



Policy opportunities to promote food security through digital inclusion

POLICY BRIEFING | July 2026

New research from the SOAS Food Studies Centre shows how digitalisation is deepening food insecurity and hindering access to welfare and food assistance amongst marginalised communities across England. This briefing explores how the current government's food policy initiatives could be strengthened by taking account of digital inclusion.



A three-way challenge: poverty, digital exclusion, and food insecurity

Over the past decade, food insecurity and food aid distribution has increased and the connection between food insecurity and digital exclusion has become more pronounced. In 2023, 16% of people using food banks had no internet access ([Trussel Trust, 2023](#)).

The past decade has also seen the transformation of the welfare system, including its digitalisation. The Covid pandemic, as well as the current 'cost-of-living' crisis, has increased both food insecurity and digitalisation (see [here pp.63-65](#)). With forecasts showing food inflation increasing over 2026 ([Food and Drink Federation, 2026](#)), partly due to the conflict in the Middle East, more needs to be done to protect those at risk of food insecurity.

The double burden of food insecurity and digital exclusion is most acute amongst those already marginalised, including working-class communities, ethnic minorities, refugees and those without recourse to public funds. Within these groups, single parent households, households with children and those with a disability are particularly affected ([The Food Foundation Food Insecurity Tracker, 2026](#); [Our Digital Nation 2025](#); [Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Digital Exclusion in the UK, 2024](#)).

For the factors driving food insecurity for these groups see further [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) for more information as well (see [here pp.60-72](#)).

The highest levels of food insecurity, ill health, and digital exclusion are found in the north of England mirroring regional structural and health inequalities in the UK, ([The Food Foundation, 2025a](#)).

Box 1. Poverty, food insecurity and digital exclusion in numbers

Poverty

- 21% of the population and 30% of children were in relative low income, after housing costs (2022/23). s ([DWP, 2025](#))
- The highest levels of deprivation in England are concentrated in post-industrial northern cities, parts of the Midlands, coastal communities, and some inner London boroughs. ([MHCLG, 2025](#))

Food Insecurity

- The distribution of emergency food parcels increased massively from 300,000 in 2013 to 3.1 million in 2023 ([Trussel, 2025](#))
- 12.0% of households experienced food insecurity in January 2026, but the percentage was as high as 18% at the height of the cost of living crisis in 2022 ([Food Foundation, 2026](#)).
- Geographically, food insecurity is highest in the north. According to [Trussel \(2023\)](#), 26% of the population in the North East was food insecure, compared to 6% in the South East and 14% in the UK overall.
- 36% of households in receipt of Universal Credit reported food insecurity in January 2026. ([Food Foundation, 2026](#))

Digital Exclusion

- 1.6 million people are offline (4% of the population) ([Lloyd's Bank, 2024](#)).
- The North East has the highest levels of internet non-users: 12.1% in 2018, compared to 11.1% in the West Midlands and 7% in London ([ONS, 2021](#)).
- 3.7m households with children do not meet the Minimum Digital Living Standard. ([Good Things Foundation, 2024](#))
- Adults with very low incomes (<£11,500) are more than twice as likely to have no home broadband. ([Fabian Society, 2022](#))

What is digital welfare and food assistance?

From Universal Credit to the Healthy Start scheme and cashless Free School Meals, recent governments have encouraged digital transformation, including in welfare, food support and healthcare. The main aim has been to make these services more efficient, cost-effective, and accountable. In some cases, an added aim has been to reduce stigma by drawing less attention to those receiving welfare. Non-government digitalisation of food provisioning includes food apps to distribute food surplus, and supermarket vouchers. The table below gives an overview of the different digitalised welfare and food assistance programmes:

Box 2. Digitalised welfare and food assistance in the UK

GOVERNMENT

Universal Credit (UC): Introduced in 2013, UC was intended to streamline benefits into a single monthly payment, promote efficiency, and encourage work. The standard allowance for a single person under 25 is £338.58 per month and for someone over 25 it is £424.90 ([Citizens Advice, 2026](#)). Adjustments are made for families, children, housing, disability and other conditions. Applications for Universal Credit are primarily made online.

Healthy Start scheme: The Healthy Start 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 discrete (reduce stigma). The scheme involves a prepaid benefits card designed to support low-income families with £4.65 per week for a pregnant woman or child under 4 (or £9.30 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.

Cashless free school meals (FSM): Introduced in the early 2000s when the Department for Education approved the use of biometric technologies in schools, and strongly encouraged from 2012 to reduce stigma, as well as flexibility and ease of payments for schools and parents. Vouchers have been distributed during the school holidays ([Freeman, S., 2026](#)).

