **government or food industry action**.

For example, in the first two weeks of lockdown (March 2020), food insecurity levels sharply spiked, with 1 in 7 (15.6%) of households affected. **This was partly due to affordability issues, many of which existed before the pandemic, but was worsened by pandemic-specific drivers, such as supply chain disruptions resulting in empty supermarket shelves and shielding measures preventing people being able to access food shops.**

However, by May 2020 food insecurity levels had fallen rapidly to 9.3% - still high, but a significant improvement. **The food industry overcame many of the early supply chain issues and improved access for customers who were shielding. At the same time, the government stepped in to cushion the impacts**

of the pandemic on food insecurity, including through income-related support, such as introducing the furlough scheme for people whose jobs were affected by the pandemic and increasing the value of benefits by £20 per week for Universal Credit recipients. Other measures such as the Covid Winter Grant Scheme also provided support for low-income families. Levels of food insecurity remained relatively stable through until the latter half of 2021.

However, the cost-of-living crisis then started to take hold. Food prices began rapidly rising with food inflation (CPIH) increasing from 0.3% in August 2021 to a high of 19.3% in April 2023. In parallel, food insecurity levels also sky-rocketed, more than doubling over the course of a year. **The increase in inflation arose as the world emerged from the pandemic with increased demand for certain products resulting in shortages of food and disruptions to food supply chains, as well as to food supply inputs such as animal feed, gas, CO2 and fertiliser. The invasion of Ukraine sharply exacerbated the situation due to wheat and**

cooking oil export disruption (along with gas and fertiliser supply issues).

While food inflation has been a global crisis, the UK felt the effects of rising food prices more acutely due to Brexit's impact on trade and the availability of migrant workers. More concerning, as the cost-of-living crisis was beginning, Government chose to begin withdrawing interventions that had been introduced as emergency measures during the pandemic, including removing the £20 uplift to Universal Credit and ending the Furlough Scheme. This poorly timed removal of support, left families in a worse financial position as inflation began to rise, seeing the cost of food and other essentials increase at unprecedented speed. While the Covid Winter Grant Scheme was replaced with the Household Support Fund to continue to allow local authorities to provide emergency support, it was not sufficient in the face of the cost-of-living crisis to make up for removed support.

As inflation started to come down, food insecurity levels came down in parallel, and have been slowly falling since the peak of the crisis three years ago. In addition to inflation coming down, government support with energy payments, as well as annual increases in benefit levels and the national living wage, have also helped to gradually bring down food insecurity levels. Alongside this, Free School Meals were expanded in Wales, Scotland and London providing much needed support to many families.

Groups with higher levels of food insecurity



Households with children compared with no children

x1.5



On Universal Credit compared to those not on Universal Credit

x3.7



Limited a lot with disability compared to those with no disability

x3.1



POLICY CHANGES TO SUPPORT FAMILIES EXPERIENCING FOOD INSECURITY: Nutritional Safety Net Schemes

Over the past five and half years, several actions have been taken to strengthen nutritional safety net schemes that specifically protect children from food insecurity, including the Free School Meals Scheme, Holiday Food Provision and the Healthy Start Scheme.

In the early days of the pandemic (Spring 2020), the Government introduced supermarket vouchers or food parcels for children who would ordinarily receive Free School Meals but were unable to due to lockdown and school closures. This ensured they received support during term time and holiday time.

In Spring 2021, the Government increased the value of the Healthy Start payments from £3.25 to £4.10 per week to help families with younger children afford healthy food. Many retailers also added value to the scheme providing even greater support for these families.

The following year (Summer 2021), the Holiday Activities and Food Programme was introduced, giving children who qualified for Free School Meals access to holidays clubs that provided nutritious food during the school holidays. Initially funded for three years, the programme received a subsequent one year extension and has now been committed to for a further three years (i.e. until 2029).

During the cost-of-living crisis, many areas of the UK recognised the importance of Free School Meal provision for low-income families, with Scotland, Wales and London all expanding Free School Meals to all primary school children, and Northern Ireland increasing their income threshold to allow more children to qualify. Most recently, England have also committed to expanding Free School Meals to all children on Universal Credit, which will be introduced from September 2026.



EVIDENCE OF IMPACT OF GOVERNMENT POLICY: £20 uplift to Universal Credit

To provide some relief during the financial hardship of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Government increased Universal Credit payments by £20 per week. The uplift was subsequently removed in October 2021 even though the cost of living was rising.

The Department of Work and Pensions Family Resources Survey that measures household food insecurity suggests that this £20 uplift played a critical role in protecting these families from food insecurity. In line with our data, the Government's own data shows the uplift reduced food insecurity among those who received it, and that food insecurity rose again when it was removed.

An academic evaluation found a decline of approximately 7 percentage points in food insecurity levels among benefit claimants affected by the uplift compared to those not affected ([Loopstra et al, 2025](#)).

Compared with before the pandemic, food insecurity levels in households on Universal Credit were 37% lower (43% in 2019-21 compared with 27% in 2020-21) ([Department of Work and Pensions, 2022](#)).

In comparison, households on housing benefit (which captures many people on legacy benefits that weren't eligible for the uplift) saw little change, further indicating the impact of the uplift.

This highlights the critical role the £20 uplift played in protecting families from food insecurity, and provides compelling evidence that increasing incomes through the benefit system is an effective and targeted solution.



EVIDENCE OF IMPACT OF GOVERNMENT POLICY: Annual inflationary changes to benefit and minimum wage levels

The Government typically reviews the level of benefit payments and the national living/minimum wage on an annual basis to maintain their relative value in line with inflationary changes. Most commonly, this increase comes into effect in April based on the level of inflation from autumn the previous year.

