Trussell
Ending hunger together

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Pathways to end the need for food banks in Northern Ireland

A Northern Ireland where everyone is guaranteed the essentials: a warm, secure home and enough income to pay their bills, including food, with no one forced to rely on charitable food provision to survive.

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Glossary

Term	Definition
Cash first / income first	Prioritises maximising household income through social security entitlements, crisis grants, cash payments, debt advice and income-maximisation support, recognising that people need adequate income, not food parcels, to meet their essential needs with dignity.
Children	Age 0 to 18.
Discretionary Support	People on a low income in an extreme, exceptional or crisis situation can apply for help from the Department for Communities (DfC) Discretionary Support scheme. Depending on personal circumstances, applicants can receive either an interest-free loan or a non-repayable grant. Financial assistance is typically awarded to help with short-term living expenses, basic household items, limited travel expenses and rent in advance to a landlord other than the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.
Charitable food provision	A broad term covering food banks, food pantries, larders, social supermarkets, affordable food clubs and other community-based food support. These initiatives vary in what they provide, how people access them, how they are run and what they aim to achieve. They often provide valuable local support and can act as gateways to advice, preventive services and wider community help.
Food bank	An organisation that distributes free emergency food parcels to people experiencing hardship. Food banks may be run by individual charities or other organisations and may also offer or signpost to debt advice, social security advice and wider support.
Food insecurity	Going without or cutting back on the quality or quantity of food because people cannot afford it, as measured by the Household Food Security Survey Module.
Food parcel	At food banks in the Trussell community, an emergency supply of food intended to last one person for at least three days. Food parcel statistics measure the number of parcels distributed, not unique individuals supported.
Full cost recovery	Securing funding for all the costs involved in running a project, including direct project costs and a proportionate share of organisational overheads.
Hunger	In this report, hunger refers to low or very low food security, rather than fasting, dieting or the effects of illness.
No wrong door	Wherever someone makes first contact, they are connected onward to the right help rather than being asked to contact another service themselves.
Severe hardship	A measure of a household's available financial resources. Severe hardship means financial resources are so low that a household is at risk of needing to use a food bank.

Term	Definition
Warm referral	The referring person or organisation actively introduces the individual to the next service, makes contact on their behalf, shares relevant information with consent and ensures the connection is completed.
Warm welcome	A dignified, compassionate and respectful response when people reach out for help, including welcoming spaces, choice, inclusive conversations and an atmosphere rooted in the belief that everyone deserves to be seen, heard and valued.

Supporting Organisations

"Today, food banks are a vital lifeline. From my own experience, using a food bank is a sign that you've got a lot of problems; it's rarely just about food. People come to food banks because something catastrophic has happened in their lives – relationship breakdown, illness, rising rents, or other crises that leave them overwhelmed. When someone reaches that point, they're often sitting with their head in their hands, carrying multiple worries at once.

Without food banks and other charitable food provision, I believe many people would face unbearable situations. Families with no food, no electricity, freezing homes, and no other support to turn to. For people already struggling with their mental health, the absence of that lifeline could be enough to leave them feeling hopeless. Food banks provide more than food; they provide a point of stability during a crisis.

The vision is not of a Northern Ireland without food banks because they have disappeared. It is a Northern Ireland where they are no longer needed.

A Northern Ireland that doesn't need food banks would mean people are no longer (financially) living at rock bottom. The psychological impact would be enormous. When you're desperate, you can't think straight – your head's like a washing machine. Being unable to provide food for your family is soul-destroying. It damages your sense of self-worth and leaves you asking, "Why can't I do the very basic things?" When that burden is lifted, people can focus on building their lives rather than simply surviving.

For me, a future without the need for food banks would mean people no longer feeling worthless because they cannot feed their children. It would improve emotional wellbeing, reduce stress and anxiety, and create happier, more content families.

Children should be allowed to be children, without carrying adult worries about money, food, or poverty. If that burden were removed from families, that one worry would be taken off their minds, allowing a generation of children to grow up free from the stress and anxiety that poverty creates.

Food banks (and other charitable food providers) are an essential response to crisis today, but it is not a future anyone should accept. A Northern Ireland where basic needs are met would mean families are no longer in survival mode, parents can provide for their children with dignity, and future generations are free to grow up without the burden of poverty. That's what a Northern Ireland without food banks should look like."

Expert by Experience and Trussell Food Bank Board Member

Introduction

Trussell is an anti-poverty charity and a community of food banks. We work together to ensure no one in the UK needs a food bank to survive, while providing emergency food and practical support for people left without enough money to live on.

In Northern Ireland, people are being pushed to the brink because they can't afford the essentials for themselves and their families. This can't go on.

We refuse to stand by while so many of us in Northern Ireland can't afford to eat, keep warm, and pay the bills. Not so long ago, food banks didn't exist. That's why we are working for a more just and compassionate society where no one needs a food bank to survive. We know food banks are not a long-term solution because hunger is not a food problem. It's a money problem.

Currently in Northern Ireland, food banks are a vital emergency response – but they should never be a permanent feature of our social safety net. **Pathways to End the Need for Food Banks in Northern Ireland** is an ambitious, collaborative policy initiative that outlines how Northern Ireland can transition from crisis charitable food provision to long-term prevention.

Our ambition is a Northern Ireland where everyone is guaranteed the essentials: a warm, secure home and enough income to pay their bills, including food, with no one forced to rely on charitable food provision to survive.

Five commitments – our ask of the Northern Ireland Executive, Assembly, and local councils

1. Take action to end the need for food banks (and charitable food provision) by committing to a Northern Ireland where everyone is guaranteed a warm, secure home and enough income to pay their bills, and formally adopt the policy recommendations in this report as the shared cross-government/cross-sector approach. This first commitment should be included in the next Northern Ireland Assembly Mandate's Programme for Government and within each of the 11 local councils' Community Plans.