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 is £49.18 for asylum seekers in self-catering accommodation, and £9.95 in accommodation where food is provided.

NON-GOVERNMENT

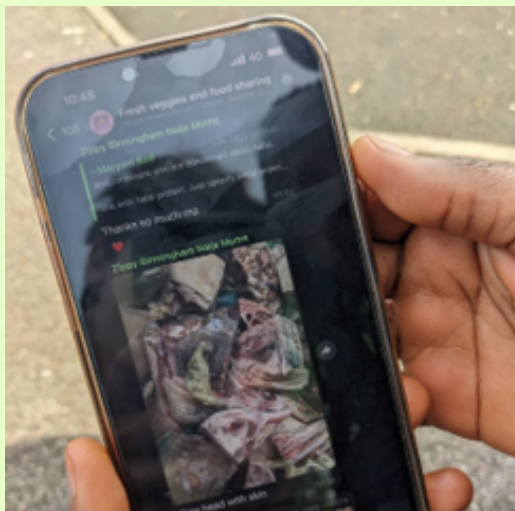
Food apps: A number of apps – mostly linked to supermarkets – are used by food assistance projects to use surplus food as part of their food supply.

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, or the Household Support Fund (HSF), which was established for use by local councils in 2021 to meet emergency needs for vulnerable families.

Adapted from Box 1, pg 11, in [Food Poverty and Digital Power](#), SOAS

How digitalisation influences food insecurity

There have been some positives to digitalisation for those on the receiving end: pre-paid cards used in Healthy Start and cashless free school meals have reduced some of the stigma as beneficiaries are less identifiable at the checkout. Another example is the creation of online community networks to share information about where to find support or specific kinds of food (as pictured below).



Box 3: Photo from the "Fragmented Welfare: Human Interventions in Digitalised Food Assistance in England" (Photo Series)

"A Nigerian couple with young children who avoid foodbanks due to stigma rely on an online community network that shares alerts about religiously appropriate halal food deliveries. Digital platforms can become a discreet work-around for accessing support without entering formal systems."

However, digitalisation can lead to exclusion of some of the most vulnerable, poor, and food insecure populations from food assistance and social welfare. Digitalisation creates a "digital paywall" for food assistance, with poverty causing barriers like device and data scarcity and a lack of digital skills for using official portals (for further information see [here](#)), p 37).

Poverty driven barriers include:

- The inability to afford or access devices (smartphone or computer) and data, leading to a reliance on basic phones, shared numbers, public Wi-Fi, and borrowed hotspots.
- Barriers such as skills, language, and culture, are compounded by poverty, and lead to a reliance on frontline workers and volunteers.

In addition, there are issues related to poor digital design:

- Overwhelming, repetitive application forms written in a way even difficult for native English-speakers to understand
- Cascading prerequisites (ID documents, bank details, email verification) and hybrid journeys requiring offline steps (print, scan, email) make registering for assistance difficult.

Automated decision-making, using algorithms for determining eligibility, benefits levels, and detecting fraud in welfare claims risks adding hardship and further contributing to food insecurity. Inaccuracies in estimating income levels and errors in fraud allegations may reduce or halt payments. Not keeping appointments or providing regular information on the Universal Credit journal, may lead to sanctions and loss of welfare payments. People experiencing poverty may miss key notifications due to lack of internet access, devices, or mobile credit.

Welfare applicants are rarely able to navigate digital systems without help. As a result, many people rely on volunteers and third sector organisations to help bridge the gap. Food assistance projects, whether in food banks or community centres, are increasingly providing digital support, for example with online applications, distributing data SIMS and devices, and providing skills training. While in some communities this may be set up well, it risks a postcode lottery of support, often reliant on short-term funding streams.

These issues are well-reflected by one of the Food Foundation Ambassadors when presented with the key issues coming out of the SOAS research:

“From my experience working across school food and supporting families, digitalisation has created as many barriers as it has efficiencies. I’ve seen firsthand how parents struggle with fragmented platforms, complex forms, or lack of clear communication, and as a result, children miss out on support they are entitled to.

What’s often overlooked is that these systems don’t remove the need for human support, they shift it. School staff end up spending significant time helping families navigate digital processes. At the same time, the move away from face-to-face interaction reduces trust and makes it harder for families to ask for help with dignity.

Digitalisation can work well when it complements, not replaces, relational and community-based approaches. Without that balance, it risks deepening existing inequalities.”

