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Food poverty & digital power

The social realities of digitalising food assistance in England

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We are witnessing the gradual disappearance
of the postwar British welfare state behind a
webpage and an algorithm.

(Alston, 2018: 6)

Contents

List of Acronyms

APPG – All-Party Parliamentary Group

AWS – Amazon Web Services

CRF – Crisis and Resilience Fund

DEFRA – Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs

DHSC – Department for Health and Social Care

DWP – Department of Work and Pensions

HAF – Holiday Activities and Food Fund

HSF – Household Support Fund

IFAN – Independent Food Aid Network

NHS – National Health Service

NHSBSA – NHS Business Services Authority

NRPF – No Recourse to Public Funds

ONS – Office for National Statistics

PIP – Personal Independence Payment

UC – Universal Credit

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

In 2025, and for the decade before, **England has been experiencing a food crisis.** The distribution of emergency food parcels increased massively from 2013 onwards, with estimates of the prevalence of food insecurity now ranging from 16% to 18% (in the UK). In 2024, 1 in 14 (7%) households used charitable food provision. Geographically, the highest levels of food insecurity can be found in former manufacturing and mining areas, such as the West Midlands and the North East, and are closely linked to poverty, for example among refugees and those with a migrant background (including in London), and in white working-class populations. The causes of food insecurity are linked to these structural inequalities, as well as to neoliberal forms of government that promote privatisation, financialisation, and reduced welfare provision. Food insecurity accelerated following the 2008 food and finance crisis, the Covid pandemic, and the so-called 'cost-of-living' crisis. The changes in welfare provision and the crises of the 2000s are also closely linked with digitalisation.

This working paper is part of an ESRC-funded project on the 'Digitalisation of Food Assistance: Political economy, governance, and food security effects across the global North–South divide'. **The study aims to understand how the digitalisation of food assistance has influenced vulnerability to food insecurity and its role as a source of power and way of governing.** This working paper presents findings for the second, in-depth phase of the research in England. It focuses on the experience of marginalised populations as well as how digital food assistance practices interact with political and economic processes.

We used **qualitative methods**, including purposive selection of Birmingham, Newham and Barnet (London), Gateshead and Hartlepool (North East), because they are among the most food insecure, and present a range of economies, diversity, and service provision. We then purposively selected food-insecure or marginalised populations to examine their experience of digitalised food assistance and welfare practices. Methods included participant observation over several weeks in food banks and community centres in London, for single days in other locations, and semi-structured interviews with a range of people and organisations (64 interviews and 30 short discussions).

We examined a range of digital practices, **including Universal Credit (UC – the UK's main welfare scheme), Healthy Start food support** prepaid debit cards, **cashless free school meals, and the Aspen card** used for asylum seekers, as government food assistance practices. We also studied the **use of digital food vouchers and apps** outside of these. From the 2010s, human rights organisations expressed concerns that digitalisation risked exclusion due to lack of internet

access or skills, with some evidence that people were worse off after the introduction UC. This period also coincided with increases in emergency food aid, which researchers linked to austerity policies that reduced welfare and public services, as well as rising food prices. Initiatives to address hunger were mostly at the local level and run by charitable organisations. National digital inclusion plans came later and focused mainly on skills and jobs generally.

Over the past decade, **the number and range of charitable food assistance projects has continued to grow**, involving not only community centres and faith groups but also increasingly professionalised food banks, such as Trussell, and those supported by the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN). People on UC were among the most frequent users of food assistance. **Digital inclusion became part of food assistance**, often as part of what are called 'wrap-around' services. These services vary widely, from providing access to a computer or free Wi-Fi to assisting with welfare applications, but also cooking and budgeting lessons, and linking people with state providers for housing, health and other services. Linked to this is the reduction and 'hub-ification' of public spaces which now provide food and digital (and other) support. While these contribute to addressing some aspects of food insecurity and digital exclusion, this trend has led to a fragmented and unaccountable landscape of service provision. Most importantly, it has contributed to an institutionalisation of food assistance while not addressing the causes of hunger.

Food-insecure and marginalised populations face multiple barriers in accessing digitalised welfare and food assistance. Poverty constrains access to devices and the internet, and compounds other barriers such as skills, language, and culture. In addition, the design of digital welfare systems itself limits access. Application forms are long and complicated and use language difficult for even native English speakers to understand. They are hard to complete on a mobile phone, the most common digital device that people may have. In addition, the process may require having, scanning and uploading ID documents, verification codes requiring email accounts, and more. Automating decisions on eligibility makes challenging them difficult or impossible. Retailers, especially small ones, may not be aware of prepaid debit cards like Healthy Start. As such, rather than bridging existing inequalities, digitalisation creates new forms of exclusion and compounds existing food insecurity. Digitalisation has simply shifted the need for human support for welfare inclusion to community networks and volunteer systems that are ill-equipped to provide consistent comprehensive assistance.

Structural inequalities are causing both food insecurity and digital access constraints. While marginalised populations have faced constraints in accessing digitalised welfare and food assistance, business and government have benefited. Supermarkets benefit from the creation of food apps that facilitate the donation of their surplus to food assistance projects, and from the purchase of their vouchers by those running food projects. The part-privatisation of welfare has led to

government contracts with Mastercard (and their local intermediaries such as allpay), Amazon and Palantir, for financial and data management services. This raises issues of surveillance, the processing of data, and its commercial potential. Government benefits by shifting much of the responsibility for addressing food insecurity to the private sector, and to local authorities, communities, charities, and people. This strategy has not led to reductions in food insecurity.

These findings highlight the need to consider digital inclusion as part of food and poverty strategies. At present, food and digital strategies are mainly at local council level and vary across the country. Food strategies have some digital components, and digital strategies often rely on food projects to implement them. The respective roles and responsibilities of the state, and the private and charitable sectors are unclear, as is an analysis of what aspects of food insecurity and digital exclusion can be addressed at the local level, and what needs to be done nationally. Given the recent spate of government initiatives on poverty, food systems, welfare and emergency food aid, this is the ideal time to work this out.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2025, millions of people in the UK are experiencing a worsening food crisis. Even in the last two years (from 2022 to 2024), the number of food-insecure people has increased by more than 2 million: from 11.6 million people in 2022 to 14.1 million people in 2024. Current numbers represent 16% of UK households. In addition, 1 in 14 (7%) households in 2024 used at least one type of charitable food provision in the last year (Trussell, 2025a). This illustrates that hunger and food insecurity these days is not confined to the Global South and is happening in a high-income country such as the UK.

Not everyone in the UK is food insecure, however, and some places are much more food insecure than others. The highest levels of food insecurity can be found in former manufacturing and mining areas, such as the West Midlands and the North East, and the lowest levels in the South East where wealth and power are concentrated. Huge differences exist within these regions too, for example, while London overall has some of the lowest levels of food insecurity, some of the highest levels are found in certain boroughs, such as Newham. While asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants are among the most food insecure, the highest level of food insecurity is found in the mostly white British North East. We will show that differences can be explained to some extent by political and economic policies, of which changes in welfare and digitalisation are part.

Rising inequality, poverty and food insecurity in the UK is a long-term trend, going back to the 1980s and neoliberal approaches of privatisation and globalisation. While New Labour (from 1997) reduced poverty, it did so through social transfers rather than reversing privatisation (see Lim, 2025 for more historical information). Sharp increases in food insecurity were seen following the 2008 food and financial crisis and the introduction of austerity policies – a reduction in spending on public services – by the 2010 coalition government. Shortly after, the UK digitalised its welfare system, starting with Universal Credit (UC), which brought together seven previous forms of welfare, with the aim of improving efficiency and accountability, but also to reduce costs. The number of food banks rose sharply from 2013–14, and, as we will show in this working paper (echoing many others), people on UC are food insecure. The Covid pandemic further increased food insecurity among sections of the population, as did the so-called 'cost-of-living' crisis,[1] and at the same time accelerated digitalisation in all walks of life, creating problems for those without digital access.

This working paper is part of an ESRC-funded project on the 'Digitalisation

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[1] This terms feeds into neoliberal logic by implying it is beyond anyone's control and focuses on individual actions.

of Food Assistance: Political economy, governance, and food security effects across the global North–South divide'. The project aims to understand how the digitalisation of food assistance has influenced vulnerability to food insecurity, its role as a source of power and way of governing, as well as its implications for addressing hunger, locally and globally. It includes case studies on Sudan and India, as well as the UK. The main research questions are:

1. To what extent have food assistance and social welfare practices been digitalised and why? What are the key organisations, authorities and businesses involved?

2. How do digital practices interact with political and economic processes (linked to food) to influence inequality and power relations? How do they govern populations and influence their actions?

3. What are the implications of digitalising food assistance for the food security of marginalised populations?

This is the second working paper on the effect of digitalised food assistance in England. In the first working paper, we focused on the first research question, exploring the range of digitalised practices and identifying some of the key political economy issues. The first working paper also traces the history of welfare, its digitalisation, and the rise in food insecurity and hunger (see Lim, 2025). In this second working paper, we continue to examine how digital food assistance practices interact with political and economic processes, but we focus on the experience of marginalised populations on the receiving end of digitalised food assistance and welfare. We conducted fieldwork in three food-insecure parts of England: Birmingham in the West Midlands, Gateshead and Hartlepool in the North East, and Newham and Barnet in London. We argue that the poor and politically marginalised face exclusion from digitalised welfare and food assistance because they are unable to pay for digital access and because of the way the system has been designed. Instead, the government aims to benefit by reducing the cost of the welfare bill, and business benefits by providing food and financial and data management services. As such, digitalisation feeds into existing inequalities and food insecurity. Charitable food and community projects have become entrenched as part of the welfare system, providing both food and digital support, absolving government from this responsibility and leading to a fragmented and unaccountable system.

This working paper is for all those who are interested in food assistance and digitalisation, not only researchers but also policy analysts, activists and practitioners. The paper includes a first analysis of all our findings, which will form the basis of discussions with different key stakeholders on policy implications, and more in-depth analysis on particular areas in journal articles. Our analysis of research findings in all three case studies will be published in a final report in mid-2026.

The paper starts by explaining the methodology (Chapter 2) and is followed by a brief overview of the national-level policies and practices related to food security and digitalisation (Chapter 3). The bulk of the paper is in the three chapters following this. Chapter 4 discusses the proliferation of different food assistance projects over the past two decades; how food projects have taken on digital and other support; and how community centres have taken on both, leading to a fragmented system that is difficult to navigate. Chapter 5 analyses marginalised populations' experience of digitalised food assistance and welfare, and investigates in detail issues of access to devices, the internet and relevant skills, as well as how the design of digital technologies enables or constrains access. In Chapter 6, we zoom out and look at how food insecurity, digitalisation and digital poverty are linked at the population or structural level; the role of supermarkets and other businesses; the strategies that councils use; and the views of people themselves on structural causes of poverty not being addressed. Chapter 7 presents our conclusions.

2.   METHODOLOGY

2.1 Analytical framework

This research combines the concepts of 'regimes of practices', political economy, and food security from a structural or population-level perspective as well as that of the individual. In analysing 'regimes of practices', we identify the range of practices associated with digitalised food assistance, the underlying assumptions and ideologies, and the government authorities, organisations and businesses involved at the international, national and local levels. This enables us to analyse not only the intended functions of food assistance and its digitalisation but also what they actually do (Foucault, 2007; Schaffer, 1984). As such, we also look at digitalised food assistance as a form of governance, and we examine aspects of surveillance and ways in which assistance affects – or aims to influence – behaviour. This is combined with a political economy analysis of how food assistance can become part of processes of maintaining power for some and creating vulnerability to food insecurity in others (see, for example, Duffield, 1994; Keen, 1994; Mkandawire, 2005). In this case study it means, for example, looking at the effects of private-sector engagement and different government policies, and the links between them. In examining the effects of digitalising food assistance on structural causes of food insecurity, we consider how political and economic processes (and ideologies), as well as inequalities in income, wealth and labour relations, contribute to food insecurity. We also explore the role of social and informal networks, and local-level food and digital access strategies.

Definitions

There are several definitions of food security, food poverty, food assistance, digital inclusion and exclusion, and digital poverty. The most common definition of **food security** is: 'Food security exists when all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (FAO, 1996). Food insecurity is the lack thereof, but in the UK the term **food poverty** is often used. Dowler (2003) defined this as the: 'inability to consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food that is useful for health in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so'. The Department for Health defines it as: 'The inability to afford, or have access to, food to make up a healthy diet'(Sustain, 2026). Earlier notions of food security also included livelihoods and income sources, and physical and economic access to shops and markets and food (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015). Food security is now usually measured by examining some aspects of household food consumption. Food assistance (as opposed to food aid) usually includes cash transfers – we use it to

refer to any form of assistance or welfare that has an influence on access to food (Harvey et al., 2010).

Definitions of digital inclusion and exclusion, and digital poverty, vary much more widely. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) defines **digital exclusion** as internet non-use: either those who have never used the internet or who have not used it in the past three months. The ONS definition of **digital inclusion** includes five sets of basic skills, including using a search engine, sending an email and shopping online (also see Chapter 6). A group of academics and professionals has developed a **digital minimum living standard**: 'A minimum digital standard of living includes, but is more than, having accessible internet, adequate equipment, and the skills and knowledge people need. It is about being able to communicate, connect and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence' (MLDS, 2025). The Digital Poverty Alliance defines **digital poverty** as: 'The inability to interact with the online world fully, when, where and how an individual needs to.' (Digital Poverty Alliance, 2025). Others have argued that the digital divide needs to be considered along a continuum with at least three levels: (1) whether or not someone has access to the internet, (2) skills and use of the internet, and (3) use in relation to tangible outcomes (Holmes and Burgess, 2022). We take this broader perspective of digital exclusion or poverty.

2.2 Methods

The fieldwork for this second phase of the research was divided between three _SOAS researchers: Yasmin Houamed, Iris Lim and Susanne Jaspars_, with each of us leading on fieldwork in different parts of the country: Yasmin on Birmingham, Iris on London, and Susanne on Gateshead and Hartlepool, although we often conducted fieldwork together. We received guidance, support and comments from our partner, the Food Foundation. We also led on different sections of this report (as indicated by the authors for each of the main chapters). Susanne edited and pulled together the final report.

The methods used are qualitative, providing a means of examining lived experiences, interactions between digital practices and political and economic processes, and causal linkages with food security outcomes (Bryman, 2008). They included participant observation and semi-structured interviews. In some instances, only short discussions with recipients of food assistance or digital support were possible. However, through some opportunities to conduct regular participant observation (mainly in London) we were able to gather rich data via cumulative interactions, such as repeated conversations and shared actions. We also reviewed documents and articles on each of the three areas, and policy papers and reports on food and digital access.

Data were collected between November 2024 and July 2025; with fieldwork in Birmingham largely from November to May, in Gateshead and Hartlepool from March to May, in Barnet (London) November to July and, while discussions and initial observations started in Newham in November 2024, the bulk of fieldwork was done from April to June the following year. Verbal consent was taken from the respondents, and if they agreed we recorded our conversations. Most interviews and discussions were in person. Recipients and community-led organisations received a remuneration of £10–£15 (depending on time spent in interview). We used a voice recorder, and Otter.ai to do the initial transcription. A few interviews were done online, in which case we used Teams to record and transcribe. When people did not consent to be recorded, we took notes by hand. We used NVivo to organise and analyse our data.

Selection of field sites

We purposively selected our three field sites based on food insecurity, and then to have a range of socio-economic status, ethnic diversity and migration status, connectivity, and service provision. Table 1 gives some of the information on each of the areas selected. The places were also in part selected due to connections from earlier times: the Food Foundation has close connections with Birmingham, and Susanne has connections with the Sudanese community there. Iris had previously worked in Newham, and all of us live in Barnet. Gateshead was chosen because of a recommendation and connection made by a church representative whom we interviewed about national issues. In Hartlepool, we went in cold but received a warm welcome from organisations we contacted – as we did everywhere.

Table 1: Characteristics of field sites

Place	Description
Birmingham	Birmingham was one of the industrial powerhouses of the country up to the mid-20th century, largely metal and later cars, but factories closed and work shifted to service-sector jobs.
	Birmingham is one of the UK's first 'super-diverse' cities: over 50% of its population identifies as Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME) (. After White residents, the largest ethnic groups are Pakistani (17%), Indian (5.8%), Bangladeshi (4.2%), and Caribbean (3.9%). It also hosts one of the largest Sudanese populations in England.
	The city has one of the highest claimant unemployment rates in England (9.1%) . The West Midlands region has one of the highest poverty rates in England (26%), with a child poverty rate of 46% in Birmingham. In the West Midlands, 16% of people are considered food insecure in 2025, with 55% in Birmingham considered at high risk. It has good digital infrastructure, with the ONS reporting a digital inclusion rate of 91.4% in 2019.

North East region Gateshead and Hartlepool	The North East is a former mining area, but mine closures started in the 1960s and ended in the 1990s with privatisation and globalisation. Factories also closed, with most of the population now dependent on the service sector and government welfare or retail. The population in the North East is mainly white: 93% in Gateshead and 96.5% in Hartlepool, with the vast majority of them British. The North East has one of the highest child poverty rates in the UK at 30% (after housing costs). It also has the highest prevalence of food insecurity, 26% in 2023 and 23% in 2025. Digital exclusion is high, although it has decreased from 21.5% in 2012 to 12.1% in 2018. Gateshead has a 20% economically inactive working-age population (likely due to disability) and an unemployment claimant rate of 4.7% in 2023. Of Hartlepool's population, 29% are economically inactive.
London Newham and Barnet	London is the financial centre of England, with extreme disparities in wealth and income, having some of both the richest and poorest in the country. Often the lowest-paid Londoners are in insecure 'gig' roles: delivery, ride-hailing, warehouse workers, cleaning, alongside work in retail and care. Of its population, 46% identify as of BAME background. This percentage rises to 70% in boroughs like Newham, with the largest ethnic groups including Bangladeshi (15%), Indian (14%), African (12%) and Pakistani (10%) communities. London's poverty rate is 26%, but Newham has a rate as high as 36%. Of children, 32% are food insecure. Barnet is less poor overall but has pockets of deprivation. Large swathes of the city are digitally excluded, especially for outer boroughs such as Barnet.

Observations

Across all field sites we conducted observations in food banks and community centres or when taking part in activities. Most interviews were conducted in person and therefore included an element of observation. When we travelled to Birmingham, Gateshead and Hartlepool, we spent three to four days each time (three visits to Gateshead/Hartlepool, and five to Birmingham), observing areas, shops, markets, internet and community cafes. Places visited specifically for observations included community cafes, hot-meal services (e.g. NEO2, BO3, ELO3, ELO4), food assistance projects (e.g. NEO3, NEO5, NEO6, BO1, ELO2), digital support organisations (e.g. BO6), and activities hosted by community centres or local organisations (e.g. NEO4, BO5). In these settings, we observed ongoing activities, took part in and took notes of short, naturally occurring conversations. Conversations with staff, volunteers and service users developed informally and opportunistically (i.e. in the moment, within the flow of observation) – a well-recognised ethnographic method (Swain and King, 2022). Fieldnotes were written up afterwards, focusing on food and digital access.

Participant observation was undertaken in London at two sites. Here, the researcher (Iris Lim) was embedded as a volunteer drop-in advisor in a community advice centre and a food bank, and was a participant-observer, providing digital assistance. In Barnet, she was also trained and then worked as a 'Digital Champion': a volunteer who gives digital skills training. This involvement entailed regular, repeated sessions over an extended period, actively taking part in day-to-day work while observing interactions relevant to food and digital access. Discussions with people coming to food or community projects and volunteers formed part of these encounters (Musante [DeWalt] and DeWalt, 2010). In Gateshead, more limited participant observation was done by Susanne in joining a day-long charity-organised activity for elderly people, and we all participated in a church-organised hot meal. Additionally, one researcher (Susanne Jaspars) has supported Sudanese asylum seekers as a volunteer since 2020. With their permission, we followed issues related to food and digital access for a small number of individuals as part of this project, documenting relevant observations in anonymised form.

Semi-structured interviews

We conducted semi-structured interviews with a range of people and organisations, as we specifically targeted food-insecure areas for our field sites, and we purposively selected food-insecure or marginalised populations for interviews. We did this through trusted sources at food banks and community centres, and connections with particular ethnic groups (for example Sudanese). The categories of people we interviewed included: high-level key informants (e.g. academics or politicians), representatives of local authorities/councils, food and digital support organisations (including independent organisations, faith-based organisations, large charities, community groups), food or digital support recipients and representatives from ethnic minorities or other marginalised groups. We asked each interviewee about the nature of food and digital support strategies, and about their experience of these strategies and of digital technologies, challenges and exclusions. We also asked about how exclusions were addressed, and the effect of digitalisation on social networks and food security. Semi-structured interviews with authorities and organisations typically lasted an hour or two, but with recipients they were usually about 15 to 30 minutes. The number of people interviewed in each category is indicated in Table 2 (see also Annex 4 for more detail).

Table 2: Interviews conducted for each area

Category	Birmingham	North East	London	Total
Local authority	4	6	2	12
Food support organisation	7	6	3	16
Digital support organisation	1	2	2	5
National charity – general	-	3	2	5
Community group/centre	3	4	3	10
Ethnic minority representative/s	5	-	-	5
Recipient interview	1	-	3	4
Recipient group	1	4	2	7
Recipient short discussions	-	4	26	30

Limitations

Reaching recipients of digital food assistance to interview was difficult and those excluded from it even more so. We took different approaches to this in each location. To understand the experience of recipients, we first interviewed representatives of food projects, community organisations and other local groups. If possible, we then interviewed individuals using the service they provided to triangulate our information. As we sometimes talked to people while food projects or other activities were ongoing, we limited the length of discussions. We generally aimed for 20–30 minutes, but sometimes discussions were less than 15 minutes. In the latter case, they are not separately referenced but considered as part of the observation. Interviewing people who are excluded was even more difficult. We started by using our connections with ethnic minorities, such as the Sudanese community in London and Birmingham. As time went on, we made connections with the Pakistani community in Birmingham too, and in East London we connected with Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Romanian and Indian communities in food banks, food pantries, and community centres. We were unable to get interviews with major supermarket chains, financial service providers or data management companies, so relied on publications about them and on their websites.

3. BACKGROUND ON POLICY AND PRACTICE

The last two decades have seen significant change in the food and digital policy and practice landscape in the UK. The distribution of emergency food parcels increased massively from 2013 onwards (see Figure 1), which has been linked to austerity measures following the 2008 food and finance crisis, and which included welfare reform such as reduced social security payments, increased conditionality, and digitalisation. Insecure and low-paid work and food prices increased (Lambie-Mumford, 2019). National measurements of food insecurity started in 2020, when the Food Foundation estimated the prevalence of food insecurity at 16% in the UK, which increased to over 18% with the 'cost-of-living' crisis in 2022 (Food Foundation, 2025a; Round 3 and Round 11). The structural causes of food insecurity are discussed further in Chapter 6. This section provides some background on the trends in policy, before going into the findings of our research.

Since 2010, successive governments have pursued a 'digital-first' or 'digital-by-default' strategy across welfare, healthcare, local government services, and job-seeking support (UK Government, 2012). Digital-by-default government services require citizens to interact with the state primarily through online platforms. This policy was part of austerity measures that aimed to make government services more efficient and accountable, and that saw the closure of physical offices, job centres, and local service points, leaving only digital channels. The digitalisation agenda has been particularly pronounced in the welfare system and was dominated by the implementation of Universal Credit (UC) from 2013 onwards. We examine access to UC in this study because the poorest people spend a disproportionately large amount of their income on food. The Food Foundation's Broken Plate report (2025e) highlights the scale of the problem, finding that the most deprived fifth of the population would need to spend 45% of their disposable income on food to afford a government-recommended healthy diet, rising to 70% for households with children.

Universal Credit was introduced in 2013, and requires claimants to apply online, and provide ongoing online entries and communications with work coaches. The introduction of UC was designed to streamline seven different legacy benefits payments, ranging from child benefit to housing and unemployment benefits, into a single monthly payment (DWP, 2010). The number of people on UC as of January 2025 is 7.5 million (DWP, 2025). According to the latest Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) data, cited in an Amnesty International report (2025a: 8), there are 24 million social security claimants in Great Britain.

In 2013, boroughs in Newcastle and London were selected to be the first areas for the roll-out of UC, ahead of the universal roll-out in 2016. Both were also experiencing significant cuts in local council budgets at the time. A study in Newcastle and Gateshead in 2018 concluded that UC negatively affected people's economic and social wellbeing, and that people considered the system complicated, hostile, impersonal and demeaning (Cheetham et al., 2019). The roll-out of UC was found to be similarly negative for London residents, with Policy in Practice, a company working on social policy, calculating that 40% of households were worse off when transitioning to UC compared to 32% in other big cities in the UK (Harkin, 2016). Alston (2018), the United Nations special rapporteur on poverty and human rights, came to similar conclusions. He also raised the risk of exclusions of people on low income, stating that only 47% have broadband internet at home, and that only 21% of the entire UK population have basic digital skills. He suggested it was a cost-cutting measure and that UC was designed with the belief that being on benefits should entail hardship. The emphasis on financial savings is confirmed by the recent National Audit Office report on progress with UC, which focuses almost exclusively on this aspect (DWP, 2024). A review of the literature (Lim, 2025) on the implementation of UC found that while it has modernised the welfare system, it has not benefited those who are applying for it, because of issues of access, algorithmic errors, roll-out concerns, and insufficient payments – all resulting in increased food insecurity. The following chapters provide more detail on these issues from the perspective of organisations and recipients.

Despite these early findings, the roll-out continued, and more government (as well as non-government) programmes were digitalised. A summary of all those linked to food access can be seen in Box 1. The fact that new forms of welfare and food assistance (digital or not) were needed over time already provides an indictment of the UC system.

Box 1: Summary of digitalised welfare and food assistance in the UK

Government

Universal Credit (UC): Introduced in 2013, it is the cornerstone of the UK's welfare digitalisation, intended to streamline benefits into a single monthly payment, promote efficiency, and encourage work by simplifying welfare support systems. The standard allowance for a single person under 25 is £316.98 per month and for someone over 25 it is £400.14. Adjustments are made for families, children, housing, disability and other conditions.

Healthy Start scheme: The scheme was initiated in 2006 and fully digitalised by 2022 to make it easier to use for families and retailers, including to make it more discreet and reduce stigma. A prepaid benefits card designed to support low-income families

with £4.25 per week for mother and child (or £8.50 for children up to the age of 1 year) to purchase fruit, vegetables, pulses, first infant formula and milk. Eligibility differs from UC and is based on household income. It ends when the child turns 4 years old.

Cashless free school meals (FSM): These were introduced in the early 2000s when the Department for Education approved the use of biometric technologies in schools in 2002 (Levy, 2020) to reduce stigma, as well as flexibility and ease of payments for schools and parents. Vouchers have been distributed during the school holidays.

Aspen card for asylum seekers: A prepaid benefits card, introduced in 2017, to provide financial support to asylum seekers. In late 2025, the weekly payment was £49.18 for asylum seekers in self-catering accommodation, and £9.95 in accommodation where food is provided.

Non-government

Food apps: A number of apps – mostly linked to supermarkets – are used by food assistance projects to use surplus food as part of their food supply. Some organisations present this as an environmental rather than an emergency food distribution project.

Supermarket vouchers: Food projects may distribute vouchers for people to buy food. Often these are vouchers from some of the large supermarkets. The funds for this may come from individual donations to food banks, but increasingly from the Household Support Fund (HSF), which was established for use by local councils in 2021 to meet emergency needs for vulnerable families.

Source: Adapted from Lim (2025).

Asylum seekers are only eligible for financial support if they can prove they will otherwise be destitute (following what is called an S95 assessment – referring to a section of the Asylum and Immigration Act). They are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity because they are not allowed to work while their asylum claim is being processed. This can take a number of years (Jaspars, 2022).

Increases in food insecurity and hunger have been evident to government for more than ten years, in particular the increase in the distribution of emergency food parcels. Andrew Forsey, national director of the charity Feeding Britain and, in 2014, Secretary to the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom, recalls that political attention to food banks began to gather momentum in late 2013. While working with former MP Frank Field, he received alarming reports describing people 'so hungry and so desperately having to use these things called food banks to survive' (NE1). Forsey and Field pressed for a public inquiry and even presented the case to then-Prime Minister David Cameron, but the government rejected the idea. Turning instead to parliament, they wrote to MPs and peers asking who else was witnessing a similar rise in food bank use and whether they would join a cross-party effort. By the end of

2013 the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on hunger had been formed, launching its own inquiry and marking the start of sustained political scrutiny of food poverty in the UK. Out of the APPG inquiry came Feeding Britain's reports and the 2016 routemap to ending hunger (Forsey and Mason, 2016), which set out a nationwide plan to relieve and ultimately prevent hunger. We discuss this in the next chapter.