Due to the rapid changes in inflation during the cost-of-living crisis, the 2022 levels were increased by only 3.1% despite inflation being 10% at the time ([Commons Library, 2025](#)). Therefore, in real terms there was a reduction in these households' income, and food insecurity levels continued to soar.

In contrast, the subsequent year, the annual increase was higher than inflation at the time (because inflation was falling) so benefits and wages increased in real terms compared to the previous year and food insecurity levels declined.

Similarly, this year (2025) benefits and the national living wage were increased in line with inflation, and the national minimum wage (the minimum wage for under 25-year-olds) was increased by more than inflation. This has likely contributed to the sharper decrease in food insecurity levels seen in our most recent survey.

While these changes to income levels occurred alongside wider inflationary changes that will have also made a difference to the cost of essentials including food, these findings strongly indicate that interventions to increase the incomes of the poorest can positively impact on food insecurity levels.

Learnings from the past five years

The drivers of food insecurity over the past five years offer insights into how to build resilience to future shocks. External events such as the pandemic, the invasion in Ukraine, and global inflation have exacerbated food insecurity here in the UK. Food price inflation has undoubtedly been one of the most significant challenges, affecting everyone, but hitting people who were already on the breadline the hardest.

While the government was not responsible for these events, it does have a responsibility to protect citizens from their impacts, and can take steps to make our food system less exposed to these dramatic fluctuations. The evidence in this report shows that government interventions can facilitate immediate and meaningful reductions in household food insecurity, whereas inadequate or withdrawn support has often coincided with a worsening of the situation.

During the cost-of-living crisis, food insecurity levels more than doubled in a year against a background of rising prices, alongside the rollback of pandemic-era support. Conversely, food insecurity levels have almost halved since peaking in 2022 as inflation has fallen and wage and benefit levels have more adequately kept pace with the cost of living. The responsiveness of food insecurity levels to policy interventions demonstrates how preventable high levels of food insecurity are, and how investment in protecting people can deliver real, tangible benefits.



Looking ahead

Addressing food insecurity is essential to advancing several government priorities, including reducing reliance on food banks, addressing disparities in life expectancy, breaking down barriers to opportunity, reducing child poverty, and having the healthiest generation of children ever. Failure to address barriers that prevent low-income families from accessing and affording a healthy diet will undermine these goals.

Furthermore, public concern on this issue is high, and there is strong demand for meaningful government action. Citizens want assurance that they will not have to face persistent uncertainty about feeding their families or rely on an unsustainable food system. Labour's manifesto made several commitments related to addressing food insecurity, and delivering on these will be important to public confidence.

The Government has made a number of positive commitments in recent months such as committing to expand Free School Meals to all children on Universal Credit and extending the Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF), helping to lay the foundations for progress. Going forward, the upcoming Child Poverty Strategy is well placed to set a clear direction for future action on food insecurity particularly for children. To build on this momentum, the Government's Food Strategy presents an opportunity to set out bold, ambitious commitments to meaningfully reduce food insecurity and tackle health inequalities, as well as increase the resilience of the UK's food system to

shocks. This should include a comprehensive set of national goals for food and nutritional security.

The insights in this report point us to clear solutions for tackling high levels of food insecurity. Government must ensure that: people have adequate money in their pockets, whether from fair wages or adequate benefits; the food system creates an environment where nutritious foods are the most affordable option and where local retail and community support is expanded to ensure these foods are readily available everywhere; and children's nutrition is adequately safeguarded through targeted nutritional safety net schemes.



Food prices are expected to remain volatile and potentially rise even further. One of the most significant emerging threats is climateflation, i.e. the impact of climate change on food prices. Increasingly frequent and severe extreme weather events such as changing rainfall patterns, droughts, floods, and heatwaves are already disrupting crop yields, damaging supply chains, and driving up the cost of food. At the same time, geopolitical instability, energy price volatility, and input cost increases (such as fertilisers and animal feed) can create further uncertainty across global food markets. Without intervention to improve the UK's food system resilience, these structural pressures threaten to make healthy diets even more unaffordable for low-income households - exacerbating food insecurity, worsening diet-related health outcomes, and further entrenching health inequalities. In this context, ensuring the affordability and accessibility of nutritious food must be treated as a long-term priority to protect the nation's health and economic resilience.

To be better prepared for future shocks, a clear national strategy is needed that ensures consistent monitoring of food insecurity, maintained minimum levels of support, and timely action when risks increase. Food insecurity is not inevitable; it is a political choice. This report outlines a clear roadmap for reducing food insecurity levels and protecting people from future risks.

ROADMAP TO REDUCE FOOD INSECURITY IN THE UK



1. Ensure wage and benefit levels factor in the cost of a healthy diet

The ability to afford a healthy diet is closely linked to income, as well as the cost of food and other essential expenses. Research from The Food Foundation's Broken Plate report shows that for many households, a nutritionally adequate diet remains unaffordable ([The Food Foundation, 2025](#)), with the most deprived fifth of UK households needing to spend 45% of their disposable income (after housing costs) on food to follow the Government's recommended healthy diet, the Eatwell Guide. Although this has declined from 50% in 2021–22 at the peak of the cost-of-living crisis, it remains above the 2020–21 level of 43%. In contrast, the most affluent fifth of households would need to spend just 11%.

