

FOOD POVERTY REPORT

APRIL 2023-
MARCH 2024

SOUTH COTSWOLDS



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Through our mapping of the food network across the Southern part of the Cotswold District, we recognise the wide range of other support that is provided by other organisations, some of which is not aimed to be food aid but does support people in food insecurity. Additionally, other crisis funding support ensures that those experiencing issues affording food can find support without needing to be referred to the Foodbank.

In many situations, and as a result of the focus not being on food aid, it is right that information is not collected by organisations on how much support has been provided to households who are food insecure.

We therefore acknowledge that this report and the research that informs is just the tip of a much larger iceberg of issues around food insecurity in the South Cotswolds, and more is still to be learnt about the issues being faced by local people. We are, therefore, grateful for the input of several organisations and groups which enables us to produce this report. We would like to extend our thanks to:

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past year, as a result of the development of a new Cotswold Food Network partnership, increased multi-agency collaboration and investment in research and participation work with local people experiencing food insecurity, the drivers that lead people in the South Cotswolds to experience significant food insecurity have become clearer than ever before.

More than 10 years ago, when the provision of food aid in the UK increased significantly, food banks aimed to provide short-term breathing space for those in acute need. However, this report highlights the fact that food banks are now seen as a solution to a chronic and ongoing problem. As a result, food banks, including Cirencester Foodbank, have had to increase the number of referrals which some clients can obtain to avoid them falling further into debt and their crises worsening.

Whilst this change has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, the trend towards higher food bank use pre-dates these crisis points.

The food bank service aims to provide short-term emergency aid and, in theory, acts to signpost people on to places that can give proper help to address the issues that have brought that person to the service. Due to this work with our partners, over recent years we have seen average numbers of referrals, over the year, fall for many clients using the foodbank. However, for some trapped in spirals of poverty or sickness, difficult relationships or ongoing mental or physical health challenges, there is no simple solution,

and this results in growing dependence on food banks and other forms of food aid.¹

Giving these people help means wrestling with a kaleidoscope of overlapping issues, but at the heart of the crisis the problem is nearly always about lack of money to buy food.

In this report, we will discuss some of these issues and their root causes at an individual, geographical and societal level.

This report is written for local policymakers, community leaders and local organisations providing support and advice to local people. It is also for key stakeholders and supporters interested in working to end the need for foodbanks and other crisis food aid.

The report is a combination of foodbank data provided by agencies referring to the foodbank, advice and support data gathered when working to support foodbank clients and participatory research with people experiencing and/or responding to hardship in the Southern part of the Cotswold District.

As part of the report, priority recommendations are given that would support the understanding of food poverty and the reduction in reliance of local people on foodbanks.

¹ 1 in 3 clients that we saw this year have needed Foodbank help in three or more of the last 6 years.

WHAT IS THE STATE OF HUNGER IN THE SOUTH COTSWOLDS?

Severe Food Insecurity is Masked or Hidden

Despite the growth in the number of food parcels provided by food banks in the UK, the Trussell Trust's 'Hunger in the UK report' suggests that more than two thirds of those experiencing food insecurity have not sought or received food aid. Other sources, such as the latest Department of Work and Pensions 'Family Resources Survey', agree². Use of Cirencester Foodbank, therefore, may not represent the entirety of need across the South Cotswolds, but those who have accessed this form of support – Many more people appear to be facing significant hardship without such help.

This is backed up by research carried out by Coventry University. In their report on 'Hidden Hardship', released in 2023, insight is provided into the barriers and stigma that prevent people asking for help as experienced by local people in the Cotswolds. Our own Foodbank engagement with people with lived experience reflects these findings.

We recognise that there are other organisations and individuals in the South Cotswolds who, whilst it is not the aim of their work to provide food aid, are supporting households in serious food hardship. These include Cirencester Pantry, Tetbury Community Fridge, The Churn Project's Freezer of Love, Kempsford Long Table, and others. However, as their primary focus is around community development, reducing food waste or

other forms of social support, it may not have been recorded as addressing food insecurity.