2. Establish a cross-departmental governance group, chaired by the Executive Office, accountable for delivering the required action to end the need for food banks in Northern Ireland and measuring progress against an outcomes framework to be developed in partnership with local government and the voluntary and community sector.

3. Commit to multi-year, flexible, full cost-recovery funding uplifted for inflation for advice and community services, ending the cycle of short-term funding that undermines the relationship-based approach proven to work for people at highest risk of needing a food bank.

4. Launch cash-first and discretionary support pilots in a small number of council areas within the next 12 months, with independent evaluation built in from the outset.

5. Formalise a data partnership, involving stakeholders from the community and voluntary sector, academics and NISRA, to build the shared evidence base needed to track progress and enable scaling of what works in ending the need for food banks (and charitable food provision).

Hunger and food bank need

In 2025, Northern Ireland provided 68,000 emergency food parcels from 1 January to 31 December 2025. Over 26,000 parcels were distributed for children; this is the sixth consecutive year that the number has been above 25,000.[1]

Parcel numbers may have eased from the peak we saw in 2023 of over 90,000, largely driven by cooling inflation; however, they remain far above pre-pandemic levels. Six years on from the onset of the cost –of living crisis, this represents very little real improvement in the living standards of people experiencing the greatest hardship.

Hunger is experienced disproportionately by particular groups of people across Northern Ireland. People who need to use a food bank are more likely to be disabled or have a long-term health condition (79% of people referred), more likely to be receiving means-tested social security (90% of people referred), and more likely to have experienced a deduction from that support, e.g. to repay a loan or other debt (63% of people referred)[2].

Even more troubling than the headline figure is the changing nature of need. Food banks are no longer being used only as a one-off response to crisis; charitable food provision is becoming entrenched. Growing numbers of people are being pulled back into crisis more frequently, without the means or savings to absorb increased costs of living (including rent, energy and food costs) or any financial shocks (for example, broken white goods). Between 2019 and 2025, the number of people referred to a food bank four or more times within a year nearly doubled. Hardship in Northern Ireland is not simply persisting; for a growing number of households, it is deepening.

Trussell and many others are deeply concerned about the impact of global instability on the cost of essentials (including food and energy). Energy prices have already started to rise, with further increases this winter and potentially into 2027[3] very likely. This will disproportionately affect Northern Ireland, as oil central heating remains the primary heating source for over 60% of households[4], and an estimated 39% of households live in fuel poverty[5].

> **I moved into temporary accommodation; it was oil [heating]. The oil was £300, but you don't get any help with that. I rang Universal Credit, but they couldn't help. I have three kids; £300 is a lot of money I can't afford.**

1 Trussell, (2026), *End of Year Statistics - factsheet*, **https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2026-03/eys_factsheet_ni_2025.pdf**

2 Ibid.

3 The Consumer Council provision Northern Ireland imports all of its home-heating oil and is therefore vulnerable to geopolitical tensions and global oil-market volatility. Its Head of Energy Policy stated that conflict involving Iran was "very likely to have some impact on home heating oil prices in Northern Ireland." Belfast Live (March 2026), **https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/northern-ireland-home-heating-oil-33515895.amp**

4 NISRA, (2025), *Continuous Household Survey heat and Insulation Results (2024/2025)*, **https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/economy/CHS-Heat-and-Insulation-202425.html**

5 Northern Ireland - National Energy Action (NEA) LucidTalk Poll – September 2025, **https://www.nea.org.uk/northern-ireland/**

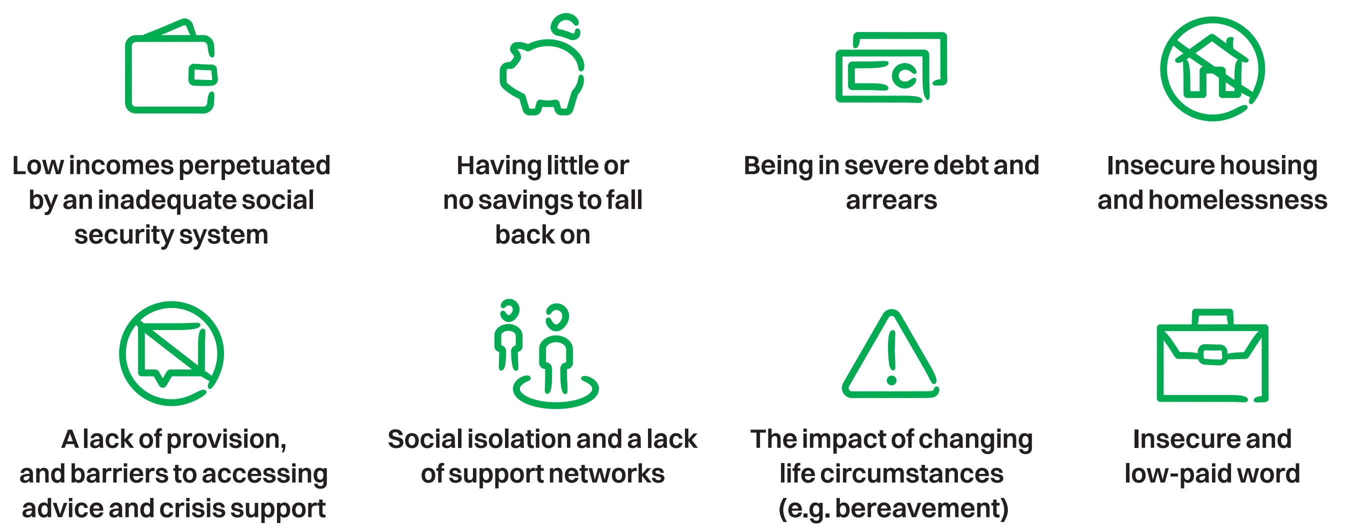
Trussell food parcel distribution is only one part of the picture

Emergency food parcel data from the Trussell community is only one part of the picture of the need for food banks in Northern Ireland. Many people turn to other charitable food providers or community groups for support, including independent food banks, local churches, pantries, larders, and social supermarkets. Hunger in the UK data shows that many people using food banks also use other forms of charitable food provision alongside it. Of people who had used a food bank in the last 12 months, 50% had also used a social supermarket or food pantry.[6] Despite this network of support, we know that many more people face hunger and do not reach out to these community groups or organisations.