In 2017, the APPG and Feeding Britain developed a legislative proposal for the provision of meals and activities during school holidays, which resulted in the government's introduction of the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme in England. The APPG on hunger in the UK was disbanded in 2019, when Frank Field left parliament, which left an informal cross-party group of MPs and peers to table parliamentary questions, motions, and further legislative proposals – covering areas such as social security reform, free school meals coverage, and school breakfast provision.

Also in 2019, the government commissioned an independent review to develop a national food strategy, covering public health, environmental protection, national food supply and the role of the food industry in supporting jobs and economic growth. It did not include addressing the increasing levels of hunger. As this was an independent review, the government could pick and choose which recommendations to follow up. These included the HAF programme, and nutrition education in schools and for families on low income. Among those not included was a proposal to extend free school meals (Food Foundation, 2023a; Sustain, 2022).

An APPG on ending the use of food banks in the UK was established in 2023 (APPG, 2023), although its initial report focuses on issues of cash vs food, and 'wrap-around' support that can be provided in food projects. 'Wrap-around' support is discussed in the next chapter. The current Labour government has made several commitments that relate to food security, including ending mass dependency on emergency food parcels, 'raising the healthiest generation of children ever' (Department for Health and Social Care, 2025), reducing child poverty and gaps in life expectancy between the richest and poorest, and giving children the best start in life. Some of these have digital components and will be discussed later. In addition, the Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) is developing a food strategy and stakeholder consultations are taking place at the time of writing.

A national digital inclusion strategy and action plan is also being developed (UK Government, 2025a). The plan's first stage refers to a Lloyds estimate that 1.6 million people in the UK are currently living offline, and around a quarter of the UK population have the lowest level of digital capability, meaning they are likely to struggle to use online services. Although this strategy differs from earlier ones, which focused largely on business, growth, and job creation (Zamani and

Rousaki, 2024) much of it still focuses on skills and jobs. Addressing issues of deprivation (low device ownership) and lack of infrastructure are part of the strategy, but dependent on partnerships with business (the UK's main telecoms and internet providers). The only mention of UC is that BT Group (formerly British Telecoms) will continue to offer those on UC a lower tariff for broadband services (and, as we will see in Chapter 5, few eligible people know about this). The government launched a call for evidence about digital inclusion in July 2025, the results of which have not yet been published. In the meantime, as we will see in the next chapter, food banks, community centres, and church and faith groups continue to address rising food insecurity and now also provide digital support.

Figure 1: Increase in distribution of emergency food parcels over time

Trussell emergency food supply parcels
Millions*, 2006/07 to 2024/25

* Number of parcels supplied, not the number of individuals receiving them

Source: https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/latest-stats/end-of-year-stats
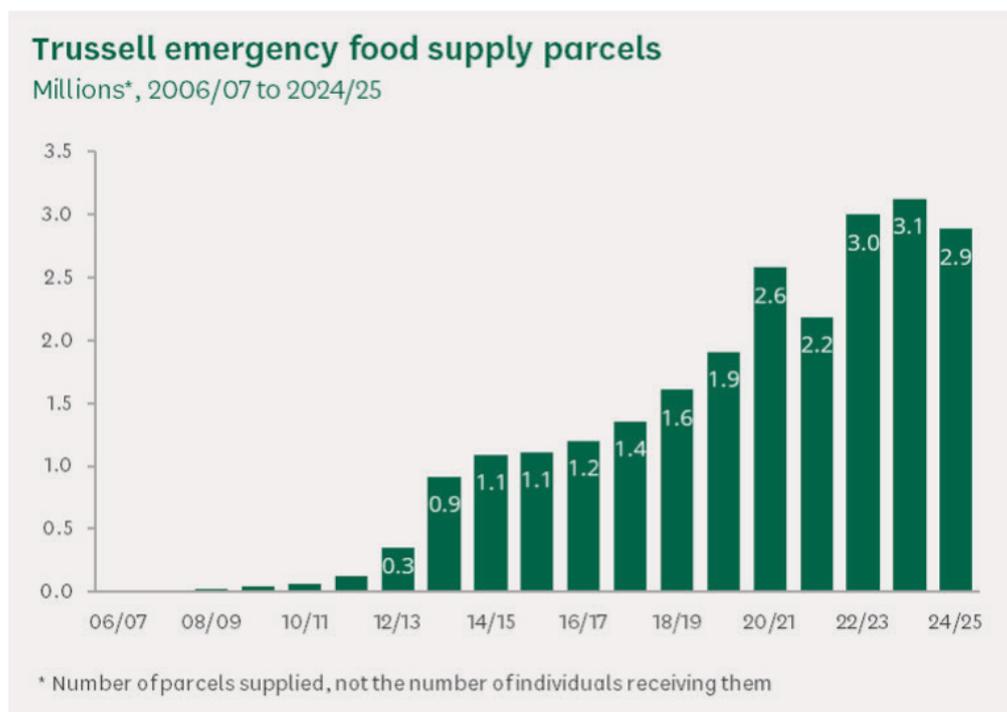
4.   EXPANSION OF FOOD AND DIGITAL ACCESS PROJECTS

By Yasmin Houamed, Susanne Jaspars and Iris Lim

4.1   Introduction

As outlined in the previous chapter, the past two decades have seen a substantial expansion in both the number and scope of food support initiatives, largely in response to the deepening crisis of food insecurity and broader poverty. Trussell food parcel distributions alone increased from 60,000 in 2010/11 to 2.89 million in 2024/25 (Trussell, 2025a). This chapter examines several ways in which food assistance and digital assistance intersect – and some instances where the digital is resisted – within this shifting landscape.

First, we outline the widening range of food assistance projects and the growing incorporation of support services in these projects, including for digital inclusion. Second, we explore the characteristics and circumstances of those seeking support from food assistance projects, illustrating that many are people eligible for, or recipients of, digitalised food assistance or welfare such as Universal Credit (UC). Third, we describe digital tools now used to manage food supply and distribution, including food vouchers, prepaid cards, and app-based systems. Fourth, we assess the current landscape of digital inclusion projects, highlighting their limited role in supporting people to engage with digitalised welfare or with emerging forms of digitalised food assistance. Finally, we bring these strands together and analyse the use of the term 'wrap-around' to describe service provision in food projects and the expanding trend of 'hub-ification' and its broader implications.

It is clear these developments over the past ten years have not reduced reliance on food aid. We argue that while alternative food projects present some progress, food assistance has become further entrenched as a long-term feature of the welfare terrain and that food aid has been institutionalised. The incorporation of digital and other support services into food banks, and the expanding range of community structures that provide food, have generated a proliferation and fragmentation of services that is confusing for providers and even more challenging for those who rely on them. They underscore the state's failure to address rising poverty and food insecurity in a coherent way or to meet need through existing welfare programmes.

4.2 A widening range of food projects include digital support

The rise of food banks and the diversification of food projects were highlighted in several publications from 2014–15 (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014). These studies also noted that food projects and food banks often provide additional forms of support – such as offering 'a listening ear' or signposting to other services – which were regarded as key contributions of these initiatives (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014). What is new in the past decade is the expansion and institutionalisation of these additional services. Many food projects now include digital inclusion support, and 'affordable food clubs' have emerged as part of the wider ecosystem of food initiatives. Larger organisations have also increasingly taken on advocacy roles, campaigning for structural change – for example within the social security system. This section is organised around three types of food projects: the provision of hot meals by community (including faith) groups; the more formalised food banks (such as those within the Trussell network); and the newer forms of food assistance that have emerged in recent years. We also examine how digital inclusion has become an essential component across all three types.

Community hot-meal projects

Charitable provision of food such as hot meals has long been part of many communities. From our observations, hot-meal provision ranged from monthly church-organised community banquets and tea and cake mornings to regular free meals in community centres or cafes, to donated iftar meals in mosques during holy periods (such as Ramadan) and daily free langar meals in Gurdwaras. In the Birtley Methodist church, for example, volunteers have provided a weekly hot meal for the past 47 years, mainly to deal with issues of isolation. Many people coming to these centres do so for social contact as much as for a hot meal (NE02). In the North of England, the origins of this provision also coincided with the period of mine closures and de-industrialisation, when communal meals were a means of supporting striking miners and their families.

The provision of hot meals or tea and biscuits is paired with social activities, reflecting an emphasis on solidarity over the delivery of food aid. Some centres started with food and added other activities, others started as a community or advice centre and added food and digital support because of the rising need. Even where providing a meal is the organising principle, aims have expanded to include services like providing a warm space or promoting sustainable eating, and limited forms of digital support. A youth arts and cultural space in Birmingham, for example, serves a weekly free lunch from their community cafe, with food

provided by another charity. They also host a weekly film screening during which they serve soup, and tea and biscuits, and which is advertised as a 'warm welcome', emphasising saving money on home heating. In addition, the centre has a computer and free Wi-Fi for public use, thus combining food with some form of digital support (BO2). Similarly, in Gateshead, a resident-led community centre within a sheltered housing scheme includes a food pantry and cooked food provision, social activities and access to a computer (NE5). However, the computer is rarely used as no one has been designated or trained to provide digital support, and privacy concerns were mentioned as a further deterrent.

An example of more extensive support from a community centre comes from semi-rural Gateshead. In addition to food (hot meals and distribution of food parcels), the centre brought in a Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) job coach to provide tailored employment support for families with long-term unemployment histories. The focus was primarily on helping young people enter the workforce, rather than supporting families with benefits claims. For those without formal qualifications, the coach facilitated access to further education at the nearest colleges, with the DWP covering transport costs. While the initiative was considered a success, it required significant input from all parties involved and was implemented only once (NE21). These are just a few examples of how community projects and hot-meal provision have added other activities, including those that engage with digital access. As noted by Lambie-Mumford (2019), however, 'the sheer range of the wider charitable food provision category makes their full extent and coverage hard … to capture'. The same applies to the range of digitalisation initiatives.

Food banks

With the rise in food insecurity from 2010 onwards, and as community projects like those described above could no longer meet growing need, the term 'food bank' emerged. National organisations like Trussell were among the few capable of scaling up their operations sufficiently. As a result, charitable food provision not only expanded but also became increasingly professionalised. In early 2026, many food banks fall under the Trussell (formerly Trussell Trust) network and operate in more than 1,400 sites across the UK (Trussell, 2025b). Trussell is closely linked to church networks, and at one stage revealed a vision of a food bank in every town or community (Trussell, 2025b). While Trussell has been distributing food since 2000, it didn't seriously expand until 2013–14. A particular aspect of Trussell food banks is that people who use the food bank must undergo a needs assessment and obtain a referral voucher from a professional such as a doctor, social worker, or staff member at Citizens Advice, or library or family hub, thus linking state provision with charitable initiatives. These vouchers typically limit the number of permitted visits, often to one visit per month for up to three months.

Growing since its early days of distributing emergency food parcels, Trussell has

added campaigning as an activity and a large range of additional services since 2020. They now consider themselves an anti-poverty charity. Their 2020–25 strategy marked a turning point, in which they 'went from seeing themselves as "universal provision" to an "anti-poverty group"' and 'set the foundations to close down' (Key informant P20). Their stated aim is to end hunger by addressing the underlying causes of poverty so that no one in the UK needs a food bank to survive. Campaigns have included, for example, the 'Guarantee Our Essentials' campaign, launched in 2023, which calls for the basic rate of UC to be directly linked to an objective assessment of the costs of essentials like food, household bills and travel (Trussell, n.d.).

Additional services include the distribution of other goods (hygiene products, pet food, etc.) and – increasingly – professional advice. As part of its 2020–25 strategic plan, 325 food banks within the Trussell community delivered advice and support on money issues – including income maximisation advice and debt advice (Finney et al., 2024). The most extensive programme is the 'Pathways out of Hunger' programme developed in a Newcastle food bank, which is described in Box 2. Another Trussell food bank we visited, in Gateshead, has a dedicated financial inclusion officer (NEO3), who mainly reported dealing with problems of debt or benefits. In London (Barnet), a Trussell food bank has a Citizens Advice desk, where two volunteers and the manager respond to client queries, most often concerning benefits, food bank registration, and signposting to other services. Additional support is provided by the local council and partner organisations and includes digital assistance (NLO7).

Box 2: Newcastle food bank 'Pathways out of Hunger' programme

- Set up in January 2020 to identify issues that were driving clients into food poverty

- Twenty volunteers alongside a small number of paid staff

- Five sessions a week, held separately at seven Newcastle food banks

- Clients' individual circumstances are assessed on a case-by-case basis, and referrals are made to a range of external services

- Deals with 60 referral agencies and has a direct escalation policy with the council

- Escalation processes through to housing, money, debt, asylum seeking and migration, safeguarding and social care

- Tracking of financial outcome for clients. A total of £3 million financial gain – includes not just welfare benefits but household support funds gained, debt written off, blankets, fuel vouchers, etc.

- Drop-ins from a range of services, such as: psychotherapy, council services (e.g. for housing. 'work and thrive' project), budgeting support, cooking classes, NHS, schools, art for kids, heat advice, dental services.

- The food bank also has links with the Royal College of Nursing, Citizens Advice, Police, ESOL, colleges and universities, Theatre Royale, Fire and Rescue, Bernardos.

Source: Interview (NE7) and website: https://www.newcastlefoodbank.org/

The other professional network of food assistance projects is the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN), which supports 800 groups across the UK (IFAN, 2025). Founded in 2016, it supports food aid providers outside of the Trussell network and aims to end the need for food banks by promoting a cash-first approach as a more dignified form of 'crisis support', in which 'everybody should be able to make the same choices as anyone else' (IFAN, 2025: 23). Unlike Trussell food banks, not all IFAN members require a referral voucher. Independent food banks, whether part of IFAN or not, often mention being open for everyone as a key feature. One food bank manager in a mosque told us that those who work in the food bank are not responsible for means-testing: 'It's not for us to judge how much of a need for food there is in that house, right? Because how do you actually ascertain? And secondly, you know, [charity] is a basic Islamic principle' (B18). Similar principles were expressed by church-run independent food projects (e.g. NE10).

Campaigning nationally and in local authorities for a cash-first approach as an alternative to emergency food aid forms a central part of IFAN's activities, alongside advocating for higher wages and 'a social security net that matches the cost of living'. In their words, social security payments should be 'adequate and easy to access while local crisis support via cash payments would be available in every UK local authority' (IFAN, 2025).

One refugee in Barnet highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of Trussell and independent food banks. He appreciated the independent food bank he had visited because anyone could attend without a voucher or registration, and there was plenty of fresh food. However, this also meant long queues, no additional services, and no space to sit or socialise. In contrast, the Trussell food bank required a referral voucher, but offered a welcoming space to sit, have tea and cake, and meet others. It also provided supermarket and energy vouchers, with support from a Citizens Advice representative. He noted, however, that this service was difficult for new asylum seekers to access: on arrival, he and others did not understand the referral process, had no phone credit, and faced language barriers.

In addition, the number of food banks in schools has increased so much in the past couple of years that the majority of food banks are now in schools, with an

estimated 5,000 in the UK (Baker, 2024; Baker and Bakopoulou, 2023; Baker et al., 2024). A National Governance Association survey in 2024 found that 20% of school governors said their school provided a food bank – compared with 8.2% in 2019 (Zaidi, 2025). Research within schools was beyond the scope of our project, however we engaged with local councils and private contractors supporting/ administering school meals, as well as a food project renting space from a school (with several of the attendees and volunteers being parents, students or teachers themselves) (E6).

Affordable food clubs, low-cost community food support, or food hubs

Although a wide range of food projects has existed for decades, a new type of project has emerged since 2013, following the APPG on hunger (see Chapter 3). These projects provide cheap or subsidised food and are variously called 'affordable food clubs', 'low-cost community food support' or 'food hubs', as well as other slightly varying terms. These models highlight choice, agency and sustainability. While having to pay a minimal price, people can choose what food they buy, often from a wider range of food than is provided by food banks, and there is usually no requirement to show evidence of need (Ranta et al., 2024). Some projects emphasise environmental sustainability and identify as anti-waste initiatives, further distancing themselves from the stigma of charity. They integrate support for a variety of services – such as welfare and job applications, housing, and digital skills training – within their food assistance schemes (see Box 3 for examples).

Feeding Britain defines affordable food clubs as spaces that 'not only offer access to low-cost groceries, but also provide a welcoming, dignified space where people can connect to their community and to expert support', which is presented as helping to address the underlying drivers of poverty (Lopez et al., 2025; see also section 4.6 of this paper for further discussion). They have supported the establishment of more than 400 affordable food clubs across the UK. Feeding Britain's nationwide study into the impact of affordable food clubs on dietary intake and wellbeing found that 63% of members who had previously used a food bank, used them less often. Over half reported accessing at least one form of advice through their club (Lopez et al., 2025). A recent report from the APPG on ending the need for food banks describes such initiatives as 'low-cost community food support' and distinguishes them from emergency food aid, noting that 'rather than helping households in financial crisis, this form of support focuses on the longer-term provision of low-cost food to households on low incomes' (APPG, 2023: 2). The Food Foundation refers to the term 'food hubs', which research by the University of Leeds described as 'food pantries, food banks, community agriculture supported schemes, social supermarkets, community kitchens and cafes', which 'have a range of benefits in the communities that

they serve' (Papargyropoulou et al., 2024: 1). However, this research also notes that 'more empirical evidence is required to build a compelling case for policy support' (2024: 1).

Box 3: Examples of alternative food provision models and their digital support

A Hartlepool community centre in the Big-League network, a community interest company (CIC) runs a weekly community pantry where users can buy common food items subsidised by 10 pence – a small but appreciated discount 'because [users] usually have to buy from convenience stores because the big shops are too far and expensive to get to' (NE28). The centre also provides ad hoc digital support, which makes use of their computer lab (such as how to use AI tools to support job applications).

In East London, a community pantry uses a membership model, with members paying a small annual fee for access to reduced-price shopping (ELP3): users pay based on the number of (primarily non-perishable) items they select. In this 'non-stigmatised space' shopping takes second place to community activities and informal social support, including peer-to-peer digital support to fill out forms for jobs or volunteer opportunities.

As noted earlier, there is considerable variation in food assistance projects' capacity to provide additional services, including digital support. At one end are food banks without a permanent physical space that prepare food parcels for pick-up only, limiting their ability to offer a warm space or additional support. At the other end are organisations that prioritise social support but lack the capacity or interest to undertake further digital tasks, such as user data collection or supply tracking.

4.3 Who comes to food assistance projects?

Consistent with other studies (e.g. Trussell, 2025a), our findings indicate that a wide range of people use food assistance. Whereas some projects cater specifically to a particular demographic or marginalised group, such as homeless people or an ethnic minority group, others reported serving a growing 'cross-section of society' (e.g. B4, B18, NE10). One food project in Hartlepool described serving 'a very multicultural mix', people who 'spend money on rent and then have nothing left for food', 'homeless, ex-forces, those with mental health issues', as well as people in debt but still working (NE10). In the rest of this section, we briefly describe our findings on particular categories of people who come to food assistance projects. A key link with digitalisation is that the majority of people who do are on UC. Even though we present people on low income and/or with disabilities as separate categories, there are overlaps between them – as people within these categories are also on UC.

People on Universal Credit

According to Trussell (2025a: 14), 'the vast majority (87%) of people referred to food banks were in receipt of a means-tested social security payment, including three-quarters of people (75%) in receipt of Universal Credit'[2]. This is because UC payments are too low to meet basic needs, fluctuate unpredictably, and because the digitalisation of the system has come with a range of access challenges (see Chapter 5). The Food Foundation's food insecurity tracking supports this information and found that in June 2025, 34% of households on UC were food insecure (Food Foundation, 2025a: Round 17).

To receive UC, claimants must agree to a 'claimant commitment' outlining the work-related activities they are required to complete, such as attending work-coach appointments, updating their CV, or searching for jobs. Communication with work coaches – or other relevant officials – occurs both online, through direct messaging or video calls within online UC accounts, and through in-person meetings. However, the mode and frequency of communication vary depending on an individual's health and personal circumstances. Failing to routinely meet these requirements can result in a reduced or no payment for extended periods of time, which is called a sanction. Payments are reduced by 100% of the UC standard allowance rate for each day the sanction is in place (i.e. £13.10 per day for those who are single and over 25) and other benefits are put at risk when a claimant is sanctioned, such as financial help with NHS costs.

Sanctions are often imposed for reasons such as lateness or missed appointments. A 2018 University of Sheffield study found that, across the UK, 'sanctioning is closely linked with rising food bank usage' (Loopstra et al., 2018). People experiencing homelessness, or other forms of digital exclusion, may miss critical notifications due to lack of affordable internet access or devices. We were also told that, in parts of Gateshead, funerals are a key reason for missing appointments (NE02). Mortality rates in the North East region are the highest in the country (see Chapter 6). A volunteer in Hartlepool talked about being sanctioned because she missed in-person appointments due to buses running late or missing text messages because of mobile phones running out of charge or credit (NE10).

In addition, people on UC may struggle because of errors in automated decision-making; resulting in inaccurate estimates of their income and thus lower UC payments than their entitlement. It takes time and effort to correct this (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Errors may also occur in allegations of fraud and results in hardship because UC payments may be halted while investigations take place (Big Brother Watch, 2025; see also Chapter 6).

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[2] Means-tested benefits are those where the amount payable depends on the income and assets of the claimant.

People on precarious or low income

The people we met at food assistance projects were often on precarious or low incomes, including zero-hours contracts (e.g. NE23, NE25). Examples were of people working as cleaners, security guards, or in Amazon warehouses or as Deliveroo drivers. Some were working two jobs or more and still needed to use food banks. According to a representative of a church-based food project: 'Many people who come in are working, or even have two jobs, and still rely on Universal Credit' (NE10). Similarly, Trussell reports that people referred to their food banks in 2024 had extremely low levels of income. Working-age people were far more likely to experience food insecurity than people over the age of 65 (19% vs 4%). The majority (95%) of people referred to food banks in 2024 were of working age (Trussell, 2025a). Across all three case studies, debt emerged as a major and recurring issue for recipients of food assistance. The cost associated with sudden life events, such as broken appliances or funerals, adds to the burden (NE03). Although these issues have accelerated since Covid-19 and the 'cost-of-living crisis', they were already noted as early as 2014 (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014), and clearly not addressed.

Single-parent households and adults living alone

Some food project representatives noted that it was increasingly common to see families coming to food banks. This includes single-parent households. The Food Foundation reports similar findings: '35.0% of single adult households with children reported experiencing food insecurity in January 2024, compared with 17.6% of multi-adult households with children' (Food Foundation, 2024a). The financial strain is particularly acute during stages when children require costly essentials, such as nappies in early childhood, and later when school-related expenses, such as field trips, begin to accumulate. In some cases, teachers have begun to collect food parcels from food banks on behalf of their students' families, highlighting the deepening role of schools as part of the safety net (B18). Trussell (2025a) reports that adults living alone are an over-represented group, making up half (50%) of households coming to food banks. In our research, a couple of food project organisers mentioned single men in particular. One example is those living in Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), refugees (NE12), but also formerly incarcerated people (B12). For a church-organised hot meal, we were told that the main group of people coming was single middle-aged white men (B3).

People with disabilities (and their carers)

Three in four (74%) people referred to Trussell food banks in 2024 were disabled

(Trussell, 2025a). These include people with learning disabilities, mental health issues, physical conditions, or long-term illness. Referrals of disabled people to food banks have been increasing steadily. Between July 2019 and July 2024, the average number of disabled people Citizens Advice referred to a food bank in a three-month period rose from 2,891 to 9,678 (Citizens Advice, 2024). In one food bank, we were told: 'over 50 percent that come have long-term disabilities, so they get referred to the financial advisor. Many don't claim Personal Independence Payment [PIP: a disability benefit] because they're not aware of it' (NE02). In some cases, family members are full-time carers and come to food banks because carer's allowance is minimal. Even so, failure to report this on time and accurately can lead to being penalised. A disabled veteran in Hartlepool described the 'disgusting' process of losing money from UC once his partner started receiving carer's allowance to look after him (NE30). We also came across adults with age-related physical and psychological conditions, and others with substance abuse issues. The latter was sometimes related to histories of deprivation, unstable housing, isolation, debt and mental health struggles (NE02, B4).

Lack of citizenship or residency status

A wide range of residency statuses – including visa holders and asylum seekers – have no recourse to public funds (NRPF), with varying restrictions on their right to work and to benefits. Under NRPF status, migrants on visas, family members of British citizens, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants are ineligible for welfare benefits and social housing. All asylum seekers and certain visa holders (students, for example) have no right to work in the UK, or only a limited right. According to Trussell (2025a), food insecurity is far higher for people with insecure migration status than for people with secure status (43% vs 14%), and a high proportion (30%) use food banks. The financial support for asylum seekers is far from sufficient to meet needs for food, clothes, transport, devices and digital connectivity, among others (Jaspars, 2022). According to Alston (2019) destitution appears to be a design feature of the UK's asylum system. Those who have newly acquired refugee status are able receive UC, but – like others – report that it is not enough to live on (B11). In addition, some face huge hurdles with the digital application process, struggling with both language issues as well as issues linked to internet access and system design (see Chapter 5). Other migrants have decades-long work histories in the UK but still have NRPF status as they have been unable to get Indefinite Leave to Remain or citizenship, despite multiple attempts, due to varying individual circumstances and lack of support (ELO6).

While asylum seekers and those on NRPF are among the most food insecure, geographically the highest levels of food insecurity are in the north of the country, where the population is around 95% white British (see Chapter 6 for more information). Even the latter may lack official documentation of citizenship, such

as birth certificate, passport, or driving licence. A community support group in the North East told us that to assist people in applying for digital welfare, they first had to help them apply for their birth certificates (NE6, NE21). This illustrates that food insecurity is linked structurally to issues of poverty and inequality rather than to individual characteristics.

Food-insecure people who do not use food projects

People accessing food assistance projects are only a fraction of the food insecure (Key informant P23). The latest family resources survey for the DWP found that 'for very low food security households, 16% used a food bank within the last 30 days, and 30% within the last 12 months' (DWP, 2025). Our research supports this: some of those most vulnerable to food insecurity were not reached by food assistance projects. Common reasons shared with us for not attending were shame, lack of culturally appropriate foods, or lack of awareness. For example, a Sudanese nurse in Birmingham told us that she would never visit a food bank because she sees what goes into the food parcels that her hospital provides to low-income patients and none of it is culturally appropriate for her (B8). Other Sudanese refugees echoed this sentiment.

Shame and the fear of being judged was brought up several times in our interviews – for example, there was one person who was about to be homeless in the middle of winter, who could not pay for gas and electricity, but was too scared to ask for help (NE21). Older people were often too proud to ask for help. Cases of extreme social isolation were also common – for example a man from Gateshead who fell into crisis and was living out of his car without even a working phone (NE4). Other examples are people with addictions, who were banned by one project (NE28) and seen as problematic by another (NEO3). Lambie-Mumford and Dowler (2014) add issues of lack of access to or insufficient information, different perceptions of food aid and who it is for, as well as negative emotional experiences of indignity and stress. Clearly, however, this needs more research as it is unlikely that all 70% of people who are food insecure and not using food banks fall into these categories.

The use of the food pantry model or hub is a recognition of stigma as a barrier to people accessing food assistance. It was an attempt to address this issue through design, with one using a £1 membership model to reduce stigma and foster ownership (ELP3, NLP2), recognising that dignity and agency were as important as material support. The hubs, discussed later, which provide a range of services, can also reduce stigma, as no one will know what you are going in for. Food vouchers or prepaid debit cards were also introduced partly as a move towards a more dignified approach, as well as in order to increase choice.

4.4 Digital tools for food supply

A number of digital tools have been developed to supply food to individuals who need it, or to food assistance projects. Here we discuss food vouchers, apps (or digital platforms), and informal digital networks, as direct links between digitalisation and food assistance. Vouchers, often distributed by food assistance projects and often funded by local councils, have been digitalised in the past decade. FareShare, an organisation established in 1994 to redistribute surplus food (largely from supermarkets), developed a digital app to facilitate this in 2015. A number of other food supply apps were developed around the same time. We argue that this has institutionalised the use of surplus food, and the role of supermarkets, as part of food assistance projects.

Food vouchers and cards

A wide range of food assistance projects, whether food banks or community centres distribute vouchers so that people can buy food. Healthy Start, as described in Box 1, is a debit-type card that can be applied for by pregnant women and those with young children at a certain low income level to access fresh fruit, vegetables and milk from certain supermarkets and other shops (any that will accept Mastercard) (see section 5.5 for further discussion).