FIGURE 1: Percentage of disposable income required to afford the Eatwell Guide by income quintile

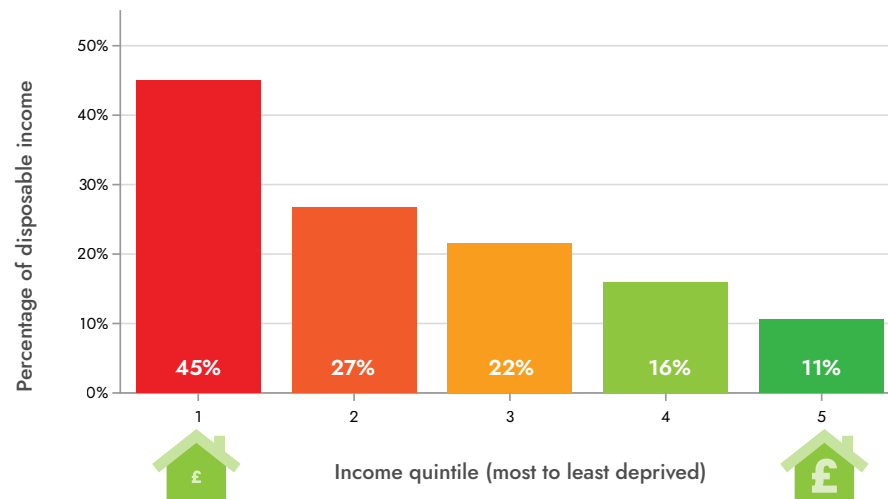
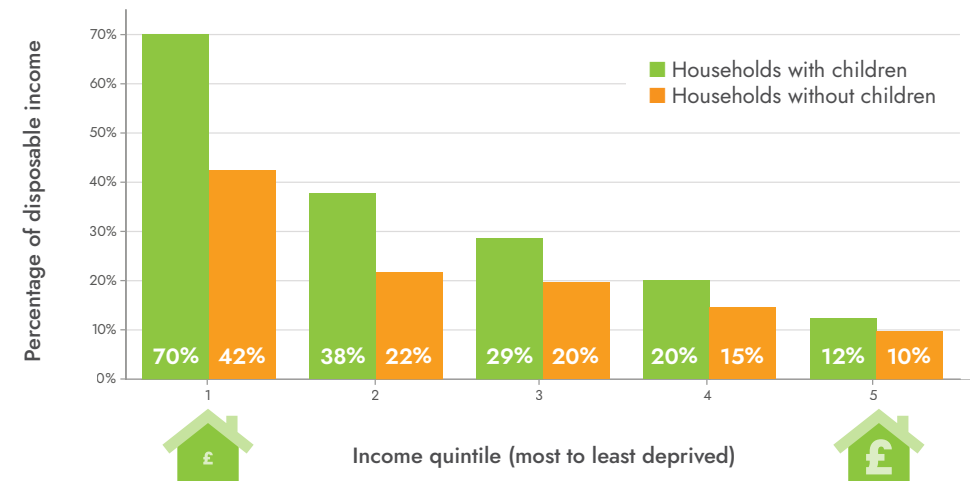


FIGURE 2: Percentage of disposable income needed to afford the Eatwell Guide for households with and without children



Source: FoodDB, University of Oxford: London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine secondary analysis of the Family Resources Survey 2022-23.

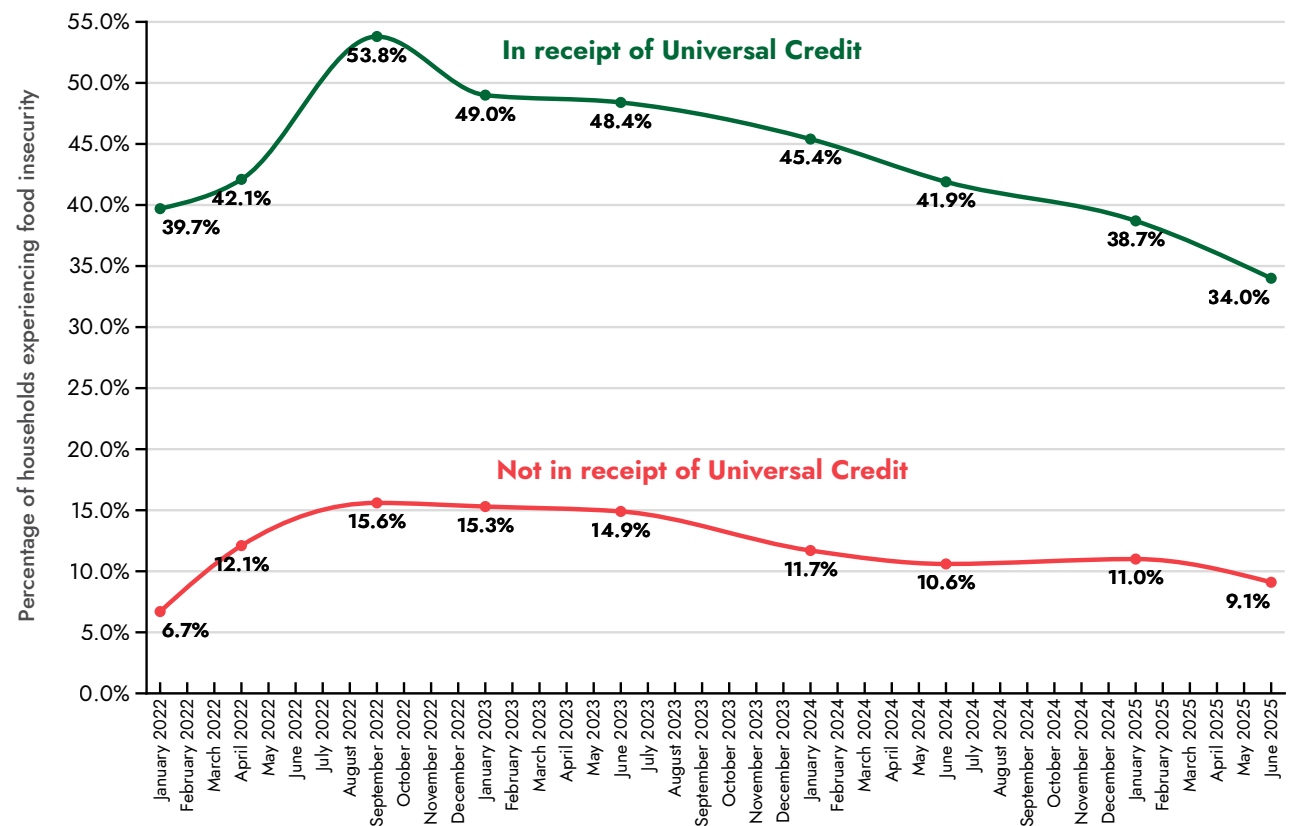
This disparity contributes to significant inequalities in dietary health and is a large part of the explanation for persistently high levels of food insecurity in the UK. It also clearly demonstrates that income levels, through both wages and benefits, are not sufficient to cover the cost of food and other basic essentials.