Trussell's *Hunger in Northern Ireland* report found that 520,000 people, including 130,000 children, faced food insecurity in Northern Ireland in 2024, compared with 370,000 people in 2022 (including 110,000 children)[7]. This represents one in five households across Northern Ireland (21%) facing hunger (an increase of five percentage points on the same period in 2022). Most significantly, it highlighted the risk of seeing hunger becoming normalised in communities across Northern Ireland, with the majority (60%) of people who experienced hunger not turning to any form of charitable food provision in the last year. Despite frequently going without essentials like food, people commonly didn't consider themselves to be facing sufficient hardship to justify turning to a food bank for support.

Hunger also impacts some groups more than others, including disabled people and households with children. This is consistent with Consumer Council for Northern Ireland's recent research, *Feeding the Family* (2026), which found that almost two in five (39%) households with children were experiencing food insecurity, with three-quarters (75%) of families stating they had difficulty covering essential household expenses to some degree[8].

More analysis on Hunger in Northern Ireland can be found in our report, but the key drivers are illustrated in the graphic below.[9]



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6 Weekes, T, et al, (2025), *Hunger in the UK 2025*, Trussell, https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/hunger-in-the-uk-2025

7 Trussell's definition of food insecurity is going without or cutting back on the quality or quantity of food due to a lack of money. People who are food insecure have, at some point over the last year, run out of food and been unable to afford more, and/or reduced meal size, eaten less, gone hungry or lost weight as a result of lack of money. Weekes, T., et al, (2025), *Hunger in the UK 2025*, Trussell, https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-11/hunger_in_the_uk_261125.pdf

8 Feeding the Family (2026) Consumer Council, https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/research/feeding-family

9 Weekes, T., et al, (2025), *Hunger in the UK 2025*, Trussell, https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-11/hunger_in_the_uk_261125.pdf

The reality of hunger and what needs to change

We cannot remove widespread hunger and the need for large-scale charitable food provision without addressing the key drivers. There has been progress, particularly the ending of the two-child limit by the UK Government and Northern Ireland's welfare mitigation package; however, historic numbers of people still cannot afford the essentials. If we are to change this and turn the tide on hunger in Northern Ireland, we need bolder, more decisive short, medium, and long-term action.

The calls to action and policy recommendations in this report have been closely informed by four workshops and an information exchange event involving people with lived experience of financial hardship and needing a food bank, as well as anti-poverty and charitable food sector partners. The need to recognise and understand 0the reality of people's lives and the experiences that have led them to need a food bank was emphasised throughout, as was the importance of the specific context that shapes hunger and hardship in Northern Ireland.

People need to use food banks because they don't have enough money for the essentials.

Some people are between jobs, have health conditions or are looking after relatives and children, while some people are in work that's insecure or doesn't pay enough to live on. Barriers like the lack of affordable childcare and transport hold people back from increasing their income, and high housing costs leave people without enough money for other essentials.

But all of this can change.

Turning the tide on hunger in Northern Ireland requires action across six key areas:

1. Poverty, income, and the cost of essentials

Families facing hunger are often caring for children or disabled adults and/or rebuilding after a crisis. Many are looking for work or already working, but are unable to meet basic costs. The hardship they face is driven by low and insecure incomes, a social security system that doesn't provide enough income for essentials, housing instability and gaps in support, pointing to the need for stronger income protection and policies that help people cope with unavoidable costs.

2. Children, childcare, and participation

Children's education, early years and childcare are major pressure points for many families facing hunger. Families describe struggling with school meals, uniforms, activities and childcare costs, leaving children at risk of exclusion from ordinary childhood experiences.

> **I’ve had to take my kid out of school on school trip days; I just couldn’t afford for them to go.**

Action should include expanding free school meal eligibility to include all families on Universal Credit, strengthening school uniform support, and improving childcare so parents on Universal Credit can access and sustain employment.

> **[I am on Universal Credit and I work.] I earn just a little over the threshold to receive free school meals, but the amount I’m paying for my kids’ lunch means I’m worse off than if I was [only] on benefits. I want to work but how is that fair.**

> **Sure Start are amazing, not just for support. They take our kids out on trips we just couldn’t afford otherwise. Like going to visit Santa; I couldn’t do that otherwise. It takes away the mum guilt.**

> **I am not able to be in a full-time band seven job in the (health and social care) trust because of the system, because I can’t afford childcare. That is not my fault; I have done the qualifications. I was asked to stay on in the social workplace. I can do the job well, but I can’t because of the system.**

3. Crisis, trauma, housing, and local disruption

Family breakdown, abuse, domestic violence and housing insecurity are often significant drivers of hardship. Participants highlighted the trauma of leaving unsafe situations, being placed in temporary accommodation far from support networks, and facing rising rents, repairs and energy costs. While more social housing is essential, immediate support is also needed for renters and families in crisis.

> **I think of the trauma around what I had experienced, and my nervous system was an actual wreck. Obviously, I was at 99 constantly; then, whenever you consider that kind of intergenerational trauma, while I am in crisis – financial crisis, emotional crisis – like, everything is a disaster. I'm expecting this child, who is drenched in my chaos as well, to go into a learning environment, to go into a classroom, and then, of course, he didn't.**

> **We were made homeless; we had to live in a hostel. When we finally got temporary accommodation, it was in Portrush, but the kids still have school in Belfast. We have three kids, but we could only bring the baby, and the other two have to stay with my mum. I spend all my time and money travelling back and forth.**

4. Income shocks and inadequate safety nets

Sudden job loss or income interruption can quickly push households into crisis, with people facing anxiety, rent uncertainty, and delays in accessing support. These experiences underline the need for fast, compassionate and adequate safety nets that prevent people from reaching the point of needing emergency food.

