



HUNGRY CHRISTMAS

A report on foodbanks in South East England for **Keith Taylor MEP**



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Keith Taylor MEP on a visit to Canterbury Food Bank

Foodbanks are a lifeline to those in need across the South East but, at the same time, they continue to be a stain on the government's record on poverty. In the last four years, since I last published my Hungry Christmas report, Conservative ministers have overseen at least a 20% rise in foodbank dependency in my constituency alone.¹

Across the UK, foodbank dependency has soared by at least 65% in the last four years.² We have even seen reports of nurses being forced to rely on foodbanks as the reality of Britain's record in-work poverty levels hit home this year.³

Low income is one of the single biggest reasons why people are forced to seek emergency food aid in 2017. In the UK, right now, there are seven million people from working households living below the poverty line.⁴ In fact, a record 60% of Britons in poverty are working.⁵ Despite low headline unemployment figures⁶, insecure work and zero hour contracts are soaring⁷ while the growth of underemployment reveals the lie at the heart of the official employment statistics.⁸

Similarly, we have seen the number of rough sleepers increase 134% under the Tories⁹ while homelessness has soared.¹⁰ In the South East, there are now more than 27,000 people without a home.¹¹ In Brighton and Hove, 1 in 69 people are homeless. Poverty, homelessness and foodbank dependency are issues that are inexorably linked and have intensified in the last seven years. It is why, just as in 2013, foodbanks remain one of Britain's few booming industries.

Amidst all of the statistics, though, it's all too easy to forget that each food parcel handed out goes to somebody in real and genuine need. From my visits to foodbanks, meeting both clients and volunteers, I have always been struck by the quiet desperation affecting people across my constituency.

During a visit to Portsmouth, I met John. He was volunteering at a local foodbank after receiving help from them at a time in his life when he was facing lots of problems. He'd lost his job, his accommodation and, subsequently, developed a drug habit and drifted into street drinking, until, eventually, he reached rock-bottom. He told me he thought that a lack of food was the least of his worries. He thought he could always resort to scavenging or begging. Eventually, however, he realised he needed to get back to a 'normal life' and regular meals, otherwise, he would die.

I also met Mary, a single parent who just couldn't keep up with the cost of clothing and feeding her children. She would often go without food so her kids could eat. For her, the foodbank was a lifeline at a time of desperation. Shockingly, the hardships facing John and Mary, who live in the fifth largest economy in the world, are in stark contrast to the prosperity enjoyed by wealthiest few in Britain. The inequality between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' in the South East, as across the UK, is startling and must be addressed.

This report aims to highlight the hardship faced by thousands of Marys and Johns across the South East of England, and indeed up and down the UK. It reveals a shameful side of the British economy that is deliberately hidden from view by the government.

As wages continue to stagnate¹², as Brexit continues to push up the cost of living¹³ and as the government forces ahead with its welfare cuts and the disastrous rollout of Universal Credit¹⁴, there is little hope this situation will improve under this administration. Some will say that poverty is inevitable, no matter what you do. Greens reject this. For us, poverty is political and its elimination will always be a top priority.

There's often a reluctance to seek charity in this country—that so many see no alternative is a truly damning indictment of government policy.

- 1 Trussell Trust, 2013-2017 see Table 1
- 2 Trussell Trust, mid-year stats, 2017 <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/mid-year-stats/>
- 3 <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/nurse-strike-pay-nhs-crisis-why-i-voted-for-industrial-action-a7736896.html>
- 4 Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/dec/07/study-finds-7m-britons-in-poverty-despite-being-from-working-families>
- 5 Cardiff University report, 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/may/22/record-britons-in-work-poverty-families-study-private-rented-housing>
- 6 Headline figures show unemployment falling over the last five years to Oct, 2017 <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/5129164/unemployment-at-record-lows-but-workers-squeezed-as-pay-still-lags-behind-inflation/>
- 7 Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2017 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/zero-hour-contracts-workers-up-13-per-cent-905000-in-year-unions-charities-crackdown-a7730001.html>
- 8 ONS says growth in full-time employment outstripped by growth in underemployment, 2017 <http://uk.businessinsider.com/the-lie-behind-the-unemployment-numbers-2017-7>
- 9 National Audit Office (NAO) figures, 2017 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/homelessness-uk-rough-sleepers-up-135-per-cent-theresa-may-light-touch-approach-policy-a7942261.html>
- 10 Government statistics, 2017 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/homeless-statistics-tories-government-figures-increase-rise-families-temporary-accommodation-bb-a7803166.html>
- 11 Shelter report, 2017 http://england.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/1440053/8112017_Far_From_Alone.pdf
- 12 Resolution Foundation report, 2017 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/uk-living-standards-fall-longest-60-years-records-began-economy-household-incomes-costs-energy-a8071146.html>
- 13 Inflation rises to 3.1% in December, 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/business/live/2017/dec/12/oil-brent-crude-forties-oil-pipeline-uk-inflation-business>
- 14 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/universal-credit-system-whistleblower-benefits-poverty-suffering-vulnerable-claimants-hunger-chaos-a7998731.html>