Food projects receive some funding through individual cash donations, but in recent years a key source of support for food assistance has been the Household Support Fund (HSF). Introduced in 2021 and administered by local councils, the HSF has been widely used to purchase vouchers that people can use to buy food and other essential goods, as well as to fund food purchases directly for projects. While vouchers offer greater choice than in-kind food parcels, they come with limitations. They can usually only be redeemed at specific outlets – most commonly large supermarkets or national retailers – and they often require a degree of digital access. For example, printed Tesco 'digital gift card' vouchers with a scannable barcode have been distributed in some centres, but these still require digital access to check the balance (NE5). Organisations also reported that distributing a limited number of vouchers to large numbers of people in need (for example in NE14 and NE21) was difficult and stressful. In some cases, projects asked Citizens Advice to take responsibility for selecting recipients to manage this pressure.

Food vouchers are also made available through the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme, which was established in 2018. This programme provides food support alongside free or subsidised activities and childcare during school holidays. Vouchers under the HAF programme are typically distributed by email.

Children participating in these activities are expected to be provided with high-quality, healthy food. A recent evaluation of the HAF programme is summarised in Box 4.

Box 4: HAF Plus in Gateshead

In 2024, Gateshead Council commissioned the Healthy Living Lab at Northumbria University to evaluate the first full roll-out of its HAF Plus programme, following a 2023 pilot that engaged 40 young people. The evaluation found that council leads defined HAF Plus around four core components: independent travel, meal and food vouchers, health and wellbeing activities, and safeguarding. While the programme offered teenagers weekly vouchers for a variety of local food outlets to provide flexibility in accessing meals, organisers noted challenges in sourcing providers that both appealed to young people and met School Food Standards, given the limited number of healthy options in the North East. They also acknowledged that the number of vouchers – typically three per week – often fell short for participants attending more activities, creating gaps in daily meal coverage.

Source: Round et al. (2025).

Supermarket apps

Supermarkets and other food outlets have developed digital tools to supply surplus food to food assistance projects and to individuals. For a reduced fee or for free, supermarkets and food businesses are linked with users at specific times of the day (typically late afternoon, evening or night) to distribute their surplus. Surplus food is food that is at or near its sell-by date and can no longer be sold by the supermarket or other food outlet (companies such as Pret a Manger, Greggs, Nando's and KFC were often mentioned as participating). The following are apps that came up in our interviews:

Olio – connects neighbours and local businesses to share food and household items. App launched in 2015.

Too Good To Go – connects users with shops, cafes, restaurants, and supermarkets that have surplus unsold food and sell it off at discounted prices. Aldi, Morrisons, Asda, Marks & Spencer's all participate. App launched in 2016.

Neighborly – connects businesses with local charities and community groups to facilitate the redistribution of surplus food and resources. Sainsbury's, Aldi, Lidl and Marks & Spencer's participate. App launched in 2015.

Foodiverse – a smartphone app enabling surplus food

donation coordination from donor organisations to charities and community organisations. Tesco is the main supplier, as well as Nando's and KFC. App launched in 2013.

Fareshare Go – allows eligible organisations to collect surplus food from local supermarkets for free. Tesco, Asda and Waitrose participate, as well as Nando's and KFC. App launched in 2015.

The individual apps were known by some of the people we interviewed but were rarely used, as they often required transport (and thus money), time slots were tight, and they still had to pay (even if less). This is discussed further in section 5.5. The apps were more frequently used by food assistance projects, with varying degrees of satisfaction.

Supplying food banks

In 2015, food banks sourced their food from local people, churches, businesses, schools and supermarkets (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015). In the past ten years, the role of supermarkets had become much more prominent, perhaps in part because since then, it has been mediated by a number of different apps. Supermarket surplus is now central to many food assistance projects.

At the same time, some interviewees (B4) described frustrations with digital platforms, citing inconsistent availability, poor quality of produce, and the administrative burden of using the systems. Many described the apps as frustrating and unreliable. One explained that their group uses these apps, yet 'they're both … not great', adding that they often skip the Foodiverse app entirely and rely on email instead (B12). The process demands constant monitoring, and you may miss notifications because you cannot make them louder. We also heard about receiving food that was unfamiliar, or out of date or rotten, and often about too much bread (some of which the volunteers would then have to dispose of).

A recurring concern was that reliance on apps and goodwill from supermarket managers left projects vulnerable to fluctuations in quality and supply. Another was the need for, and reliance on volunteers collecting food in person – sometimes multiple times a week. Recent research further underscores the limitations of this model. A FoodRise survey found that 91% of food aid workers had to discard donations from businesses because they were damaged, inedible or unsuitable (Atkins, 2025). In addition:

- 85% reported feeling frustrated, angry or sad when receiving unusable donations.

- 98% believed government should take stronger action to prevent food waste at source.

- 84% said large businesses should be legally required to report their food waste.

Many, often the better-funded organisations, had a paid-for membership with FareShare (separate from the app), through which they could get a regular supply (also see Chapter 6). The FareShare network channels surplus from farms, processors and wholesalers to frontline charities for a small handling fee (B6) (see Box 5).

Projects do still rely on donations of cash or food from other sources as well. Religious groups leaned on donations from congregations and others from nearby businesses. In the past few years, increased food and fuel prices have meant falling donations as well as rising demand. 'People who were once donators are now looking to supplement by using a food bank' (NE20). This trend was reflected nationally: between April and July 2024, almost 80% of IFAN members reported a decline in food donations, and nearly half saw financial donations fall compared to the previous year (Zaidi, 2025). To access other funding streams, people told us they either preferred being a charity (for access to a wide range of different grants, NE22) or being a community interest company (to access funds through trading, and to have more freedom with how the funds are spent, including grants) (NE16).

Box 5: The Felix Project × FareShare

FareShare is the UK's largest food redistribution network, working with producers, retailers and manufacturers to redistribute surplus food. Through 17 regional partners – including the Felix Project, which covers London – FareShare channels surplus to over 8,000 charities and community groups across the UK. In 2024/25, this network redistributed the equivalent of 148 million meals. The Fareshare Go app was developed in 2015 and facilitates these exchanges, allowing smaller groups to collect food directly from supermarkets each day.

In September 2025, FareShare and the Felix Project announced their merger under the Felix name. Earlier joint advocacy, including a successful campaign with DEFRA for the £15 million Surplus with Purpose fund, helped growers cover the costs of preparing surplus fruit and vegetables for redistribution. At the 2025 Future Food Symposium, the Felix Project noted: 'Distributing surplus food is not the solution to poverty or food waste. It is a way to try to address and mitigate both problems.' Their policy priorities focus on environmental change rather than poverty, including tax incentives for businesses donating food, mandatory food waste reporting, and legal protection for food donors.

Source: Presentation by the Felix Project at the Future Food Symposium conference in Birmingham, 22 May 2025.

Informal digital networks

Facebook and WhatsApp groups play an important role in reaching marginalised communities. Our interviews illustrate their diversity: a local community WhatsApp group of around 40 families sharing news of food deals and donations (B13); an informal WhatsApp network of charities, organisations and volunteers exchanging information on surplus goods and funding opportunities (NE19); an organisation providing hot meals and a member-run food pantry coordinating food pick-ups on WhatsApp (ELO3); a women-only Facebook group for immigrants providing peer support and advice on issues such as welfare applications (B14); a women-only WhatsApp group coordinating parcel drop-offs for survivors of domestic abuse (B17); and WhatsApp groups of people pooling bulk purchases of culturally significant foods and arranging delivery through shared delivery services (B21, NLO21).

4.5 Digital inclusion projects and access to welfare

The UK's welfare system requires online application and reporting. UC is the main welfare benefit in the UK and the cornerstone of the UK's digitalisation of welfare services (Lim, 2025). As we will see in Chapter 5, many marginalised groups struggle with digital access and need support with their digital welfare and food assistance applications. In this section, we illustrate that there are digital inclusion projects that support people in developing digital skills, but they rarely provide direct assistance with accessing welfare benefits. These may take the form of stand-alone digital inclusion projects or digital inclusion initiatives embedded within food projects, and we encountered both approaches. An exception is the widespread distribution of data SIMs, which is carried out by many organisations, groups and initiatives. Almost all of these are run by charities or volunteers.

The digital skills taught in stand-alone digital inclusion projects we observed in Birmingham and London appear to be aimed mostly at people struggling with their general computing skills. From our interviews and observations, the kinds of skills covered include: setting up an email account, basics of the internet, online shopping, banking, AI tools, and online safety, as well as how to use Facebook for socialising. When we observed a digital skills class for the elderly in Birmingham (BO6), the class focused on drawing and online shopping but did not cover how to navigate their state pensions or UC. When asked why they did not cover these topics, the instructors informed us they had concerns around privacy, particularly when it involves sensitive information like bank accounts. In another observation, an elderly woman mentioned dropping out of digital skills classes when they started on online banking because she feared pressing the wrong button or not remembering her password. Some people coming to the classes we observed relied on younger relatives for digital skills (NEO4). Digital inclusion projects are often aimed at the elderly, even though digital exclusion is a much broader

issue and not necessarily linked to age. In one centre, people requiring help with benefits or housing were typically signposted to other organisations for more specialised assistance (B7). In all sites, Citizens Advice was a key organisation for help with welfare applications, although their availability varied widely. In Gateshead, they are open for face-to-face consultation seven days a week, whereas in Birmingham advice is offered online only. In Newham, they are only open one day a week within a specific timeslot (10–11 on Mondays).

Some digital inclusion classes were able to provide devices – such as offering a laptop or tablet upon completion of a course (e.g. NLP1, ELR1, ELR5) – to enable participants to sustain the skills they have learned and to engage more fully with digitalised services. However, practitioners also noted that devices and software become outdated quickly, meaning people can feel 'back to square one' when systems change (P19). One food bank attendee and volunteer who had completed a course and received a device said she had forgotten much of what she learned and still returned regularly for help with basic digital tasks (ELP1). In Gateshead, a project offering small grants for digital inclusion projects received no requests from food banks, which the project director suggested was due to the fact that, for many people, the most pressing barrier is not skills but access to appropriate devices (NE8). As one organisation working on digital access observed, 'access' remains the 'biggest blind spot', with digital inclusion too often conflated with skills training while overlooking foundational issues such as the affordability of data and hardware (Key informant P22).

Much digital support is provided through the kinds of interventions described earlier in this chapter: informal intermediaries in food assistance projects or community centres. Volunteers in food banks, community projects or libraries work outside of their remit to provide digital support. These projects often provide free e-sims and, less frequently, loaned or donated devices. Through the Good Things Foundation, one charity distributed 174 SIM cards and 50 laptops. Some volunteers help with navigating the digitalised benefits system (ELO7, NE15) but others were hesitant to give advice because of the risk of giving incorrect advice (B9, B4). In charities with limited or no established links to local authorities or external support services, volunteers are often left to develop their expertise through direct experience while supporting clients over extended periods of time.

4.6 'Wrap-around' and 'hub-ification'

The additional services provided by food projects are often called 'wrap-around' services. These can include a range of support services that are often presented as addressing poverty and food insecurity alongside emergency food assistance. In addition to digital inclusion initiatives, commonly mentioned services include cooking and budgeting classes. As illustrated in Box 2, 'wrap-around' services could include any or all of the following:

Employability training (including internal volunteer schemes)

Cooking classes

Budgeting classes and debt advice

Advice from councils or Citizens Advice on benefits and taxes

Legal advice for migrants and asylum seekers

NHS surgery drop-ins, dental, mental health and drug rehabilitation services

Nurse drop-ins

Digital literacy support

Language training

Safety training

Free activities for children

Drop-ins by local or national charities, such as Barnardo's

Signposting for services that aren't able to do drop-ins

Arts and culture groups

'Wrap-around' support varied widely in terms of type, frequency, and the level of expertise offered. It can be about linking people to the services (housing, benefits, healthcare, education, etc.) or about making them employable or skilled (for work, in digital technology), choosing nutritious food or managing their finances well. At one end are smaller operations with limited funding that provide just a few additional services. One 'environmental waste' project recounted trying to offer sexual health products, portable showers and e-sims for their users, but having to abandon this plan as it would have required the managers to complete a two-day training for which they could find neither the time nor the staff (B3). At the other extreme is the programme developed by the Newcastle Food Bank described in Box 3. Most of the additional services discussed in section 4.2 have been described as 'wrap-around'. In this section we trace the evolution of 'wrap-around' and 'hub-ification' and analyse what this does in terms of responsibility for addressing the causes of hunger.

Evolution of 'wrap-around'

The idea of 'wrap-around' has evolved since the APPG inquiry and action plan in 2016 (mentioned in Chapter 3). Out of the APPG inquiry came a nationwide plan to relieve and ultimately prevent hunger in the UK. At the heart of the strategy

was the 'Food Bank Plus' model, which places trained welfare rights officers and other professionals in food banks to tackle the root causes of crisis, such as benefits delays or debt. Alongside this immediate intervention, Feeding Britain pledged to work with groups preventing edible food from going to waste, turning surplus supplies towards those in need and providing affordable food (Forsey and Mason, 2016). They also suggested that longer-term measures were needed to improve food security, including improved access to benefits and to work, for example: an increase in UC payments, less delay in processing claims, a warning period for sanctioning, a package of support when moving from welfare into work, preventing gas, electricity and water companies charging a premium for 'pay as you go'. In addition, adequate cooking facilities for those in social housing, legislative action to protect those on zero-hours contracts, the institution of a national living wage, and more (Forsey and Mason, 2016). However, the focus in the past decade has been very heavily on immediate measures.

In her submission to the 2014 APPG Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty in Britain, food and social policy researcher Professor Elizabeth Dowler warned that:

> institutionalization of charitable responses contributes to fundamental issues being sidelined and depoliticized, with solutions located in 'proper use of resources' at local levels. This enables both the state to retreat from responsibilities and food businesses to gain from improving corporate social responsibility (CSR) and reduced landfill taxes. There is no real gain to those who are bearing the brunt of economic austerity in the UK today. (Dowler, 2014)

More than a decade ago, social policy analysts highlighted the rise of food banks and their limited role in addressing the causes of food insecurity, such as benefits cuts and rising food prices (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015). 'Wrap-around' services may have had a limited effect in some instances (in particular by linking people to state services), but over this same period the number of food banks increased. 'Wrap-around' services create the appearance of addressing the underlying causes of poverty and food insecurity but cannot do so simply by linking to state provision of social services (welfare, health, housing, etc.) and attempting to change individual behaviour (see also Chapter 6). This set-up also normalises the charitable response to need and absolves government from the responsibility of ensuring equitable access to food.

Use of the term 'wrap-around' has become increasingly common in recent years, though its definition varies between organisations. Feeding Britain uses it to highlight the coordination of multiple services alongside food provision to address underlying vulnerabilities. In contrast, Trussell does not use the term in its latest strategy (2025–30), instead referring to 'emergency food alongside tailored

support and advice', suggesting a possible shift away from the terminology. The wrap-around concept also implies centralisation in a single location (see the next section, on 'hub-ification'), while at the same time contributing to the fragmentation of services. 'Wrap-around' has also become a condition imposed by those supplying food banks. At a food partnership meeting in London in July 2025, a major surplus food supplier in Barnet announced that it would begin auditing the food banks it supplies, asking each to offer 'wrap-around' services as a condition for continued support (NLO21).

Many of the 'wrap-around' services are dependent on volunteers. Food organisations described feeling overstretched – short on volunteers, funding and, above all, meaningful long-term investments from national government. Some saw the trend as evidence of responsibility being pushed from the state onto the charitable sector. A Birmingham-based volunteer who founded her own charity captured this frustration: 'It shouldn't be my responsibility to be helping all these people … the government is responsible.'(B13) Several others also expressed worry about giving incorrect advice or being held accountable for decisions they feel should be made by trained professionals. As one volunteer put it, 'You can't promise things. We're amateurs but try to be professional' (B4). 'People are really tired … and kind of exhausted by everything the council is asking them to do. So the idea that people can take on more and do more all the time and somehow volunteer, yeah, I mean, I don't want to volunteer in my library. I just want to go there in between the other stuff' (B22). 'Wrap-around' services create the appearance of addressing hunger, but in reality they cannot resolve the structural causes of food insecurity, effectively allowing central government to shift responsibility onto charitable organisations.

'Hub-ification'

Parallel to, or even earlier than the evolution of 'wrap-around', has been the 'hub-ification' of public spaces or social infrastructure. We came across family hubs, community hubs, libraries being turned into hubs, as well as 'food hubs' – another word for food projects with 'wrap-around' services. Family hubs, library hubs, and other forms of community hubs function as multi-purpose spaces that provide a wide range of support services, including digital help, such as accessing benefits or providing supermarket vouchers and other forms of food assistance. The spread of different types of hubs – a trend we refer to as 'hub-ification' – was evident throughout our findings. Most of these provide some form of food and/or digital support, each with its own balance of council involvement and volunteer support.

Family hubs have their roots in the post-war welfare state, beginning with the idea of 'child welfare centres' in 1949. These evolved in the 1980s into voluntary-sector family centres, which offered support to parents but lacked statutory

backing. In the 2000s, New Labour built on this groundwork with Sure Start Children's Centres – nationally funded, preschool-focused facilities supported by ring-fenced budgets that created enduring early-years infrastructure (Family Hubs Network, n.d.). Family hubs specialise in improving children's health, education and overall wellbeing. Many hubs now provide food support, digital access and broader family services, as we observed in Gateshead and Barnet. The Conservative government closed family hubs but, in their last year, 400 new 'family hubs' were launched across 75 local authorities (UK Government, 2023). The current Labour government has committed £500 million in July 2025 to extend the hubs to every local authority by April 2026 (Farley, 2025).

Co-locating libraries with other services marks a more visible shift, especially as some councils now regard traditional libraries as 'outdated' (B22), even while community groups strongly disagree. Recent policy papers and research – from the Libraries Taskforce, Carnegie Trust, Locality and the Local Government Association – have increasingly highlighted the value of co-locating libraries with other services. Their role has long been evolving to support wider goals, such as employment assistance, public health promotion and cultural participation. In Birmingham, library transformation driven by budget cuts is still unfolding. The Save Our Libraries campaign continues to oppose both closures and the shift to fully volunteer-run facilities, yet plans are already moving forward.

In Hartlepool, all libraries have been transformed into community hubs. Tracing the evolution of community hubs and their relationship with government support is challenging, but the language of the Community Hub Handbook (Locality, 2020) highlights a growing belief that local communities are best placed to address their own needs. In some sense, all local-level social infrastructure can be termed a 'community hub', including community centres, libraries, schools, as well as those recently established in places like Hartlepool (McShane and Coffey, 2022). We interviewed a local authority representative at a mixed-use council community hub in Hartlepool (NE27), which combines food provision, welfare support, and digital access within a single site. The hub hosts a volunteer-run subsidised café, HAF programmes, and a reduced-price fresh food project, offers advice on food assistance and welfare referrals (including to nearby food banks), and provides a library space with public computers and free Wi-Fi. Other hubs, such as a London borough's residents' hub emphasises digital inclusion. These residents' hubs were set up across the borough's four localities, offering face-to-face support for 'residents who find it difficult to access the support they need through other channels' (Residents' Hub, n.d.).

4.7 Conclusion

Over the last decade, we have seen a proliferation of food assistance projects, and their institutionalisation, closely linked to the provision of additional

services, including for digital inclusion. At the same time, community centres and, increasingly, 'hubs' have started to provide both food and digital services, and other services, too. On the one hand, this demonstrates grassroots autonomy and the value of trusted, local spaces where people can find immediate help. On the other, they risk deepening an ad hoc system of charitable provision rather than advancing a universal, rights-based food policy. With 'wrap-around' services, food assistance projects are not only expected to address hunger but also to help people out of food poverty and become skilled and employable. Responsibility has been shifted to volunteers and different forms of community social infrastructure. This has resulted in an unaccountable fragmented system, resulting from neoliberal deregulation, that actually makes it harder to find help. Furthermore, linking welfare advice or other essential services to food banks may also have the unintended effect of entrenching food aid as a response to hunger.

5. EXPERIENCE OF DIGITAL FOOD ASSISTANCE BY MARGINALISED POPULATIONS

By Iris Lim, Susanne Jaspars and Yasmin Houamed

5.1 Introduction

The digitalisation of food assistance and welfare was justified as improving efficiency and accountability but has created multiple intersecting barriers that shape how people access food support across England. In this chapter, we present the experiences of marginalised populations using and navigating digitalising food assistance support. First, our interviews and observations with marginalised groups reveal how poverty operates as a key barrier, creating material conditions that render other barriers, such as digital skills gaps, language and literacy challenges, and cultural-emotional dimensions, increasingly insurmountable. Second, we illustrate how the decrease in public spaces and services brought about by austerity has further limited people's access to both support and the internet. Third, we explore issues of the design of digitalised systems and how this influences access. Fourth, we discuss how food banks and community spaces have become crucial points of human contact, providing social connections for people navigating the digital systems, but are also places where the limits of this fragile, under-resourced safety net become visible. We argue that the accumulating barriers of digitalising food assistance make it increasingly difficult to access for those who need it most.

5.2 Poverty as a key barrier to digital inclusion

At the core of marginalised populations' experience of digital access lies economic deprivation. The requirement to go online to access help amounts to what a representative from the Good Things Foundation (a digital inclusion charity) characterised as a 'paywall' for assistance (Key informant P22). In our interviews, organisations referred to digital access issues as being a problem of 'no device, no internet, no access, no IT literacy' (NE15), or due to 'data poverty, device poverty and skills' (NE32), all of which are necessary to be able to access any form of digitalised welfare.

The difficulties of accessing appropriate devices came up several times, particularly in the North East. For example, a food bank representative referred to most people not having smartphones 'but at the same time the government

requires people to go on a digital journey' (NE7) and a church group told us that many people just have old 'brick' phones (NE10). It is not possible to access the internet on these phones and thus it is impossible to apply for Universal Credit (UC) or any other form of digitalised assistance online using them. Similarly, a homeless man at a food bank said he had no smartphone but had just bought a £10 phone which allowed him to call about his UC but not to access it online. Accessing his UC journal requires access to email and a login process requiring a confirmation code sent through a mobile phone for identity verification (NEO3).

Others did not have access to a phone at all or had to share one. One man coming to a church-run cafe told us his phone had been stolen so he could not check whether his benefit payments had come in and was 'scared to go to the machines to check if there is money on his account because people can rob you right then and there' (NE31). A charity representative gave the example of a homeless man in London he had interviewed:

> So we interviewed one man who was homeless in London and his phone was shared by five different people. They were five different people who only met occasionally, but that number was used by them as the contact for the DWP, so he would get a call for somebody else. They'd be like, 'Well, are they there?' They're like, 'Man, I haven't seen them for two weeks.' They then get sanctioned, and then that causes huge problems. (NE13)

From observations in Birmingham and London, device ownership patterns appeared more favourable. One Birmingham volunteer observed that people typically possessed their own devices, noting that 'people rarely come in to ask us, "Can I use your phone?"' (B15). In London, people coming to advice drop-ins were observed with smartphones or to have access to family members' smart devices. This could be in part due to migration experiences of some refugee populations, and the higher proportion of refugees in London and Birmingham (Kaufmann, 2018; Morgan, 2023). Seeing someone with a smartphone, however, doesn't mean they own it, or have paid for it. One (Sudanese) refugee explained that he bought a smartphone one year ago from a friend but still had to pay it off. Some organisations said they buy phones and vouchers (for phone credit) so that people could contact the DWP (NE21).

Additionally, device ownership did not equate to consistent digital access, and people frequently struggled with data poverty. Access to internet or mobile data, because of the cost, was mentioned often in our interviews. Many organisations, in all sites, whether food banks or community centres, said they distribute data SIM cards for internet access. According to a community food project director, 'more and more people are asking us to help them with phone vouchers' (NE16). In London, people at a community centre informed us they had no internet access

at home or had no data plan, or only a limited data plan, because they cannot afford it (ELR2, ELR20, ELR23).

This led to a number of strategies to access the internet, for example:

> Sitting on walls of houses with internet to be able to connect because they cannot afford home internet (NE10).
>
> Using hotspot connections from others' phones to access the internet in public spaces (ELR23).
>
> Going to public spaces such as libraries (see section 5.3 for more) and community centres (ELR15, NLO3).

In community centres, people would rely on the centre's Wi-Fi or on a volunteer's data plan or an organisation's connection to access their UC platforms. In an observation at a holiday activity meal, a parent approached one of us to ask if she could hotspot from our phone as her data plan had run out (ELR23). At an advice drop-in, a Pakistani migrant had to borrow data from volunteers to apply for a digital inclusion class as he could not pay for data that month (ERL1). He was struggling with his NRPF[3] status and unable to work because his lawyer had misprocessed his application for Indefinite Leave to Remain.

People interviewed largely focused on mobile data or data plans rather than broadband, because they considered getting a broadband connection beyond their means (NE32). A community food bank user commented that:

> they want you to do everything online, which is just not possible. Firstly, you have to be able to afford the internet. So you actually have to pay for someone to come out and put [in] your Wi-Fi [connection]. And if you're like me, you have to pay £37/month for that privilege. I also had to have a phone line … (NE14)

A centre worker pointed out that she could get a 'social tariff' and pay less, and that was the first she'd heard of it. Similarly, a refugee in Barnet was told about it on a visit to a community cafe and had never heard of it either (NLO3). There appears to be a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy (NE14). The extent of this is indicated in a paper by Policy and Practice, a social policy company, showing that in the North East alone, 219,916 eligible households were not claiming the broadband social tariffs they are entitled to. A total of £36 million available for social tariffs is not taken up. This could partly be because a social tariff still entails a regular monthly payment that some people are just unable to afford, as well as there

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[3] No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) is a condition imposed on people subject to immigration control under Section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, meaning they cannot access most welfare benefits, tax credits, or housing assistance from the state. This includes UC, Housing Benefit, Child Benefit, and local authority housing. People with NRPF status include those on visitor visas, student visas, work visas, and some family visas, as well as undocumented migrants (Home Office, 2025; NRPF Network, n.d.).

being no way to find the information (Collins et al., 2024: 9). This is also in line with national findings, which show that support for broadband is significantly underclaimed, with 19 out of 20 eligible households missing out, equivalent to £768 million going unclaimed up to April 2023 (Clegg et al., 2023).

5.3 Closure of public spaces and 'not-spots' as barriers

The experience of limited access to connectivity is compounded by the closure and sparse availability of public digital access points, as well as their fragmented nature (as discussed in Chapter 4). This was noted in all of our field locations and, even where community spaces remain open in limited form, there may be constraints on access. In one semi-rural area in Gateshead, for example, the library was only open two days a week (NE21) and was housed within the local school, which meant 'you have to go through the school gate, and some people are hesitant to do that' (NE32).

The case of Birmingham further exemplifies this pattern: library closures have reshaped how and where residents can access physical and digital services. The city's library network has endured repeated austerity measures since 2016–17, when the council declared bankruptcy. Budget cuts forced shorter hours and staff reductions, as well as several closures. The council's plan lays out a patchwork of services: some library hubs open five days a week, some part-time. In addition, there are community-run libraries, a Virtual (digital) Library; an expanded mobile service; a Prison Library; self-service kiosks; and a Libraries at Home programme (Brock, 2024). Although officials promise 'cosy' and 'universal' spaces, residents are concerned that this shift will lead to unprofessional staffing and uneven access (B22). London demonstrated similar patterns of infrastructure erosion. In Barnet, London's second-largest borough, some libraries have closed and some have been replaced by automated library services that operate without human support. Community centres are becoming fewer and more geographically dispersed.

For some, even getting to the library or other public space is a massive issue, both because of the cost of transport and because of its unreliability (NE32). This becomes an issue particularly as community spaces become more scarce: 'they don't understand the hassle it takes to get there [the library]. People have to get the bus, pay for printing, etc.' (NE10). In semi-rural Gateshead, a community representative mentioned that when the library is closed, people will need to get a bus to nearby towns or the DWP office to keep up their UC journal. In Barnet, accessing food banks where internet connection is available also requires substantial travel, creating particular barriers for recipients with mobility limitations or those carrying weekly food supplies. For example, all the food banks we observed in the borough required a significant walk, often uphill or deep into their neighbourhoods, from the nearest transportation point.