Rebecca, Food Foundation Food Ambassador, Educator and Parent, Devon

Feeding into inequalities

The digitalisation of food assistance risks entrenching inequalities because it creates new forms of exclusion and compounds existing food insecurity. For many in need of food assistance, digitalisation has made it harder to apply. This also adds to the barriers to affording a healthy diet, as healthy foods are nearly twice as expensive as unhealthy foods, driving health inequalities ([The Food Foundation, 2026b](#)).

Food apps and vouchers at present are mainly connected to the major retailers. At the same time, the groceries sector has become increasingly consolidated, with just four major retailers accounting for two-thirds of market share ([DEFRA, 2026](#)). This consolidation can limit farmer’s options when negotiating contracts, and is part of a ‘just in time’ retail model that leaves the food system vulnerable to shocks ([Sustain, 2024](#)).

Digitalisation requires sophisticated financial, data management and analytics services. In the UK, privatisation has involved contracting corporations including Mastercard, and their local intermediary Allpay, for the Healthy Start card, Palantir for data management with the NHS and [Amazon Web Services](#) with DWP. Privacy International ([2020](#)) has raised issues of lack of transparency and accountability over the Palantir contract and concerns about data use.

Policy opportunities for addressing digital exclusion and its links to food insecurity

The following recommendations build on existing government policies and aims, indicating what needs to be done to maximise both food security and digital inclusion.

1. Ensuring adequacy of wages and benefits and access to welfare for all.

Currently, neither benefit levels nor the National Living Wage are based on the cost of essential goods ([JRF, 2026](#)), nor have they increased in line with recent inflation. This limits many households' ability to afford a healthy diet: the most deprived fifth of UK households would need to spend an unrealistic 49% of their disposable income (after housing costs) on food to follow the Government's recommended healthy diet, the Eatwell Guide. In contrast, the most affluent fifth of households would need to spend just 11% ([The Food Foundation, 2026b](#)).

Inadequate benefit levels are compounded by digitalisation, which excludes many marginalised people from accessing welfare. Stagnant wages mean even people in work are not immune from food insecurity ([The Food Foundation, 2024](#)). Therefore, to reduce food insecurity, ensuring digital inclusion is important alongside increasing the incomes of the lowest-income households.

Recommendations:

- Deliver the Labour manifesto commitment to enact the socio-economic duty in Section 1 of the Equality Act 2010 (Labour Party, 2024). This should include addressing digital exclusion, as this commitment requires certain public bodies to consider how their strategic decisions might help to reduce inequalities associated with socio economic disadvantage.
- Track the cost of a healthy diet, and ensure benefits and minimum wages are set at an appropriate level for people to be able to afford a healthy diet along with the other essentials
- Better enforcement and more resources for digital inclusion through procurement requirements (national and local level). Digital inclusion should be part of equality impact assessments of digital transformation programmes.
- Ensure inclusive design of digital welfare through the allocation of consistent resources to evaluate user experience and co-design with affected populations.
- Improved accountability to address the harmful user-experiences of automated decision making and sanctions in welfare.

2. Support local authorities to address food insecurity through secure social infrastructure and integrating digital support into services.

The new Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF), provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to local authorities, represents an improvement on the previous Household Support Fund (HSF) through its shift to longer-term funding and an emphasis on cash-first support and resilience building through integrating food assistance with advice and financial services. The shift to cash transfers has the potential to give households more autonomy and flexibility in meeting their basic needs ([IFAN, 2025](#)) but depends on addressing digital exclusion among eligible households to be effective.

Improving people's access to welfare through digital inclusion, increasing the level of welfare (and income), and shifting from emergency food parcels to cash transfers, is only part of addressing food insecurity. The other part is food prices and access to a healthy diet. This is what the national food strategy aims to address with its proposed 'good food cycle'. Part of this strategy is to make the UK's food supply and marketing more diverse, including better direct access to markets for farmers, SMEs and local businesses, The aim is to shorten supply chains with benefits to the environment and the local economy, and to support access to affordable food

Social supermarkets and affordable food clubs, along with their wrap-around services, can provide important immediate support by building trust, reducing social isolation, and improving access to nutritious food (Feeding Britain, 2024). These initiatives can also help mitigate some aspects of digital exclusion and support household incomes. They can support the aims of the CRF by providing crisis payments and financial advice services on benefits applications, savings, debt management, and budgeting. However, there is a risk that reliance on these models may entrench food assistance projects and place too much responsibility on food insecure people themselves.