WHAT HAS CHANGED SINCE 2013: DEMAND AND SUPPLY

Foodbanks have become ubiquitous across the South East. There are few, if any, towns that do not have a foodbank or similar form of emergency food aid. To quote a report on foodbanks in Hampshire¹⁹, 'A form of support that was relatively unknown a decade ago is now viewed as a fixture'. We are now seeing the long-term developments, impacts and strains across public and voluntary sector services. The standard foodbank parcel still provides three days of food following referrals from doctors, the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB), and support workers.



Keith Taylor MEP visits a foodbank in Ashford.

15 Source: The Trussell Trust, 2013

16 Source: The Trussell Trust, 2014

17 Source: The Trussell Trust, 2017

18 2017 statistics represented 6 months between April and September. The final year estimate was calculated by dividing the number by 6 and multiplying by 12 to extrapolate for the full year. The figure is likely to be conservative as more people rely on foodbanks in the winter.

19 The Bill Sargent Trust report, 2015 <https://bstrust.org.uk/current-research/past-research/food-banks-research/>

TABLE 1 THE CHANGE IN FOODBANK USE ACROSS THE SOUTH EAST BETWEEN 2013 AND 2017

COUNTY	NUMBER OF EMERGENCY FOOD PARCELS HANDED OUT				%CHANGE 2013-2017
	APRIL TO NOVEMBER 2013 ¹⁵	END OF YEAR 2013 ¹⁶	APRIL TO SEPTEMBER 2017 ¹⁷	END OF YEAR 2017 ¹⁸	
BERKSHIRE	3526	13113	5639	11278	-13.99%
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE	703	1414	1027	2054	45.26%
EAST SUSSEX	5277	15952	12009	24018	50.56%
HAMPSHIRE	9671	22655	10736	21472	-5.22%
ISLE OF WIGHT	2755	6075	2212	4424	-27.18%
KENT	7015	14078	8784	17568	24.79%
OXFORDSHIRE	2030	4353	2579	5158	18.49%
SURREY	2582	6787	7584	15168	123.49%
WEST SUSSEX	4248	8961	5415	10830	20.86%
TOTAL	37807	93388	55985	111970	19.90%

CASE STUDY: RISE IN MALNUTRITION

Malnutrition is steadily rising in the UK. Figures released at the end of 2016 showed that 184,528 hospital bed days were taken up by cases of malnutrition.²⁰ This compared to just 65,048 in 2006-7. Each hospital day costs around £400 to the NHS. Independent Age said at the time that the rise was mainly due to rising poverty and cuts to meals-on-wheels services and social care – particularly for older people. The number of people receiving a meals on wheels services dropped by 63% from 2010 to 2014. A study by Unicef in 2017 found that one in five children in the UK suffer food insecurity. The UK ranked 34th out of 41 ‘high income’ countries in the study.²¹

Across the UK, foodbank use has steadily risen since 2013; at which point there were just under 400 Trussell Trust foodbanks. This year, there are 428 Trussell Trust foodbanks with around 1400 distribution centres.

The Trussell Trust continues to be the largest network of foodbanks, both across the UK and in the South East. There are still a large number of independent foodbanks, basics banks, and other organisations providing emergency food aid. Research by IFAN found at least 651 independent foodbanks in the UK.²²

In 2013, we saw that some foodbanks were also providing other items, such as toiletries, nappies and sanitary products. This practice has become far more common and the Trussell Trust lists the typical additional items as:

TOILETRIES – DEODORANT, TOILET PAPER, SHOWER GEL, SHAVING GEL, SHAMPOO, SOAP, TOOTHBRUSHES, TOOTHPASTE, HAND WIPES

HOUSEHOLD ITEMS – LAUNDRY LIQUID DETERGENT, LAUNDRY POWDER, WASHING UP LIQUID

FEMININE PRODUCTS – SANITARY TOWELS AND TAMPONS

BABY SUPPLIES – NAPPIES, BABY WIPES AND BABY FOOD.

Source: The Trussell Trust

It is important to recognise that foodbank use represents some people in crisis, but not all of those who are experiencing crisis. Moreover, people and families in crisis are the tip of the iceberg in terms of long-term food insecurity and poverty. For many of these just-managing families, an unexpected bill, a period of ill health, or loss of work can tip them over into crisis, homelessness and possibly a long period of time in temporary housing.

WHY ARE PEOPLE USING FOODBANKS?