In addition, some places are 'not-spots' in terms of phone coverage because there is no connection at all, particularly in rural areas (NE8). Even in urban areas, however, there are not-spots, including parts of Barnet. For one refugee we met with several times, this was a huge problem. He is on UC, and PIP (Personal Independence Payment – due to chronic illness) and was moved to a 'not spot' in East Barnet. From there his GP or hospital was unable to contact him, he had no contact with his friends (leading to depression as he was confined to his flat), and even referral to a food bank needed a phone call. Even though Barnet Council has an agreement with Community Fibre to provide free broadband access for certain categories of people, they did not cover the area where he lived (NLO3). Without friends or volunteers helping him he would not be able to survive.

5.4 Skills, culture and language as a constraint to digital access

While poverty creates material barriers to digital access, there are additional layers of exclusion that interact with and amplify economic deprivations. Secondary barriers include digital skills, language, and cultural factors, as well as usable design. They do not operate independently but become more difficult to navigate when experienced alongside the material constraints of poverty. Digital skills, often simply understood as the ability to use digital devices and navigate online platforms, resist simple definition. Van Laar et al. (2020) show that digital skills develop from a combination of resources such as time, materials, motivation, social support and culture, all shaped by a person's demographics, socio-economic status and psychology. In other words, education, income, job status, social networks, gender, cultural background, language and available time influence not only access to digital tools but also how effectively people can use them. In this section, we examine how digital skills, language and cultural factors create interlocking barriers to accessing digitalised food assistance. Our data reveal how these categories are experienced as inseparable challenges by those navigating welfare systems.

Digital skills

Our observations and interviews reveal what appears to be a striking unevenness in digital capabilities; people may be able to perform some digital tasks but not others. UC requires claimants to navigate a complex multi-step digital process. This includes creating an online account with identity verification, completing a detailed 'to-do list' with updates on housing, work, earnings and savings, uploading supporting documents, using an online journal of ongoing communications (UK Government, 2026; Amnesty International, 2025a). The 'digital-by-default' design means that most communications need to be done via an online portal, although some in-person appointments remain. These requirements demand a

combination of digital literacy, document management skills, sustained online engagement, and the ability to navigate complex bureaucratic interfaces. In our fieldwork the assumption that such capabilities were commonplace was repeatedly challenged.

A charity representative in semi-rural Gateshead, for example, shared that women who were able to navigate Facebook to maintain social connections found themselves unable to perform basic email functions (NE31). In another centre, an elderly woman had an iPad and a smartphone but used them 'just for texts and playing games' (NE29). Although these instances demonstrate various levels of digital skills, they do not necessarily translate into the ability to use digital welfare and food assistance systems effectively. A digital inclusion instructor in Birmingham captured this, stating that 'people's digital skills can be very compartmentalised. They know how to use the internet but only speak with family and friends' (B7), suggesting that digital literacy is not a singular skill but rather a collection of context-specific practices with limited transferability.

We also observed a disconnect between perceived and actual digital capabilities. We observed many instances where device ownership didn't translate into the ability to use the device functionally. A food bank manager in Barnet told us about a man who 'despite being super-capable' with his phone, 'always comes to the food bank for help with online forms because he just can't understand certain things', like applications for different support schemes or managing other administrative tasks online (NLP2). At a drop-in session, a man came in every week for help with small grant applications, saying that 'even though I've completed digital skills classes' and had received a tablet upon completing training, he felt what he could do digitally on his own was inconsistent (ELR1). People often possessed smartphones but did not know 'how to use their smartphone, [for] email … passwords, [or] printing' (B9). Skills barriers operate at multiple levels, from basic device operation, to interface navigation, to complex form completion, revealing how the digital literacy requirements of welfare systems extend far beyond the skills people in fact possess.

In many instances, age was an issue in relation to digital skills. According to a representative from a mosque in Birmingham, their 'congregation over 60, lack[ed] digital skills' (B18). Older people we spoke to reflected on technological shifts, stating: 'when I was younger, there was no computer … I think it's easier for the younger generation because they're growing up with it' (NE14). However, some young people do struggle. An outreach officer at the DWP argued that 'youth are the most disconnected' (B16). This is corroborated by reports from the Good Things Foundation and others stating that young people in the UK from lower-income households and other marginalised backgrounds struggle with digital access and skills (Good Things Foundation, 2024; Magee, 2025). Similarly, older people in digital skills classes are not necessarily financially disadvantaged.

Digital skills are not static but contingent, requiring continual adaptation and relearning. Even those who had worked with computers before could face barriers, and those who were new to digital skills learned and helped others. One former Coal Board and brewery worker explained that he 'used to work with computers but now was unable to because his memory was gone' (NE05). His experience illustrates the temporal fragility of digital skills, as they are not fixed assets but vulnerable to both personal circumstances (such as memory loss) and the rapid pace of technological change. Conversely, some people who start off without digital skills learn so well that they assist others (see Box 6).

Box 6: From needing help to supporting others with digital access

When we first met Ahmed (not his real name) in December 2023, he had just gained refugee status (after arriving as an asylum seeker in May 2021). At this time he told us he did not know computers and knew nothing about how his UC application was done as volunteers had done it for him. When we met him again in January 2025, we found that he had become a key (voluntary) support worker for his community, telling us he helps hundreds of people. One recent arrival, who could not read and write even in his own language, explained to us that he calls Ahmed, sends him the messages he cannot read, and Ahmed translates and writes answers that the new arrivals can copy and paste into forms (B11). This illustrates both the practical use of specific digital functions, such as voice messaging and copy-pasting, and the role of volunteers in enabling access to welfare.

Another issue was the extreme range in digital skills levels. Observations at digital inclusion classes in a Birmingham community centre showed how some confidently used a mouse to draw images while others in a nearby table struggled to click on dropdown menus for an activity simulating online shopping (B7, BO3). In another place, we heard how 'one man simply "doesn't even know how to look in his inbox"' (NE22). Reflecting on this range, a digital skills instructor shared that there was 'not a lot of training for people at the absolute bottom – who don't know what email is' (B7). Others pointed out that many in need of food or welfare lacked even basic language or literacy skills. This was true for ethnic minorities, such as Somali or Sudanese refugees, as well as white working-class people in the North East.

Language and literacy

Most digital systems presuppose reading and writing skills (Koltay, 2011). Our research shows that the lack of language and literacy skills is a fundamental mechanism of exclusion from digital food assistance. This applied to both migrant and refugee communities and marginalised white working-class communities.

It ranged from the Sudanese example noted above, where the local language lacks a written form, to cases in the North East where poor-quality education and/or non-attendance resulted in non-literacy. In Gateshead, low literacy was so widespread that volunteers always read out the contents of a food parcel during distributions (NEO2).

For migrant communities, a food pantry manager with a decade of experience serving in East London captured this dual burden of language and digital skills when explaining that 'digitising assumes digital skills and skills in English, and most of the people who come have one or either of those, and sometimes both are missing' (ELP1). Refugees and other migrants, for whom English is not their first language, face particular challenges with access to digitalised welfare. Digital support for those struggling with English often involve elaborate chains of translation and brokering between volunteers, people coming in for support, and digital translations from available apps. For example, a typical session of support at an advice drop-in in Newham that people from the migrant community attend to get support with things like their UC management, required navigation of multiple languages, such as Urdu, Romanian or Gujarati. Those needing support themselves, always helped volunteer advisors with translations. Alternatively, a translation app was used, although the accuracy is limited (ELO9, NLP2). A community project director shared that, for many refugees, 'reading instructions on the bank machine [ATM] is hard because they do not know to read well. Some people just press things' (NE15).

Social networks sometimes provided linguistic bridges, but the shape and level of support provided by these networks varied widely. A Romanian mother learned how to apply for child benefits through her Romanian friends, but when they left the UK she found herself without support (ELR23). Her isolation, both social and digital, meant she remained unaware of support schemes, such as Healthy Start. In Birmingham, a Sudanese refugee told us about helping 'a lot of people' with forms such as applying for UC, even though 'I struggle as well, but I could understand just more than them', adding that many people ask him for help understanding official emails (B10). Another refugee highlighted the risks of completing welfare forms without support. While trying to register her disabled adult daughter for UC, she mistakenly entered her own name as the applicant and overlooked the fine print stating that – even if the claim is denied – signing up for UC automatically ends all other benefits. As a result, she lost several hundred pounds per month (B8).

Digital access requires marginalised people to draw on multiple literacies at once, such as functional literacy (applying reading/writing skills to tasks like form filling), technological literacy (using portals, understanding and managing descriptions of credentials), information literacy (interpreting official emails, discerning requirements and consequences), and adaptive literacy (coping with frequent system and process changes). Even when basic language proficiency is

present, these layered literacies create steep demands that many can only navigate with support (Koltay, 2011; see also section 5.5 on design).

Cultural and emotional barriers

Cultural norms and emotional dimensions shape how people experience and respond to their need for food assistance and the challenges of digital access. As we saw in section 4.3, some people, in particular older people, are too proud to come to food banks for help. Stigma around poverty creates additional layers of exclusion. South Asian communities were described as tending to be 'shy around strangers' and 'might not want to share their experiences because of the stigma surrounding poverty. They might feel ashamed of their struggles' (ELP5), making it doubly difficult to seek help with digital navigation.

Cultural unfamiliarity with bureaucratic systems, in particular their digital forms, created additional barriers. The expectation that access to food welfare needs filling out forms represents a cultural assumption which, as one food pantry manager noted, 'in itself is alien to lots of people' (ELP1). People's relationship to help-seeking was culturally mediated too, with a food pantry manager in a predominantly Asian migrant neighbourhood saying that 'my experience of residents in this area is that people are not … wired yet to seeking help from services … [but] primarily wired to seeking solutions from within their own people group' (ELP1). For example, a woman who repeatedly attended weekly digital advice drop-ins said that she did not trust online forms, leading her to rely heavily on the volunteers for everything, from her electricity bills to housing repairs to UC benefits management (ELR13), preferring mediated human contact over direct digital engagement.

Across all our field sites, digitalisation has reshaped the emotional dimensions and psychological pressures of accessing support, often exacerbating feelings of shame and undermining dignity. The assumption that digital access is straightforward placed additional emotional labour on those who struggled. One person described the overall experience of the digitalisation of welfare, saying she had 'never heard anybody say it's easier now or it's better now, not one person, even when overhearing people's conversation, it's always been negative, it's impossible' (B17). A food project organiser observed that UC is 'torturous', explaining that she 'has people crying in the queues', noting 'it doesn't matter how much you manage your money if you haven't got enough' (B4). A librarian adds that people 'get very, very stressed' and clearly want 'somebody basically to stand by them while they go through it' (B9). Yet she noted uncertainty over how much help she can actually provide, if any. This underscores both the inconsistency of available support and the persistent demand for in-person guidance. This psychological pressure manifested in various ways. Community advisors told and retold the cases of people for whom anything to do with the

benefit system created anxiety, with one person describing it as 'the tyranny of their telephone', where answering a phone call from Job Centre Plus is so important that they constantly had to make sure their phone was charged because they couldn't risk not answering a call (NE13).

5.5 Digital design and process as key barriers to inclusion

The promise of digital transformation in welfare provision rests on assumptions of simplification and efficiency. However, as we (and others) show, the design of digital systems itself creates significant barriers, in particular for the marginalised people we discuss above.

To analyse the issues of human–computer interaction for them, we draw on the concept of affordance, which is about what technology allows or invites users to do, or, constrains them from doing (Norman, 2013). They enable action when there is a clear alignment with users' capabilities and goals. This points to what Norman describes as 'perceived affordances' that allow users to know what to do just by looking. However, affordances become constraints when they create barriers through mismatched capabilities, cultural misalignments, or differential availability. As such, designed affordances 'are never equally perceptible to all, and never equally available to all' (Costanza-Chock, 2020: 39). Users from different backgrounds can understand and interact with them differently based on demographic context, lived experience, and culture (Sun and Suthers, 2023). For example, a button labelled 'apply now' leads to an expectation of immediate action, yet our interviews and observations show cascading requirements for documentation, verification codes and device capabilities that the interface does not initially signal.

We also make use of the concept of user-journey mapping, to trace the complete path users take through a system (Stickdorn and Schneider, 2012), which can reveal another dimension of a user's experience of a digitalising service. As the discussion in the rest of this section shows, the journeys we documented resembled labyrinths rather than straight linear paths. People moved between online portals, phone calls, physical documents, and in-person visits in patterns that defied any organised sequence. This fragmentation creates compound barriers where failure at one point can cascade through the entire experience that people have of the service.

Design issues

The design of benefits systems poses major constraints precisely for those who

need benefits most. Our interviews provided information about the issues that people faced with UC and PIP (for people with disabilities). As we described earlier, UC requires claimants to maintain an online account and journal for communication with the DWP. To set up an online account, an individual must have access to the internet and a laptop or smartphone, an email address and a mobile phone number to receive verification codes. The online forms that a claimant must complete are available only in English and Welsh (Amnesty International, 2025b).

Our research indicates that these online systems assume that smartphone ownership allows for full digital participation. Numerous people across all our field sites told us that this is not the case: that doing UC applications on a phone is very difficult. As one Sudanese refugee told us: 'actually phones and tablets are not really helpful … for those who do not know how to read well. To understand the questions. It was much easier to have it big, on a computer' (B10). Others noted that it is 'hard work doing everything on your phone' (NE16), or that while 'most people now have a phone', the reality is that 'it is difficult to access files on your phone' (NE6). Smartphone ownership clearly does not equal the ability to access welfare digitally.

The design of forms creates additional barriers. UC's interface was described as having 'too many pages, repeated questions' (B11). Pension credit applications proved similarly overwhelming, with elderly people explaining that 'the form is hard, lots of pages, ask about your mobility, about all your medications, and then seem to be asking the same questions again and again' (NEO4). Even those well-versed in forms and applications expressed frustration, with one food project organiser declaring 'we're sick to death of portals' (B4), suggesting that complex form design affected users across abilities and experience.

The language used can be difficult even for people with good English-language skills. A charity representative in Gateshead, noted that 'even for people who speak English as their first language, being able to comprehend how to pass the benefits system' was challenging (NE13). 'The language used on the forms is hard' (NEO3). Similarly, an Indian man (ELR14), with good English fluency, needed support filling out online forms because he found forming written statements on these official platforms difficult.

Particular procedures or requirements can be hard to complete. For example: 'getting a photograph for proof of ID that doesn't have glare or sparkle on it, is a proper task for some people' (NE13). When systems failed, design choices left users stranded, as one person explained in relation to the NHS app: 'I'm locked out of mine because I changed my address and phone number, and now I haven't got access to it' (NE14). Government websites often present a circular user journey that offers no alternative. A Nigerian man settled in Birmingham discovered that when calling a helpline for questions about the GOV.UK website,

they simply refer you back to the website (B21). Similarly, a Pakistani man spent two hours applying for a grant designated for former retail workers, only to discover at the very end that he fell just one year outside their cut-off date, a crucial detail that appeared nowhere on the form or eligibility instructions (ELR1). After witnessing countless such experiences, one support worker captured the cumulative emotional impact: 'you can feel like this is intentionally designed to drive people insane' (B9).

Additionally, digital systems often fail to accommodate diverse access needs, particularly for those with disabilities who 'need to have a long history of proof, which takes a long time and multiple visits to put together. Some found it difficult to understand the requirements of the forms, especially with having to prove multiple chronic health conditions' (ELR22). A registered blind person informed us that because he is unable to read forms on his phone, the DWP sends them to him in A3 format but they take 12 weeks to get to him in the post (NE14).

The experiences shared in this section are echoed by others. An Amnesty International report recently concluded that 'the digital-by-default welfare system … created new obstacles for marginalised claimants' (Amnesty International, 2025a). Their research echoes ours in that people found online forms difficult, in addition to assumptions about claimants' access to devices and the internet not being valid (Amnesty International, 2025a). Gateshead Council (2025), in an update on its poverty strategy, similarly quotes one resident 'on Universal Credit … [who] had looked at disability benefits but couldn't face the forms', and another who 'struggle[s] to use the journal on my phone, but my laptop won't work'. The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) found that between March 2022 and February 2023, about one-third of the 2.9 million registrations for UC failed to submit a claim. They concluded that the rule of law has been undermined by the digitalisation of the UK's main working-age benefit. These rule-of-law breaches are likely to be the consequences of digital design and implementation choices, none of which are an inevitability of digitalisation (CPAG, 2023).

Hybrid complexity and fragmented systems

Digitalisation has created hybrid systems requiring both digital and analogue competencies, multiplying rather than reducing administrative burdens. Our fieldwork revealed fractured user journeys requiring constant switching between different modes of interaction (Ebbers et al., 2008). These fragmented pathways illustrate a lack of coherent design, and additional hurdles in applying for welfare. People had to navigate a mix of paper, phone and online interactions. This, combined with the complexity of cases, becomes difficult for support workers and volunteers (see Box 7).

Registration for UC, for example, requires extensive offline preparation before

starting the online process. As one community centre director in semi-rural Gateshead explained:

> To do the initial registration for UC, you have to have bank account, passport, driving licence or other ID, email account. Sometimes people would have no email, and no passport. They need help to set up an email address. If you don't have everything ready when you start the online process, you are timed out after one hour and then have to start the whole process again. We had to help some people getting their birth certificate. It was a nightmare to get everything started. (NE21)

The extent of support needed is also illustrated by a digital drop-in session in East London, where there were at least three mobile phones playing music on speaker-phone while advisors are on hold (EL11).

Disability benefit applications demonstrated extreme hybrid complexity with labyrinthine user journeys. Supporting one family with PIP forms took more than 12 hours of support over four weeks because of the numerous documentary proofs needed (see Box 7 for more details). The burden falls heavily on those with complex needs. A mother struggling with severe migraines and seizures described that administration is like a full-time job (ELR23), while a dad with a disabled son and wife coping with depression said he struggled with the annual Disability Living Allowance renewal that was over 80 pages long (ELR25). Helping people with digital welfare applications (as part of participant observation) confirmed that applications were very complicated and the requirement to have a long history of proof took a long time and multiple visits to put together (ELR22).

Box 7: How hybrid systems make applying for digital welfare difficult

Iqbal* is a Pakistani national with Indefinite Leave to Remain. He migrated to the UK via Italy and currently resides in Newham, East London. I (Iris Lim) met him as a volunteer during participant observation at a weekly digital drop-in service. A soft-spoken man, he would wait quietly for hours in the busy centre, always carrying a heavy bag filled with meticulously organised documents containing pages of forms and letters for himself, his wife, and his son's cases. Despite being regarded as a 'well-educated gentleman' (ELO8) by drop-in staff and possessing functional digital skills, he says 'the [benefits] system is too complicated with so many things to prove, and I am afraid to miss something and start all over again'. As such, Iqbal has become a regular attendee at the drop-in centre. He also mentioned that, as he struggles with agoraphobia, 'new places is [are] difficult for him and he knows everyone here now'.

He was recently advised by a manager of the drop-in to apply for PIP and housing support as he was struggling with his inappropriate housing and daily expenses. His son has scoliosis,

while both Iqbal and his wife manage chronic knee and back pain alongside breathing difficulties. Their council-provided flat, compounds these challenges with pervasive mould, damp and multiple flights of stairs, all issues that are problematic given the family's mobility restrictions. These needs drove Iqbal to pursue disability support through both Newham Council and PIP.

Over multiple drop-in sessions, Iqbal and I spent more than 12 hours assembling his applications, a time investment that speaks to both the complexity of the forms and the fragmentation of required evidence. While the applications appeared straightforward at first, offering phone, paper or online options, the reality proved far more complex. For example, the PIP website's initial requirements list to prepare for the application seemed manageable: contact details, National Insurance number, bank details, and medical information. However, once we began the application, it became clear that to fill out the sections for each medical condition required extensive proof, such as official diagnosis statements and specialist reports. This meant navigating between the paper form and multiple digital platforms, logging into the NHS app for medical records, downloading PDFs of appointment letters, cross-referencing these with physical documents Iqbal carried, and attempting to reconcile information that appeared differently across systems.

The process demanded constant switching between interfaces, each with its own login requirements, navigation logic, and data presentation format. Prescription records on the NHS app did not align with medications actually dispensed at the pharmacy and Iqbal had to call his wife to take a photo of all his medication bottles to confirm what he was actually taking. Medical appointments that had been cancelled or rescheduled remained in the system as completed consultations, while others disappeared entirely. This mattered because the applications required precise documentation of all current medications and treatment history to assess disability severity, with each discrepancy potentially triggering questions about the validity of Iqbal's claims.

To address these contradictions, I helped Iqbal create a list of his medical records reconciling all three sources, highlighting discrepancies we would need to explain in the written sections. I helped him to write detailed statements for each section, carefully pointing out which specific symptoms and limitations the form was assessing. I guided him through the NHS app's confusing interface to locate and download his Summary Care Record, helped him request missing letters from specialists via the GP surgery's online portal, and drafted explanatory notes for why certain evidence appeared contradictory. Despite completing the application after four visits, the outcome remained uncertain, a reflection of how – even with substantial support for claimants – the system's complexity creates barriers that technical assistance alone cannot fully overcome.

* All names and locations have been anonymised to protect participant confidentiality.

Poor system integration and transparency

System fragmentation leads to programmes being operated in isolation when the user, in fact, needs to move across multiple systems to get assistance. These systems and schemes span central government schemes like UC, local authority provisions such as school-based food support and hardship funds, as well as charitable food assistance projects. For marginalised populations, this also creates a constant process of learning and relearning different parts and functions, what interaction designers call 'cognitive load' (Brennan, 2024). Digital systems monitored users' circumstances, and potentially penalised users as a result, creating stressful and fearful experiences of engaging with systems that are meant to support them. This applies in particular to people on precarious incomes, but who still need to report for UC, and because systems often fail to provide feedback on unsuccessful applications.

In all our field sites, we talked to people who were dealing with the challenge of reporting changing circumstances and incomes on their UC journal. For example, in Birmingham, we met a Sudanese refugee who was on an uncertain zero-hours contract with Amazon, and previously with UberEats, and who was going on and off of UC depending on whether he was in work and how much he was making. It is cut when his income is too high. His wife's Healthy Start payments also stopped when he started earning more than £400 a week (B11). In another case, an Uber driver worried about submitting a change of circumstances as UC algorithms wouldn't reflect new payment structures which meant his pay was reduced (ELR19). A man we interviewed in Hartlepool struggled to understand repeated messages on his UC journal asking him to report earnings with threats to close his claim, yet he did not know what he needed to do or how to do it (NE23). Users felt 'punished' despite following instructions (ELR24).

Two other issues emerge from these examples: first, that for those whose work is precarious and variable, both work and UC payments vary from month to month thus making it difficult to plan or budget. As we will see in Chapter 6, marginalised people were often described as leading 'chaotic lives' and being unable to budget. It appears, however, that it is the uncertainties of work and benefits that contribute to this. Second, it means that people on precarious wages are under continuous surveillance, having to provide information on their income on a weekly basis. As one couple at a church tea and cake morning explained: 'people need permanent jobs to be able to get off UC. Get rid of zero-hours contracts. All the job sites are advertising the same jobs. The wife has done at least 100 interviews, but there is no work' (NE30). At the same time, they had no choice but to provide personal information as a condition of receiving benefits.

Digital systems also failed to provide transparent feedback about eligibility or errors. Both a food pantry and an advice drop-in worker told us about systematic

application failures with Healthy Start; they did not bother to encourage applications among their community any more, as they never had anyone at the food bank who successfully enrolled (ELO2, ELO9). According to another food bank manager, you never find out what the issue was that caused the rejection (NLP3). This opacity left both support workers and applicants frustrated, 'All we can do as a food bank is check, then we just have to say to the client, I'm sorry, but it's saying you're not eligible' (NLP3). In-depth research specifically on the Healthy Start scheme makes similar observations about the difficulties in application. While uptake of Healthy Start has improved with digitalisation, the latest figures[4] show that 34% of eligible families were still not accessing it (Barrett et al., 2024). Barrett et al. (2024) found that the scheme was highly valued by those who accessed it, but digital exclusion, the nature of the online forms, and complexity of the eligibility criteria were all barriers to accessing Healthy Start. Auto-enrolment, as an 'opt out' system, as suggested by the Food Foundation and Sustain, would address this (Barrett et al., 2024; Food Foundation, 2025b; Sustain, 2024).

Vouchers, card systems, and food apps

Vouchers, debit-type cards (like the Healthy Start card and the Aspen card for asylum seekers), and apps which advertise low-cost or free food (see Chapter 4), are widely used in food assistance delivery and added another layer for users to navigate, requiring different or additional digital processes.

Redemption of a voucher may require downloading an app and creating a profile. The director of a community project explained the complexities of using free school meal vouchers during the holidays:

> So, it comes to the parents by email. But they do not know what to do with the link. It leads you to a website which can be quite overwhelming. Lots of pictures, need to make choices, go to shopping basket, 'buy now'. Then you get the voucher and need to take a screen shot of that. (NE15)

This process requires multiple digital literacies while providing no integrated support. A mother similarly explained she 'can't use [school vouchers] by myself and someone has to show me …' (ELR10). A digital voucher pilot (in North London) revealed similar implementation difficulties as the scheme required users to download the app and create a profile (NLO6), which many found difficult without support (NLO13) (see Box 8 for a detailed case study of this pilot).

The next step is redeeming the voucher at the supermarket, which can sometimes be problematic and lead to stigmatising the individual:

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[4] Figures after 2023 are not available.

> Then you find that people at the till (at the supermarket) do not know how to process this. Everyone can see you, and then there is the perception that some people are getting things for free. Get lots of questions of why these people are not working, why are they getting free food. (NE15)

In addition, parents told us that sometimes the school-provided supermarket vouchers they were given were for more expensive supermarkets or those that were further away than the one they prefer to use (ELR4, ELR10). Sudanese refugees informed us that they needed cash to purchase things other than food or items available in the supermarkets where they could redeem vouchers (B1). One group told us that they received supermarket vouchers from the Zakat Foundation, to be used at Tesco only for food and clothes. They found that one way around this was to use the voucher to buy an Amazon card that you can spend on anything (B1). Some people will sell their vouchers for a lower value in cash so they can buy other things, such as data for internet access, or to send money home to Sudan. We heard from one refugee that a taxi driver would come to the hotel where he lived initially (as an asylum seeker) to buy vouchers worth £25 with £20 cash (B10).

There are issues with using prepaid cards, such as Healthy Start and Aspen, in shops or supermarkets, and with activation. A community centre manager told us that the Healthy Start card sometimes doesn't work in the supermarket, requiring calls to the NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA) support line; then it works for a while, but later may stop again. She thought she herself probably had about £100 on her Healthy Start card, which she thought would just be going back to the government, and she had given up on the scheme (NE15). As the scheme is based on income levels, dropping in and out could be due to fluctuating income. The key issue in this case, however, is that the recipient did not know why the card only worked sometimes.

Professor Greta Defeyter wrote about these issues in 2022 (Defeyter et al., 2022) and found these problems persisted more recently: many shops in North Tyneside still did not accept the Healthy Start card. She heard about this from groups she is connected with; for example, on she saw on a Facebook group that it is not accepted by some local shops. She felt that the card is not viewed through the eyes of someone living in poverty: that it is not user friendly. Even though the card can be used in any shop that takes Mastercard, smaller retailers often lack information about the card, which creates difficulties for those on the scheme, and retailers also lose out financially. Goods bought with the Healthy Start card still need to be paid for separately, meaning that the card has not completely removed the stigma associated with vouchers as was intended. She is looking into how the scheme can be made better (NE3). Barrett et al. (2024), in their evaluation of the scheme, found that for the majority of Healthy Start users the card worked well, and that they preferred it to the paper vouchers because it is less likely to be

damaged and allows for more flexible spending. However, information provision about Healthy Start – particularly to small retailers – needs to be improved and responsibility for implementation clearly defined (Barrett et al., 2024).

For the Aspen card, one asylum seeker explained the difficulties of activation:

> When it comes in the post, it comes with instructions on how to activate it. For me it was easy [as he speaks good English], but I help many others who struggle. You have to first of all call a number, then give your DOB [date of birth] and the 16-digit number on the card. You can also request to get the balance [as payments are made from the moment you get your S95 status].[5] I then usually go with them the first time they use the ATM, show them how to get the money (what buttons to press – as the language on the machines is usually only English). Some people get the card after 1 month, but most get it after 2–3 months, leaving them with no spending money at all during this period. (NE30)

Another explained:

> It is hard to know how much credit is left on your card. You need to go to a bank machine, where there are no translation services and there are too many options, it gets confusing. It is also therefore difficult to get money out from these machines. And there is an issue around forgetting pins/codes. (B1)

When we talked to people about their experience of food apps like Olio and Too Good To Go (TGTG), we found they were rarely used. The collections are rarely practical as time slots are short and it is often necessary to pay for transport, and for the food itself (see Box 8).