Therefore, to reduce food insecurity, increasing the incomes of the lowest-income households is essential. The Government acknowledged this challenge in its manifesto commitment to review Universal Credit to "make work pay and tackle poverty." ([Labour Party, 2024](#)). Currently, neither benefit levels nor the National Living Wage are based on the cost of essential goods, which limits many households' ability to afford a healthy diet.

"From my experience in schools and at home, it's clear that low income and limited benefits make nutritious food a luxury. Children deserve more than occasional support—structural change is needed to make healthy meals accessible for every family."

Rebecca, Food Activist and Food Educator, Devon

FIGURE 3: Percentage of households in receipt of Universal Credit experiencing food insecurity





Food insecurity is especially prevalent among households receiving benefits. A third (34%) of households on Universal Credit are experiencing food insecurity, compared with 9% of those not receiving it ([The Food Foundation](#)). This raises important questions about the adequacy of social security for people unable to work full-time, such as disabled people or single parents.

Furthermore, employment alone does not always protect against food insecurity. According to the Food Insecurity Tracker, even respondents in full-time work are not immune from food insecurity ([The Food Foundation](#)). This underscores the need for wage

levels to reflect the actual cost of living. The Real Living Wage, as recommended by the Living Wage Foundation is £13.85 in London and £12.60 elsewhere. This is calculated based on living costs, compared to the Government's statutory National Living Wage of £12.21, which is based on a percentage of median earnings ([Living Wage Foundation](#)).

More positively, evidence shows that increasing incomes can reduce food insecurity at scale. Although such interventions can be costly, they offer long-term returns through reduced demand for emergency food support and lower healthcare costs related to diet-related ill health.



Recommendations

- > Track the cost of a healthy diet, and ensure benefits and minimum wages are set at an appropriate level for people to be able to afford a healthy diet along with the other essentials
- > Deliver the Labour manifesto commitment to enact the socio-economic duty in Section 1 of the Equality Act 2010 ([Labour Party, 2024](#)), which requires certain public bodies to consider how their strategic decisions might help to reduce inequalities associated with socio-economic disadvantage. This should include ensuring that a review of the impact on food insecurity levels is always conducted before making changes to social security and minimum wages.



2. Strengthen Nutritional Safety Nets Schemes for Children

Children's health in the UK has severely declined in recent years, with significant disparities between the most and least deprived. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are now on average shorter and face higher rates of obesity, diabetes, and dental decay ([The Food Foundation, 2023](#)).

Addressing income and structural barriers to healthy diets is essential to tackling food insecurity, but additional targeted support is also needed for children due to their greater risk of food insecurity and how critical proper nutrition during childhood is for development and long-term health. The Government's goal of creating "the healthiest generation of children ever" depends on improving access to nutritious food, particularly for those most in need. Strengthening nutritional safety nets such as Healthy Start, Free School Meals, and holiday food provision is vital.

Many of these schemes deliver more than their cash equivalent could achieve because it is cheaper to prepare nutritious food at scale (for example, in a school setting) than for each individual parent to do this with the allotted funding. Moreover, these schemes have the potential to provide reassurance to parents that nutrition protection for their children is locked in, and that access to fruit and vegetables through Healthy Start, or a hot lunch at school, is ringfenced. Therefore, these programmes offer both economic and social value; they reduce pressure on families, improve children's nutrition, and contribute to long-term health outcomes.



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The Healthy Start Scheme

Failing to give children in the UK the best start in life can have lifelong implications for them individually and for wider society. The early years are a critical period for nutrition, supporting healthy growth, development and learning while reducing the risk of diet-related illnesses later in life. Early food experiences shape long-term eating habits and health outcomes. Inadequate nutrition during this stage can lead to lasting developmental impacts and increased risk of chronic disease. Evidence also links early-life food insecurity with higher obesity risk in later life ([The Food Foundation](#)).

Stronger nutrition policy for young children is fundamental to meeting the government's goals of reducing health inequalities and giving every child the best start in life. The Healthy Start Scheme is an essential nutritional safety net that helps to reduce the financial burden on the lowest income families during pregnancy and early childhood, many of whom are struggling with food insecurity. It provides weekly payments that can be used to buy nutritious foods such as fruit, vegetables, first infant formula, and milk. The current payment is £4.25 per week (rising to £4.65 in April 2026), with double the amount available for infants under one.