> **I lost my job two weeks ago. At the moment, I need to sort of track down a food bank voucher tomorrow from maybe one of the MLAs. Absolutely no idea how I'm paying my rent next month. I'm at the stage, actually, where the GP has prescribed diazepam because the anxiety has gone absolutely through the roof. I do have a job interview tomorrow.**

5. Advice, advocacy, and prevention

Timely, accessible and compassionate advice services are critical to preventing hardship. Advice can both address people's immediate financial crisis and improve their financial situation in the longer-term. There is also clear evidence of the social and economic impacts of effective advice provision.[10] More accessible services based on need, not availability. clearer guidance, trusted advocates, and holistic, community-based support that addresses income, housing, energy, mental health and social connection before problems escalate all have a crucial role to play.

6. Joined-up, locally tailored systems

Overall, the evidence points to the need for joined-up, locally tailored and sustainably funded systems. But right now, fragmented services, short-term funding and barriers related to rural isolation, transport, childcare, language, literacy and digital exclusion all limit access to support. Ending the need for food banks (and charitable food provision) will require coordinated system change, long-term investment and stronger partnerships across policy, services, and community infrastructure.

“Do you know what? I'm in crisis. And instead of being like, ‘I'll take your details and pass it on,’ if you had somebody who could stick with you the whole way, then they could build up your case.”

Antrim Foodbank & Community Advice Antrim and Newtownabbey (CAAN): providing accessible advice and support to people facing financial hardship

In 2021 Antrim Foodbank and Community Advice Antrim & Newtownabbey (CAAN) identified a growing need for accessible advice and support among people experiencing financial hardship and food insecurity. In response, the two organisations began working together through an initial advice pilot within the foodbank setting, recognising that emergency food provision alone could not address the complex underlying issues driving people into crisis. The partnership built on the strong foundations already established to expand the reach of the service across all five distribution centres, and provide longer-term stability and sustainability for the work and ensuring more people could access timely advice and practical support alongside emergency food provision.

10 Advice NI, (2025), *Social Value Analysis: Advice NI Debt Advice Service*, https://www.adviceni.net/policy/publications/social-value-analysis-advice-ni-debt-advice-service

The success of the service has been built on a genuinely collaborative approach. By combining Antrim Foodbank's frontline reach and trusted relationships within the community with CAAN's specialist advice and casework expertise, the partnership ensures people can access timely, compassionate and practical support at their point of need. Advisers are fully integrated within the food bank setting, working closely alongside staff and volunteers to provide seamless support for individuals and families facing destitution or severe financial insecurity.

The joined-up nature of the partnership has allowed the service not only to respond to immediate crisis, but also to tackle some of the underlying causes of poverty. Through ongoing advice, advocacy and casework, people are supported to maximise income, resolve benefit issues, manage debt and improve financial stability over the longer term.

The impact of the partnership has exceeded all original expectations. To date, 798 people have increased their income through the service, with financial gains totalling £702,582 secured for households across the Antrim area in addition to helping people access other charitable support and onward referrals to statutory and voluntary agencies.

One person referred to the food bank, unsure whether his reinstated benefits were correct, was referred to the adviser team for support. Through detailed casework, the adviser identified that an ESA premium had been omitted from his claim. Following significant follow-up and advocacy, the issue was resolved, resulting in an additional £21 per week and more than £13,000 in backdated payments. The client also received budgeting support to help manage this significant change in circumstances.

This project is now integral to Antrim Food Bank's offer, with CAAN advisers well embedded across the food bank setting. A Welfare Advice Worker provides advice and casework at drop-in sessions across the five distribution centres, including triage, follow-up appointments and more intensive appeals support where needed. Warm handovers are made to CAAN specialists, such as debt workers and tribunal representatives, or to external agencies. CAAN also delivers workshops to help volunteers understand the causes of hardship, available support and the benefits system.

The partnership between Antrim Food Bank and CAAN extends beyond direct service delivery. Both organisations work closely with local statutory and voluntary sector partners, including the Council-facilitated Anti-Poverty Strategy steering group, to ensure services are coordinated, responsive and aligned with wider community need. Through strong local relationships and ongoing engagement with the council, elected representatives and anti-poverty networks, the partnership is helping to amplify the voices and experiences of people facing hunger and contribute to conversations influencing local and regional policy.

Feedback from service users demonstrates the value of this collaborative approach. In a 2024 survey, 92% of respondents described the service as extremely or very helpful, while all participants reported experiencing some benefit. Seventy-nine per cent sprovision the service had improved their circumstances, and 96% felt no additional support was needed following engagement with the project.

Through shared values, strong partnership working and a commitment to dignity and inclusion, Antrim Foodbank and CAAN have created a service that is not only improving financial outcomes for local people, but also strengthening the wider community response to poverty and hardship and helping to end the need for emergency food provision by maximising people's incomes.

Why charitable food provision cannot be the end solution in tackling hunger

Food banks are only part of the picture when it comes to charitable food support in local communities. The number and variety of food pantries, social supermarkets, and affordable food clubs across the UK have increased significantly in recent years. There is no standardised definition or model for these projects, and as such, they vary widely in what they offer, how they are accessed and run, and what they aim to achieve. Some are focused on sustainability by redistributing surplus food. Others maintain a focus on the community aspect, aiming to bring people together and tackle isolation. Almost all aim to support people on low incomes by providing access to free or low-cost food[11]. It is imperative we keep food insecurity and food waste problems distinct; and ensure the latter is not seen as the primary solution for the former.[12]

These initiatives, and the dedicated people who work and volunteer in them, provide invaluable help for people in their communities. Many of the organisations involved are well connected in their local communities and act as a gateway to other services and support; others go beyond food provision to offer advice and other preventative services that can help build financial resilience.