The rise of wrap-around services as part of alternative food projects, are partly a response to cuts in public services, and include financial advice, digital inclusion support, and a range of other services. At the same time, remaining community spaces are being turned into hubs which provide food, digital and other forms of support. This "hub-ification" has both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, families receive support for multiple overlapping barriers to food security in one place. On the other hand, with limited resources and capacity, these services do not have the time, manpower, expertise or the privacy clearance for holistic welfare support. Many rely on volunteers, precarious funding structures and surplus food and provision is fragmented such that access becomes a postcode lottery.

Recommendations:

- Alongside digital cash transfers delivered as part of the CRF adequate funding will be needed for:
 - Devices and connectivity to support families in immediate crisis
 - Local authorities to be able to provide continued support including alternative (non-digital) services and vouchers where digital exclusion can't be resolved.
- Where cash assistance or vouchers are given, these should be for use in small shops and local markets, as well as supermarkets (and be provided alongside digital inclusion if digital).
- Government should establish a universal standardised mechanism / service for digital inclusion accessible to all who need it, rather than ad hoc and fragmented services through hubs or wrap-around in food assistance projects. This should be based on a review of the effectiveness of existing services and designed with those experiencing digital exclusion.
- Establishing a cross-departmental taskforce (DEFRA, DWP and MHCLG) to support a shift in local food assistance from short-term funding models and reliance on supermarket surplus to one that supports access to affordable food, community-building, and supports SMEs and farmers. For potential enablers see The Food Foundation, 2025, Roadmap to Reducing Food Insecurity Report, p.23

“Digitalisation can make services more efficient, but for many young people and families, it is creating new barriers rather than removing them. I have seen how processes like cashless free school meals or online applications can feel inaccessible or unclear, particularly for families facing language barriers or financial pressure.

Local food support programmes remain vital because they provide not just access to food, but human connection, trust, and reassurance. That face-to-face support cannot be replaced by a screen. Digital systems should support access, not become a gatekeeper - otherwise we risk deepening food insecurity for those who need support the most.”

Yusuf, 17, Food Foundation Food Ambassador and school student, London

3. Embed monitoring and accountability over digital inclusion and food security

The government launched its first Digital Inclusion Action Plan in over ten years in February 2025 which is a result of promising cross-government action. However, monitoring the impact of the action plan needs to be transparent. The scope needs to be widened beyond skills and mobile data access to address the need for better broadband infrastructure. Relying on social tariffs provided by private internet providers is not enough.

Primary legislation in the form of a Good Food Bill has the potential to lock in the long-term affordability of nutritious foods. Whilst previous food strategies, reviews and policies have not survived changes of government, legislation is harder to overturn. Embedding targets for children’s health and food security into a legal framework, alongside duties on government departments to take action, will ensure that governments continue to implement actions that reduce levels of food insecurity. See here for the case for a Good Food Bill.

The latest Child Poverty Strategy recommends ‘Improving digital access to save families money and improve access to services’, which will also improve food security in particular by facilitating access to Healthy Start.

Recommendations:

- Introduce a critical threshold for household food insecurity and embed this within relevant strategies such as the Food Strategy and Child Poverty Strategy.
- Both strategies should also include requirements for digital inclusion.
- Monitoring of the Healthy Start scheme uptake in relation to digital inclusion and the child poverty strategy.
- Use the Minimum digital living standards as a guide to ensuring that households can participate fully in the digital world.
- Embed digital access provision into crisis support funded through local authorities e.g. debt advice, food bank users, homelessness services - ensuring that digital exclusion is not a barrier to accessing support.
- Conduct a comprehensive, independent and impartial review of the use of digital technologies used by the DWP and the NHS.
- Greater transparency in government contracts with data analytics companies, in terms of their use of data, and assessments of their impact vulnerable populations.

Recommendations continued:

- Introduce primary legislation in the form of a Good Food Bill that locks in the long-term affordability of nutritious foods, while providing certainty for citizens, businesses, producers and investors alike. This should be accompanied by a designated authority with the powers to monitor and act when needed, for instance by expanding the remit of the Food Standards Agency.

For more on policy recommendations on tackling digital exclusion see: [The Good Things Foundation](#).

For more information:

- Research paper from SOAS Digitalising food assistance project: [Food poverty & digital power: The social realities of digitalising food assistance in England](#)
- More on the research findings:
 - [New research reveals how UK welfare digitalisation could limit access to food assistance](#) | [Food Foundation](#)
 - [Pod Bites: Locked out of food assistance](#) | [Food Foundation](#)
 - [SOAS photo series](#)

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