More research on local food insecurity needs to take place to better understand levels of unmet need in our area.

Previously stable households in the South Cotswolds are facing growing food insecurity.

41% of the clients referred to the Foodbank from April 2023 to March 2024 had not used the Foodbank previously. The rising cost of essentials, health issues, debt, delays to benefit payments and insecure housing were among key contributory factors. Around one in every four of these new clients visited the Foodbank at a time when they were earning³, however this income was insufficient to afford the essentials they needed.

These clients, who have not needed to use the foodbank before, may be especially at risk as they are less aware of avenues of support available to address the issues being faced⁴.



² Of very low food security households, 14% had used a food bank within the last 30 days, and 31% within the last 12 months.

³ 'Earnings' as a source of income includes those clients receiving earnings alone, earnings and benefits, and those with insufficient access to their income.

⁴ A recent Foodbank survey showed that new clients were less likely to know of multiple routes to Foodbank support.

Alternative crisis funding reduces food bank provision.

The amount of food bank aid provided by the Cirencester Foodbank to local households with children fell to its lowest level in five years. This is despite upward trends both nationally and county wide that identify family households as being less food secure.

Foodbank provision in the Stroud & Cotswold district to households with children is lower than the national and county average. A connection can be made between this data and the provision of the Household Support Funding by Stroud and Cotswold Citizens Advice given directly to families.

Conversations with families show that a food voucher model was preferred to foodbank provision and families would first approach Citizens Advice for food aid support, only turning to the foodbank if this were not obtainable.

However, the Household Support Fund itself is only a short-term measure which could be removed at any time. Its removal would leave few other avenues to maximise families' incomes other than a return to using the Foodbank.

WHO IS AT GREATEST RISK OF FOOD POVERTY IN THE SOUTH COTSWOLDS?

The impact of the financial and economic challenges over several years have impacted all of us. Over the past year, the rising cost of living has been the main cause for people needing to use the Foodbank⁵. However, our findings show that these impacts have been especially severe for some. Certain groups have been identified as being in significant food insecurity and therefore needing to use the Foodbank.

Working-age adults are much more likely to need to turn to a food bank than pensioners.

This is particularly the case for single adults living alone (approximately one third of our clients over this period and accounting for a similar proportion of total referrals to the Foodbank in 2023/24) and those not currently in paid work⁶



34%

of people referred for foodbank support say that they are the sole occupant of their home.



59%

of all referrals were made for households that included children under the age of 16 and half of these referrals were for lone parent families

Families with children are at a high risk of food poverty.

59% of all referrals were made for households that included children under the age of 16 and half of these referrals were for lone parent families, a group known to be more vulnerable to food insecurity⁷. Additionally, these households are more likely to be at risk during school holidays, where costs of dependents increase, school food provision is not available, and household income may reduce because of term-time only jobs or taking unpaid leave.

One-in-three referrals to the Foodbank, over this period, cited that new, changing or ongoing impacts of physical or mental health conditions contributed to clients being in food crisis.

⁵ 'Rising cost of essentials' was provided as a contributing factor for Foodbank support by 56% of households referred between April 2023 and March 2024, affecting adult only households and households with children equally.

⁶ Approximately two thirds of clients were in receipt of benefits (without any earnings) at one point in time whilst using the Foodbank in 2023/24. Included in this number is a small percentage (10%) who moved between paid work and receiving state benefits only whilst receiving support from the Foodbank.

⁷ Food insecurity among single parent families | Food Foundation, https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/Single%20Parents%20briefing_FINAL.pdf

These health challenges were given as a reason for needing a food parcel, at least once over the period of the year, by 43% of our clients/households.

More research is needed to understand what proportion of this figure relates to disability, as this is not currently possible with data collected⁸.

The Foodbank's Citizens Advice team also found that PIP (Personal Independence Payment) was the top benefit issue for Foodbank clients referred to them.



John is 60 and lives on the outskirts of a rural town. Long term ill-health has left him trapped in food poverty and needing support from the foodbank since 2022.