However, the existing evidence suggests that low-cost charitable food provision does not, in itself, enable people to move out of poverty or protect them from hunger. Instead, many people experience a cycle of using different forms of charitable food provision. For example, people using support such as food clubs continue to have a high risk of food insecurity and of having to turn to a food bank.[13]

The Department for Communities (DfC) has funded Social Supermarkets, defined as community-based organisations, to provide food, cleaning products, and toiletries at discounted prices, and support individuals struggling with food poverty by offering a sustainable approach to addressing the root causes of poverty, rather than just providing immediate food relief[14]. This was in response to a recommendation in the Welfare Reform Mitigations Report (Evason Report) completed in 2016 that sought to mitigate the impact of UK-wide welfare reforms in Northern Ireland. This report highlighted that "Stormont should pilot strategies to tackle food poverty, potentially through a network of community food shops, social stores and supermarkets".[15]

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11 Orchard et al, (2025), *Resetting local crisis support in England*, Trussell, **https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/publications/report/resetting-local-crisis-support-in-england**

12 Ibid.

13 Lopez et al,(2025), *Feeding Community: The Role of Affordable Food Clubs in Building Resilient Communities,* **https://feedingbritain.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/FINAL-Feeding-Community-Report.pdf**

14 Department for Communities, (2022), *Social Supermarket Support - Screening*, **https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/social-supermarket-support-screening**

15 Department for Communities, (2022), Social Supermarket Screening, **https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/social-supermarket-support-screening**

A pilot programme commenced in 2017 (funded by Welfare Mitigation Funds to 2020) and, while Covid-related delays stalled implementation, social supermarkets are now fully operational across Northern Ireland. In 2024/45, the DfC allocated £2.75m to the programme, enabling each of the 11 local Councils to commission a range of projects in their boroughs. At a regional level, the funding contributed to supporting just over 13,000 households with access to food and wraparound support in 2024/25[16].

There is no questioning the significance of this programme to the individuals who have accessed support, or the quality of dignified support and care that many individuals and families have received from staff and volunteers. For many of our food banks that either run social supermarkets alongside or refer out to them, this provision meets a current need in their community. However, this comes at a high operational cost, and is not a solution that can plausibly be scaled to meet the level of hunger and hardship across Northern Ireland. Many social supermarkets find that they have to purchase additional stock beyond their funding; this is not a cost-effective or sustainable use of funding.

Reliance on charitable food provision cannot be the end solution to ending hunger in Northern Ireland. Community food projects have genuine and long-term societal value, including reducing social isolation and connecting people with the services and support which can help to address the drivers of hardship. But the end goal must be for people to choose to attend because they value that connection or access to services, not to be compelled by low income and because they have no other way of being able to afford food and other essentials.

To truly tackle hunger in Northern Ireland requires a new approach to local crisis support that prioritises cash-first, or income-focused support to help people through a sudden financial crisis, connected to the right advice and wider support to prevent sustained hardship[17]. This is the kind of investment that provides a lifeline to people when they are struggling to cope with the cost of living and reduces the need for emergency food to fill the gap in a crisis, as well as helping people onto a more secure financial footing for the future.[18]

16 Trussell, (2026), *End of Year Statistics Northern Ireland Factsheet*, **https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2026-03/eys_factsheet_ni_2025.pdf**

17 Trussell defines cash/Income first as prioritising maximising household income through social security entitlements, crisis grants, cash payments, debt advice and income-maximisation support, recognising that people need adequate income, not food parcels, to meet their essential needs with dignity.

18 Orchard et al, (2025), *Resetting local crisis support in England: Recommendations for the new Crisis and Resilience Fund.* Trussell, **https://policyinpractice.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/FINAL-Resetting-local-crisis-support-in-England-Trussell-Policy-in-Practice-Dec-25-1.pdf**

Why cash-first support?

Cash-first crisis support is a long-established approach, and there is strong evidence of success in other parts of the UK, such as Scottish Welfare Fund[19] and Wales' Discretionary Assistance Fund[20]. This evidence from across the UK has recently led the UK government to launch a new approach to local crisis support in England, through the Crisis and Resilience Fund[21]. Providing cash grants to support someone through an income shock or prevent a crisis from escalating, rather than in-kind donations, empowers individuals and families to make informed choices that best suit their circumstances. Local authorities taking a cash-first approach can provide the people they support with dignity, autonomy, and the ability to address their specific needs most effectively.

Evidence shows that cash-first policies at a local level are more efficient and flexible, reducing administrative burdens and ensuring quicker, more effective support for individuals facing hardship than vouchers or in-kind support. Trussell's *Cash-First Approaches to Supporting People Facing Financial Hardship Locally: A Literature Review* found that "providing people with cash rather than in-kind support can be a more efficient and effective use of government money because it reduces the cost of co-ordination and logistics and minimises waste[22]."

A cash-first approach to local crisis support brings multiple benefits:

- **A more dignified approach:** Cash gives people agency to manage their own finances, respecting their autonomy and avoiding the stigma often associated with vouchers or in-kind support.[23]
- **Increased effectiveness:** Cash payments offer speed, choice and flexibility, often essential to relieve a financial crisis and prevent hardship from escalating.[24] For example, cash payments mean someone can buy school uniforms, get their car through an MOT or pay down debt to prevent a more costly crisis in a way that emergency food parcels and shopping vouchers cannot.[25]
- **Better value for money:** By providing support in the most flexible form, cash-first approaches allow councils to target help where it is most needed and ensure funds make the biggest possible difference for households. Crucially, *cash-first does not mean cash-only.*[26] Councils can still use in-kind provision where it delivers better value for all involved (e.g. direct provision of furniture and white goods), while ensuring cash is the default starting point.