Box 8: Recipients' views on food apps

> I've ordered from two of them while they had an offer on, and it was like a fortnight supply all the times. And I mean, yes it's still not good, yeah, but then they go back up to the proper prices (NE14, participant in group discussion).
>
> I've heard [of] the apps. Where they want to get rid of stuff at the end. Yes, I've heard of them, but I've heard good stories and I've heard bad stories about them (NE14, participant 2 in group discussion)

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[5] S95 status refers to the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 that states that a person seeking asylum in the UK can get housing and financial support from the Home Office (NRPF Network, 2025).

> I have the TGTG app, which is a good idea, but you still need to spend money. [Shows the app with discounted meals, for example a surprise bag (picture of sandwich), which is reduced from £9.00 to £3.30 which is 1.9 km away and has to be collected between 17.45 and 18.00 today. (NE23)
>
> I am aware of the apps of Olio and TGTG. I don't use them because usually the food to collect is too far from my house and I have to take the bus which is too expensive. (NE24)
>
> I used them once … Depends on what they offer. But it goes quickly. (NE29)

The labour required for these schemes gets redistributed from the app company to council staff, to food bank volunteers, and ultimately to recipients themselves. This raises critical questions about who bears the true costs of technological 'efficiencies'. Furthermore, effective support for digital food assistance requires 'face-to-face support to go along with it …' (NLA8). Box 9 gives a case study of trying to pilot the use of a food app in London.

Box 9: Barriers in adopting digital vouchers for food distribution

Pitching the pilot

In January 2025, Barnet Council partnered with a food surplus redistribution app to pilot a digital voucher scheme aimed at supporting food-insecure residents. As part of this study, I (Iris Lim) was invited to observe this initiative from when it began in January up to July 2025. My access included attendance at online planning meetings between council staff and the app company, observation sessions at food banks, interviews with frontline workers and volunteers supporting the initiative, and a review of email communications between stakeholders. Simultaneously, as I volunteered as a Digital Champion at a local food bank providing direct digital support to users, I also gained exposure to the digital struggles of the food bank.

Roll-out and implementation struggles

The pilot initiative offered quarterly allocations of £15 vouchers from the surplus food app, redeemable through a 16-character voucher code on a smartphone app for discounted surplus food at local retailers. Positioned as both addressing food waste and providing 'value to residents suffering from food security challenges' (co-founder, 23 Jan. 2025), the app company offered '800 vouchers this calendar year' funded entirely by them, presenting an opportunity for a cash-strapped local authority to provide additional support for food-insecure families.

Users needed to 'have a smartphone and download the app', 'Be

confident enough to use the app', and 'Be conversant in English' to complete mandatory feedback surveys (email, 6 Feb. 2025). To use the voucher, people needed to have an email address to create an account, know how to use a map function to select vendors nearby, and select options most relevant to their needs. The 16-digit voucher codes proved particularly problematic as they were too difficult and unwieldy to enter into the app. A volunteer at the food bank described the redemption process as 'pretty labour-intensive and error-prone'. By mid-March, only 3 of 200 available vouchers had been activated (email, 14 March 2025).

Council staff identified their capacity as the core constraint, noting: 'It is difficult to support use of the voucher. We don't really have the capacity to help and check-in' (Meeting notes, 19 March 2025). The pilot's eventual roll-out hinged on mobilising third-sector infrastructure and volunteer labour. Food banks across the borough had already established digital inclusion support with a growing cohort of 'Digital Champions' offering in-person one-to-one technology assistance. As a Digital Champion volunteer myself, I suggested this existing infrastructure could support the voucher roll-out. Uptake improved once 'we established that we had these vouchers at the food bank, that we'll be there every week [and that] people can help you literally to use your phone and show you how it works' (NLA8, 24 July 2025). Volunteers showed people 'step by step on their phone … this is the map, you can put in your home address or you can zoom in and out' to find the pick-up points' (Interview, 24 July 2025).

As such, behind the successfully redeemed vouchers was a team of people providing the labour-intensive support. The app company itself acknowledged this dependency, noting distribution through understaffed council hubs in previous pilots 'wasn't super successful' as staff 'couldn't go over adding and using the app' (NLO6).

We could not get clarification from the app team whether this support need was considered in the design of pilot schemes. They declined to discuss their pilots directly, stating that 'our organisation focuses on the environmental challenges of food waste rather than the food insecurity aspect, so this is not an area we're expert in and communicate about externally at this point' (email 15 April 2025). This raises questions about the voucher scheme's design: Is the long code system the only viable redemption method? Are there cost constraints limiting alternative approaches? The apparent disconnect between the app's environmental mission and the food insecurity context in which it operates warrants further examination.

The digital format also triggered unexpected resistance. Volunteers reported encountering 'a fairly serious suspicion, that if they participated, they would be tracked in some way and that information would be used against them' (NLP5). These fears, whether well founded or not, reflect marginalised populations' rational assessment of digital surveillance risks, particularly for those with insecure immigration status or benefits claims.

5.6   Experience of social aspects of food banks

Food assistance as a key point of social contact

Digitalisation of food assistance and welfare in theory removed the need for human interaction in welfare applications. However, as we have seen in this chapter, welfare applicants are rarely able to navigate digital systems without help. We also saw, in Chapter 4, that for many food projects social interaction is a key aim. With declining face-to-face interaction in welfare provision, food assistance projects have become a key point of social contact, to help with welfare applications but also to reduce isolation and revive a sense of community.

People coming to food assistance projects repeatedly told us that in-person contact was essential for both practical assistance and the sense of connection that sustains community life (ELP1, ELP3, ELP5). A project manager described how even mundane activities like collecting food can provide vital social interaction, expressing doubts about digitalised schemes precisely because they remove that opportunity (B4). In her words, 'welfare services are not connecting with the people, they do not know them', adding that 'the social fabric of the welfare system is threadbare' and that 'a lot of this work is about building relationship and building trust'. For her, the act of meeting people face-to-face is a core part of how support systems should function.

People coming to food banks and community centres linked digitalisation to everyday alienation, especially where language barriers, limited Wi-Fi, or device poverty were involved, and where fears of surveillance persist (ELP1). Several emphasised the emotional toll: 'Sometimes it can be very lonely, everybody is isolated' (ELR4). They described how food pantries and hot meals help people 'get nicer things' while providing a point of contact (ELR6). One man who had been scammed by lawyers when seeking permanent status said he comes weekly to the hot-meal and advice drop-in because being by himself thinking about his situation is not good for his mental health (ELR1). Together, these accounts reflect a concern that, as public services shift toward digital delivery and as physical gathering places disappear, marginalised people risk becoming invisible and more vulnerable, undermining both the effectiveness of welfare support and the relationships of trust that make the system more accessible to marginalised recipients.

Experience of 'wrap-around'

People appreciated different forms of 'wrap-around' too. Many first arrive for food, then stay because of the social contact, trust, and practical routes into other

support. Several spoke of finding spaces by word of mouth, returning for the 'community feeling' and feeling noticed if they did not attend (ELR25, ELR27, ELR28, ELR29, ELR30). Others described coming weekly because being alone with worries was harmful to mental health, and the company alongside a hot meal was positive in itself (ELR1, NEO2). Some understood the extra help through relationships rather than services, seeing digital or benefits support as help from a trusted person at the pantry (ELR6).

Across our field sites, people would sit with a worker or volunteer to complete forms for UC, PIP or immigration processes, ask for a second pair of eyes and book time to get it done properly. They are asked what they are struggling with and, where possible, linked on the spot to housing, health or mental health support, with drop-ins arranged and workers doing quick look-ups on their phones to show what is available. Cooking groups, budgeting sessions and coffee mornings create low-pressure ways to share worries about jobs, housing, debt or status that then lead to onward help (ELP3, NE18, NE4). People valued being greeted by name, introduced to others and quietly supported with digital tasks such as logging in, uploading documents or reading emails that felt overwhelming at home (ELP1, NE5). So even if 'wrap-around' support does not directly address causes of food insecurity, it is appreciated as a form of social interaction and provides some immediate support.

At the same time, people encounter limits and risks. Provision is uneven and fragile, often dependent on a few staff or volunteers. When a volunteer or service provider leaves, support may simply stop (NE12). Some worry about privacy and competence when volunteers handle sensitive information, saying training and safeguards matter if computers and phones are shared or passwords are discussed. People appreciate being able to talk to someone trusted in a familiar space, to get forms checked and to be walked across the room to a partner, yet they also carry the cost when a link breaks or a promised call never comes (B9, B13, B17, B22, ELP4, NEO3). In short, people experience food assistance projects as one of the last staffed, predictable places they can turn to in person. People come because it is somewhere to be, to be known and to move more than one problem forward at once, but they also feel the strain of a system that asks food spaces to absorb responsibilities without the stable resources and protections that this role requires.

Taken together, these comments show that the erosion of face-to-face infrastructures through closures of physical spaces and their replacement by digital systems does not merely subtract a social nicety. It removes the relational glue that enables people to interpret requirements, discover entitlements, avoid predation and remain socially connected.

5.7 Conclusion

People's experience of digitalised food assistance reveals fundamental tensions between digital-first policy assumptions and the lived realities of marginalised populations. The absence of positive experiences of digitalising welfare and food assistance is an empirical finding that demonstrates that those with the greatest need consistently report exclusion rather than empowerment and efficiencies. Poverty, and the design of digitalised welfare, operate as overriding constraints. As such, rather than bridging existing inequalities, digitalisation creates new forms of exclusion and compounds existing disadvantages and food insecurity. These issues applied across all our research sites and for all population groups, including refugees and others from a migrant background, as well as white British people in some of the most marginalised parts of the country.

Poverty leads to limited or no access to devices and the internet, and renders other barriers, such as skills, language, culture, increasingly insurmountable. The design of digital welfare systems (such as UC and Healthy Start) makes it difficult for people to apply for and benefit from the support offered. As would be expected, this effect is worse for the most vulnerable populations (people with disabilities or language issues). People were aware of food apps for individual use but did not consider them suitable as a source of food.

With these constraints, contrary to efforts to minimise the need for human interaction, digital-first delivery has just shifted this responsibility to community networks and volunteer systems that are ill-equipped to provide consistent, comprehensive assistance. This creates a two-tier system where digital capability determines not only access to support but also the quality and dignity of that access.

6.   POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND FOOD INSECURITY AT POPULATION LEVEL

By Susanne Jaspars, Yasmin Houamed and Iris Lim

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, we have seen how issues of food insecurity and digital access are intimately linked to poverty at the level of recipients of food assistance, or for those living in poverty generally. The poorest and most marginalised people are among the most food insecure and also face most difficulty accessing devices, and internet and skills training, which makes applying for welfare and work hugely more difficult. In this chapter, we demonstrate how these same links also exist at the population or structural level. Structural inequalities are causing both food insecurity and digital access constraints, while England's key economic institutions in finance and retail benefit. At the same time, policies and practices to address food insecurity often operate at a local or individual level.

In this chapter, we start with an examination of structural inequalities and how they relate to food insecurity, digitalisation and digital poverty. We then examine how digitalisation feeds into corporate dominance in food systems and thereby contribute to food insecurity. Other businesses involved in the digitalisation of food and welfare assistance include financial services and data management providers. We argue that the increasing role of the private sector in addressing food insecurity is part of an overall neoliberal trend that also includes shifting responsibility to council or community level. We analyse the relationship between food and digital strategies at the local level and argue that they can play some role in addressing causes of food insecurity, but mainly that national-level policy change is necessary. As charitable organisations are largely unable to address structural causes, much of their focus is on changing individual behaviour through budgeting and cooking lessons, and digital skills training. For those on the receiving end, this situation leads to a feeling of powerlessness, sometimes shame, but also anger that the cause of their suffering not being addressed.

6.2 Structural inequality as a cause of food insecurity

The UK faces some of the highest levels of inequality among advanced economies, spanning income, wealth, regional economic performance, education and health, as well as food insecurity and digital exclusion. By the 2010s, the UK had become

one of the most regionally unequal of the world's industrialised economies in terms of GDP per capita, productivity and disposable income (Harvard University, 2023; McCann, 2020). The richest 10% of households hold 43% of all wealth (Equality Trust, 2025). In this section, we discuss inequalities in income and wealth (including regional differences), their origin in de-industrialisation and neoliberal economic strategies, followed by recent drivers of food insecurity and digitalisation such as the Covid pandemic and the 'cost-of-living crisis'. We end the section by examining how these inequalities are reflected in surveys of food insecurity, malnutrition and mortality.

Inequalities in income, wealth and economic growth

Nationally, the largest economic sectors are finance and retail, crowding out other sectors (Martin and Sunley, 2023: 392). The dominance of the financial sector has created a shift away from funding industry to financial institutions and real estate (Martin and Sunley, 2023: 392). From the 1970s, after deregulation, finance became the nation's prime growth engine and, by the 1980s and 1990s, the government's focus was on making London a global financial centre. In retail, supermarkets have dominated for the past 25 years, with their share of retail expenditure rising from 37.3% in 1989 to 44.5% in 2020 (ONS, 2021a). This growth is partly explained by supermarkets offering a broad range of goods, drawing consumers away from specialist retailers (ONS, 2021a). According to the 2025 food strategy (DEFRA, 2025), food and drink is the largest manufacturing sector, greater than automobiles and aerospace combined. As a whole it generated £153 billion in revenue and employed 4.2 million people in 2023.

With economic and financial, as well as political power in London, the UK is one of the most geographically unequal countries. Martin and Sunley (2023) argue that the concentration of finance in the centre has not had a positive trickle-down effect. London generated almost a quarter of the UK's GDP in 2023 (Harari, 2025), and property wealth is highest in the South East of England (Equality Trust, 2025). Mean property values increased by 150% in London between 2008 and 2018 but less than 20% in the North (Phillips and Agrawal, 2020). While doing fieldwork in the North East, we heard about outsiders buying houses as a good investment, as for social housing there is a guaranteed 10% profit by renting them out (NE9). Average income also varies geographically: it is lowest in the West Midlands and the North East (at about £600/week) and highest in London (at about £767/week)[6] (Francis-Devine, 2023). London has the highest proportion of income from employment (84%) and the North East the highest proportion of income from state support at 20% (DWP, 2024). These differences are also seen in education and health services. The North East consistently comes last in terms of A-level results (UK Parliament, 2022). People interviewed in the North East frequently commented on the poor quality of education and how this

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[6] Before housing costs in 2021/22 to 2023/24, the pattern is similar after housing costs (Harvard University, 2023).

hindered job prospects (e.g. NE17, NE21, NE27). In interviews, we heard about an inability to read and write as common in the region. For both men and women, health inequalities have worsened and regional differences are apparent, with life expectancy lowest and mortality highest in the North East (ONS, 2024a; also see further below in sub-section on food insecurity, malnutrition and mortality).

Huge differences can also be seen within regions and local authorities. While wealth is concentrated in London, the city also contains some of England's most deprived areas (Phillips and Agrawal, 2020). Elsewhere, Solihull, next to Birmingham, is a wealthy commuter area (Phillips and Agrawal, 2020). In Gateshead and Hartlepool, two of the most deprived cities in the North East, poor wards were often right next to wealthier ones. We saw the differences ourselves between city centres and much wealthier areas, like those around Saltwell Park in Gateshead and Ward Jackson Park in Hartlepool – formerly the residences of shipping company owners. Former industrial towns in the North and the Midlands are poorer than other parts of these regions.

Regional inequalities and economic decline in the North East and the Midlands can be linked to a long history of mining and manufacturing and the economic policies that brought an end to them from the 1960s onwards. In the North, mines closed as oil replaced coal as fuel for transport, heating and industry, with major closures in the 1980s when Thatcher's government denationalised, privatised and globalised energy sources. Nationally, the 1970s saw a shift from a Keynesian welfarist model with the aim of full employment, to a neoliberal, financialisation and globalisation model. Public industries, utilities and services were privatised (Martin and Sunley, 2023), and labour markets were deregulated. This ultimately led to many companies sourcing their labour elsewhere, and factories closed. De-industrialisation also had a lasting impact in East London, with the closure of the Royal Docks resulting in an estimated 48,000 job losses (Falk, 1981). The privatisation and globalisation of finance, services and labour markets has had the effect of 'importing into the West some of the chronic precarity and superfluity that has long been fostered in the global South' (Keen, 2023: 6).

Since the 1930s, various governments have promoted projects to 'level up' those regions that experienced economic decline. Most of these were project and private-sector dependent and failed to lead to economic growth. The first such scheme, was the Special Areas Act, passed in 1934 to attract capital into the northern mining areas (see Annex 2 on the North East). Initiatives became more frequent in the New Labour era (from 1997), including the setting up of a number of regional development agencies, which operated through public–private and civil society partnerships, and were subsequently taken up by successive Conservative governments. The term 'levelling up' has since become associated with Boris Johnson's government, particularly post-Brexit, when it was first concerned with transport, broadband, and research and development investment, and later with inequalities in health, crime and education. However, it remained unclear exactly

what inequalities were to be addressed and where (Newman, 2021). In 2019, the Conservative government initiated four funds to encourage local growth: the Towns Fund, the Community Renewal Fund, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) and the Levelling Up Fund. However, with weak (and underfunded) local government capacity, and numerous different funds to apply for, local authorities struggled to deliver projects and thus spent only a small fraction of the allocated funds. In our interviews, the SPF was mentioned several times as a project-based source of funding that was usually spent on infrastructure. Residents in Hartlepool referred to the marina as one example, which provided jobs temporarily but is of little use to most of the population. 'Under the last labour government, [Peter] Mandelson was the MP here. You'd think Hartlepool would be booming. But we just got the marina' (NE23). Others said: 'the money from government has gone to a leisure centre, museums, ships for tourism. How will this trickle down to help people?' (NE27).

The crises of the 2000s and the rise of food insecurity and digitalisation

The 2008 food and financial crisis, the Covid pandemic, the 'cost-of-living' crisis, and the nature of government response led to further inequalities. The economic recession following the 2008 food and financial crisis led to increases in food prices and, for some, rising insecurity in jobs and income, and unemployment. The UK government's actions in response were, first, to bail out British banks (at an estimated cost of £141 billion) and, second, to impose austerity measures on the public sector. The latter involved changes in the country's social security system. The 2012 Welfare Reform Act made cuts in a range of benefits, including child benefits (introducing a two-child limit for claiming child support), housing benefits, disability allowance, and the freezing of automatic inflation-based increases in benefits for working-age people (Farnsworth, 2021; Berman, 2024; Zamani and Rousaki, 2024). It also included cuts in public-sector jobs (Oxfam, 2013): overall this resulted in the poorest 10% of the population seeing a 38% reduction in their income. Increased food insecurity and a rise in the number of food banks was noted by researchers in 2014–15 (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014) and linked directly to welfare reform – for example, reduced entitlements and new conditionalities (Lambie-Mumford, 2019).

The digitalisation of the welfare system and the introduction of Universal Credit (UC) was part of the welfare reform, first introduced in 2013 and rolled out over the following decade. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the aim was to increase efficiency by cutting costs and improving accountability. Since then, the UK's dominant fiscal policy has been austerity, with the aim of reducing the UK budget deficit and growing the economy. Those studying food aid in the UK at the time also noted the shift in responsibility for ensuring access to food from the state to the charitable sector. These shifts have resulted in the privatisation and

individualisation of risk as part of a policy framework emphasising individual behaviour and individual responsibility for poverty (Lambie-Mumford, 2019), thus rooting welfare and food assistance firmly within the prevailing neoliberal ideologies.

The Covid pandemic led to further increases in food insecurity and an acceleration of digitalisation. By 2020, many households were already dependent on food banks, which now faced a increase in demand because people lost work and income. Food Foundation surveys showed an increase in food insecurity by 2021, from 7.6% to 9% of households (Goudie and McIntyre, 2021). People lost work or income, food prices increased, and not all were eligible or able to apply for UC; and for those who could apply, the funds were often insufficient to meet their needs. Hardest hit, and most food insecure, were those who were already marginalised, including frontline workers – those who were unable to work from home (e.g. bus drivers, delivery drivers, nurses). Those working in the food sector were among the worst affected (Goudie and McIntyre, 2021). Rural and coastal areas, already among the most food insecure, were also hard hit, as they were dependent on the hospitality industry and public transport, both of which were decimated (Phillips and Agrawal, 2020).

The pandemic accelerated the digitalisation of public services and highlighted the severity of digital exclusion and its link with poverty. While government provided some funding for devices (for example through schools), affordable Wi-Fi was left to the market. In addition, some of the most vulnerable – for example those staying in hostels or temporary housing – were not able to get broadband at home (Holmes and Burgess, 2022). The pandemic accelerated digitalisation because it was the only way to access UC, and many more people needed it. According to a charity representative, the DWP ran an ad saying 'UC gets you to work faster' (P20). Many faced problems with their application, however:

> Job centre closures and increased application demand (950,000 new applications at the end of March), means that the majority of claimants are being directed to complete their Universal Credit application online; however, reports suggest significant queues of over 100,000 applicants. (Power et al., 2020: 5)

Some noted an increase in inequality due to the 'digital-by-default' approach of many essential services during the pandemic (Connected Voices, 2023). On the retail side, supermarkets expanded their online service, necessitating an expansion in delivery (Power et al., 2020), as well as increasing their share of the retail sector. The expanded digitalisation divided those who could shelter and work from home from those who were on the frontline and continued to provide key services, including food deliveries. In our interviews, we found that food bank users and others living in poverty were often dependent on precarious

work for companies like Deliveroo, UberEats and Amazon, illustrating this division. Notable as well is that Amazon has launched multi-banks to distribute their surplus goods. FareShare, a project that has delivered surplus food from supermarkets and other sources to food banks for many years, received money from DEFRA during the pandemic for this, an activity which later became a key part of their programme (Key informant P23).

The so-called 'cost-of-living crisis' further increased inequalities and food insecurity. Between January 2021 and April 2025, UK food prices rose by 36% – over three times the increase of the preceding decade. In 2023, food price inflation reached 19.2%, the highest in 45 years, following global shocks such as the war in Ukraine (DEFRA, 2025). A number of people we talked to complained about the recent increase in food prices and their consequent need to use food banks. One food assistance project manager described 'people from the area just coming up and saying "can we have something" … especially fresh stuff', due to price hikes (B12). Others commented on increases in transport costs (NE15), people not being able to afford electricity or gas (meaning they are unable to cook) (NE22), or just the cost-of-living crisis in general as reason for coming to a food bank (B15, NE18, NE21, NE26). Furthermore, the term 'cost-of-living crisis' feeds into the neoliberal logic. Rather than linking it to inequalities within the national and global food and financial systems, this term implies that the crisis is due to factors beyond anyone's control. In particular, it downplays the role of Brexit in lowering wages and rising inflation rates (Partington, 2022).

Food insecurity, malnutrition and mortality

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) did not include food security in their family resources survey until 2019–20. Their 2022–23 data show that the proportion of food-secure households decreased from 92% in 2019–20, to 90% in 2022–23, with similar findings in the following year (DWP, 2025).

As expected from the discussion at the start of this section on structural inequality, the survey shows regional inequalities. Households in the North East and North West were among the least likely to be food secure, with similar rates in the West Midlands (see Figure 2). Other food security surveys show similar regional differences. A Trussell survey in 2023 showed that 26% of the population in the North East was food insecure and 17% in the West Midlands, compared to 6% in the South East and 14% in the UK overall (Trussell Trust, 2023). In 2025, while overall food insecurity in the UK increased, it was slightly lower in the North East at 23% the North West having the highest level of food insecurity (Trussell, 2025a). A recent survey by the Food Foundation found even higher levels of food insecurity in parts of the North East (54% in Hartlepool) and the West Midlands (56% in most local authorities) (Food Foundation, 2025c). Like income and wealth, differences are apparent within regions or local authorities.

Households in inner London were least likely to be food secure (83%) and most likely to have used a food bank (DWP, 2025). Note that the areas of highest food insecurity include those that are predominantly white British (the North East), as well as those that are highly diverse, such as Birmingham and parts of London, thus indicating that food insecurity is a problem of poverty and deprivation generally. While asylum seekers and refugees are undoubtably among the most food insecure (Hamilton et al. 2022), this will not be reflected in national surveys as they are dispersed and the numbers are small.

These food security conditions are reflected in malnutrition and mortality. In 2023/24, children in the most deprived areas were more than twice as likely to experience obesity compared to those in the least deprived areas (DHSC, 2025). In the UK, the cost of a healthy diet is generally much higher than for unhealthy high-fat or processed foods (Food Foundation, 2025d). Families on low incomes have no choice but to live on cheap, ultra-processed food (Food Foundation, 2023c). As expected, the prevalence of obesity was highest in the North East (25% of year 6 children, aged 10–11 years old), followed by the West Midlands and Yorkshire (DHSC, 2025).

For mortality, in 2021 to 2023, the most recent period for which data are available, the North East had the highest all-cause mortality rate (1,105 per 100,000), 22% higher than the South East, the region with the lowest rate (902 per 100,000) (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2024). According to Berman (2024), austerity measures led to a significant drop in life expectancy, averaging about three months for men and five months for women between 2010 and 2019, or around 190,000 excess deaths, representing a 3% increase in mortality over this period. One significant cause Berman (2024) identified was the increase in 'deaths of despair', which include drug-related deaths. Hiam et al. (2025) similarly report a large increase in suicide in the North East since the 1980s. The North East has double the rate of suicide of London (where it has declined significantly over the same time period), which they link to de-industrialisation and austerity (Hiam et al., 2025). The podcast series 'This is the North'[7] also suggests this is related to a feeling of hopelessness for the future, and to male unemployment and uncertainty about men's role in society.

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[7] https://open.spotify.com/episode/2rtecRiS23JtW2aNnN7D0p?si=xEpRG6VxRDyUUIwtSbiRLg

Figure 2: Household food security in the UK (2023)

Source: *Family Resources Survey*. DWP; https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2024/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2024-theme-4-food-security-at-household-level

To conclude, the causes of food insecurity are structural; they are linked to economic policies that favour finance over manufacturing, ideologies that promote privatisation and globalisation, and welfare provision that is insufficient to meet needs and is difficult to access. Huge regional inequalities have not been addressed by initiatives to 'level up', and the Covid pandemic further increased inequalities and dependence on precarious work (as well as the number of food banks). In many food security assessment reports, however, those who are food insecure are often described as those with disabilities (including mental health issues), the unemployed or those on UC, families with children, homeless people, and people from racialised (or migrant) communities. This means that solutions are often sought at the household or community level (see section 6.6 in this chapter), indicating that how household food security is assessed and analysed is part of neoliberal ideologies of individualising risk and responsibility.

6.3 Structural inequalities and digital exclusion

As we saw in Chapter 5, poverty is an overriding factor in digital exclusion. Austerity policies from 2010 onwards have led not only to changes in benefits and the nature of employment, but also to the withdrawal of physical public services, where people could access free internet services needed to apply for digitalised welfare. From 2020, with the Covid pandemic, the drive to digitalise welfare accelerated as people were forced to use digital channels to apply. The

geographical disparities in poverty, infrastructure and investment described in the previous section have also led to barriers to digital inclusion. This section discusses structural inequalities in digital exclusion, the lack of consistent digital exclusion estimates, and how inequalities are exacerbated by automated decision-making on welfare entitlements.

Digital access in the UK varies sharply by region. According to national census data, the North East has the highest levels of digital exclusion (internet non-users), although rates fell from 21.5% in 2012 to 12.1% in 2018 (ONS, 2021b), compared to 11.1% in the West Midlands and 7% in London. The North East also had low levels of digital skills (ONS, 2021b). To assess this, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) uses a framework developed by Lloyds Bank of five basic skills, including: using a search engine, sending emails, buying items, verifying information and completing application forms. Digital inclusion experts stressed how connectivity gaps cluster in deprived and coastal communities: 'in areas that are one, two or three on the index of multiple deprivation we tend to see high digital exclusion' (Key informant P22). Digital exclusion because of disability and education mirrors regional inequalities. These conditions or circumstances are linked to poverty and in part determined by an industrial past and the social trauma linked to its demise, as well as lack of employment opportunities.

In rural areas, investment in infrastructure is a key factor. Only 54% of rural premises are able to access gigabit-capable broadband compared with 85% nationally, and 10% lack superfast connections versus just 1% in urban areas (Rural Services Network, 2025). One digital inclusion project in the North East referred to rural areas with no or poor connectivity as 'not-spots', and informed us how a local group used a privately bought Starlink satellite dish because 'there was no other way to broadcast' their project (NE8). Others have also noted the use of Starlink in rural parts of England (Quinn, 2025). However, as research in Barnet shows, 'not-spots' can also be found in some of the most affluent areas (see Annex 3), showing the large variability in digital infrastructure within local authorities as well as across the country. According to the Good Things Foundation (2025), 3.7 million families who are below the minimum digital living standard are concentrated in these communities facing infrastructure deficits.