"I have been living with my condition for 20 years. I have been on the roundabout for a long time, falling through the cracks several times because of my age and situation. I am now housebound. Since covid, I can only allow a very small number of people in as the complications I would experience should I contract it are life-threatening."

John has the support of a social prescribing link worker, but because of his ill-health and debt accrued because of the cost-of-living crisis, he continues to be unable to afford the essentials and still struggles to obtain food for himself.

⁸ Information concerning health (the physical or mental health of a person, including the provision of health care services) is classed as special category personal data and this information may not be captured by referrers to the Foodbank. Therefore, it is likely that this figure, whilst significant, is higher than the data suggests.

WHAT ARE THE DRIVERS OF HUNGER IN THE SOUTH COTSWOLDS?

Just as there is no 'typical' person who finds themselves in need of food bank support, there is also no single or simple journey that leads them there. But, while there are many contributing factors, only two referrals were made during the year where clients had sufficient funds to purchase food but due to other circumstances were unable to do so. Therefore, insufficient income is the fundamental driver for almost all people forced to use the food bank.

Additional support, to ensure foodbank clients are receiving the benefits they are entitled to, and their incomes are maximised, has resulted in prolonged use of the foodbank being minimised. It is still apparent that there are households experiencing negative monthly budgets which keep them trapped in crisis, resulting in a need for crisis support to minimise growing monthly debt.

The Trussell Trust identify three main factors that combine to prevent people from having sufficient income to avoid food insecurity, and leave them having to turn to food banks⁹:

- o The design and delivery of the social security system.
- o Work which does not provide sufficient protection from financial hardship.
- o Difficulty accessing suitable jobs, especially for disabled people, people with caring responsibilities and parents (especially mothers).

Research by the Foodbank at a local level sees several key factors that either contribute to these factors or stand alone, and that cause people to fall into or remain in food crisis. This is further,

and clearly, illustrated by the Coventry University's report on 'Hidden Hardship' in the North Cotswolds.¹⁰

Households in need of energy support are highly likely to also need food aid.

Nationally it has been reported, over the past twelve months, that people are still having to make choices between heating or eating. However, clients referred to the foodbank are likely to be experiencing situations where they are both in food and energy crisis. This may be exacerbated for local people as housing stock in rural areas often costs more to heat¹¹.

As part of the support provision from the foodbank, energy vouchers may also be issued through our partner, the Fuel Bank Foundation to households who are in energy crisis. These vouchers can only be issued if the household is on a prepayment meter and, therefore, some clients are unable to receive aid.

⁹ Hunger in the UK - The Trussell Trust: <https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/hunger-in-the-uk/>

¹⁰ Hidden hardship, Everyday experiences, coping strategies, and barriers to wellbeing in rural Britain, <https://hiddenhardship.coventry.ac.uk/>

¹¹ Rural cost of Living, Rural Services Network, <https://rsnonline.org.uk/images/publications/rural-cost-of-living.pdf>

Research¹² conducted by the Foodbank discovered:



34%

of households referred to the Foodbank are on a pre-payment meter

60%

of these needed an energy voucher as they were critically low or out of credit

Transport Poverty & Centralisation of Services

A lack of regular public transport and long distances to essential services means that adults, especially those in rural communities, who do not drive or are unable to afford the cost of running a vehicle are more vulnerable¹³. This group is likely to be disadvantaged as they are unable to easily access services, support, or job opportunities.



Foodbank clients travelling by public transport from Eastleach to Cirencester will need to allow 2hrs and 45 minutes to travel. They will only be able to spend a maximum of 2hrs and 45 minutes in town before needing to catch the last public transport home.

Centralisation of services, which are located mainly in the largest town in the area, and a lack of services in smaller townships, means that people must travel to access these services.

The need to use private transport services, such as taxis, can be the only solution for some and comes at a high financial cost.



A referrer informed the Foodbank that unexpected hospital trips for a client, due to a deterioration in health, have caused financial hardship due to the high costs of travel.