While both food prices, unemployment and benefit sanctions have fallen slightly since 2013, these have not been enough to bring about an overall fall in the numbers of people needing emergency food aid. The latest data from the Trussell Trust shows low income is now the biggest single reason for people needing emergency food aid. This is followed by benefit delays, and then benefit changes.

²⁰ Government figures, 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/nov/25/huge-rise-in-hospital-beds-in-england-taken-up-by-people-with-malnutrition>

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jun/15/levels-of-child-hunger-and-deprivation-in-uk-among-highest-of-rich-nations>

²² <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/may/29/report-reveals-scale-of-food-bank-use-in-the-uk-ifan>

- 23 ONS statistics
<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/may/11/number-of-zero-hours-contracts-stalls-at-staggering-1-7-million>
- 24 <http://uk.businessinsider.com/ons-underemployment-double-unemployment-rate-2017-9>
- 25 https://bstrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/BST_Foodbanks_Full-report.pdf
- 26 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-33429390>

LOW INCOME

Low income has now become the largest single issue for people needing emergency food aid. While unemployment statistics have nationally fallen, this appears to have had little to no impact on the number of people needing emergency food aid. This is due to the security and pay in those jobs. The number of zero-hour contracts has escalated since 2013, with an estimated 1.7 million people being nominally employed on them.²³ According to the ONS, underemployment is now double the official unemployment rate – meaning around 3.3 million people (9.7%) of working age people are underemployed.²⁴

In the 2015 Bill Sargent Trust report on foodbanks in Hampshire, low income was a strong theme.²⁵ The researchers found people were getting into debt and crisis despite careful budgeting and frugal living. This applied to both people receiving benefits and to people in work. In both cases, an unexpected bill, a period of unemployment or some other change of circumstances often led to a crisis from which it was difficult to escape or recover.

TABLE 2 THE CHANGING FACTORS LEADING TO FOODBANK RELIANCE

IN 2017	IN 2013
LOW INCOME: 27%	BENEFIT DELAYS: 33%
BENEFIT DELAYS: 25%	BENEFIT CHANGES: 19%
BENEFIT CHANGES: 18%	LOW INCOMES: 19%
DEBT 8%	BENEFIT SANCTIONS: 15%

Source: The Trussell Trust

BENEFIT CHANGES

Benefits have continued to be the subject of cuts since 2014. The benefit cap was reduced in 2016²⁶, at the same time that Child Tax Credit and Universal Credit was limited to the first two children in a family.²⁷ The official impact assessment found these changes would affect 330,000 children, and that more than half of families affected would be single-parent households and over a third from black and minority ethnic communities.²⁸

There have also been further cuts to Council Tax Support (also known as Council Tax Reduction), which replaced Council Tax Benefit in 2013.²⁹ What this means is that an increasing number of councils are requiring residents to pay a proportion of the council tax where they previously would have been exempt, and this proportion is rising. The Child Poverty Action Group has called this ‘a new poll tax.’³⁰

BENEFIT FREEZE

The benefit freeze has now been in place since 2015. This means benefits are not keeping up with rises in prices. The government recently confirmed that the freeze would continue in 2018/19.³¹ The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has calculated that the freeze will put around half a million people into poverty by 2021.³² For example, a couple with two children on Universal Credit will lose £832 a year compared to if benefits had kept pace with the rise in costs.

27 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/apr/03/two-child-limit-on-benefits-are-you-going-to-be-affected>

28 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/jul/20/benefit-cuts-to-hit-huge-number-of-children-government-figures-show>

29 New Policy Institute report finds cuts to Council Tax Support is a false economy for local authorities, 2017 <http://www.npi.org.uk/publications/council-tax/are-cuts-council-tax-support-england-false-economy-councils/>

30 <http://www.cpag.org.uk/content/new-poll-tax>

31 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/nov/27/benefit-freeze-to-stay-working-people-costing-typical-family-300-a-year>

32 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/benefits-freeze-uk-half-a-million-people-poverty-government-lift-welfare-changes-a7990036.html>

33 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/benefit-sanctions-statistics-2017>

34 Official Figures obtained by Labour MP Frank Field, 2016 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/benefit-payments-delays-uk-dwp-food-banks-damian-green-a7416621.html>

35 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/sep/16/universal-credit-rent-arrears-soar>

36 <https://www.ft.com/content/84807466-c91d-11e7-ab19-7a9fb7d6163e>

37 <http://www.politics.co.uk/comment-analysis/2017/07/12/food-prices-set-to-soar-as-hard-brex-it-approaches>

38 Defra; ONS, 2017 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/282152/trend-in-food-prices-united-kingdom-uk/>

BENEFIT SANCTIONS AND DELAYS

Benefit sanctions on Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) have fallen since 2013, but in 2016, there were still 125,000 people on JSA and 11,500 people on ESA sanctioned in the South East. National statistics from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) also point to an increase in the number of Universal Credit sanctions in 2017.³³

Benefit delays are still a major reason for people accessing foodbanks. In 2016, 92,000 people were found to have waited for more than 16 days for their first benefit payment.³⁴ 240,000 people waited for more than ten days, and 1.1 million people waited longer than five days. 202,083 people applied for emergency payments, with one in four (56,143) people being refused support.