Digital inclusion experts highlight the limits of digital exclusion estimates because of variation in measurement. Our findings (see Chapter 5), and those of other researchers, show that digital exclusion is more complex than simply looking at infrastructure, connectivity and skills (Holmes and Burgess, 2022). Issues of housing, immigration status, education, financial stress, are all important. Researchers and professionals working on digital inequalities suggest that: 'A minimum digital standard of living includes, but is more than, having accessible internet, adequate equipment, and the skills and knowledge people need. It is about being able to communicate, connect and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence' (MLDS, 2025).

National census data provide no comprehensive view of digital exclusion, forcing analysts to piece together indicators of access (Key informant P22). The ONS defines digitally excluded adults as those who have either never used the internet or have not used it in the last three months, as 'internet non-users'. Skills are assessed using the indicators in the Lloyds Bank framework discussed above. In 2018, 5.3 million adults were in the category of non-users. Eight per cent of people in the UK (4.3 million people) were estimated to have zero basic digital skills (unable to do any of the activities in the five basic digital skills), and 12% (6.4 million adults) were estimated to have only limited abilities online (missing at least one of the basic digital skills) (ONS, 2021b). It is difficult to compare this number to the 3.7 million families below the minimum digital living standard. The national digital inclusion action plan uses an estimate that a quarter of the UK population have the lowest level of digital capability, meaning they are likely to struggle to use online services (UK Government, 2025a). This fragmented picture obscures the true overlap between poverty, food insecurity, and digital exclusion. As with food insecurity, measurements of digital exclusion and skills are largely focused on individuals and families.

At a population level, the use of digital technologies in automated decision-making has been shown to be discriminatory and can feed into structural inequalities. The DWP uses automated decision-making in a number of ways. First, means-testing to calculate UC allowances has been automated using a Real Time Information (RTI) system, whereby employers automatically transfer salary information. The DWP then uses an algorithm[8] to combine monthly income with a person's characteristics and situation to calculate how much UC payment they should receive. From the start, however, this has been error-prone, with errors more likely for people on irregular incomes (Human Rights Watch, 2020). According to Alston (2018: 9), this necessitated a DWP team working full-time on the errors in monthly payments (with claimants having to wait for weeks to get the proper amount). Second, it uses a risk-score system to vet benefits claimants and detect potential fraud. It has so far used this for requests for UC advance payments (to assist people during the wait period before UC kicks in) and for a Targeted Case Reviews. The DWP has been running the latter since 2022 to identify and review claims considered at high risk of fraud (Big Brother Watch, 2025).

Despite requests by civil liberties, social justice and human rights organisations for detail on the algorithm and the data the DWP uses, very little has been forthcoming. We do know that it uses past data to profile benefits claimants and to predict the risk of fraud. One possible issue with this is that marginalised people, who are less able to appeal fraud allegations, may still have their data recorded erroneously as fraudulent. As past data are based on DWP staff determinations, their own biases may have come into the algorithm too. Information disclosed by

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[8] An algorithm is a sequence of instructions that tells a computer how to perform a task. The algorithm programmed to calculate UC 'take[s] the many and varied inputs about the claimant's family and financial circumstances and work[s] out the award each month' (Human Rights Watch, 2020: 14). They are used to categorise, predict and guide behaviour.

the DWP confirmed disparities in age and disability beyond what are expected, showing discrimination in cases flagged as a fraud risk (Public Law Project, 2023a; Big Brother Watch, 2025). Any technology or information management system reflects the underlying biases, worldview and assumptions of the people who built them (Amnesty International, 2023). Investigations by the Guardian, furthermore, based on data from the UK government's internal fairness analysis, revealed that the AI system used to detect welfare fraud showed bias according to people's age, disability, marital status and nationality. Crucially, no fairness analysis has yet been undertaken regarding potential bias based on race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, pregnancy, maternity or gender reassignment status (Booth, 2024). In a commentary on government use of AI in general, the Public Law Project (2023b) has called this a 'hurt first, fix later' approach. All of this has devastating impacts on those already struggling with inadequate access to food, poor housing or disabilities as, while investigations take place, benefit payments may be suspended.

Following Eubanks (2018), this is what Duffield (2019) has called the rise of the 'digital poorhouse'. 'Billions of low-income households, working poor, the destitute, and irregular migrants are having their welfare interactions with state authorities and their subcontractors automated and externalized by artificial intelligence and predictive algorithms' (Duffield, 2019: 13).

6.4 Structural inequalities in food systems

In this section, we first discuss inequalities and the control of supermarkets in the food system, then how the use of food apps and vouchers by charities and government programmes feeds into these inequalities, and other ways in which supermarkets influence charities.

Corporate control within the food system

Marked by the structural inequalities discussed so far, the UK food system entrenches gaps in diet, health, and access to food. A food system consists of the organisations, authorities and institutions involved in, and that influence, production, trade (import/export), processing and manufacturing, retail (wholesalers, retailers, caterers), and consumption. In the UK, private-sector interests and profit-making motivations are over-represented in this system, resulting in a lack of concern for ensuring access for everyone to sufficient affordable healthy food. The result is patterns of diet-related illnesses and food insecurity in some sections of the population, while others profit. We argue that digitalisation feeds into these inequalities.

While corporate control in the food system is usually discussed in relation to

companies providing inputs such as seeds, fertilisers and equipment, retailers also have a huge amount of power (Clapp et al., 2025; Lang et al., 2009). Out of total consumer spending on food, the majority goes to manufacturers and retailers, with only a minimal amount going to farmers (Lang et al., 2009: 147). As for the economy generally, neoliberal market-based ideologies influence the management of the food system, which has led to a shift of power from government to food corporations (Tansey, 2009). Only a handful of major retailers control UK grocery shopping; in particular, four retailers account for three-quarters of all sales (Lang et al., 2009): Tesco's, Morrisons, Sainsbury's and Asda (Food Foundation, 2023b). This dominance places them in a unique position to shape consumer diets and limit choice (Cooper et al., 2022; Woroniecka et al., 2023). In other words, their corporate power means they are able to shape supply and demand. The result is a self-reinforcing 'junk food cycle', in which sugar producers, manufacturers and retailers channel profits back into increasing consumption (Woroniecka et al., 2023). This leaves many communities with limited access to healthy food. The Food Foundation reported that in early 2025 healthy foods were double the cost of less healthy ones (Food Foundation, 2025). More broadly, death and disability from dietary risks have risen by 46% in the last decade (DEFRA, 2025). Some areas we visited, with the most food-insecure populations, were also food deserts: places lacking shops that sell affordable and healthy food.

The UK imports almost half its food (Power et al., 2020), which means it is vulnerable to global price fluctuations and, as described in section 6.2, food prices rose during the Covid pandemic and in 2022 following the outbreak of the Ukraine war. At the same time, a Food Foundation assessment found that Sainsbury's and Tesco's made their highest profits for 8–10 years in 2021/22 (Food Foundation, 2024b). Some of this can be attributed to digitalisation: online shopping and cheap labour to deliver it. In other European countries, measures taken by government or retailers kept the price of basic goods low (Food Foundation, 2023b). A representative from a charity in the North East had this interpretation:

> I've no doubt that the level of inflation around basic food products during the cost-of-living crisis was way in excess of the actual baseline level of inflation. And nobody seemed to want to listen to the fact that basic food stuffs were going up so much and things could have been done about that. (NE13)

Concerns persist over the sector's labour practices, as no major retailer has National Living Wage accreditation and 25.8% of food-sector workers experienced food insecurity in early 2023 (English and Tobi, 2023).

As well as the move to online shopping from established supermarkets, food retail increasingly includes tech companies. Several large tech companies are providing e-commerce services for groceries. Amazon and Alibaba, for example, have bought into food grocery e-retail. With its purchase of Whole Foods Market

and its use of big data to track consumer behaviour and preferences, Amazon might well become one of the world's top ten food retailers. This indicates that we may be witnessing a shift in corporate power from the supermarkets to the tech sector (Prause et al., 2020) in food systems. The effect on consumers and on inequalities will need to be closely monitored but clearly increases the scope for consumer surveillance.

The role of supermarkets in digitalised food assistance

Supermarkets have a close association with food assistance projects, through initiatives to donate surplus food and through providing direct donations to charities, and because vouchers provided by charities or government programmes are used in the main supermarkets.

Since 2015, surplus food donation has often been mediated by digital platforms such as FareShare Go, Neigbourly, and Foodiverse, each of which is linked with a number of supermarkets, as well as fast-food chains such as Nando's, KFC, Greggs or others. Their use among the food assistance organisations we interviewed was very widespread. Some organisers would present it as a 'food share' that promoted a dignified approach by asking people to come and collect food that would otherwise be wasted. At the same time, they were often negative about the kinds of food received and the way the apps functioned (see Chapter 4). Almost all of them used or had used FareShare, and many also had arrangements to collect direct from local supermarkets. If they used FareShare, this would usually be the paid service rather than the app. This entails paying a regular contribution to receive deliveries of food (weekly, every two weeks or monthly). Some said they used both. One food project manager who does explains the app as follows:

> So we have the FareShare app on my phone, and I'll get a notification because I am signed up [for] whatever's available within my area. They'll match me to supermarkets, like Tesco. We were matched with Nando's. We're matched with KFC. And then we get odd ones now and again. We get notification through that'll say, 'There's food available.' It'll say, 'Are you able to collect?' You accept it, and then you have a time slot to when you can go and pick up the food donations. (NE16)

While this manager was positive about FareShare, she was less so about Neighbourly, which partners with a number of supermarkets: 'if I turn up at Aldi and Lidl, they'll just be like, "Oh yeah, there's nothing", or it's gone in the bin. But a lot of that is because, I think, it's not communicated by Neighbourly to the store how it exactly works.' Others were also less enthusiastic as discussed in Chapter 4. Many food assistance projects, however, expressed an unavoidable dependence on supermarkets, even while recognising the arrangement as far from

ideal: 'We wonder about supermarkets and surplus enabling a broken system, but we also feel as if the government and people in power would honestly let people starve' (NE6). Others would suggest improved apps. This means that supermarkets remain able to dispose of their surplus through food projects and have free advertising to those that need food aid.

Researchers have long argued that food corporations benefit financially and discursively from donating surplus food, while continuing practices that worsen food insecurity and underpay farmers (Caplan, 2016; Caraher and Davison, 2019; Caraher and Furey, 2022). By taking care of 'food waste', and thus removing the cost of disposal for supermarkets, food banks are perpetuating a food system that continuously produces waste (Caraher and Davison, 2019). Instead, the whole process takes up lots of volunteer time in driving to collect surplus food when the supermarket informs them (via the app) that it is available. We heard of two 'food share' projects that had folded because they could no longer recruit enough volunteers. One was the 'Pickle Palace' in Gateshead, that used to pick up surplus and deliver it to community food projects (NE21). In Hartlepool, the Food Network folded for the same reason (NE28). To overcome reliance on surplus, an organisation in Gateshead, supported by the council, is developing a new strategy for purchasing and delivering food for assistance projects. As an alternative, they are developing a community food hub, from which organisations can buy food in bulk at low prices, and have it delivered. In some ways the project is aiming to undermine the power of supermarkets, by consistently and reliably being able to deliver low-cost food (NE20).

As we have seen in Chapter 4, food vouchers are either directly purchased by charities from the main supermarkets (perhaps from council-provided household support funds) or are redeemable in them (free school meals or Holiday Activities and Food Fund [HAF] vouchers). This means that digitalised food assistance in some ways directly feeds into the business of the big supermarkets. The digitalised Health Start card addresses this to some extent by being usable in any shop that accepts Mastercard.

6.5 The role of business in digitalised welfare

Private-sector entities other than supermarkets are also involved in the UK's welfare system. Financial institutions like Mastercard, Visa, and intermediaries like allpay and Prepaid Financial Services (and others such as Soldo) play a large role, and so do data management companies like Palantir and Amazon Web Services. This means private companies potentially have access to data on welfare recipients and a growing influence over policy.

Since the early 2010s, Mastercard has recognised the profit potential in government benefit schemes, calling Mastercard Prepaid Government Plans a

'huge opportunity' (Mastercard, 2012). As of 2024, prepaid cards used for food assistance and welfare, like Healthy Start and now Aspen, are Mastercard. In 2012, annual open-loop prepaid public-sector spending was projected to reach USD 9.3 billion in the UK and Ireland by 2017 (Mastercard, 2012). The same document explicitly states that one of the benefits to Mastercard is to attract new customers and to create opportunities to cross-sell other commercial products. The company also benefits by getting people used to cashless finance systems. Their intermediary for Healthy Start, allpay, has been awarded £554 million in government contracts since 2015 (UK Government, 2025b). Other intermediaries like Soldo are involved in contracts with local government social services but will not be discussed here.

The NHS Healthy Start scheme operates through prepaid cards issued by allpay under a Mastercard licence (NHS, 2026). Allpay describes its prepaid cards as 'preloaded Mastercard[s]', with recorded and monitored transactions and remote loading, positioned for benefit disbursements and emergency aid (Mason, 2023). It stresses the ability to restrict spending by merchant category codes (such as supermarkets) and to deploy cards 'in a matter of days', highlighting speed and compliance (Smith, 2025).

This arrangement places a private financial services company at the heart of a fundamental food security programme, with – in theory – the potential for control and surveillance of what poor families eat, where they shop, and when they purchase food. Despite the lack of firm evidence of this kind of surveillance in the case of Healthy Start, the prospect raises a number of concerns. First, people we interviewed fear the use of their personal data for surveillance purposes and, in some cases, declined to register for digitalised welfare for this reason (see Chapter 5). Specific evidence of this for Healthy Start was found in a recent evaluation, in particular the fear that information provided would affect other welfare entitlements (Barrett et al., 2024: 6). Government departments do, of course, have valid reasons for surveillance: 'The ability to count and keep track of a population is necessary for the fair and targeted delivery of social protection and welfare' (Weitzberg et al., 2021: 2). At the same time, asking about food is a very sensitive issue, as evidenced from research into food intake generally (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015). The same would apply to digitally collected data, in particular when getting consent for the use of data is difficult and people do not have a choice if providing their data is a condition for receiving assistance.

A second issue is who has access to the data, and how they are used. Data sharing between different government departments makes sense for the purpose of auto-enrolment and streamlining the registration for different welfare schemes; for example, between the DWP that administers UC and the Department for Education for free school meals (already agreed), but also with NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA) for Healthy Start. As a number of charities, advocacy organisations, health professionals, local government officials and

academics argue, this will improve uptake (Food Foundation, 2025f). The issue here is the partnership with private companies, like Mastercard and allpay, as financial institutions and with corporations like Palantir and Amazon for data storage and processing. In other contexts, financial institutions have used data obtained through welfare delivery contracts to sell other financial products or to prevent people from getting loans (e.g. Bantock, 2018; Mann, 2021). We also know that it is possible to monitor movement and expenditure on a Mastercard-operated card, as this is done with the Aspen card used by asylum seekers. The Aspen card has been used by the Home Office to monitor how money is spent and where, and they may use this information to ask questions and halt payments (Bennani-Taylor and Meer, 2024; Privacy International, 2019). We were unable to get an interview with allpay or NHSBSA to discuss issues of data sharing, storage and processing.

The financial intermediaries involved in the administration of the Aspen card and payment system (Sodexo at first and Prepaid Financial Services since May 2021) have been mired in controversy. Sodexo because of its disregard for privacy and wellbeing when managing the probation service (among other issues; see Tillyard, 2019), and the latter for breaking competition rules and money laundering (Asylum and Refugee Network, 2021).

In terms of data storage and processing, Section 6.3 discussed some of the issues with DWP private sector contracts and the use of claimant data for machine learning and profiling, and that the nature of the algorithms and the precise role of the different private companies is largely undisclosed. Civil liberties, social justice and human rights organisations have raised concerns about the use of personal data but freedom of information requests have had only a limited response. This is even more concerning, knowing that Palantir, a major data analytics vendor, signed a contract in 2020 with the UK NHS to process and analyse health data. The contract states that Palantir can use stored personal data to improve its own systems. Palantir also builds AI technologies for surveillance and military purposes globally, and in the UK has contracts with the police and immigration authorities. Interoperability between these could lead to the exchange of sensitive data. Its terms of service with the NHS are subject to a non-disclosure agreement (Privacy International, 2020). At the same time, we know that data processing is what Palantir does, and that the Covid pandemic was highly profitable for them, with the value of the company increasing from $670.6 million to $1.2 billion, between 31 December 2018 and 30 June 2020 (Privacy International, 2020). The same concerns apply to Amazon Web Services (AWS). In 2016, AWS signed a cloud hosting agreement with the DWP; the Home Office (responsible for asylum seekers) and DEFRA both signed agreements in late 2023 (Butler, 2024).

Privacy international (2020) has called for increased transparency in government contracts, for the introduction of human rights safeguards and for impact assessments. These are particularly important when contracts deal with vulnerable

populations, and when we know companies like Mastercard and Palantir lobby specifically for welfare contracts (e.g. Quinn, 2023). At a minimum, safeguards are needed in order to ensure informed consent when people provide their data when applying for welfare programmes.

6.6 The localisation of food and digital strategies

This section discusses food and digital strategies at the local level, which is mainly where they are implemented. Local strategies have been established by councils and communities in the absence of national strategies to address issues of food and digital poverty. While there are links to digitalised food assistance in food strategies, and digital inclusion strategies often link to food banks and projects, there is no consistent approach. In the absence of a national policy or coordination, strategies differ in scope and scale and, like food and digital inclusion projects themselves, produce an extremely fragmented system.

Strategies are developed at council level, but the actual projects are implemented by charities, community interest companies or community groups, and are dependent on large numbers of volunteers. The reliance on volunteers, who are often busy meeting day-to-day needs, and short-term and unreliable funding, has meant that advocacy to bring about structural change is limited. This has led to a focus on behaviour change at project level, through providing cooking lessons and digital skills training, for example, despite clear knowledge among volunteers and other frontline workers about the structural causes of food insecurity. This section discusses each of these issues in turn.

Council and community-level food strategies

Many local authorities have created their own food strategies. The councils in places we visited present a range of different strategies with different names: from a food systems strategy, a young people and food security strategy, to a food partnership, a food alliance, a food justice network, and more.

Food strategies and partnerships show similarities but often have a different range of actions. Similar aspects include a focus on food systems, in particular reducing food waste, and promoting healthy diets. Some include emergency food distribution, whereas other councils have this as a separate strategy. Birmingham City Council, for example, recognises the high levels of food insecurity through providing cash grants to food banks and is linked to a separate food justice network of 250 organisations that provide emergency food assistance. Their overall strategy focuses on creating sustainable food systems (Birmingham City Council, 2022). The Newham Young People and Food Security Strategy puts emergency food aid at its centre (Newham Council, 2021). It partners with the

Newham Food Alliance, composed of different organisations that distribute food parcels, and is complemented by the council's £6 million Eat For Free programme for primary schools (Razzaque, 2025). Barnet Council has several food banks, and its strategy focuses on promoting healthy diets, knowledge and skills, possibilities for local food production and reducing food waste. In Gateshead, a council food partnership lead was appointed in December 2023, which brings together organisations providing emergency food assistance and uses a food systems approach for longer-term improvement in local production, access and diets (Gateshead Council, n.d.).

For each food strategy, digitalisation aspects include increasing the uptake of Healthy Start, which requires digital access for registration, and the provision of cash grants to community projects, which may be provided as digital vouchers. The focus on food waste is indirectly linked to the various apps, as described earlier.

Some strategies have grand aims of promoting social justice and addressing inequalities, which are unlikely to be achieved through local strategies alone. The food justice network in Birmingham, for example, aims to bring organisations and people together to advocate for better food systems and to address inequality (Active Wellbeing Society, 2024). The Newham food strategy is 'part of a series of actions to address poverty and inequality'. This raises issues of the scope for advocacy to bring about national change, and the central government's strategy for ending dependency on emergency food parcels.

In all our research sites, people who manage or work in food assistance projects informed us that, despite appreciating the food partnerships, they have little time to participate in regular meetings or in lobbying for a more equal food (and benefits) system nationally (e.g. P22, B18, NE21, NE22, NE28). Many mentioned simply being too busy with the day-to-day running of project. One community project manager, after saying that the food partnership is a good thing, told us:

> The other thing is, though, we've got a cafe to run, we've got an organisation to run. We've got, like, this nice stuff all together. We're all part-time. We can't be like, trudging off to Gateshead to go to these network and things all the time…. It's hard to combine the day-to-day on-the-ground project with the higher-level stuff … (NE22)

Someone else running a fully volunteer-run food project, admitted being 'too busy to even talk to people' during food bank sessions … we're run 100% by volunteer agency, so nobody's actually paid' (B18). Others argue that local change can ultimately lead to national change: as one representative from a London food assistance scheme explained, their organisation has 'spent … 10 years demonstrating by doing', rather than engaging in 'prominent advocacy work' (Key informant P6).

Furthermore, there is no one government department, locally or centrally, that has responsibility for food security. According to one council representative: 'there are 114 different food partnerships in the UK, and 16 government departments are in charge of food' (B5), suggesting this might be the reason it has been difficult to influence national food policy. This complexity makes it difficult to know who to advocate to for change. Another factor is that local councils have no legal responsibility for food. In their budget, it is classified under 'miscellaneous' (B5). It is currently unclear how, or whether, local councils or organisations are feeding into the development of the national food strategy.

Funding constraints, both the lack of funding and the uncertainty regarding future funding, further compound the challenges to efforts to bring about change. Council representatives, and local organisations commented on the pressure to spend large amounts of money in a short amount of time with the Household Support Fund (HSF): £25 million in 2023–24 was a 'crazy amount of money you have to spend in six months' (B5). One community organisation representative told us about being contacted about available funds (£5,000) but having to spend it quickly, and the only way she could do this was by buying bulk food from Tescos and storing it (NE21). Often unspent amounts of money remain with the council, and there is no possibility of roll-over. This mechanism is challenging for councils because they can only employ people to work on these schemes in the short term but still have to monitor implementation when short-term staff are gone. For the implementing projects, their reliance on volunteers and the heavy workload mean few have the time, training or expertise to write grant proposals.

The current Labour government's plans to replace short-term funding through the HSF with a longer-term Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF) from April 2026 addresses some of these issues. At the same time, the CRF is linked with Labour's manifesto pledge of ending dependence on emergency food parcels. As Trussell and the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) noted in their November 2025 brief, the CRF is a step forward if it can take a cash rather than a food-first approach, but it will not address the problems of low and precarious income, or the inadequacies of England's social security system, or high food prices (Trussell and IFAN, 2025). Cash vouchers also pose the risk of feeding into the dominant role of supermarkets in the UK food system.

Local authorities and food partnerships will ultimately need to consider what can and should be done at the local level to address food insecurity. Structural causes of food insecurity operate at national level and require change at that level, for example through the Child Poverty or Food Strategy. Until they have an effect, much of the responsibility to address food insecurity remains with local actors. It will be important to determine the respective roles of the state and of the charitable sector – a need that has been stressed before (see Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014)

Finally, a cash-first approach will need services to promote digital inclusion. These and the other 'wrap-around' services promoted by the CRF (financial and debt advice) are in fact often implemented through food banks, thus in some ways this works against ending dependence on food banks.

Local-level digital inclusion strategies

Like food strategies, digital inclusion strategies vary widely across the country but are often linked to food banks or community projects that also distribute food. Of the places we visited, London showed the most well-developed digital strategies. Newham and Barnet councils, for example, have specific but very different digital inclusion strategies.

The Newham Digital Inclusion Alliance operates as a council-facilitated network connecting voluntary, community and faith organisations engaged in digital inclusion work across the borough. It has a Digital Inclusion Small Grants Programme, which allocates £80,000 annually, providing grants of up to £5,000 to member organisations to support approximately 16 projects each year. The programme funds projects on: basic skills training (email, internet browsing, social media, online safety) and advanced training (coding, digital marketing, graphic design, data analysis). Notably, the Inclusion Alliance provides small grants to community food projects to embed digital assistance within food banks, creating 'wrap-around' services that address the intersection of digital exclusion and food insecurity. The programme operates on a partnership model, encouraging organisations to leverage additional funding sources and in-kind contributions to maximise impact (Newham Council, 2025).

Barnet Council has a borough-wide Digital Champions programme and a broader council-led digital inclusion strategy. Trained volunteers are placed in food banks, libraries and housing sites to support residents, many of whom are hard to reach. Around 12 digital champions work in food banks, helping with tasks like NHS app navigation, UC applications, and Healthy Start sign-ups. Complementary digital skills workshops cater to both beginners and more advanced learners. The programme has recruited multi-lingual digital champions to support residents facing language barriers. This project faced numerous constraints, however, one of which was that one of the sites allocated for a Digital Champion did not have internet access (Barnet's digital infrastructure is poor) and distances between sites where digital support is offered remain large, although there are efforts to recruit more volunteers and set up new sites to deliver support.

An evaluation of Birmingham Council's digital inclusion strategy similarly notes the role of food banks and community centres (in particular 'warm spaces') in providing free Wi-Fi and digital inclusion activities, but this is less evident in the strategy document itself (Kerrigan, 2024). The digital inclusion page of

Digital Birmingham (digitalbirmingham.co.uk) has not been updated since 2023, and community and food projects we visited had little involvement in digital inclusion. One exception was the Neighbourhood Network Scheme digital programme, which offers grants for up to £2,000 to support community-based digital inclusion projects. In Gateshead, the council funded a digital inclusion project via 'Connected Voices' that carried out a mapping of digital inclusion issues in the area. As expected, they found a great need for digital access (Connected Voices, 2023). The digital inclusion officer works mostly with the NHS, local government and charities, building relationships and understanding of digital inclusion needs (NE8).

Adding digital inclusion activities to food banks or projects (see Chapter 4) appears to contradict the aim of ending dependence on emergency food parcels (which are, of course, often handed out by food banks). While this is a good short-term measure, ultimately digital inclusion as part of charitable food aid projects does not provide an accountable or efficient service.

Changing behaviour as a key part of all local-level strategies

Across our three case studies, we found that people managing or working in food projects, expressed views about the abilities of those seeking help to access food, and were involved in activities that directly or indirectly aimed to change behaviour. We saw in Chapter 4 that food projects were often associated with cooking lessons, skills training (digital as well as other employment-related training), lessons in budgeting, etc. These activities are sometimes presented as addressing root causes of poverty even though, at the same time, those working in food banks know that a major causes are the inadequacies of the benefits system or low income. We also saw in Chapter 4 that digital inclusion projects usually focused on digital skills and that these were rarely linked to applying for benefits.

Assumptions about ability or skills fall broadly into three categories. First, people living in extreme poverty have short attention spans, suffer from depression or anxiety, or addiction (alcohol and drugs) and therefore are unable to organise themselves or their money to buy and cook food, or manage their finances, and/ or who may prefer the ease of a take-away option (B4, B12, B15, B16, NE18, NO3). They have 'chaotic lives' (NE6, NEO2). Second, that people have become dependent on benefits, in some cases even adopted dependence as a life choice (NE18, NE28) and, third, that they do not have the necessary skills to cook, budget or find work (e.g. NE22). Skills training is often presented as addressing root or underlying causes of food insecurity. For digital inclusion, the assumption is that people did not know how to use a computer or smartphone, rather than the design of the system, and that they should be able to do that. Examples of assumptions about food and digital-related abilities are listed in Box 10.