Others referred also reported hospital visits putting a strain on finances due to fuel and parking costs, which resulted in clients needing foodbank support.

Locally offered support, through community hubs, pop-up advice sessions, mobile support services (including such services as banking) and community advisors can help reduce the disempowerment that lack of strong transport links creates.

However, for some, the stigma of being seen to need help prevents people from raising awareness of their situations. This is especially true in smaller rural communities. Being able to

¹² Survey conducted with all Foodbank clients between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024. Response breakdown to the question 'Does your property have a pre-payment meter': 34% (Yes); 26% (No); 40% (Did not respond, declined to answer or were unable to be asked).

¹³ 2021 Census data reports that 11% of households in the Cotswolds do not have access to a car or van.

visit support networks outside of their local community can reduce this embarrassment and stigma and the impact it has on mental health.



Dawn, a grandmother, visited a local community pantry to collect a packet of nappies for her daughter who lived over 20 miles away from the pantry and had a young child.

In conversation she was asked if her daughter knew about support networks, such as the Foodbank, in the area she lived. Dawn shared that her daughter was too embarrassed to ask for any help or support in her community.

Childcare

The funding plan for free childcare, of up to 30 hours per week from nine months-old, is welcome support to families in or seeking employment. However, insufficient childcare provision in the local area, combined with the above transport challenges which especially impact families with children in different settings, result in households struggling to gain or return to employment.

Additionally, the existing benefit system can result in clients finding themselves worse off when in employment than when receiving benefits only.

The challenge for families is even greater around school holidays, and this is evidenced in the high referral numbers from schools around these periods.



44%

increase in the average number of referrals to Cirencester Foodbank in the week preceding and during school holidays.

Therefore, whilst the extension of childcare may give support in term time, similar levels of free or low-cost local provision for childcare in holidays needs to be available, or families will continue to struggle to see benefits from employment.

High cost of living

The cost of living in rural areas is influenced by a complex interplay of housing prices, high local essential expenses, transportation costs, and income disparities.

People living in the countryside often spend more on essentials like heating, transport, and housing. These costs can be significantly higher for rural residents compared to their urban counterparts¹⁴.

Additionally, since the pandemic, house prices have surged, especially in rural areas while the interest rate increases have resulted in additional

¹⁴ Rural cost of living, Overview of key differences in cost of living between rural and urban locations. Rural Service Network, (July 2022). <https://rsnonline.org.uk/images/publications/rural-cost-of-living.pdf>

cost to homeowners. Renters have also experienced higher costs due to interest rate hikes being passed on by their landlords.



17%

of referrals made between April 2023 –
March 2024
came through housing associations,
housing support charities or statutory
housing departments.

The same issues that impact people accessing services and support extend to access to low-cost food and other essentials.

Some analysis conducted by the foodbank on the costs of a shopping basket shows that, whilst people for the most part do have access to local food provision, the costs are significantly higher to purchase food in smaller towns or communities.

The cost to purchase a basket of food was up to 62% higher in rural towns than if households were able to travel to, and make, the same purchase in lower cost superstores in Cirencester.

Lack of knowledge of support

This report has already identified that the Cotswolds is seeing increasing numbers of households, who seem to have previously been food secure, referred to the foodbank and that often these households do not know where to get support.

However, this is also true of many foodbank clients.

A survey conducted by the Foodbank identified that 56% of clients did not know of any avenue for support other than the one they received the referral from. This rose to 79% of clients who were using the Foodbank for the first time.

This creates a vulnerability for people if that support route is unavailable due to capacity issues, reduced resources, or service provision. Equally if the client's issues change and they need a different type of support that is not available from the existing support provider, they may encounter issues.

This is often seen, and can be evidenced, by the Foodbank's support work, where conversations discover that clients have been unaware of access to financial, or other key support that could improve their financial outlook.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE TO END THE NEED FOR FOODBANKS IN OUR COMMUNITY?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRIORITY ACTIONS AND NEXT STEPS.