Issues relating to Universal Credit are likely to become a significant problem in the coming year. Evidence from areas where Universal Credit has been implemented have shown a rise in rent arrears.³⁵ In these areas, half of tenants were a month behind paying their rent and 30% were two months behind. This compares to 10% of tenants a month behind and 5% two months behind in areas where Universal Credit has not been fully implemented.

FOOD PRICES

Food prices have fallen since 2013, but are still higher than before the 2008 recession. However, rising inflation in 2017 is having a disproportionate impact on food.³⁶ Compared to the year before, there was an 8.5% rise in the cost of fish, a 5.7% rise in vegetables and similar rises in oil, eggs and dairy. Some analysts have expressed concern that Brexit may increase the cost of food in the UK, with that cost being much higher in the event of a ‘no-deal’ Brexit.³⁷

FIGURE 1 UK FOOD PRICES AUGUST 2014 TO MAY 2017

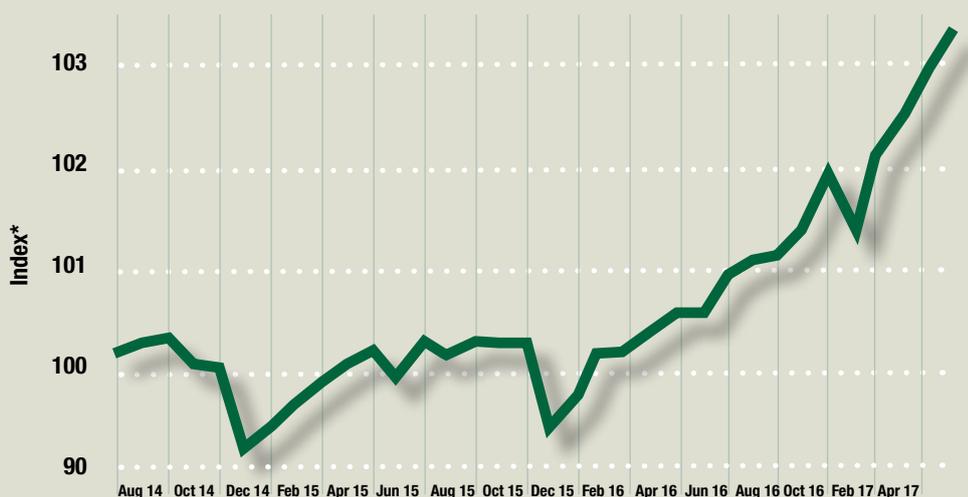


Figure 1 shows monthly Consumer Price Index (CPI) for food and non-alcoholic beverages in the United Kingdom (UK) from August 2014 to May 2016, where the year 2015* equals 100.

FOODBANKS IN THE SOUTH EAST

In 2006, around 1000 people in the South East received emergency food aid. By 2012, that figure was 45,000, and in the first six months of 2017, it had increased to 56,000. It is estimated that, in total, 112,000 people in the South East will have received emergency food aid this year. The original Hungry Christmas report estimated a 60% increase in 2013/14, but the latter months of the financial year were much worse than expected and foodbank use actually saw a 103% increase by the end of year.

If foodbank use for the second half of 2017 follows the same trend as the first six months, then it would be 20% higher than in 2013. If the trend holds, the biggest increases compared to 2013 have been in Surrey (123%) and East Sussex (50%). The Isle of Wight and Berkshire may see a similar or lower demand for foodbanks while Hampshire also looks like it will have similar numbers to last year. However, it is likely that, as with previous years, these estimates will be conservative as there will be higher numbers of people using foodbanks over the winter.

BERKSHIRE

FOODSHARE, MAIDENHEAD

Foodshare Maidenhead has built itself up into a service that supports around 200 people a week. They run a foodbank twice a week and provide community meals three times a week. They also have a focus on providing fresh food, in order to improve nutrition. The foodbank is largely supported by donations, and they are seeking to work more closely with local supermarkets in the future. Foodshare Maidenhead has freezers, fridges, storage space, and volunteers – and Lester Tanner, Co-Manager, feels they are a robust organisation, able to respond to local changes.

He adds that the foodbank supports other organisations in the town who work with the same groups of people who are struggling. This includes a homeless shelter and a transitional house.