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19 Scottish Welfare Fund - help with living costs, **https://www.mygov.scot/scottish-welfare-fund**

20 Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF), **https://www.gov.wales/discretionary-assistance-fund-daf**

21 Crisis Resilience Fund (2026) Guidance for local authorities. **https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/crisis-and-resilience-fund-guidance-for-local-authorities-in-england-1-april-2026-to-31-march-2029/the-crisis-and-resilience-fund-guidance-for-local-authorities-in-england-1-april-2026-to-31-march-2029**

22 Trussell, (2022), *Cash-First Approaches to Supporting People Facing Financial Hardship Locally: A Literature Review*, **https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/wp-assets/Cash-first-literature-review.pdf**

23 Whitham, *'Cash First' - Responding to the Needs of Low Income Residents through the Provision of Local Welfare Support*, **https://www.resolvepoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/GMPA-Briefing-%E2%80%98Cash-first-August-2020.pdf**

24 Farnworth-Mayers and Orchard, (2023), *Cash or Food? Exploring Effective Responses to Destitution*, **https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/wp-assets/appg_report_2023_updated.pdf**

25 Lipscomb and Walker, (2022), *An Evaluation of the Leeds City Council Cash Grant Pilot Programme*, **https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/wp-assets/Vantage-Point-Research-Leeds-Cash-First-evaluation.pdf**

26 Cash first and the Crisis and Resilience Fund – Cash first but not cash only Note from Crisis Support Working Group – August 2025, **https://cdn.sanity.io/files/vujd5l5m/production/a4ac533a86f5d48d586638313b2ac820ee8cb585.pdf**

Cash-first, but not cash-only

Cash-first support does not mean the relationship is solely transactional. Done well, it provides close links to advice and wider support, ensuring that crisis support acts as a gateway to building longer-term financial resilience.

Neither does cash-first mean cash-only. While cash should be the default, there should still be flexibility for in-kind support (e.g., white goods and essential furniture) in cases where cash may not be practical or preferred[27]. It might be that providing white goods or furniture offers best value for money. Some people might also prefer a food parcel as an emergency form of support depending on their location because local shopping venues are cost-prohibitive. People with complex needs may also be best supported through vouchers or food parcels, once the benefits of cash payments are ruled out.

The UK APPG on ending the need for food banks inquiry titled *Cash or food? Exploring effective responses to destitution (2023)* explored effective responses to destitution and found that "Several of the main challenges with food-based support are mitigated by a cash-first approach, and cash grants offer a more accessible, dignified, and flexible form of support to people facing financial crisis. However, the evidence also cautioned against a one-size fits all approach, recognising that people should be able to access the support that suits them best[28].

Cash-first approaches also need to be part of a strong local support system that prioritises good coordination of local services and effective referral pathways to help target support and prevent crises from recurring." Supporting people with a cash-first approach and prioritising income-focused solutions, including advice and support to maximise income, might also involve referrals to other local services such as employment support.

This approach is not brand new to Northern Ireland, but the widescale adoption of a cash-first approach to supporting people facing financial crisis, closely coordinated with advice and wider support would be a significant step towards ending the need for food banks and other charitable food provision.

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27 Ibid,.

28 APPG on Ending the Need for Food Banks, (2023), *Cash or Food? Exploring effective reponses to destitution.* **https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/wp-assets/appg_report_2023_updated.pdf**

Framework to end the need for food banks (and charitable food provision) in Northern Ireland, and policy recommendations

The current system in Northern Ireland is not working because it is designed to respond to crises rather than prevent them. People reach food banks after months of facing difficulty, debt, disconnected services, stigma, and a social security system that too often fails to catch them. By the time someone is referred to a food bank, the damage is already done.

The evidence gathered through this process, across workshops, lived-experience participation and from frontline advice organisations, is consistent: *current responses are fragmented, short-term funded, and arrive too late*. But Northern Ireland has the building blocks of something better in every constituency. What has been missing is the cross-system architecture, the sustained funding, and the political commitment to connect those building blocks into something that genuinely prevents hardship rather than managing it indefinitely.

Trussell wants to see a **Northern Ireland where everyone is guaranteed the essentials: a warm, secure home and enough income to pay their bills, including food, with no one forced to rely on charitable food provision to survive.**

That means identifying people at risk of hunger, at the earliest possible opportunity. It means a connected, supported journey through the system, where there is no wrong door, people only have to tell their story once, and the help they receive is coordinated, well-timed and delivered with dignity and compassion. And it means a system that acts on what it knows: using evidence and lived experience continuously, at every stage, to get better at reaching people sooner and supporting them more effectively.

During this process, it was vital that Trussell prioritised the voices of lived experience throughout. Discussions were focused on current experiences of hunger and hardship and on what a future in which people didn't have to rely on charitable food aid would look like. By looking at a life cycle approach, our experts by experience highlighted a range of issues, and potential crisis points, and what either supported them or on reflection, what they wished had supported them at the time.

Two things were evident: the stressful mental load people carry living in crisis is draining, and intersectional issues of living in poverty resulting in experiencing one crisis after another. Secondly, the repeated need to protect their children so they do not fully experience the hardship of poverty. Families don't just go without material goods; they will sacrifice their own meals to ensure their children don't go hungry.

Trussell's Pathways to end the need for foodbanks proposes a connected, phased model built specifically for Northern Ireland's circumstances: *its post-conflict context, its rural geography, its history of fragmented and short-term funding, and the trust deficit that runs through all of it.* It sets out a shared outcomes framework so that progress is tracked, not assumed. And it closes with a clear, deliverable proposition: *five commitments capable of moving Northern Ireland from crisis response toward genuine early intervention-prevention within this Assembly mandate and toward ending the need for food banks and charitable food provision within a decade.*

We are not asking government to do this alone, and we are not asking it to start from nothing. On 2nd June 2026, Trussell and supporting organisations[29] held a one-day hybrid information exchange: Pathways to end the need for food banks in Northern Ireland.