Despite its importance, the scheme is not currently reaching its full potential. Strengthening Healthy Start by addressing gaps in access and delivery would better support young children during this crucial stage and improve both health outcomes and value for public investment.

Restrictive eligibility criteria result in children falling through the gap: The current eligibility criteria mean that many families experiencing food insecurity do not qualify for the scheme; only those on qualifying benefits with a household income of £408 per month or less, excluding benefits, are currently eligible. In April 2025, just 330,500 children under four years old and pregnant women were registered for Healthy Start, equating to around 10% of the total population in these groups. However, 36% of households with children under 5 are living in poverty ([The Food Foundation](#)). This disconnect

Start including its value and eligibility" ([UK Government, 2025](#)) but no further updates on eligibility have been provided. Additionally, the Healthy Start scheme is currently only available to families with children under four years old, leaving a gap between Healthy Start ending and children starting school (where they could access Free School Meals), during which children are at higher risk of food insecurity and poor quality diets. Lastly, though a consultation for permanently expanding the scheme to some children from households with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) has been conducted,

"Working in school food and raising a child, I see how families on low incomes struggle to buy healthy ingredients. Even with Free School Meals or Healthy Start, many children still miss out on the nutrition they need to grow and learn."

Rebecca, Food Activist and Food Educator, Devon

highlights a clear gap between the number of families able to access Healthy Start, and the true number of those who need this vital nutritional safety net. It has recently been announced that the Free School Meals Scheme eligibility criteria will change from September 2026 to remove the income threshold so all children in families in receipt of Universal Credit can access them - the same should be done for Healthy Start. The Government's Response to a House of Lords Inquiry on Obesity published in January 2025 said that they were "exploring all viable routes to improve uptake on Healthy

the government response is long overdue – as of June 2025, only 75 families with NRPF were registered for Healthy Start and, in just three months, 50 applications were rejected ([UK Government](#)).

The scheme is failing to reach all eligible families:

Accessing statutory benefits should be simple for those who are eligible. Yet historical data suggests around one-third of eligible households are not claiming Healthy Start. Families must currently apply for the scheme, but many miss out due to lack of awareness, ➤

- uncertainty about eligibility, and administrative hurdles. This could be addressed by shifting to an opt-out model, automatically enrolling eligible families. However, this would require resolving data-sharing barriers between the Department for Work and Pensions (which holds benefit and income data) and DHSC/NHSBSA (which administers the scheme). Additionally, uptake data - previously published by NHSBSA and DHSC - has been withdrawn due to errors and has not been reinstated. This lack of data undermines efforts by retailers, local authorities, NGOs and NHSBSA to improve uptake as the impact of interventions cannot be evaluated.

The value of the scheme has not kept pace with rapid food price inflation: In April 2021, the Government increased the value of Healthy Start from £3.10 to £4.25 – the first increase since 2010. However, subsequent food price inflation has left families unable to buy the same amount of food with the weekly payment that they could when it was first increased. This issue was partially acknowledged in a recent commitment to increase the payment to £4.65 per week from April 2026 - a modest 40p increase. While the uplift is welcome, it falls far short of what is required to keep pace with inflation. Had the payments increased in line with food and drink inflation since April 2021, it would have been worth £5.78 at the time of the announcement - a difference of £1.53. Additionally, during the pandemic many retailers promoted the scheme and added value but have been unable to overcome IT barriers to doing so with the newer digital card.



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Recommendations

- **EXPAND THE ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA TO REACH MORE FAMILIES IN NEED.**
Expand eligibility to include all families on Universal Credit (in line with the recent Free School Meal eligibility expansion); increase the age threshold of children to include four year olds (to cover the gap before access to Free School Meals begins); and permanently extend eligibility to all families with No Recourse to Public Funds.
- **INCREASE UPTAKE TO ENSURE NO ELIGIBLE FAMILIES MISS OUT.**
Resolve data issues and start publishing uptake data; immediately write to all eligible families to ensure they are aware of the scheme; and introduce auto-enrolment, with an "opt-out" rather than "opt-in" system.
- **ENSURE THE WEEKLY PAYMENTS MAINTAIN THEIR RELATIVE VALUE.**
Increase payments to reflect inflationary increases in food prices; review the value annually to ensure it is increased in line with inflationary changes; and explore how to facilitate retailers adding further value to the scheme.

Free School Meals

The Government's pledge to expand Free School Meal eligibility to all families receiving Universal Credit from September 2026 represents a major step towards a fairer, healthier society for all children. Removing financial barriers to school meals creates the conditions for many more children to reach their full potential. The evidence is clear: children who receive regular, healthy meals show better concentration, improved attendance, and even higher future earnings ([The Food Foundation, 2025](#)). This expansion has the potential to significantly improve children's health, wellbeing, and educational outcomes by providing a free, nutritious meal every school day.

To ensure that the benefits of this policy are fully realised, effective implementation will be critical. Currently, families must actively apply for Free School Meals, but many eligible children miss out due to lack of awareness, confusion over eligibility, or the administrative burden of applying. Although the Government has made improvements to the eligibility checking system, this still leaves an unnecessary burden for parents and doesn't guarantee all children are reached.

An "opt-out" rather than "opt-in" approach would ensure that all families who want access to scheme are easily able to. Many local authorities have set up more automated processes at the local level but there has been varying success due to resource and data use barriers. The most effective solution would be to ➤



- introduce automatic enrolment at the national level. This would require overcoming data sharing issues between the Department for Work and Pensions (which holds benefit and income data) and the Department for Education (which administers the scheme). As immediate steps toward national automation, the Government should write to all families on Universal Credit to encourage them to apply, add the option to grant permission to check Free School Meal eligibility to the Universal Credit Application form, and improve data access for local authorities to support local efforts.