They are now working more with schools to support breakfast clubs, and have established several school holiday projects to provide community lunches twice a week and nutritious ready meals made by the volunteers.

Lester Tanner says the numbers have crept up by around 5-10% and that they are keeping a close eye on Universal Credit, as it is due to be implemented in Maidenhead in February. They have built up their stock in preparation for an increase in demand.

He explains that one of their priorities is to improve access to the foodbank. Around 40% of the vouchers issued are not used. In response, they have made their foodbank more welcoming and friendly, particularly to people with children. On top of this they have added to their distribution points so that people don't have to travel into town. Even so, Lester says, there are people in need who are still unaware that there is a foodbank in Maidenhead. So many times, we've heard people call and say, 'How do I get food vouchers? I had no idea there was a foodbank and I am in difficulty'.

“ So many times, we've heard people call and say, 'How do I get food vouchers? I had no idea there was a foodbank and I am in difficulty.

Lester Tanner,
Co-Manager

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

AYLESBURY FOODBANK

Aylesbury Foodbank is relatively new, having started in April 2016. Between then and April 2017, they supported 745 people. Already this year, they have supported 757. Heather-Joy Garrett strongly believes that foodbanks should be an 'adjunct and not a necessity.'

“ The number of people that I see with delays in benefits or problems in benefit is heartbreaking.

Heather-Joy Garrett,
Co-ordinator

They already have 42 referral agencies, and distribute their food parcels through a network of churches – their own premises are not able to have people coming directly to it. Heather says they are still in the process of embedding, and so have not started doing anything beyond food parcels – such as courses. Even so, she is ‘permanently on call’ outside the three days a week that the foodbank is open.

She sees a lot of people, particularly on ESA, who are suffering benefit delays and issues so severe that they are having to exceed their policy of only giving out vouchers three times a year. Heather also explains that the high turnover in social workers makes it difficult to work with them. By contrast, the local housing associations are very good, in her experience.

The foodbank is preparing itself for Universal Credit, and in particular is looking at how best to support older people who are currently not accessing the foodbank – possibly due to triple-lock pension protections keeping them out of poverty, as well as access issues, including mobility and web proficiency limitations.

SUSSEX

BRIGHTON AND HOVE FOOD PARTNERSHIP

“ A meal is something you take part in, can share, and can happen long-term.

Emily O’Brien, Policy
and Partnership Manager

The Brighton and Hove Food Partnership has been in existence since 2003 and is concerned with all aspects of food and people. Brighton and Hove was one of the first cities in the UK to develop a food strategy. Emily explains that the approach of the partnership is to bring people together; this is because food policy is fragmented across government departments and agencies. The same is true of food poverty policy, and at a local level, they are working to bring together around 50 statutory and voluntary partners to develop and deliver the 70 plus points in the action plan.

The focus of the Partnership is on prevention, rather on crisis response. For example, the Partnership worked with the School Meals service and a local charity to support a school holidays meal service, something which has now been rolled out across the city. Emily explains that these were partners with a common agenda, but who had never worked with each other and needed to be brought together.

According to research done by the Partnership, lunch clubs in the city are providing an important service for people in a number of ways. They provide a warm meal, a social setting, warmth, and the opportunity for participation. Emily feels they can be a very empowering model for tackling food insecurity and social isolation in communities. The research also found that people were able to get advice from friends, neighbours and volunteers.

In another piece of work, the partnership has been working with adult social care services to enable people to pool their personal health budgets and enable someone to come in to cook for a group – as opposed to the 15-minute ‘peel the foil’ service that has become common. ‘Older people and people with disabilities and long-term conditions struggle to access foodbanks,’ she explains. There is a Brighton and Hove City Tracker survey, which found one in five residents believe they will have trouble paying for food, fuel or water in the coming year.³⁹ It was more than a third for people with a disability or long-term health condition.

The Partnership does still provide support and work around crisis response. In particular, they have been working to prepare for the introduction of Universal Credit. They held a session with someone from the Hastings Foodbank, where Universal Credit has been in place for some time now. They saw a doubling of demand locally, and a significant increase in people in distress and people with mental health conditions coming to the foodbank. This had a knock on effect on their volunteers, who began to struggle with the emotional impact of what they were seeing on a regular basis.

39 <https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/sites/brighton-hove.gov.uk/files/City%20Tracker%202017%20report%20-%20V2%2005%2012%2017%20vFinal.pdf>

In response, Emily explains, the Partnership has organised training sessions for foodbank volunteers on Universal Credit with a local money advice service and are going to put on ‘cooking-on-a-budget’ courses for service users. The Partnership are also going to be giving volunteers training on how to support people with mental health conditions and on how to develop their own resilience. Emily explains that the partnership does what it can to support change at a national level through a more humane welfare system, a crisis loan system, and a living wage. “A lot of factors are outside of our control. We can submit what we learn locally,” she says.