As highlighted in this report, ultimately not having enough food to eat is a result of insufficient income to buy food, not a result of a lack of available food. The lack of income is further exacerbated by high cost of living in rural areas.

At a local level, the evidence collected by Cirencester Foodbank suggests that changes to local infrastructure, targeted support for families, additional capacity for mental health support and a continued partnership focus on financial inclusion and advice, would help reduce the number of households in need of food aid. These recommendations include:

Improve transport links and access to services.

The issues around transport poverty, centralisation of services and stigma of accessing local support, mean that a diverse approach is needed to provide local services alongside improving transport links.

The Department for Transport's long term bus service improvement plans grant (BSIP+) has allocated over £4,000,000 in funding to Gloucestershire County Council.

The current plan in place to expand the service area of the 'Robin', Gloucestershire County Council's new on-demand bus service, is welcome. However, this service predominantly works to connect local people to their nearest public transport link, which remains inadequate. Robust and regular provision for working aged people is needed to cover the 210 square miles of the Southern part of the Cotswold District to enable them to access work.

Where transportation links cannot be improved, support hubs or pop-up centres should be considered which bring key services, including the job centre, mobile health care and advice and support to local communities.

Improved capacity for mental health support services

The primary request from foodbank clients for additional help is greater access to mental health services. It is recognised by many agencies in the Cotswolds that onward referral capacity to these services is severely lacking locally, with limited opportunities to assist people in getting help.

Recognising the challenges of rising health issues leading people to need to use the foodbank, additional resources need to be committed to ensure timely access to mental health support is available.

Ensure holiday support for working families.

Sufficient holiday childcare or family support should be provided alongside any increase in term-time childcare provision if households are going to be able to take on work opportunities in the district. The current HAF (Holiday Activity and Food Programme) comes to an end in March 2024, and has not delivered sufficient provision to enable low-income, but full-time working families, to access low-cost school holiday childcare.

Continued investment and development of the Cotswold Food Network partnership

The work of the Cotswold Food Network partnership, which puts financial inclusion at the heart of its vision and strategy, has created

greater opportunities for conversation around food insecurity and for agencies to work together to map existing support and provision and identify gaps in service.

Continued, and improved, mapping of food insecurity, undertaken by the network, will support more effective research into gaps in support provision and how cash-first interventions can reduce local food insecurity levels. IFAN (Independent Food Aid Network) which produces a 'Worrying About Money' leaflet that is used across the district, feels this is critical to enable the understanding around this support.

Further development of advice first approaches to addressing food insecurity.

The foodbank's partnership with Citizens Advice, along with launching an in-house family engagement project, supported by the Symondson Foundation, show the positive impact of advice and support to clients in resolving long term and deep financial issues.

Working with referral partners who ensure all who seek referral to the Foodbank can access support that addresses the issues they are facing remains a priority for the Foodbank and we will continue to focus resource to work with our partners to ensure this is a reality.

At a national level, to end the need for foodbanks, organisations including the Trussell Trust, Joseph Rountree Foundation, Gingerbread foundation and others, recognise the following actions need to be addressed:

Strengthening of Incomes and Financial Support

The evidence of financial hardship amongst Foodbank clients, which has been gathered by Cirencester and other Foodbanks, should be employed to advocate for robust social safety nets, including accessible benefits, mental health & disability support, and housing assistance.

Strengthening social security systems can prevent financial crises that lead to food insecurity.

Reduce Cost of Living

The relevant agencies should work towards reducing essential living costs such as housing, utilities, and transportation. Affordable housing initiatives and targeted subsidies can alleviate financial strain.

Cirencester Foodbank supports the Trussell Trust and Joseph Rountree Foundation's call for an essentials guarantee to ensure that households have sufficient income to afford the essentials they need to survive.