In addition to improving access, the quality of school food must also be prioritised. A healthy school lunch can be a crucial source of nourishment, especially for children from low-income households. With children on average eating half the recommended amount of fruit and vegetables and twice the recommended sugar, strengthening school food standards is vital ([The Food Foundation, 2025](#)).

The proposed update to the School Food Standards is a welcome move and must be ambitious aligning with the latest nutrition and sustainability evidence, closing existing loopholes, and ensuring proper monitoring and support for schools that may struggle to meet the standards. This is also essential for the success of the Government's breakfast club provision for all primary school children that is currently being piloted.

The Government should go even further by leveraging school food procurement to support British farmers. Updating procurement rules to prioritise minimally processed UK-grown food would improve the quality of school meals while supporting local economies and sustainability goals.

With children spending 190 days a year in school, the school food system presents a major opportunity to drive better health, education, and economic outcomes. Ministers now have a rare chance to deliver a bold, joined-up reset of school food policy - one that ensures all children, particularly those from low-income families, benefit from this important investment.



Recommendations

- Introduce national auto-enrolment of Free School Meals, with an "opt-out" rather than "opt-in" system to ensure all those who are entitled are registered to receive them; and while national processes are being developed actively support local authorities to introduce more automated processes.
- Improve the quality of school food by ensuring the current review of the school food standards results in meaningful and ambitious improvements to the nutritional quality of food served to children in schools; and introduce nationwide monitoring for school food to ensure the School Food Standards are adhered to, with a process to support schools to improve in the event of non-compliance.



3. Rebalance the cost of the basket

Food insecurity is one of the most severe manifestations of poverty, and both are deeply linked to health. It's not just about having enough food or calories, but about consistent access to nutritious food that supports health and prevents disease. The ability to afford healthy food is a major driver of diet quality and a key reason behind the stark dietary health gap between the wealthiest and poorest in the UK.

Financial constraints push millions toward cheaper, calorie-dense but nutrient-poor foods, undermining their health and widening health inequalities. This issue is not only about the absolute price of food relative to income, but also the relative price difference between healthy and unhealthy options. The Food Foundation's Broken Plate report shows that on average healthy food is twice as expensive as less healthy food per calorie, a disparity that has persisted for over a decade and worsened in recent years ([The Food Foundation, 2025](#)). As a result of this, families on tight budgets are increasingly pushed to choose less nutritious options. Similarly, findings from the Kids Food Guarantee show that meeting the 5-a-day fruit and veg recommendation



could cost £8.67 to £13.24 per week, depending on the retailer. This amounts to 34-52% of one person's weekly food budget in the poorest 10% of households, compared to 17-26% for the wealthiest ([The Food Foundation, 2024](#)). The impact of this is reflected in people's diets: Food Foundation data shows 64% of food-insecure households report cutting back on fruit purchases (vs. 14% of food-secure households), and 50% report cutting back on vegetables (vs. 8%), due to financial pressures ([The Food Foundation, 2025](#)).

Addressing this imbalance that traps low-income families into unhealthy diets by rebalancing the food system so that nutritious options are more affordable must be a core pillar of any strategy to improve national health and reduce inequalities. Retailers have a fundamental role to play in ensuring that families can secure adequate food to prevent hunger and prevent a shift to less healthy options as a strategy for managing financial pressures - particularly encouraging minimally processed foods such as fruit, veg, beans and pulses ➤

"Budgeting as a student has shown me how difficult it is to prioritise a balanced diet when food prices rise faster than income. This highlights the structural need for stronger government support to prevent widening health inequalities."

Siddhi, Food Ambassador and Student, London

> and other whole foods. Manufacturers and retailers have come under scrutiny over the past few years for their large profits, record levels of executive pay, and shareholder pay outs against the backdrop of high food inflation and food insecurity ([The Food Foundation, 2024](#)). Voluntary actions have frequently been shown to fail. Instead big shifts in the incentives and standards in the system within which businesses operate are required to shift endemic power imbalances within the UK's food system in which profits and power are concentrated in the middle of the food chain, leaving farmers and citizens feeling the squeeze.

Fiscal measures can play a dual role in incentivising businesses to make food healthier for everyone, while also raising much needed revenue that can be invested back into initiatives that support families to access and afford healthier food. The Soft Drinks Industry Levy is a proven example - its sugar thresholds prompted reformulation, and the revenue has supported food and activity programmes for low-income families ([Cobiac et al, 2024](#); [UK Government](#)). Expanding this approach to other food categories could deliver similar benefits. However, any increases in food prices must be matched by reinvestment in nutritional safety nets to protect low-income households.

64% of food insecure households report cutting back on fruit purchases, and 42% report cutting back on vegetables

The food strategy has the potential to create real momentum and the needed incentives across the system, but securing the long-term affordability of nutritious food requires a long term vision and commitment as the backbone of a 'good food cycle'. This can only be achieved through legislation, for instance as a Food Bill, which can set targets for national and household food security, drive policy coherence by linking up government departments, provide longevity and certainty to policies introduced in this political term, boost long term resilience across the system, and in turn provide more confidence for investors and businesses.



Recommendations

- > Building on the success of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy, introduce a new levy on unhealthy food that incentivises manufacturers to make food healthier while also raising revenue that can be invested back into initiatives that support families to access nutritious and affordable food.
- > Introduce primary legislation in the form of a Food Bill that locks in the long-term affordability of nutritious foods, while providing certainty for citizens, businesses, producers and investors alike.