Through Sustain, the Partnership are supporting the development of similar local food poverty partnerships elsewhere in the UK.

CASE STUDY BRIGHTON AND HOVE FOOD PARTNERSHIP REPORT ON FOODBANKS

Their most recent annual picture of foodbank use was published in September 2017.⁴⁰ It found there were 16 foodbanks in Brighton and Hove, plus one in Shoreham. Only one is a Trussell Trust foodbank, and three foodbanks are run out of Children’s Centres. Several of the foodbanks in the city provide support to specific groups, such as young people, women, students and people without recourse to public funds.

Brighton and Hove has seen a steady rise in foodbank use. The Food Partnership has recorded this since 2014.

TABLE 3 THE RISE IN FOODBANKS IN BRIGHTON AND HOVE

Year	Number of foodbanks	Number of parcels per week
2017	16	315
2016	15	298
2015	15	289
2014	13	266

Source: Brighton and Hove Food Partnership

The Partnership also examined who was accessing emergency food aid and why. The ten foodbanks reporting on this saw increases in people:

IN INSECURE HOUSING (7/10 FOODBANKS)

WITH A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION (6/10 FOODBANKS)

IN LARGE FAMILIES AND/OR SINGLE PARENT HOUSEHOLDS (5/10 FOODBANKS)

IN WORK (4/10 FOODBANKS)

WHO WERE REFUGEES, ASYLUM SEEKERS, OR STREET HOMELESS (3/10 FOODBANKS)

WHO ARE YOUNG AND/OR DISABLED (2/10 FOODBANKS)

⁴⁰ <http://bhfood.org.uk/the-changing-picture-of-brighton-hove-food-banks/>

Low income, benefit delays and debt were the top reasons why people were accessing emergency food aid in Brighton and Hove.

The report found that five foodbanks could always meet demand; three said they usually could; and three said they occasionally could not. Two places said they often ran out of particular goods, such as fruit, vegetables and toiletries. Most already provide money advice, with cookery skills, housing advice and mental health advice services being provided by some foodbanks and identified as future priorities for other foodbanks. The cost of transport and stigma were the main reasons people found it difficult to access emergency food aid.

HAMPSHIRE

FRIENDS OF THE HOMELESS

Friends of the Homeless run two foodbanks in Fareham and in Gosport. They also run a free Sunday lunch project for homeless and other vulnerable people. They provide seven days worth of food and toiletries, which people can access four times a year.

Phil Rutt, the chair of the trustees, says they are now seeing a 10% rise in people coming through his doors since last year. This was after a fall in demand in 2015/16. He is unsure as to the cause of the rise, but knows that it has mainly been concentrated in Gosport. "I would never have expected, given the trend up to the end of 2016, for the numbers to have gone up in the way they have. That was completely unpredicted in our thinking."

They have also seen a rise in the number of families using the foodbanks. "The unemployment stats don't appear to have had any impact on foodbank use," says Mr Rutt.

Benefit sanctions, delays and benefit-related issues continue to be an issue in the area. Universal Credit roll out next year is the biggest coming issue for the foodbank. Mr Rutt explains that the foodbanks in Southampton have seen a 16% rise in use because of the roll out of Universal Credit there, and that they have increased the number of times people can use the foodbank from four times a year to six. It is something they are bracing themselves for.

“ I would anticipate that Universal Credit will have a detrimental effect on the level of demand.

Phil Rutt, Chairman of Trustees

CASE STUDY: BILL SARGENT TRUST REPORT

The Bill Sargent Trust was established in memory of one of the founders of the Portsmouth Housing Association. It carries out research on homelessness and poverty in Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton, and in 2015 published a report on foodbanks in the county. The researchers interviewed 22 people who were using foodbanks in Hampshire, and a further 15 volunteers and workers at the foodbanks.⁴¹ The researchers concluded:

"Our interviews confirmed that foodbank users end up in food crises for a combination of reasons. They have usually been dealing with a variety of challenges for some time when a significant change in circumstance tips them over the edge and starts a spiral of descent. People whose income barely covers, or doesn't quite cover, basic outgoings, gradually use up savings and exhaust other sources of support until they have no resilience to unpredictable events"

⁴¹ <https://bstrust.org.uk/current-research/past-research/food-banks-research/>

The report also challenges some of the prejudiced views often expressed about people who use foodbanks:

“While a few service users had come to regard a foodbank as part of their regular landscape of support, most had done, and were determined to do, all they could to avoid needing a food parcel. They lived frugally and budgeted carefully, were attempting to clear debts, and those who could were looking hard for employment. Most took a high degree of personal responsibility for their situation and tended to blame themselves for their difficulties even when it was not clear what they could have done to prevent them.”