THE YEAR IN NUMBERS



4,416

emergency food parcels provided



1,997

food parcels provided for children



95

agencies referring clients to Cirencester Foodbank to provide support to their clients



2.8

The average number of food vouchers per household provided in the 12 months to April 2024



3%

year-on-year increase in number of households needing food aid



41%

of clients were for people needing to use the foodbank for the first time



£467,067

Debt managed for Foodbank clients through Citizens Advice



£230,600+

Positive financial impact for Foodbank clients (inc financial gains from provision of food parcels, energy vouchers, foodbank schools work, and CA support)

DEFINITIONS

Financial Inclusion

Financial inclusion is a term which can mean many things to different people. It can be about whether people have access to appropriate financial products and services, whether they have the skills to manage their money or more broadly whether they have enough money to meet their day- to-day living costs and play an active role in society.

Cirencester Foodbank's approach to financial inclusion is focused on addressing the root causes of crisis and striving to ensure that people are able to reach a point where their income meets their needs, and they no longer have to access emergency food.

Food bank (see also Food parcel)

An organisation which distributes free food parcels and may also provide additional support by offering or signposting to debt advice and benefits advice. Food banks can be run by individual charities or by other organisations, such as advice centres, faith groups, schools, universities, and hospitals. At Cirencester food banks a person brings their e-referral from a referral agency and collects an emergency parcel of food and other essentials in return. In some cases, the food is delivered direct to their home.

Food parcel / emergency parcel

At Cirencester Foodbank, a food parcel is an emergency supply of food and other essentials, including household, hygiene, baby, and pet items. Food in the parcel is long life and nutritionally balanced. A parcel is intended to last one person at least three days.

Food Aid

Support from a food bank or other emergency provider, including hot or cold meals from an organisation like a soup kitchen, and access to low-cost food from models such as food pantries or social supermarkets.

Food insecurity

Households are considered food insecure if they experience low or very low food security as measured by the Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM). Food insecurity means going without or cutting back on quality or quantity of food due to a lack of money. Food insecurity has an internationally used and operationalised definition via application of the adult version of the HFSSM. Originally developed in the United States, it collects data on food security by asking ten questions as part of a household survey which allows for robust measurement.

Personal Independence Payment

A welfare benefit that is intended to help working age adults with the extra costs of living with a health condition or a disability. It is non-means-tested, non-contributory, and tax-free; it is not linked to a person's ability to work, and it is available equally to people in or out of work. It is not intended to be a substitute for a person's earnings, unlike Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) or ESA's predecessor, Incapacity Benefit.

Eligibility for PIP is based upon the practical effects of a condition on a person's life, rather than the condition itself. It is not currently available to children who still claim Disability Living Allowance and are invited to claim PIP from their 16th birthday; it can

be claimed by adults under the State Pension age, and people already on the benefit will continue to receive it after they retire.

- Referral Partner / Agency** An agency or service referring someone to a food bank for emergency food. Examples include welfare or debt advice services, social workers, GPs, schools, health visitors and day centres for homeless people.
- Social Prescribing** Social prescribing is an all-age, whole population approach and is a key component of Universal Personalised Care. In social prescribing, local agencies refer people to a social prescribing link worker. The worker supports people to take control of their health and wellbeing by connecting people to activities, groups, and services in their community to meet the practical, social, and emotional needs that affect their health and wellbeing.
- Transport Poverty** Transport poverty refers to a lack of adequate transport services necessary to access general services and work, or to the inability to pay for these transport services. An individual may be in transport poverty because of:
- Availability of transport (services offered)
 - Accessibility of transport (being deterred by surrounding terrain or accessibility requirements)
 - The cost or affordability of transport
 - Time spent travelling (known as time poverty/time poor)
 - The adequacy of transport travel conditions (being dangerous or unsafe)
- Two child limit** A limit on eligibility for Child Tax Credit or the Child Element under Universal Credit for the third or subsequent child born after 6 April 2017.
- Working age** 18-64 years old (for the purposes of this study as no one under the age of 18 was surveyed).

ACRONYMS

CA	Citizens Advice
CDC	Cotswold District Council
HAF	Holiday Activity and Food Programme
PIP	Personal Independence Payment