The conference created a cross-sector collaborative space for civil servants, health and social care workers alongside organisations from the emergency food sector, faith groups, advice agencies, educators, academia, individuals and campaigners with lived experience, and other community support workers to come together to combine their skills, experiences, and evidence of best practice. Four workshops were held to discuss practical pathways for short, medium, and long-term change in tackling hunger and hardship. Participants reached an unusually consistent conclusion: *Community partnership is key, incremental change will not be enough, but the building blocks of something better already exist in every constituency*. This is the moment to connect them.

From this, we have developed a framework to move away from reliance on crisis support and charitable food aid to a preventative, income-based system where everyone can afford the essentials.

Our framework brings together evidence on hardship and food bank use, the lived experience of poverty, and learning from cross-sector collaboration, while outlining practical pathways for short, medium and long-term change in Northern Ireland.

29 Trussell Hybrid Information Exchange: Pathways to End the Need for Food Banks in Northern Ireland – Skainos/Online – 2 June 2026

One connected system:

Each element covers what it means in practice, where it has gone wrong before, and what we will measure - tackling fuel and housing insecurity, food insecurity, and the wider affordability of essentials - as one connected system.

What each element covers in practice

Connected element	Where this has gone wrong before	What we will measure*
Income and cash-first	Support too often defaulted to a food parcel even when the problem was income – masking rather than resolving it.	% contacts resolved through income-based support; benefit uptake and debt outcomes; reduction in high-cost credit use.
Advice and early intervention	Advice historically reached people only at crisis point, with short-term funding cycles undermining the relationship-building this depends on.	Time between need emerging and support received; % of advice contacts that occur before crisis, not during it.
Food security and community	Community food provision grew up ad hoc, with no shared standards or referral links into advice and income support.	Ulster University's At-Risk Food Insecurity Index to map need against provision; reliance on emergency parcels over time.
Housing and energy costs	Housing and energy advice sat in a separate system from food and income support, so people facing all three pressures navigated disconnected services.	% of food bank and advice contacts also connected into housing and energy support.
Governance and partnership	Responsibility sat narrowly with the Department for Communities, with no shared outcomes framework connecting health, education, justice and local government.	Cross-departmental governance structure exists and functions; outcomes reported against the Five NI Outcomes and Four Rs (Section3).
Data and intelligence	Lack of connections between data sets, narrow definitions of outcomes	Cross departmental agreement, taking the measures above to measure success, with whole person's financial, health and wellbeing lived experience into account

* All measurement tools will be subject to periodic review to ensure accurate outcomes and appropriate evidence and impact is reported on.

Four practice principles sit underneath every element of the model and every phase of delivery.

Policy recommendations: Ending hunger, today, together, and forever

Our highlighted key drivers of food bank use in the Trussell community set out the 'why' we need to have a pathway to end the need for food banks (and charitable food provision). Our framework outlines the journey of 'how' we can achieve this, and our policy recommendations call on the Northern Ireland Executive and 11 councils to implement the changes to make ending hunger in Northern Ireland a tangible reality.

Our recommendations set out a practical pathway to substantially reduce, and ultimately end, the need for food banks and charitable food provision in Northern Ireland. They are grounded in evidence that hunger and food bank need are driven primarily by inadequate incomes and limited financial resources, alongside rising living and energy costs, insecure housing and work, health inequalities, long-term disabilities, barriers to services, and wider structural inequalities. Ending hunger in Northern Ireland requires immediate action to stabilise household incomes, alongside longer-term reform to prevent people from reaching crisis in the first place.

Only by ensuring everyone has enough money to live with dignity can we truly end the need for food banks and charitable food provision. This will require coordinated action across government, public bodies, councils, and community organisations, backed by sustained investment in advice services, community infrastructure, and dignity-based alternatives to charitable food provision. It must also reduce stigma and reflect Northern Ireland's specific context, including rurality, post-conflict dynamics, and persistent inequalities.

Short-term recommendations (2027-2029)

Our short-term recommendations are designed to be low-cost and easily actioned, reflecting the current financial constraints within the Northern Ireland Executive. They are estimated to be deliverable in the first two years of the mandate, but will require coordinated action across government, public bodies, councils, and community organisations to succeed.

In the short term, action should focus on easing the immediate pressures that push people towards charitable food provision. This should include maximising household incomes through benefit take-up, alongside timely access to independent debt, money, and budgeting advice. Support should be available earlier, through trusted community settings and stronger referral pathways, particularly for people who are isolated or who may be reluctant to disclose their circumstances. This would help people access support before debts build up or their situation deteriorates.

Referral pathways should move beyond signposting towards active, warm referrals, preventing people from having to repeat their story multiple times. Stronger connections between different services enable a more effective multi-agency approach to supporting and advocating for individuals in line with their needs.

Practical measures such as providing targeted financial support with energy, rent, and transport costs would help reduce immediate hardship. Interventions should be delivered through local, accessible services, with a 'no wrong door' approach and robust data-sharing arrangements, and focused on relationship-based, trauma-informed advice and support, peer support, and community connection.

Medium-term recommendations (2027-2032)

Our medium-term priorities focus on considered coordination, prevention, and structural improvement. They are therefore proposed for delivery within the Northern Ireland Assembly mandate and offer an opportunity to embed this work in revised Council Community Plans.

Over the medium term, prevention should be embedded across public systems and community provision. This includes integrating financial literacy, life skills, and advice into schools, and delivering preventive advice across early years, health, education, and community settings.