The researchers recorded the devastating impact that crisis can have on individuals and families.

“This is why my depression’s really, really bad [...] at the moment, because I don’t know what’s going to happen. Every day, I think to myself, “Why did I wake up? Because you’ve got the same problem again. How do I make ends meet to feed my child?”

“When you can’t go to your friends or your family and all your resources have run out. It’s unbelievable, really [...] It’s a bit embarrassing. You shouldn’t have to do things like this. I shouldn’t. I shouldn’t, really but it ends up, I’ve got no other choice really.”

Several people who had used foodbanks went back to volunteer, or donate money if they could. However, the report highlights that the long term sustainability of foodbanks is at risk, concluding: ‘Foodbanks appear to be a fragile and limited response to the growing vulnerabilities within society at large (including the vulnerability of public and voluntary services).’

ISLE OF WIGHT

ISLE OF WIGHT CITIZENS’ ADVICE BUREAU

Paul Savill has been CEO at the Isle of Wight CAB for a year. “Even in the year I have been here, we have seen demand increase for just about everything our charity does. So there is no light at the end of the tunnel,” he explains. Very few people have savings that enable them to ride out the loss of a job, or some other crisis.

The CAB are the second largest referring agency, behind the DWP. Paul explains that the CAB also run the Help Through Crisis Scheme, which was created from the local welfare assistance scheme. They have been able to match fund £250,000 with support from the Big Lottery Fund. This enables them to give out vouchers to spend on food and fuel. In November, they helped 62 people, topping the previous peak of 54.

It is mainly people under 30 who are coming to them in crisis, Paul explains, which is in contrast to their other services ‘such as debt’ where it tends to be middle-aged people. He explains that housing is a major issue on the Island. They have had to give out tents and sleeping bags to people, and they had one case recently of someone on crutches who they paid to stay in a B&B for a couple of nights because there was no other help available.

For Paul, what CAB are doing is ‘plugging the gap’ in between a crisis and someone receiving support through the welfare system. Even so, this is less than straightforward.

“ We can be in a position here that we are still handing out tents and sleeping bags because there is just no accommodation available for them.

Paul Savill, Chief Executive

One of the issues they are working on is 'mandatory reconsideration' of ESA and Personal Independence Payments (PIP), where people have been judged as 'fit to work'. They took 29 cases of this to tribunal and won 27 of them in just three months. During the appeal time, people don't receive benefits and need to be supported through it. They have also developed a special team to help families get access to Child Tax Credits.

However, the CAB are particularly concerned about Universal Credit and the five weeks it will take people to get money. "It's that waiting time that's the killer," Paul says.

KENT

NOURISH: TUNBRIDGE WELLS COMMUNITY FOODBANK

Nourish Tunbridge Wells Community Foodbank started five years ago. Olga Johnson, Co-Chair, explains that they now have 100 different referral agencies that comprise various charities, the CAB, and social services. The CAB is the biggest referrer, while housing associations, schools and GPs also provide some vouchers. The foodbank provides emergency food for three days, for up to 12 weeks in a year – although 80% of the people using their service just need the three days to help them through a temporary situation, such as a benefit delay. They also provide £12,000 in vouchers for fresh food to encourage good nutrition.

Overall, so far this year, they have supported 600 people through the foodbank. Nourish support a Holiday Hunger Campaign which provides breakfast bags to 144 children in the community. Despite there being a great deal of affluence in Tunbridge Wells, poverty is present in almost every part of the city.

Olga explains that they deliver food parcels to the door. This means Nourish doesn't have to rent a large space in an expensive area, and it enables them to overcome the transport access issues faced by many of the people they support, as well as the embarrassment of queuing. Nourish also do some extras, such as providing turkeys at Christmas with the support of a local donation.

The biggest reason people need a food parcel is benefit delays or changes. But the foodbank is seeing a significant rise in the number of people they are supporting who are survivors of domestic violence. "It is our fastest growing group," explains Olga. Nourish has one person who knows the location of the local safe house, and they can get a food parcel with toiletries to them within two hours.

They are looking to expand their reach in Tunbridge Well in the coming future. The number of people they are supporting is already doubling every year, but they have a strong fundraising effort and a supportive community which has meant they have not had to buy food in for two years.

OXFORDSHIRE

NORTH OXFORDSHIRE FOODBANK

North Oxfordshire FoodBank covers a large part of rural Oxfordshire, from the outskirts of Oxford City to Bicester. They provide food parcels once a week from three outlets, where people collect them – although in 'some very rural areas' the foodbank does delivery.