Box 10: Views about people who need food assistance

> People are in trauma; even if, in principle, they could learn certain things, they won't do them. Or they can't do [them]. (Community food project manager)
>
> Homeless people … have a very short span for anything you want to tell them, the attention span is really short. [They] have so many stress[es] around and they're like, kind of depression anxiety that just affect the behaviour. (Homeless organisation representatives)
>
> Groups gathered to discuss their experience of poverty had to be a 'small group because people have chaotic and difficult lives. [This way] we get to know them and what their issues are.' (Local authority).
>
> Most will choose to go and hit the High Street for something speedy, although not nutritious. (Government authority)
>
> And there is a cycle of, you know, being unemployed and being in a benefit system and not having aspiration to get out of that. (Organisation)
>
> Generally, there are issues of poverty, housing, getting GP appointments. Problems with drugs and alcohol. There are lots of funerals. People lead chaotic lives. (Food bank manager)

While issues of trauma and addiction clearly need addressing before people are able to apply independently for social welfare or work, others link problems of food insecurity and digital exclusion to individual behaviour. People who are homeless, depressed or suffer from addictions may not benefit from cooking or budgeting lessons or from digital skills training. In fact, representatives from charities and the council recognised this, as well as the inadequacy of UC and the precarious nature of work. They mentioned that not only was access to food an issue but also the cost of cooking it (NE12), or that people could not afford electricity (NE13, NE21, NE22, NE7). We were often told that people living in poverty need adequate housing, schools, health, income or welfare programmes that are sufficient for a family to live on. In Chapter 5, we showed how living on precarious income and UC means never knowing what your monthly income is going to be, thus making it impossible to plan

So why do organisations continue to provide different forms of skills training to address underlying causes of food insecurity? Some academics argue this is recasting food poverty as a treatable condition (Moller, 2022: 112) and that charities normalise 'shaping minds' through psychological tweaks rather than addressing the structural logics behind social injustice (Moller, 2022). Others write that there is a climate of blame – encouraged by the media and politicians – that is laid at the feet of the victims themselves (Wells and Caraher, 2014). Another explanation is that for volunteers and others working for food and digital inclusion projects, this is what – practically – they can do, or possibly a way of

dealing with the stress and moral dilemmas of working in a food crisis that is becoming ever more severe and that they are unable to address. The danger is that this becomes a reality distortion that they themselves come to believe, or that the implied blame of poor or food-insecure people may then be used further by governments to justify policies such as tightening welfare entitlements or devolving responsibility to local councils.

6.7 Anger and powerlessness in the face of structural causes of hunger

In this final section we discuss how food-insecure people and charities understand the structural causes of hunger, and their anger at it not being addressed. We also return to the scope for lobbying and advocacy initiatives that organisations are using to elicit action to address the causes of England's food crisis nationally.

Knowledge and outrage about structural causes of hunger

While charities and community groups focus on interventions at the household or community level to reduce people's suffering, they know exactly what the more structural problems are.

People working for charities and for local government often mentioned austerity and the cost-of-living crisis as key causes of food insecurity. First of all, they told us that welfare is simply not enough to live on and buy sufficient food (e.g. B15). Also that, 'without a doubt incomes have stagnated, as costs have gone up' (NE19). Food costs are up about 30% on average, fuel costs have gone up as well, more than doubling since 2023. Someone from a community organisation told us that their council is 'brutal' and imposes the highest council taxes in the country but provides little funding for community food projects (NE10).

Getting a good job is difficult. One food bank manager explained that before she got that job, she had been doing three jobs and still had to use community cafes to make ends meet. She thinks part of the problem is the poor education where she lives, which reduces opportunities to apply for better jobs. She used to work for a major fast-food outlet, initially without a contract, but when she did have a contract as a manager, she was still on the minimum wage (NE03). Others mentioned precarious work and zero-hours contracts (NE10, NE28, NE30). 'One job that was advertised, was for just six hours in one day. [The government has] created new employment agencies that have taken over support for getting work. People need permanent jobs to be able to get off Universal Credit' (NE30). But generally, 'there just isn't much work and travel to work is difficult and expensive' (NE12). One man mentioned that his wife had gone to at

least a hundred interviews, but there is no work. He also argued that it is cheaper for companies to create two part-time jobs than one full-time job (NE30).

In every place we went to, food project workers talked about the cost of housing. Some said that the cost of housing, combined with that of heating, is so high that people have to live in shared accommodation or become homeless. This is a major cause of depression: 'to be honest, if all your earnings is going to pay bills, and you have nothing left, it affects you mentally. You can't buy anything for yourself, but you have to wake up every morning, and, you know, leave your house to work for nothing' (B15). One volunteer at a community project said they were effectively forced to become self-sufficient because of a deliberate strategy to cut welfare:

> Lots of benefits were put together in Universal Credit. At every stage [when they merged benefits], they anticipated that 25% of people would no longer be eligible. Now with PIP [Personal Independence Payment] reform, you have to prove your level of disability. It is carefully calculated to reduce [entitlements]. People have to re-apply. The appeals system has also been made more difficult. Why do we have food banks in a country like this? Fifteen years of austerity, everything has been cut. People and charities have had to step up. Another section of society that is forced to become self-sufficient. All run by people with lived experience. I call it 'forced self-sufficiency'. So that wages can be kept low. Pay rises do not match inflation. Many people claiming Universal Credit are in work. Who runs the contract for the Universal Credit system? Everything has been privatised. (NE15)

Other volunteers referred to the worsening housing situation as linked to privatisation. 'Initially, the council oversaw providing housing for refugees and got payment per property. The contract is renewed every three years, so private companies basically put in a lower bid than the council, and they got the contract.' According to one volunteer, the private sector cannot provide the same level of service. Another volunteer, in the same discussion, said that since the government privatised PIP and UC the private companies are not really interested in the job they are supposed to be doing, just interested in making a profit (NEO3).

Failures of government responsibility

'Food banks, in this day and age!' (NE14)

Outrage about food insecurity, hunger and the rise in food banks was most often expressed by frontline workers in community projects or food banks, or by people

having to go to food banks themselves to make ends meet. The quote above is typical of those having to use food banks. In contrast, some food bank managers and local government officials would say there is no food insecurity because there are so many food banks and other food projects in the area that it is possible to find free or cheap food somewhere every day.

Organisations, and those working in them, are acutely aware that they are addressing failures in government responsibility. For example, someone from a church organisation said they feel a personal responsibility to model a new way of living but: 'As soon as local governments don't have money to do things, all of a sudden, the church has a seat at the table.' The church wants to be a 'critical' partner, but there shouldn't be an expectation to fill the gap – 'We're not a given, we are struggling in many places' (B3). We often heard about the third sector stepping in to do the work that the public sector could be doing. A charity representative felt that the public sector should be telling the private sector to toe the line, pull its weight, stop putting prices up. Then people could afford heating, they would not have to come into food banks and warm banks (NE13). Others too said that basically they exist because the government is not meeting its responsibility. 'The government wants people who are skilled up, and they want volunteers, and they want people towards further steps towards employment. Well, we're doing all that. We're not getting any money for it' (NE22). 'Of course it should not be like this, we are compensating for state failure' (NE5). More specific examples included having to compensate for the Department for Education not providing free school meals or HAF funding for all school-age children. 'We always say free school meals should be open to all children' (NE16).

Even a local government representative himself said:

> I don't think it's right that the third sector has to pick up the slack, because, you know, benefits rates are too low. It's working only because there is this third sector, and who then also rely on the large number of volunteers. So there's two things. One is the level of benefit support, and the other is some recognition that most people need help with doing that [applying for benefits], and then you know who should be providing that, that help, absolutely. (NE19).

Some people we interviewed also gave solutions. The main one is that the government should take responsibility for what is happening and the need for a welfare system and incomes to be sufficient to meet a family's needs. Some other immediate ones included:

> Simple thing. You need the internet to access [benefits]. Everybody's got to pay a bill for the internet. At least help

with the payment of the internet? If it's a need, if people have got to access it. (NE14)

If you need to claim online, you need to have a computer. (NE19)

There should be some system where paying people who have worked – that they get their benefits immediately when they lose their work. (NE23)

Society needs an overhaul. Start with the people coming out of the army. Three out of five people on the street are soldiers. In sleeping bags. They need to be given a job, and somewhere to live. They have no address, so [it's] difficult to even apply for jobs, or Universal Credit. (NE30)

While we were often told that going to food strategy or partnership meetings was difficult because frontline workers were dealing with day-to-day issues and simply did not have time, we did hear about some examples of advocacy too. For example, one local council official informed us that she will give feedback to her councillor/local and challenges him to challenge their MP (NE27). A community organisation representative told us that they had been part of the 'real living wage' campaign (NE12). In Chapter 4, we also discussed the national-level campaigning that organisations like Trussell and IFAN do to end hunger and the need for food banks. The current Labour government has pledged to end the distribution of emergency food parcels in their manifesto, but no firm strategy has as yet been developed.

6.8 Conclusions

Both food insecurity and digital poverty are closely linked to structural and geographical differences in income, wealth and service provision. These inequalities grew during the Covid pandemic and the 'cost-of-living crisis', which accelerated digitalisation and increased food insecurity. Marginalised populations faced greater constraints in accessing secure income or welfare, but businesses made profits – including supermarkets (and other retail outlets) and financial and data management service providers. Supermarkets already dominate a highly unequal food system in the UK and are further enabled by food apps and volunteers that help dispose of their surplus, and through the distribution of vouchers as aid.

Food and digital inclusion strategies are usually implemented at council or community level, but – while useful and appreciated – their scope varies. The need for digital inclusion as part of food strategies is not clearly recognised and

digital inclusion strategies often rely on food projects. These issues will become even more important with the current government's plan to end the dependence on emergency food parcels through the locally managed CRF. These local strategies cannot address national-level structural causes and local charities cannot hold national government to account because they are too busy meeting day-to-day needs. Food projects often provide cooking, budgeting and digital skills training even while knowing that these are not the main causes of hunger. Both the organisations working on access to food, and those who are food insecure, understand that the nature of work and the welfare system are to blame and that they are compensating for the failures of government.

7.　　　　　CONCLUSIONS

In this working paper we have shown that, over the last ten to fifteen years, digital practices used in food and welfare have proliferated while, at the same time, food insecurity and the number and types of food assistance projects have increased. The rise in food insecurity and food projects is linked to digitalisation on several fronts: first, poverty is a key determinant of both food insecurity and digital poverty, at an individual and population level. Second, the digitalisation of welfare and food assistance has made it more difficult for marginalised populations to apply for assistance – thus contributing to their food insecurity. Because of these difficulties, the number of food banks and other food projects has increased and digital support has been added to the services they provide. While specific digital support projects do exist, they focus on general skills, such as using email or online shopping, rather than applying or registering for digitalised welfare. Third, a number of digital tools have been developed to support food supply to individuals and organisations, with varying degrees of use and satisfaction on the part of recipients. Arguably, this has provided more benefits to the supermarkets linked to these tools – as people or organisations collect their food waste or surplus, or shop at them with the vouchers or debit-type cards provided. Overall, digitalisation is feeding into England's inequalities, by risking further exclusion of some of the most marginalised populations and by benefiting large retail and financial and data management organisations. The main reason there is not a bigger food crisis in England is because of the actions of charities and other voluntary organisations, and an enormous number of volunteers who assist with access to food and digital inclusion.

The digitalisation of food and welfare has introduced a regime of practices that include a range of digital technologies, government departments and local government authorities, businesses, organisations, community groups and volunteers. The stated objective of digitalisation was to improve efficiency and accountability but, in practice digitalisation has led to new types of exclusions for some of the most vulnerable, and dependence on an ever-growing range of food assistance projects, many of which support digital inclusion. Government failure to consider the practicalities of ensuring digital access has shifted responsibility for implementation from government to a range of different organisations and people. Food assistance organisations provide other services, including digital support, and community centres and 'hubs' provide food, and digital and other services. This fragmentation of service provision makes it more difficult for those who need support to know where to find it. Turning food projects into 'hubs' to provide 'wrap-around' services presents progress but may, in the long term, make the government's aim of ending dependence on emergency food parcels more difficult. Strategies to address food insecurity have so far been led by local councils, and their role will increase with the Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF),

but they cannot address structural causes at national (and international) level.

Poverty and digital design are the overarching constraints to digital inclusion. Poverty means people are unable to access devices or pay for internet access, and compounds the difficulties of acquiring digital skills, or the language and confidence necessary to complete digital forms. We found that the actual design of digital welfare systems, whether the interfaces themselves or the various requirements in the process of application and use, creates barriers to inclusion. We argue that this can be seen as a form of 'hostile design' that actively excludes people. As Rosenberger (2020) explains in relation to urban architecture, the designation of something as hostile is not an objective description, it is an allegation. The only question is whether it is intentional or just a useful side-effect for a government intent on reducing the benefits bill. The digital exclusion of people eligible for different forms of welfare, and the rise in food assistance. can be seen as a policy failure, that researchers, charities, human rights and civil liberties organisations have shown for the last decade. The effect is also that it reduces the number of people applying for benefits, and responsibility for facilitating digital inclusion and providing food assistance has been shifted to the voluntary sector. Local councils and charities, and people themselves, have been made responsible for food security. All of this displays an underlying neoliberal logic of privatisation, market-based approaches and individual responsibility.

Digitalisation feeds into this individualisation of care. A focus on skills assumes that food poverty and digital exclusion can be addressed through training, whether in digital skills, cooking, budgeting, or other skills. For many projects, this was a key component of their 'wrap-around' services. For the larger organisations this was done at the same time as campaigning on the inadequacy of Universal Credit (UC) and the need for cash-first approaches. The smaller organisations – and individuals – were also very well aware of the role of poverty and inequality in services (health, education), employment opportunities, wages and wealth more generally within England.

Digitalisation feeds into structural inequalities in several ways. First, it has created a category of people that is under constant surveillance by government and business. UC requires claimants to maintain an online journal for regular communication with the DWP on income and job searches. With rising uncertainty and precarity of work this means people are reporting to the DWP for years. Furthermore, many available jobs – such as zero-hours contracts with Amazon or Deliveroo – entail a different form of digital surveillance. This makes the UK's marginalised populations highly subjected to surveillance, while they remain indefinitely in a state of precarity. Second, supermarkets and corporations like Mastercard, Amazon and Palantir potentially benefit from managing the data acquired through partnerships with the DWP, NHS and other government departments. These processes of digitalisation, along with the decline in secure work, and the increase in surveillance, accelerated during the Covid pandemic.

Food insecurity, and the constraints of digital design and issues of surveillance affect all marginalised people – including refugees, migrants and white working-class populations. While surveys link food insecurity to people from ethnic minorities or of a migrant background, or those with disabilities, from a regional perspective the highest levels of food insecurity are in the mostly white British North East. Digital exclusion is an issue of poverty and digital design for all marginalised populations, whose experience of welfare and food assistance applications is remarkably similar.

Ultimately, the UK government is not complying with its obligations under international human rights declarations. Amnesty International, in examining the UK's welfare system, concluded that it does not comply with its obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Violations include the inadequacy of social security, and the barriers imposed by digitalisation, which risk violating human rights because they increase hardship.

Ultimately, these rights, and the right to food, need to be put into law so that government can be held to account. More immediate recommendations might include (1) the provision of sufficient government-funded points of contact to support digital applications for welfare, rather than relying on add-ons to food projects or volunteers, and (2) auto-enrolment to digitalised food assistance programmes such as Healthy Start. In the medium term, government websites for these schemes can be made free to access for those who have the skills, but without internet provision. Councils will need sufficient funding to administer the CRF and, together with food partnerships, determine the role of cash grants and the means of disbursement. Determining what aspects of food insecurity can actually be addressed at the local level will be important. The structural causes of hunger and food insecurity need to be addressed at national level, however. This might include monitoring the impact of relevant government strategies, such as the Child Poverty Strategy. The need for a secure income, and wage and benefits levels that take into account the cost of a healthy diet and minimum digital living standards is also clear. Ultimately, food insecurity will not be addressed until inequalities in food systems, social infrastructure and employment have been rectified, but much can be done before then. This working paper will form the basis of discussions on specific policy recommendations with a range of stakeholders involved in food assistance and digitalisation in the UK.

Annex 1 – Birmingham

By Yasmin Houamed

Overview

Birmingham, located in England's West Midlands, is home to over 1.1 million residents. It is often referred to as the country's 'Second City' – a status tied not only to its population size (second only to London) but also to its historic leadership in manufacturing and trade. Despite this legacy, Birmingham now faces some of the highest levels of deprivation in the UK.

In 2023, Birmingham City Council effectively declared bankruptcy, due, in part, to its inability to meet over £700 million in equal pay claims resulting from historic gender-based discrimination alongside an £80 million overspend on a new cloud-based IT system roll-out (Madden, 2023). The council's bankruptcy has forced the suspension of all non-essential spending, threatening key local services such libraries, arts funding and school transport for young people, and leaving residents to cope with deteriorating conditions as well as a 21% rise in council tax in April 2025 (Sandiford and Gilbert, 2024). Public anger has grown over the lack of a full inquiry, with many fearing long-term damage to community welfare and trust in local government.

Birmingham has also recently become one of the UK's first 'super-diverse' cities: over 50% of its population identifies as Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic (Birmingham City Observatory, 2022). After White residents, the largest ethnic groups are Pakistani (17%), Indian (5.8%), Bangladeshi (4.2%) and Caribbean (3.9%) (Birmingham City Council, 2021). The Office for National Statistics' (ONS's) latest figures report there are '1,000 Sudanese (plus or minus 3,000)' living in Birmingham, which members of the Sudanese community told us was a significant underestimate, particularly as at least 18,000 Sudanese people have sought asylum in the UK in the past five years.

Historical context

Economy

Birmingham's recent history has been defined by repeated waves of major redevelopment – both economic and architectural – as the city has attempted to recover from industrial decline, adapt to demographic changes, and reassert itself as a centre of innovation. Despite remaining a significant cultural and economic 'core city' within England, Birmingham continues to grapple with some of the highest levels of deprivation and unemployment in the country.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Birmingham rose to prominence as Britain's industrial powerhouse, earning the nickname 'the city of a thousand trades'. Its access to raw materials for metal manufacturing and the construction of a dense canal network linking inland Birmingham to national and international markets underpinned its emergence as a hub for innovation and skilled trades – a status it retained well into the mid-20th century. During the Second World War, the city cemented its role as a manufacturing leader, with its factories producing large quantities of tanks and other military equipment.

Following the war, Birmingham's automotive industry expanded on this productivity. By the mid-20th century, the city had made the UK the world's second-largest car producer after the United States (Birmingham City Council, 2008). This rapid industrial growth and the rise of mass consumer markets triggered the modernisation of traditional manufacturing (particularly metal) industries. However, as scholar and West Midlands native Mark Duffield notes, such modernisation 'invariably meant the deskilling of manual work', with many white workers either exiting the manufacturing industry or continuing to operate in outdated, underperforming foundries (Duffield, 1988).

Post-war migration to the United Kingdom to several regions, including the West Midlands, was driven by the economic boom and labour shortages that followed the Second World War. With the encouragement of the government and industry, those shortages were met with workers from Britain's former colonies – particularly the West Indies, Pakistan and India – beginning soon after those countries' independence and reaching a peak in the 1960s. Labour practices and urban resettlement projects contributed to tensions and inequality; 'within the West Midlands, immigration saw the collaboration of government agencies, trade unions and the majority of employers to restrict and disperse those [migrants] coming into the region' to restrict their labour organising (Duffield, 1988: 05). Nevertheless, work, though often physically demanding and low paid, remained widely available through the mid-1960s.

Work availability began to unravel in the early 1970s, with recession and economic restructuring. De-industrialisation – often criticised for naturalising the prioritisation of capitalist interests over social wellbeing – accelerated as trade barriers fell and global competition intensified. Vehicle manufacturing, for example, shifted to continental Europe, and between 1970 and 1980 the number of UK-produced vehicles dropped by half (Duffield, 1988). These changes reflected the broader dynamics of globalisation, as production followed cheaper labour and integrated supply chains across borders. When Thatcher's Conservative government took office, Birmingham's unemployment rate stood at 6.9%; within three years it had more than tripled, reaching 21.5% by October 1982 (Bloomfield, 2019). It was this collapse into mass unemployment that led Birmingham City Council to diversify the city's economic base and pivot towards service-sector employment.

Between 1981 and 2005, manufacturing jobs in Birmingham fell by 71.5%, while service-sector employment grew by 46% (Birmingham City Council, 2008). Today, services account for 87% of the local economy (Birmingham City Council, 2025a). Yet the shift has done little to resolve the city's deep-rooted economic challenges. As of 2025, Birmingham holds the highest claimant unemployment rate (14.2%) among England's core cities, nearly three times the national average of 5.1% (Birmingham City Council, 2025b).

Location shapes economic prospects for migrant communities as well as white British working-class people. Economic disparities within the British Pakistani community are sharpened by a persistent North–South divide (Samad, 2012), with those in the West Midlands and northern towns – especially the large Kashmiri populations in Birmingham, Bradford, Oldham and similar areas – hit hardest by the decline of manufacturing and the shift to a service-based economy.

At the start of the 21st century, Birmingham remained a central target for investments in technology and trade. In the past 15 years, Birmingham has seen record investment, particularly in the city centre, partly due to HS2 and to becoming a designated Enterprise Zone in 2011 (with speciality sectors listed as: advanced manufacturing and engineering, business services, financial services, ICT, pharmaceuticals and healthcare) (Birmingham City Council, 2025a). In addition to these sectors, the city also benefits from its universities, shopping centres, and the international convention centre.

Migration

Overseas migration to Birmingham has shifted notably over time. Between the 1950s and 1980s, most newcomers came from southern India and the Caribbean. In more recent years, arrivals have become far more diverse, with people coming from Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Since 2001, countries such as Iran, Zimbabwe, the Philippines and Romania have emerged among the most common places of birth for residents. Other countries, such as Sudan, may not be correctly represented in official figures, yet the Sudanese community tells us their numbers have increased since 2003 (the start of the war in Darfur).

In 2001 and 2011, the largest groups born outside the UK were from Pakistan, India, and the Republic of Ireland, while across England as a whole, India was followed by Poland and Pakistan. The number of Birmingham residents born abroad increased for nearly all major countries of origin between 2001 and 2011, except for the Republic of Ireland, which saw a 29.5% decline. After a long period of Irish emigration, European Union membership brought economic growth to the Republic, leading many migrants to return home. The sharpest growth was among Romanian-born residents, rising from 66 to 1,433. Those born in Poland and Somalia increased about ninefold, while the numbers of people born in China, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Iran roughly tripled (Birmingham City Council 2013).

Deprivation and food insecurity

Despite its regeneration efforts, Birmingham today faces acute deprivation. It holds the highest child poverty rate in England, with 46% of children living in poverty – compared to a national average of 24% (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024). Deprivation is widespread: 88% of Birmingham's 69 wards are more deprived than the national average, and 64% rank among the 20% most deprived areas in England (Birmingham City Council, 2019). As of August 2024, 41.7% of households in the city are receiving Universal Credit, and 15.2% are on Housing Benefit, both more than double the national averages of 20.4% and 6.9%, respectively (Birmingham City Council, 2025a).

Though Birmingham is known for its vibrant and diverse culinary culture, many of its most deprived wards lack a supermarket within walking distance, limiting access to affordable, healthy food (Birmingham City Council, 2022). More than half of Birmingham's population (55.3%) live in areas identified as being at the highest risk of food insecurity (Birmingham City Council, 2025a). Birmingham's Public Health division has created a dedicated food systems team and launched a co-developed eight-year food strategy to build a more sustainable and equitable food environment.

Digital access

Birmingham's digital infrastructure exceeds the national average in terms of coverage and performance, although data are still limited on digital (skills and) access, which relates to income. Just 0.5% of premises in the city lack access to broadband speeds adequate for basic online activities, compared to 0.7% across England. Furthermore, 92.9% of Birmingham premises benefit from fast and reliable broadband – 10.3 percentage points higher than the national average (Birmingham City Council, 2025a). Despite this strong connectivity, digital exclusion based on skills persists among certain groups, particularly older adults and ethnic minority groups. The city has created a digital inclusion strategy and aims to plan for improved digital infrastructure and training.

Annex 2 – The North East: Gateshead and Hartlepool

By Susanne Jaspars

Introduction

The wider North East region has a population of just over 2.7 million (Statista, 2024) and is one of the least populated regions in the country. Since 2024, it has been governed through two Combined Authorities, including the North East Combined Authority (NECA), consisting of the local authority areas of County Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, South Tyneside and Sunderland. The other is the Tees Valley Combined Authority, which includes Darlingon, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland, and Stockton-on-Tees. Combined Authorities are part of devolved government, with elected mayors and local growth and investment plans.

The GDP per head for the North East is much lower than for England overall (Ward and Harari, 2025) and, correspondingly, it has some of the highest levels of deprivation within the country, with more than 16% of the population within the lowest LSOAs.[9] It has the highest rate of free school meal eligibility in England – excluding London (30% in the NECA) – and numbers have been steadily rising since 2015. It has a child poverty rate of 30% (North East Combined Authority, 2022). The latest Office for National Statistics (ONS) survey showed the highest levels of deprivation in Hartlepool and Sunderland (5.6% and 5.4% respectively for three dimensions), followed by Gateshead (4.9%), with slightly lower levels in North Tyneside (3.7%) and Northumberland (3.4%). Newcastle was the first city to introduce Universal Credit (Casla, 2018). However, even within this overall level of deprivation, there are pockets of wealth.

In contrast with our other sampled locations, the population in the North East is mainly white British, around 95% or more in many local authority areas – for example, in Hartlepool (96.5%) and Gateshead (93.5%) – but with slightly lower estimates of around 80% in Newcastle and Middleborough (ONS, 2021a). Since 2021, net international migration has increased but still remains at a relatively low percentage (North East Combined Authority, 2024a).

Levels of economic inactivity and disability are high (ONS, 2021c). As well as limited employment opportunities, this is likely linked to a number of health conditions: in particular, musculoskeletal conditions such as arthritis, pulmonary diseases and obesity, with the first two often a result of many years of working in the mines. Life expectancy at birth in the North East has been consistently

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[9] LSOA stands for Lower Layer Super Output Area, a small, consistent geographic area in England and Wales used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) for statistical analysis. Each LSOA contains 1,000 to 3,000 residents and 400 to 1,200 households.

lower than England over the last 20 years for both men and women. For men, life expectancy in the 2020 to 2022 period at birth was 77.2 years in the North East and 78.9 in England. For women it was 81.2 years in the North East and 82.8 in England (North East Combined Authority, 2024b).

Not surprisingly, the region also has the highest food insecurity and mortality rates in the country. National food security assessments consistently show the region has the highest levels of food insecurity. A recent Trussell survey (Trussell Trust, 2023) showed the North East to have 26% of the population food insecure, compared to 6% in the South East and 14% in the UK overall. For mortality, in the most recent period of 2021 to 2023, the North East had the highest all-cause mortality rate (1,105 per 100,000), 22% higher than the South East, the region with the lowest rate (902 per 100,000) (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2024).

The region also has the highest levels of digital exclusion nationally, although this has decreased over the years from 21.5% in 2012, down to 12.1% in 2018 (ONS, 2021). According to Collins et al. (2024), one in three people in the North East experience some form of digital exclusion.

Social and economic history[10]

The history of the North East is intimately linked with coalmining. The boundaries of the northern coalfield spanned much of the wider North East region. It was of key importance nationally: the Industrial Revolution in the UK was founded on coal and, until the First World War, the northern (Durham) field and South Wales were leading coal-exporting regions. Both produced high-quality but hard-to-access coal. The areas were important in Labour politics and trade unionism.

In the 1920s, economic crisis forced a reduction in wages and, later, when manufacturing belts around London gained greater prominence, unemployment in the North East increased further. After the Second World War, mines were nationalised to ensure production for post-war reconstruction and included formal recognition of the National Union of Miners (NUM)[11]. The strong need for coal in the post-war period meant that government actively discouraged alternative employment in the area, ensuring that all available labour went into the mines (a total dependency that had serious consequence when the mines closed). Closures started in the 1960s in the west of the area, and in the 1980s in the east. In the 1960s, oil replaced coal as the major fuel for transportation, industrial and domestic heating, and as the basis of the new petrochemical processing industry. Gas and nuclear power followed (Beynon and Hudson, 2021: 49). Alternative

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[10] The first paragraphs of this section draw mostly on Beynon and Hudson (2021).

[11] With Will Lawther of Chopwell, Gateshead, as inaugural President.

employment was encouraged, as well as miners moving to new more mechanised pits. The North East was designated a Special Development Area but factories that opened mainly had what were considered 'women's jobs' (shoes, cosmetics, food) and did not attract unemployed miners (Beynon and Hudson, 2021: 63). Some men started work in the Courtauld (textiles), Black & Decker and Ford Motor factories.

When Thatcher's government denationalised, privatised and globalised energy sources, the closure of mines was inevitable. The first act was to enable companies to make use of cheaper labour outside of the country (through the removal of capital export controls), leading to lower wages and longer hours. Massive strike actions followed, with the longest lasting one year, starting in 1984. By the early 1990s, when the mines finally closed, the government used a strategy of promoting private investment in manufacturing in the region and – at least in theory – offered retraining. However, most miners were unable to find work. Issues of ill-health were one reason for this. Often it had been possible to cope with industrial injuries or ill-health in the mines, for example through support from other miners, but not in new jobs. To keep unemployment numbers low (and so absolve government from recognising the failure of their strategy), job centres encouraged people to register as disabled.