4. Support local authorities to address food insecurity in their communities through monitoring and social infrastructure



Too many communities in the UK still lack reliable access to affordable, nutritious food. Rural communities may face long distances and limited transport to supermarkets, while inner-city areas may have shops or takeaways in abundance but few selling affordable, nutritious food. Local actors like councils and community groups are often best placed to understand these place-specific barriers and respond with practical solutions—whether through planning, use of public assets, or targeted support for community food provision. National action (as identified in the rest of this report) is essential, but without enabling and resourcing local action as well, barriers to accessing healthy and affordable food will remain.

Even where physical access is not a barrier, the price of food is often prohibitive for households who face food insecurity ([The Food Foundation](#)).

The Rise of Community Food Provision

In response to these concerns, charitable and community food initiatives have expanded dramatically over the past decade. Provision now ranges from traditional, short term emergency food parcels provided by food banks, to low-cost groceries in social supermarkets, food clubs and pantries, to pre-prepared meals in community venues and cafés.

WHAT ARE FOOD CLUBS?

Food Clubs, such as a Food Pantries and Social Supermarkets, are membership-based services in communities where people can pay a small weekly fee to access a wide range of nutritious food at more affordable prices. These Clubs help households stretch their budgets and often offer wider social opportunities and support services.

While it is not possible to get data on the full scale of provision nationally, there are an estimated 6,900 food banks including around 4,000 in schools ([University of Bristol](#); [Trussel Trust](#)), more than 700 community fridges ([Hubbub](#)), at least 120 food pantries ([Your Local Pantry](#)), and many more community cafés and shared meal projects (FoodCycle alone delivers ~100 meals weekly). To put this scale in context: the UK has around 3,000 Tesco stores and 1,400 McDonalds outlets.

In Leeds alone, there are thought to be around 150 food initiatives, encompassing food redistribution, cooking and growing classes, social supermarkets, and shared meals ([Foodwise](#)). The city's Food Aid Network now has data showing a levelling off in food bank usage alongside the continued growth in social supermarket access ([Feeding Britain](#)).

There is growing evidence that this trend is more widespread and that people are increasingly turning towards longer term models of support such as food clubs and pantries, and away from food banks ([Food Standards Agency, 2025](#)), and so maximising the potential benefits for those households facing the greatest risk of chronic food insecurity is a high priority. These models provide affordable (rather than free) food and are powered by a mix of surplus food from retailers and manufacturers, philanthropic donations, and local authority funding such as the Household Support Fund. This cash funding is then used to purchase food direct from wholesalers or supermarkets, supplementing the food available through surplus channels. Many focus on hunger relief, but some have a stronger focus on nutrition and many offer much more than a normal commercial retailer could provide including wraparound support, debt advice, benefits guidance, cooking classes, food growing opportunities and community building.

But the sector is fragile. Many projects operate on a knife-edge, and food surplus is reported to be declining as food companies improve forecasting and reduce waste—often through AI-enabled supply chains. At the same time, philanthropic funds are harder to secure. Without stronger public support, many of these retail options risk contraction just when they are needed more than ever.

The Opportunity for Local Government

This challenge also presents an opportunity.

Developing the local infrastructure to make nutritious food more accessible to families on low incomes at risk of food insecurity can, not only make other measures like better incomes and cash-first support more effective, but could also offer an opportunity to adopt the principles of the Good Food Cyle, set out in the government's latest policy paper on its Food Strategy ([UK Government](#)). In turn, the limited resource that local government is already providing could deliver even greater social and economic impact by enabling these enterprises to source more of their food, as minimally processed whole foods from local food producers, reducing the number of intermediaries taking a profit and so improving both farming and business viability of small suppliers, and consumer affordability.

With the right support, these charitable food initiatives are uniquely positioned to:

- Reduce health inequalities through affordable, nutritious food access. For example, nearly half of members of the Bread and Butter Things Food Clubs reported improvements in their diet, with 79% saying they now eat more fruit and vegetables ([The Bread and Butter Thing](#)). Similarly, evaluations of Feeding Britain's Food Clubs found that 98% of members reported being able to afford more balanced meals and 77% were eating more fresh produce ([Feeding Britain](#)).
- Build social support by strengthening local relationships and reducing isolation.
- Stimulate local economies by sourcing and spending locally, supporting small producers and local businesses.
- Increase resilience of supply chains through reducing exclusive dependence on a few major suppliers.
- Improve environmental impacts by shortening supply chains and increasing consumption of seasonally available British food.

Many small, local businesses which are wanting to deliver social as well as economic goals can also help to deliver these outcomes but they face barriers in competing with large businesses operating in the dominant commercial system because of their huge economies of scale, more human resources and the power they wield in the system.