These are basic food parcels, with around three to four days of food. On top of this, the Oxford Fresh Foodbank will drop off some fresh fruit and vegetables from supermarkets where they are at their sell by dates, and some bits and pieces from donations. "We have consolidated our service. We are able financially, we have a good giving base – schools, churches," Melvina explains.

“ Out here, if you live in a village with ten social houses, you are on your own, and they have often got no one to go to and there is a lack of transport here.

Melvina Fawcett,
Organiser

They are seeing a rise in issues from Universal Credit. Foodbank vouchers are often one of the ways in which social workers or CAB can help. Melvina adds, “There are also people who are being reassessed for all sorts of reasons and there are reductions in their benefits.”

She also explains that she is seeing a number of younger people with families and severe health conditions. In one case, a young woman died and her widower was struggling to access benefits. She has noticed changes in mental health as well: “There is a lot of anxiety around people. They are worrying more because it is getting difficult for them.”

Isolation and lack of affordable transport compound the rural poverty being faced in North Oxfordshire. Melvina explains that seasonal working in agriculture and hotels means that people are often suddenly made unemployed. At least two people are rough sleeping in their area, as crisis accommodation has been cut and rents are dire.

Melvina explains, “We stick to our basic service because that is helping people. We wish we weren’t here. We wish foodbanks didn’t exist, really, but they do.”

SURREY

ST MATTHEW’S FOODBANK, REDHILL

St Matthew’s Foodbank has been running for five years. Reverend Andrew Cunnington explains that they started issuing vouchers through schools and doctors. It was when they partnered with the local CAB that they saw a big rise in demand. They now also work with social services, the local housing association, and debt advice agencies.

The foodbank issues three days worth of food to individuals and families up to three times a year. The referral forms specifically ask what is being done to address the underlying issues that have brought them to the foodbank, Rev. Cunnington explains. In 2016, St Matthew’s Foodbank distributed £24,000 of food, gas and electricity top-ups. By the end of October 2017, this has increased to £34,000 – and they have since experienced an increase in demand. They recently had 25 families come through the foodbank in just two hours.

Like other foodbanks, St. Matthew’s is concerned about the impact of Universal Credit, which has yet to be fully implemented locally. They are training up volunteers to help with filling in the online forms required to get Universal Credit in anticipation.

Rev. Cunnington explains that the foodbank received donations from 20 harvest festivals recently, but that this is already being eaten into. They are now doing a ‘reverse-advent calendar’ where people put an item a day into a box and then bring that finished box to the foodbank. The support they receive from church members, the wider community and from local organisations is vital to what they do. However, Rev Cunnington is concerned about whether they can meet an ever increasing demand. “I suppose my worry now as a Vicar is that we have got so many people that we are reaching the point where we too can’t expand what we are doing much more; people are working so hard.”

“ The messages we are getting from other places is that when Universal Credit comes into play, demand becomes overwhelming.

Reverend Andrew
Cunnington

CONCLUSION

In the four years since the original **Hungry Christmas report**, foodbanks have become institutionalised across the South East – reflecting the national picture. Many foodbanks are now building on extra services, such as baby goods and advice services. One of the warnings from the original report was that an institutional system of foodbanks, like the one in Canada, would mean a failure on the part of politics and civil society to repair the welfare system. There is every sign that this is the likely situation to develop unless radical action is taken.

“If we are all still doing this in 20 years, we will have failed. The country will have failed itself.” **John Marshall, Milton Keynes Foodbank** (Hungry Christmas, 2013).⁴²

The figures point towards a slow and moderate rise since 2013, but to a more dramatic increase in Surrey and East Sussex. While some of the underlying causes, such as benefit sanctions, food prices, and unemployment, have shown slight improvement, these have not been reflected in the experiences of foodbanks. This may, in part, be due to the rise of insecure and casualised work, such as zero hour contracts and the continued cuts to benefits and public services.

Brighton and Hove’s investment in mental health resilience training for volunteers is emblematic of the lack of a strategic approach to food poverty, leaving local organisations and partnerships to pick up the pieces as people fall into crisis.

As post-Brexit Britain faces increasing economic turmoil, inflation and the ‘biggest squeeze on living standards since records began’⁴³ at the same time as Universal Credit is rolled out and wages continue to stagnate, it is clear the South East’s foodbank crisis is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. Universal Credit is a particular and immediate concern. It’s notable that, where it has already been rolled out, foodbanks have experienced an increase in demand ranging from 16% to 100%.

Foodbanks are an essential lifeline to people across the region but their continued ubiquity risks allowing the symptoms of systematic government policy failure to be repackaged as commendable charity.



42 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/nov/23/uk-fall-living-standards-resolution-foundation-budget>

43 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/uk-living-standards-fall-longest-60-years-records-began-economy-household-incomes-costs-energy-a8071146.html>

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