Communities experienced a form of social trauma over this period, from which most have not recovered, leading to depression and despair. Mining was a way of life, not just a job, and formed the social structure of communities. Even if the income had been the same for the new jobs, the whole social infrastructure of the community was lost. The income was not the same, however. New forms of work were low-paid and precarious employment compared to coalmining, where workers were guaranteed a wage that was sufficient for a family to live on. Social life also changed as clubs, chapels, associations, and other organisations linked to mining closed.

During the 1980s, much manufacturing in the North East also closed as companies made use of cheaper labour elsewhere. Huge numbers of jobs were lost. Even the Labour government elected in the late 1990s continued with the same strategy of depending on private investment and accepting the conditions created by globalisation. In the end, most companies left the area, because labour was cheaper elsewhere. They were replaced by even more precarious work. In March 2021, North East residents were most likely to be employed in the health (including care) or retail (including wholesale) sectors. More than three in ten workers were in these two sectors (North East Combined Authority, 2023).

Migration (in and out)

Many of our informants in the North East told us that people rarely move far away

from the community where they were born. If they do, it would be to the nearest town, or perhaps a neighbouring village. This could be in part a remnant of the close community spirit during the mining times, combined with a suspicion of outsiders, but also a function of low qualifications making it difficult to find work elsewhere. People also commented on the influx of asylum seekers and refugees. Precise proportions in relation to the original, or white British, inhabitants are not yet known (the next census is in 2031). In rural areas of Gateshead, community representatives informed us that people from troublesome council estates had been moved into rural areas without any additional funding for the council to address issues of, for example, drug and alcohol abuse.

Gateshead

Gateshead has a population of around 197,700. It has a large urban hub centred around the main town centre area in Bridges ward, and a number of smaller urban centres such as Blaydon, Whickham, Felling and Birtley. Around two-thirds of the borough is rural, with numerous small settlements such Kibblesworth, Sunniside, Chopwell and High Spen (Gateshead Council, 2024). Rural areas in the west of Gateshead, such as Chopwell, are former mining villages, with others just across the border with County Durham. These communities never recovered from the mines closures. Shops, cafes and pubs closed, and transport is poor (NE21).

As for the North East overall, unemployment and ill-health are high, educational attainment low. In 2023, 20% of working-age people were economically inactive, and 4.7% claimed unemployment benefit (ONS, 2024b). In Gateshead 30% of children lived in poverty in 2017/18, and this will have likely increased with the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis (Bradshaw, 2020). Health conditions from mining and shipbuilding work are common, including lung disease and osteoarthritis (NE9), as is drug and alcohol abuse. Gateshead is in the 10% of local authorities with the lowest male life expectancy in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (North East Combined Authority, 2024b). A high proportion of those who lived in Gateshead worked in traditional industries such as mining and later manufacturing (glass and brick factories along the Tyne, which closed in the 1970s and 1980s). The Team Valley Trading Estate (TVTE) was established in the 1930s with the funds released as part of the Special Areas Act, and continues to provide some employment. In the 1980s Gateshead saw the development of the MetroCentre, one of the UK's and Europe's largest shopping centres, which is a key current source of employment.

Infrastructure in the area is weak, including transport across the area, education, and food outlets. Especially in rural areas, access to shops can be an issue (no shops and poor transport) (NE9). Rural schools may not have sixth forms, and even secondary schools may be some distance away. Housing is an issue, as

local housing is now seen as good investment by outsiders. The same is true in Hartlepool. For private rentals, the cost can become exorbitant. In one area, we were told, rent had doubled in the past 2–3 years (NE21).

Being one of the most deprived areas in England, and in the North East, Gateshead also has one of the highest numbers of food bank clients. Overall, digital poverty is prominent because of high levels of overall poverty (Connected Voices, 2023).

Hartlepool

The population of Hartlepool is around 92,000, with hardly any change in the last ten years. As for other areas in the North East, life expectancy at birth is low (77.2 years for males, and 81.4 years for females). The most deprived areas are in the centre of Hartlepool. Walking through, we saw many shops were closed or empty, or were discount shops.

Economic inactivity in Hartlepool is even higher than Gateshead, at 29.7%, and an unemployment claimant rate of 5.1% (ONS, 2024c). Of the population of Hartlepool, 23.2 per cent say that their day-to-day activities are limited due to their health[12]. As for other areas, employment opportunities are few, low-income and precarious. One church organisation mentioned available jobs are at the recycling centre, at Asda, or new gig economy jobs such as Deliveroo, Just Eat, Uber. Amazon also provides work nearby. Most jobs are zero-hours contracts. Hairdressing and window cleaning were also mentioned.

As in Gateshead, education is poor. According to one council worker, one-third of the population of Hartlepool is illiterate, with an average adult reading age of 7–9. Huge numbers of children are excluded from school due to social and family issues (NE27). The number of food banks or projects is more limited than in Gateshead, but there is still a possibility of finding free or discounted foods on most days. Food insecurity is high, more than 50% according to a newspaper article in 2021 (Dowdswell, 2023).

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[12] file:///Users/yaz/Downloads/Hartlepool_Ward_Profiles___file_size_reduced.pdf

Annex 3 – London: Newham and Barnet

By Iris Lim

Introduction

London, the capital city of England and the United Kingdom, is home to over 8.9 million residents across its 32 boroughs and the City of London (GLA, 2024). London's diversity sets it apart from other UK cities and regions. Over 300 languages are spoken and 46% of its population identify as Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic (BAME) (Trust for London, 2024).

The city's role in international finance, cultural production and political influence masks significant disparities in wealth, opportunities and access to basic services. While London generates about 22.3% of the UK's GDP (Harari, 2025), it also contains some of England's most deprived areas, with significant differences both between and within individual boroughs. For example, on average, London's poverty rate is 26% after housing costs (Trust for London, 2025), but East London's boroughs, such as Tower Hamlets and Newham, have the highest rates of poverty in London at 39% and 36% respectively, after housing costs. This is compared to 19% in Richmond or 16% in Merton. Child poverty reveals even sharper contrasts. On average, a third of London's children live in poverty but, in Tower Hamlets, 47% of children live in poverty after housing costs, while in Richmond upon Thames the figure is just 15%, meaning a child in Tower Hamlets is more than three times as likely to grow up in poverty (Trust for London, 2026). The four boroughs with the highest child poverty rates – Hackney, Islington, Tower Hamlets and Newham – all have rates exceeding 40%, while neighbouring boroughs may have rates below 20%, illustrating how wealth and poverty sit side by side in London (Trust for London, 2026).

Life expectancy measures show similar disparities. For example, compared to the average life expectancy of 82.8 years for women, London performs better, at 83.6 years (ONS 2024a, 2024b). Infant mortality rates are 3.9 deaths per 1,000 births for the UK overall and, in London, the figures range from 6 per 1,000 births in Harrow to 1.9 per 1,000 births in Sutton (ONS, 2025).

The benefits system provides inadequate support for London's high living costs. London has the highest proportion of Universal Credit (UC) households affected by the benefit cap at 3.8%, compared to the national average of 1.9%, but this rises to over 5% in some outer London boroughs (DWP, 2025b). Over 38,000 London households had their income reduced by the benefit cap in May 2024, an increase of 49% since before the pandemic, with the highest concentrations in boroughs already experiencing deprivation (Trust for London, 2026). The

cap limits benefits to £25,323 per year for couples and single parents in Greater London, despite housing costs consuming 57% of poor households' total income (DWP, 2025).

Historical context

London has transformed from an industrial and port-based economy into a service-dominated global hub. The post-war period (1948 to the 1970s) saw significant Commonwealth immigration, particularly from the Caribbean and South Asia, establishing the multicultural communities that now characterise areas like Newham (Hansen, 2000).
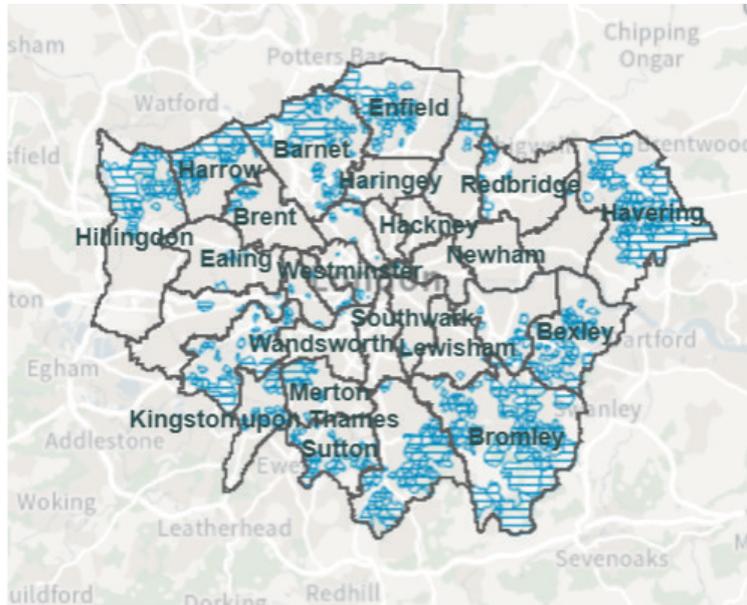
The de-industrialisation of the 1960s to the 1980s had a lasting impact on East London's boroughs. The decline of London's manufacturing industries since the post-war years is particularly visible in the closure of the Royal Docks, resulting in an estimated 48,000 job losses (Falk, 1981). The shrinking of traditional industries in East London, such as garments or furniture manufacturing ('Meet East London's Finest Manufacturers – East End Trades Guild', 2017), created areas of deepening poverty that still exist today. At the same time, the growth of financial services, especially after deregulation in the 1980s, concentrated in Central and West London, leaving former industrial areas behind (Leyshon and Thrift, 1993; Martin and Sunley, 2023).

Since the period of post-war reconstruction, London has been at the forefront of government efforts to 'modernise' public services. New municipal government structures were established, notably the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1965, to oversee public housing, transport and planning programmes. This body was dissolved in 1986, after Thatcher's attempts to privatise and decentralise service delivery in that year (Cunningham, 2014). It was re-established as the Greater London Authority (GLA) in 2000 by New Labour for a 'modernised' London (Travers, 2002). During this time, London also embraced early digital initiatives, such as LondonConnects, which developed IT infrastructures, a London-wide public service network and early government digital portals (GLA, 2003).

In the 2010s, London became a testing ground for digital government initiatives. For example, the Borough of Hammersmith in London was selected as one of the early areas for the roll-out of UC in 2013, ahead of the universal roll-out that began in 2016, marking a significant shift towards a digital-first approach to welfare provision (DWP, 2013). The roll-out of UC was particularly negative for London residents, with Policy in Practice calculating that 40% of households were found to be worse off when transitioning to UC, compared to 32% in other big cities in the UK (Harkin, 2016). This move also happened within the context of austerity policies that significantly reduced borough budgets. As of 2024, London boroughs employed 54,000 fewer full-time equivalent staff than in 2010,

a one third reduction, while the city's population grew by 884,000 (11%) more residents (London Councils, 2024a). From 2024 to 2025, London boroughs' Core Spending Power (CSP) has remained a fifth lower than in 2010 (London Councils, 2024b).

Figure 3: LOTI digital exclusion map 2023

Source: Loti digital inclusion map: https://gis2.london.gov.uk/portal/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=44fd21710d444f9b88604eb726fb678e

In 2019, the London Office of Technology and Innovation (LOTI) developed a mapping technique that reveals the spatial distribution of digital exclusion across the capital, showing large swathes of the city as digitally excluded, especially in outer boroughs such as Barnet and Bromley. Despite the capital's reputation for technological innovation, digital skills gaps affect 23% of adults in inner London, with particularly high rates among older residents (45% of over-65s) and those with English as a second language (31%) (Good Things Foundation, 2024). Broadband infrastructure quality was also surprisingly low for a major city, with up to 20% of residents experiencing speeds lower that 10Mb (Price, 2025).

In response to these challenges, London has adopted a food bank-style model to address digital exclusion. Get Online London, a digital inclusion service delivered by the charity Good Things Foundation and supported by City Hall and LOTI, operates the London Device Bank, which functions 'like a foodbank for data' (BBC, 2025). The initiative refurbishes donated devices and distributes them through a network of community organisations to those in need. By 2025, it had distributed 88,500 data packages and 7,119 devices, while establishing more than 1,100 digital inclusion hubs across every London borough providing free internet access.

Employment and economic context

London's labour market presents a contrast of relatively higher average wages alongside in-work poverty. While the median annual salary of £49,700 exceeds the UK average of £39,039, this masks extreme variation (Clark, 2025). A quarter of the UK's gig economy workers are based in London, creating precarious employment conditions without sick pay, holiday entitlement or pension contributions (Cockett, 2023). In 2024, while 4% of residents in the City of London were paid below the London Living Wage of £14.80 per hour, outer boroughs like Barking and Dagenham had 23% of working residents making even less than this amount (Trust for London, 2025).

While London workers earn the highest median annual salary in the UK this income is eroded by housing expenses. London households in poverty spend 57% of their total income on housing costs compared to 33% for households in other parts of the England (Trust for London, 2025).

Newham Borough

Newham was formed in 1965 from the merger of the medieval parishes of West Ham and East Ham as part of the Greater London reorganisation under the London Government Act of 1963. This act sought to streamline and modernise London's government structure and reduce the number of government districts in the area.

The borough's industrial heritage shapes its current challenges. Before de-industrialisation, West Ham alone had 706 industrial sites, including major employers like Tate & Lyle sugar refineries, while East Ham housed Europe's largest gas works at the time in Beckton (Brown, 2014). The Royal Docks, which could accommodate ships of 30,000 tonnes, employed 34,000 dockers in 1937 (down from 52,000 in 1920), but closed in 1972 due to containerisation, with ships requiring deeper-water berths. This industrial collapse devastated the local economy. By the late 1950s, while unskilled jobs remained plentiful, there was a lack of meaningful employment opportunities for young men, signalling the area's economic decline (Brown, 2014)

Newham's population is an example of 'super-diversity', characterised by 'multiple small ethnic groups and multiple social, legal, and cultural differences that cut across ethnicity' (Mintchev and Moore, 2017: 565). Over 70% of the population identifies as BAME and more than 200 languages are spoken within the borough boundaries (Aziz, 2024). The borough's population of approximately 397,741 (Taylor, 2025), is a young population, with 40% of residents under 25 years of age, creating particular pressures on education and youth-oriented services (Newham Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, 2025). The largest ethnic groups include Bangladeshi (16%), Indian (11%), African (12%), and Pakistani

(9%) communities, many established since the 1960s–1970s (Crystal Roof, 2021, from Census data). Overall, more than half of Newham's residents were born outside the UK (ONS, 2023).

Many of Newham's wards rank among England's most deprived, according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation (ONS, 2021c), with child poverty and fuel poverty creating contexts where crisis support becomes normalised rather than exceptional. In terms of measurements of Adult Skills Proficiency, measuring levels of literacy, numeracy, digital skills and ESOL, 24.1% of Newham's population (60,876) need support (Learning and Working Institute, 2025).

In Newham, food insecurity is both acute and visible. Approximately 45% of children live in poverty, with 32% experiencing food insecurity (Trust for London, 2025). During the Easter holidays of 2021 alone, 17,154 pupils received food vouchers, illustrating the scale of need. The borough's childhood obesity rates are among London's highest: 23% of Reception pupils are overweight or obese (8th in London), rising to 43% by Year 6 (2nd in London).

Barnet

Barnet, also established in 1965 from parts of Middlesex and Hertfordshire, represents suburban North London's relative prosperity while harbouring significant internal variations in socio-economic circumstances (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018).

Barnet is London's second-largest borough by population (389,344 in 2021). It encompasses significant internal variation across its 24 wards. While overall statistics indicate 35.9% BAME population, lower than London's average, this figure obscures geographical concentrations, with wards like Colindale (59.9% BAME), Burnt Oak and West Hendon significantly exceeding London averages (Census 2021 | Barnet Open Data, n.d.).

Spatial clustering of diversity and deprivation within Barnet reveals underlying inequalities. Census 2021 data indicate that the five most deprived areas include Burnt Oak and Watling Park (66.3% of households deprived in at least one dimension), demonstrating how aggregate borough prosperity can coexist with concentrated disadvantage. Approximately 95,000 residents in Barnet live in poverty. Geographically, the most deprived parts of the borough are primarily concentrated in Brunswick Park, Burnt Oak, Colindale, Golders Green and Underhill (Reeve, 2022).

In terms of measurements of Adult Skills Proficiency, measuring levels of literacy, numeracy, digital skills and ESOL, 23.9% of Barnet's population (63,236) need support (Learning and Working Institute, 2025). This skills gap has direct

implications for digital inclusion and household income opportunities.

Barnet's food insecurity is more hidden but nonetheless significant. While aggregate statistics suggest relative prosperity, concentrated pockets of deprivation mean substantial numbers face food access challenges. Food bank usage in Barnet has increased year on year since data collection began in 2020. In 2023, Barnet's food banks have reached 153,000 recipients (Barnet Food Partnership, 2024).

Annex 4 – Interviews

National

Code	Category	Date	Interviewers	Place
P20	National church-based organisation	27 Feb. 2025	SJ, YH	London, SOAS
P21	Digital service provider	16 Jan. 2025	SJ, YH, IL	Online
P22	Digital support organisation	10 April 2025	SJ, YH, IL	Online
P23	National food charity	12 May 2025	SJ, YH, IL	Online

Birmingham

Code	Category	Date	Interviewers	Place
B1	Ethnic minority reps. (Sudanese)	13 Nov. 2024	YH, SJ, IL	Birmingham
B2	Ethnic minority reps. (Sudanese)	14 Nov. 2024	YH, SJ, IL	Birmingham
B3	Organisation (food), religious	14 Nov. 2024	YH, SJ, IL	Birmingham
B4	Organisation (food)	15 Nov. 2024	YH, SJ, IL	Birmingham
B5	Local authority	15 Nov. 2024	YH, SJ, IL	Birmingham
B6	Organisation (food)	21 Jan. 2025	YH, SJ, IL	Online
B7	Organisation (digital)	17 Jan. 2025	YH, IL	Online
B8	Ethnic minority reps. (Sudanese community group)	26 Jan. 2025	SJ, YH	Birmingham
B9	Local authority	27 Jan. 2025	SJ, YH	Birmingham
B10	Ethnic minority individual (Sudanese)	27 Jan. 2025	SJ, YH	Birmingham
B11	Recipients group (Sudanese)	28 Jan. 2025	SJ, YH	Birmingham
B12	Organisation (food)	28 Jan. 2025	SJ, YH	Birmingham
B13	Community reps. (Pakistani)	11 Feb. 2025	IL, YH	Birmingham
B14	Community group reps. (Sudanese)	12 Feb. 2025	IL, YH	Birmingham
B15	Community group (food), Pakistani	12 Feb. 2025	IL, YH	Birmingham
B16	Local authority	20 Feb. 2025	IL, YH	Online
B17	Local authority	30 April 2025	YH	Online
B18	Organisation (food), religious	30 April 2025	YH	Birmingham
B19	Community reps. (also ethnic minority – S. Asian)	31 April 2025	YH	Birmingham
B20	Organisation (food)	31 April 2025	YH	Birmingham
B21	Recipients, ethnic minority, Nigerian	1 May 2025	YH	Birmingham
B22	Community group	1 May 2025	YH	Birmingham

Gateshead and Hartlepool

Code	Category	Date	Interviewers	Place
NE1	High-level key informant, Andrew Forsey	27 Jan. 2025	SJ	Online
NE2	Local authority	3 March 2025	SJ, IL	Online
NE3	High-level key informant, Greta Defeyter	7 March 2025	SJ	Online
NE4	National charity	18 March 2025	SJ, IL, YH	Gateshead
NE5	Community group rep.	18 March 2025	SJ, IL, YH	Gateshead
NE6	Local authority	19 March 2025	SJ, IL, YH	Gateshead
NE7	Food organisation	19 March 2025	SJ, IL, YH	Newcastle
NE8	Digital support organisation	19 March 2025	SJ, IL, YH	Newcastle*
NE9	Local authority	13 Nov. 2024	YH, SJ, IL	Gateshead
NE10	Food organisation – religious	14 Nov. 2024	YH, SJ, IL	Hartlepool
NE11	Local authority	14 Nov. 2024	YH, SJ, IL	Online
NE12	Food organisation	23 April 2025	SJ	Online
NE13	National charity	29 April 2025	SJ	Gateshead
NE14	Recipient group, same centre as NE5	30 April 2025	SJ	Gateshead
NE15	Community group	30 April 2025	SJ	Gateshead
NE16	Food organisation	1 May 2025	SJ	Gateshead
NE17	Food organisation	1 May 2025	SJ	Gateshead
NE18	National charity	1 May 2025	SJ	Gateshead
NE19	Local authority	2 May 2025	SJ	Gateshead
NE20	Food organisation	6 May 2025	SJ, YH	Gateshead
NE21	Community centre	7 May 2025	SJ, YH	Gateshead
NE22	Food organisation	7 May 2025	SJ, YH	Gateshead
NE23	Recipient – male	8 May 2025	SJ	Hartlepool
NE24	Recipient – male	8 May 2025	SJ	Hartlepool
NE25	Recipient – female	8 May 2025	YH	Hartlepool
NE26	Recipient – female	8 May 2025	YH	Hartlepool
NE27	Local authority	8 May 2025	SJ, YH	Hartlepool
NE28	Community centre	8 May 2025	SJ, YH	Hartlepool
NE29	Recipients – family	9 May 2025	SJ	Hartlepool
NE30	Recipients – couple	9 May 2025	SJ	Hartlepool
NE29	Recipient – mixed group	9 May 2025	YH	Hartlepool
NE30	Digital support organisation	16 May 2025	SJ, IL	Online

* Organisation for Gateshead

London

Code	Category	Date	Interviewers	Place
ELP1	Food pantry manager	24 April 2025	IL	Newham
ELP2	Local authority	25 March 2025	IL	Tower Hamlets
ELP3	Food pantry founder	28 April 2025	SJ, IL, YH	Newham
ELP4	National food charity	29 May 2025	SJ, IL, YH	Online
ELP5	Community centre co-manager	1 May 2025	IL	Online
ELR1	Recipient – male	Multiple days	IL	Newham
ELR2	Recipient – male	2 May 2025	IL	Newham
ELR3	Recipient – male	2 May 2025	IL	Newham
ELR4	Recipient – female	2 May 2025	IL	Newham
ELR5	Recipient – female	2 May 2025	YH	Newham
ELR6	Recipient – female	2 May 2025	YH	Newham
ELR7	Recipient – female	2 May 2025	YH	Newham
ELR8	Recipient – female	2 May 2025	YH	Newham
ELR9	Recipient – female	2 May 2025	YH	Newham
ELR10	Recipient – female	Multiple days	IL	Newham
ELR11	Recipient – male	Multiple days	IL	Newham
ELR12	Recipient – male	Multiple days	IL	Newham
ELR13	Recipient – female	Multiple days	IL	Newham
ELR14	Recipient – male	Multiple days	IL	Newham
ELR15	Recipient – male	Multiple days	IL	Newham
ELR16	Recipient – male	Multiple days	IL	Newham
ELR17	Recipient – male	Multiple days	IL	Newham
ELR18	Recipient – female	Multiple days	IL	Newham
ELR19	Recipient – male	Multiple days	IL	Newham
ELR20	Recipient – female	Multiple days	IL	Newham
ELR21	Recipient – male	Multiple days	IL	Newham
ELR22	Recipient – male	Multiple days	IL	Newham
ELR23	Recipient – female	11 April 2025	IL, YH	Newham
ELR24	Recipient – female	11 April 2025	IL, YH	Newham
ELR25	Recipient – female	11 April 2025	YH	Newham
ELR26	Recipient – male	11 April 2025	IL	Newham
ELR27	Recipient – female	11 April 2025	YH	Newham
ELR28	Recipient – female	11 April 2025	IL	Newham
ELR29	Recipient – female	11 April 2025	YH	Newham
ELR30	Recipient – female	16 May 2025	IL	Newham

Code	Category	Date	Interviewers	Place
NLP1	Local authority	3 Feb. 2025	IL, SJ	Online
NLP2	Food bank manager	27 Feb. 2025	IL	Online
NLP3	Charity worker	11 March 2025	IL	Online
NLP4	Local authority	3 Feb. 2025	IL	Online
NLV3	Digital support volunteer	4 Sept. 2025	IL	Online
NLV4	Digital support volunteer	18 Feb. 2025	IL	Barnet
NLA8	Social worker	24 July 2025	IL	Online
NLA9	Social worker	19 March 2025	IL	Online
NLR1	Recipient – male	Multiple days	SJ	Barnet

Annex 5 – Observations

Birmingham

Code	Category	Date	Interviewers	Place
BO1	Organisation (food)	15 Nov. 2025	YH, SJ, IL	Birmingham
BO2	Organisation (food)	27 Jan. 2025	YH, SJ	Birmingham
BO3	Organisation (food)	12 Feb 2025	YH, IL	Birmingham
BO4	Local authority (museum)	13 Feb. 2025	YH, IL	Birmingham
BO5	Organisation (food)	05 April 2025	YH, IL	Birmingham
BO6	Organisation (digital)	29 April 2025	YH, IL	Birmingham

The North East

Code	Category	Date	Interviewers	Place
NEO1	Walk-through town centre	20 March 2025	IL, YH, SJ	Hartlepool
NEO2	Food bank and volunteer group	19 March 2025	SJ, IL, YH	Gateshead
NEO3	Food bank	29 April 2025	SJ	Gateshead
NEO4	National charity (same as NE4)	2 May 2025	SJ	Gateshead
NEO5	Food organisation	9 May 2025	YH, SJ	Hartlepool
NEO6	Food organisation	9 May 2025	SJ, YH	Hartlepool

London

Code	Category	Date	Interviewers	Place
NLO1	Food charity sector meeting	2 Nov. 2024	IL, YH, SJ	Barnet
NLO2	Food bank	4 Jan. 2025	SJ	Barnet
NLO3	Community centre	22 Jan. 2025	SJ, IL	Barnet
NLO4	Food voucher pilot meeting	23 Jan. 2025	IL	Barnet
NLO5	Food charity sector meeting	24 Jan. 2025	IL, YH, SJ	Barnet
NLO6	Food voucher pilot meeting	6 Feb. 2025	IL	Barnet
NLO7	Digital support meeting	18 Feb. 2025	IL	Barnet
NLO8	Food voucher pilot meeting	25 Feb. 2025	IL	Barnet
NLO9	Food voucher pilot discussion	26 Feb. 2025	IL	Barnet
NLO10	Digital support session	27 Feb. 2025	IL	Barnet
NLO11	Food bank	4 March 2025	IL	Barnet
NLO12	Digital support session	13 March 2025	IL	Barnet
NLO13	Food voucher pilot meeting	19 March 2025	IL	Barnet
NLO14	Food voucher pilot discussion	2 April 2025	IL	Barnet
NLO15	Food bank	12 April 2025	SJ	Barnet
NLO16	Digital support meeting	16 April 2025	IL	Barnet
NLO17	Digital support meeting	17 April 2025	IL	Barnet
NLO18	Food charity sector meeting	25 April 2025	IL, YH	Barnet
NLO19	Digital support session	01 May 2025	IL	Barnet

Code	Category	Date	Interviewers	Place
NLO20	Digital support session	5 June 2025	IL	Barnet
NLO21	Food charity sector meeting	18 July 2025	IL, YH	Barnet
NLO22	Digital support session	3 July 2025	IL	Barnet
NLO23	Digital support meeting	10 July 2025	IL	Barnet
ELO1	Team observation walk-through the borough	26 Nov. 2024	IL, YH	Newham
ELO2	Food pantry observation	14 March 2025	IL	Newham
ELO3	Food pantry observation	28 March 2025	IL. YH	Newham
ELO4	Food pantry observation	11 April 2025	IL, YH	Newham
ELO5	Food pantry observation	24 April 2025	IL	Newham
ELO6	Food pantry observation	2 May 2025	IL, YH	Newham
ELO7	Community digital advice observation	14 May 2025	IL	Newham
ELO8	Community digital advice observation	4 March 2025	IL	Newham
ELO9	Community digital advice observation	28 May 2025	IL	Newham
ELO10	Community digital advice observation	4 June 2025	IL	Newham
ELO11	Community digital advice observation	11 June 2025	IL	Newham
ELO12	Community digital advice observation	18 June 2025	IL	Newham
ELO13	Community digital advice observation	25 June 2025	IL	Newham

Annex 6 – References

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