A CALL FOR JOINED-UP POLICY – 10 POLICY ENABLERS SPANNING 3 GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS

Realising these benefits requires coordinated, cross-departmental action. Specifically, DEFRA, DWP, and MHCLG should collaborate to align policy levers, funding streams, and regulatory frameworks to enable community food initiatives and small local businesses which focus on affordable access to minimally processed British foods to thrive and grow. At least ten policy enablers could unlock both scale and greater financial stability for these initiatives:

1. **Easing planning barriers** for food production and retail (e.g. farm shops, polytunnels, urban growing etc). (MHCLG and Local Government)
2. **Embedding food infrastructure** in new housing developments via Section 106 (S106) and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). (MHCLG and Local Government)
3. **Investing in regional food infrastructure** such as warehousing, packing, and processing. (Combined Mayoral Authorities, MHCLG/DEFRA)
4. **Requiring anchor institutions** (schools, hospitals, universities) to source a share of food locally and serve seasonally where possible, at the same time as removing some of the barriers they face. This helps to create higher demand overall, and therefore economies of scale which keep prices down. (DEFRA)
5. **Leveraging publicly owned assets**, from empty high street premises to council land to offer free or subsidised support to local food initiatives. (MHCLG and Local Government)
6. **Directing farming subsidies** to incentivise local, sustainable supply into public sector and community food systems. (DEFRA)
7. **Supporting food partnerships** to establish and grow, building on the Sustainable Food Places model. (MHCLG and Local Government)
8. **Using the Crisis and Resilience Fund** to require local authorities to gather data on the scale of demand for community food provision as part of their reporting to central government, and use the funding to accelerate the shift 'from food bank to food club', through strategic grantmaking for social supermarket development alongside direct cash transfers and vouchers (DWP).
9. **Using business rate relief** to help initiatives and small businesses delivering social goals afford to operate in prime locations. (MHCLG and Local Government)
10. **Mandating the development of local food access plans**, developed by councils or mayoral authorities with small businesses, charitable food providers, anchor institutions, and growers. (DEFRA/ MHCLG and Local Government).





MONITORING LOCAL FOOD INSECURITY

Some local authorities already monitor prevalence of food insecurity locally by conducting city-wide food aid counts. This involves coordinating with all the local community food providers to count the number of people that use their service weekly. Whilst Trussell Trust already measures number of their users, in a [city-wide food aid counts](#) conducted during one week period in 2023 and 2025, the Trussell Trust foodbank users only accounted for 6% of food aid visitors in 2023 and 4% in 2025. However there was an overall increase in the number of visits to food project in 2025 compared to 2023. This shows that just using Trussell Trust data as a proxy for food insecurity could lead to a considerable underestimation of reliance on food aid. The new Crisis and Resilience Fund could provide a mechanism for local authorities to regularly monitor levels of food insecurity in their localities. These findings could help build a better picture of a place-based need, which can in return inform better decision-making and national policy intervention. For more see [here](#).



Recommendations

- DEFRA, DWP, and MHCLG should establish a joint cross-departmental taskforce of civil servants supported by a panel of experts to explore how existing policy levers, funding streams, and regulatory frameworks can be aligned to deliver improved access to affordable, nutritious foods in all communities, but particularly the most deprived. The Food Strategy, and DWP's plans to reduce the mass dependence on emergency food parcels should include actions based on the task force's conclusions. With the right support, community food enterprises could move from surviving on the margins to driving systemic change in the UK's food system.



5. Set a critical threshold for emergency intervention

The government have already begun making many welcome commitments to help families struggling with food insecurity, including their manifesto pledge to 'end the mass dependency on emergency food parcels'. To assess the positive impact of any policies or interventions implemented, close monitoring of food insecurity will be needed. Ultimately the government must commit to eradicating household food insecurity in the UK, recognising its responsibility to protect people from hunger and malnutrition, and to uphold the right to food.

Furthermore, to effectively tackle food insecurity in the long term, building resilience to external shocks and a fragile global food system, any monitoring of policies must be accompanied by a readiness to act decisively on food insecurity when conditions reach critical levels. Recent years have shown that as a nation we must be prepared for such external shocks that threaten food security, whether geo-political, climate or other. It is not enough for government to introduce policies and assume that they will continue to be sufficient as the external context changes: the level of government intervention must adapt accordingly. For example, at the start of the pandemic, emergency meetings were convened by government on access to food and appropriate measures taken — as we've seen this successfully mitigated some of the impact of the unexpected shock of the pandemic. Another very basic ➤



- example of this is the need for wages, social security levels, the Healthy Start weekly payment value and free school meals value all rising with inflation to ensure they maintain their relative value not merely their absolute value.

Therefore, the government should introduce a clearly defined critical threshold of food insecurity that serves as an early warning system - when reached it

"How can families on low incomes truly prioritise healthy food when the cheaper and more accessible options are often the unhealthiest? I've experienced the difficult trade-off between stretching a small budget and wanting to put fresh, nutritious meals on the table, this is a choice no one should have to make in the UK."

Joyce, Food Ambassador

should automatically trigger a coordinated response by government to implement emergency measures that improve access to food for citizens. In the first instance, this threshold should be set at half of current levels of food insecurity.

Importantly, the existence of a threshold does not mean that higher levels of food insecurity are acceptable until they are breached. Rather, the threshold would provide a line beyond which inaction becomes unconscionable and a threat to national stability, bringing accountability and urgency to what has previously been too slow and weak a response. While there is no acceptable number of people suffering with food insecurity and government should always be endeavoring to support citizens to access and afford the food they need, it is clear that there are moments when greater intervention is needed.

To determine when such a critical threshold is met, there will need to be a designated authority in Government who has responsibility to monitor levels of food insecurity and the powers to act accordingly, using this data to inform and drive action at the national and local authority level in response to increasing levels of food insecurity. This could be achieved by expanding an existing department or authorities' responsibilities, for instance the Food Standards Agency who already routinely collect data on certain aspects of the food system.



Recommendation

- Introduce a critical threshold for household food insecurity, and embed this within relevant strategies such as the Food Strategy and Child Poverty Strategy. This should be accompanied by a designated authority with the powers to monitor and act when needed, for instance by expanding the remit of the Food Standards Agency.



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foodfoundation.org.uk | [in the-food-foundation](https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-food-foundation)