The advice and community sector requires stable, flexible and multi-year funding to provide consistent support, retain skilled staff and build effective local partnerships. Policy and service design should also address the wider drivers of hardship, including unaffordable housing and childcare, high energy costs, low wages, insecure work, rural inequality, and poor transport access. Services must be designed to meet the needs of rural communities, disabled people and marginalised groups, with practical action to reduce barriers linked to language, literacy, stigma, and accessibility.

The key driver of food bank need in the UK is low incomes. An inability to afford food is a symptom of struggling to afford many essentials, including housing costs, suitable clothing, essential travel costs, utility bills, internet access, and toiletries, as well as food. One-off or short periods of financial crisis are generally unrelated to food, instead being triggered by events such as eviction, job loss, separation, short-term illness, bereavement, or domestic abuse. Therefore, crisis support should recognise the issues pushing people or households to a point where they are unable to cover the cost of both food and other essentials, rather than focusing on the symptom of food insecurity. Public resources should be focused on building sustainable community networks and infrastructure that enable fast, easy access to advice and other wraparound services that tackle low income. Investment into holistic advice, whether provided through a charitable food organisation or another community group, must be the priority, not funding free or subsidised food.

Embedding a cash-first approach to crisis support allows individuals and households to pay for the essentials they need at the point of crisis. In contrast, direct spend on food, vouchers restricted to food, or funding for organisations to provide free or subsidised food is not as effective. We therefore recommend that the funding allocated to run social supermarkets should instead be invested into advice and wraparound support, and in a significantly increased Discretionary Support scheme. This will be far more effective in helping people to weather crises, stabilise their situation and build financial resilience. It will allow people flexibility, dignity, and autonomy, as we move towards a Northern Ireland where everyone can afford the essentials.

Longer-term recommendations (lifespan of 10-year Anti-Poverty Strategy)

To eradicate the need for food banks (and charitable food provision) in Northern Ireland, in addition to short- and medium-term actions to increase people's income and support now, we need ambitious long-term priorities: Focused on income adequacy, structural change, ending reliance on crisis support, and embedding an income-first system that integrates upstream holistic advice.

Longer-term system change cannot be achieved by simply hoping for a better future. We will only end the need for food banks and charitable food provision by moving towards an income-first system that prevents income, food and fuel insecurity by ensuring everyone has enough money to live with dignity. This means embedding cash-first responses, strengthening social security, and ensuring Universal Credit enables people to afford the essentials.

Priorities for change

Over the life of the next Northern Ireland Assembly, we need to see significant action across each of the six areas identified as priorities for change. These should include:

1. **Committing to end the need for food banks and charitable food provision in Northern Ireland, and developing a cross-departmental action plan integrated into the Anti-Poverty Strategy.**

2. **Improving incomes by:**
    - Lobbying the UK government to introduce an Essentials Guarantee in Universal Credit.
    - Recognising Northern Ireland's welfare mitigations are a lifeline and securing them well beyond 2028.
    - Increasing funding for benefit take up and income maximisation support in community settings.
    - Increasing access to secure, decently paid work.
    - Ensure the forthcoming PIP review recommendations are considered jointly with the community and voluntary sector to ensure people with disabilities and long-term health conditions are not detrimentally impacted in Northern Ireland.

3. **Supporting families with children by:**
    - Extending access to free school meals to all families on Universal Credit.
    - Strengthening school uniform support and improving childcare provision.

4. **Ensuring housing costs do not drive hunger by:**
    - Mitigating the current freeze of Local Housing Allowance and lobbying the UK government to permanently re-link housing support to local rents.
    - Increasing investment in domestic energy efficiency, making homes easier and more affordable to heat.

5. **Enabling people to weather crises and financial shocks by:**
    - Strengthening Discretionary Support and committing to long-term and adequate funding.
    - Setting up pilot projects to trial and evaluate cash first models of support.

6. **Strengthening community advice, advocacy and prevention by:**
    - Supporting providers to move from signposting to active, warm referrals.
    - Embedding holistic advice as a core part of public services.
    - Providing sustainable, full-cost recovery, flexible, multi-year funding uplifted for inflation to build sustainable community infrastructure.

Conclusion

This is the moment in the political and fiscal cycle where Northern Ireland can choose to build a connected, earlier-intervention system rather than continuing to manage hardship one crisis at a time. We are asking the Northern Ireland Executive, the Assembly, and local councils to make five specific commitments:

1. Take action to end the need for food banks (and charitable food provision) by committing to a Northern Ireland where everyone is guaranteed a warm, secure home and enough income to pay their bills, and formally adopt the policy recommendations in this report as the shared cross-government/cross-sector approach. This first commitment should be included in the next Northern Ireland Assembly Mandate's Programme for Government and within each of the 11 local councils' Community Plans.

2. Establish a cross-departmental governance group, chaired by the Executive Office, accountable for delivering the required action to end the need for food banks in Northern Ireland and measuring progress against an outcomes framework to be developed in partnership with local government and the voluntary and community sector.

3. Commit to multi-year, flexible, full cost-recovery funding uplifted for inflation for advice and community services, ending the cycle of short-term funding that undermines the relationship-based approach proven to work for people at highest risk of needing a food bank.

4. Launch cash-first and discretionary support pilots in a small number of council areas within the next 12 months, with independent evaluation built in from the outset.

5. Formalise a data partnership, involving stakeholders from the community and voluntary sector, academics and NISRA, to build the shared evidence base needed to track progress and enable scaling of what works in ending the need for food banks (and charitable food provision).

None of these five commitments requires the government to act alone. The partners named throughout this document are already engaged, already aligned, and already prepared to deliver. What has been missing is a shared commitment from the government to connect the system around them.

Northern Ireland does not lack evidence, partners, or public appetite for change. What it has lacked is a moment of genuine political commitment to act on all three together. This proposition is that moment.

Trussell and supporting organisations are ready to deliver our part. We are asking the Northern Ireland Executive and all 11 local councils to deliver yours. We can end hunger – today, together, and forever.

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