BEYOND THE FOOD PARCEL:
Understanding Food Insecurity in Bournemouth

Research Report | August 2026

Partner organisations

Bournemouth Foodbank & The Open University

Authors

Chloe Durrant, *Bournemouth Foodbank*

Alessandra Marino, *The Open University*

Merim Baitimbetova, *The Open University*

Maria Nita, *The Open University*

Nicoleta Tipi, *The Open University*

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the staff and volunteers at Bournemouth Foodbank for their invaluable support throughout this research. Their knowledge, insights and commitment to the project helped shape this report. We are particularly grateful to colleagues who contributed their time to reviewing findings, providing feedback and sharing their expertise.

Above all, we would like to thank everyone who took part in this research. We are grateful for the openness and honesty with which they shared their experiences. Their contributions have provided valuable insights, informed the findings presented in this report, and will help shape future improvements to services for people experiencing food insecurity.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a collaborative research project between Bournemouth Foodbank and The Open University, funded through the Open Societal Challenges Programme in 2026. The study was undertaken to better understand the changing nature of food poverty in Bournemouth, identify the factors driving foodbank use, and capture the experiences of people accessing foodbank support.

The research combined quantitative analysis of Bournemouth Foodbank voucher data from 2019 to June 2026 with qualitative interviews involving 45 people who had accessed the foodbank. Together, these methods provide both a statistical overview of local trends and an in-depth understanding of the realities of living with food insecurity.

Research at a glance

- ■ 45 Interviews
- ■ 45,000+ Voucher Records Analysed
- ■ 2019–2026 Data Analysed

Participant voice

"*They treated you as a person, and not a nobody*."

Key Findings

Connecting through food

Bournemouth Foodbank provides more than food. Participants consistently praised the kindness, compassion, and respect shown by staff and volunteers. Many described the foodbank as a welcoming and non-judgmental space that helped reduce the feelings of shame and isolation. The emotional support, social connection, and signposting provided by staff are as important as food parcels themselves.

Food insecurity is becoming chronic rather than temporary

Many participants described relying on foodbanks and other forms of food aid regularly rather than occasionally. Foodbank support often enabled people to redirect limited income towards rent, utility bills and debt repayments. For some, food insecurity has become a long-term reality driven by rising living costs, low incomes and inadequate financial support.

Choosing between essentials

December consistently records the highest number of foodbank vouchers, reflecting the increased financial pressures many households face during the winter months, when people are often forced to choose between 'heating or eating'. Participants described living with constant financial trade-offs, where limited income meant needing to prioritise one essential expense over another. Many spoke about skipping meals, rationing food, delaying bill payments and going without everyday necessities in order to stretch budgets.

Health and food insecurity are closely interconnected

The research identified a strong relationship between poor health and financial hardship. Physical illnesses, disabilities, mental health conditions, caring responsibilities and addiction often affected participants' ability to work and maintain financial stability. At the same time, food insecurity negatively affected physical health, mental wellbeing, nutrition, and management of existing health conditions. Many participants described a cycle in which poor health contributed to poverty and poverty further affected health.

Food insecurity is increasingly driven by structural economic pressures

The most common reason for referrals in 2025 was rising costs of essentials, accounting for 38% of referrals. Health-related issues and debt were also major contributing factors. Interview participants consistently described wages, benefits and other sources of income as insufficient to cover the cost of housing, utilities and food. Their experiences suggest that foodbank use is increasingly driven by persistent low incomes and wider economic pressure, rather than isolated emergencies.

Single adults are the largest group accessing support

Nearly two-thirds (63%) of 2025 vouchers were issued to people living alone. Adults aged 31–65 represented the largest proportion of foodbank users, particularly those living in single-person households. Food insecurity is not limited to families with children and increasingly affects working-age adults living alone.

Dignity, choice and flexibility matter

While participants expressed gratitude for the support received, many also wanted greater choice over the food they received. Suggestions included increased access to fresh food, supermarket vouchers, community supermarket models, and services that provide greater flexibility and independence. Participants viewed these approaches as important for maintaining dignity and improving nutritional outcomes.

Foodbank demand remains significantly higher than before the pandemic

Demand for Bournemouth Foodbank increased dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic and has remained persistently high. Voucher numbers rose from 3,661 in 2019 to a peak of 7,200 in 2024. Although voucher numbers fell slightly in 2025, they remained approximately 82% higher than pre-pandemic levels, indicating that many households continue to experience significant financial hardship.

Summary of Conclusions

Food poverty in Bournemouth is increasingly driven by broader structural issues, including low incomes, rising living costs, insecure housing, debt and ill health. Foodbanks play a vital role in preventing hunger and supporting people through periods of hardship, but they cannot address the root causes of poverty alone.

The research highlights the importance of combining emergency food provision with compassionate, holistic support that promotes dignity, autonomy and wellbeing. It also points to the need for wider action from local and national policymakers to improve income security, strengthen welfare support, address housing affordability and reduce the financial pressures driving demand for foodbanks.

Bournemouth Foodbank continues to provide a critical safety net for thousands of local people. However, the experiences shared in this report demonstrate that long-term reductions in food poverty will require systemic solutions that ensure everyone has sufficient income and support to meet their basic needs without relying on emergency food aid. Alongside emergency food provision, holistic person-centred support has an important role in helping people address the underlying causes of financial hardship. Bournemouth Foodbank's Money Advice Service, providing fully confidential advice and practical support, has already supported people by integrating practical financial guidance with food support. In addition, the planned expansion of this work through the new Money Matters partnership across Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, will strengthen this approach.

Introduction

Bournemouth Foodbank works directly with people facing financial hardship caused by a wide range of issues. It provides people in crisis with a three-day emergency food parcel, alongside essential toiletries and some fresh produce. The foodbank meets people's practical and emotional needs while also signposting them to specialist services that can help them move out of crisis. For Bournemouth Foodbank, 2024 was a turning point: as the cost-of-living crisis and fuel poverty intensified, new people began coming through the door. People in full-time employment who could no longer afford their outgoings and bills were accessing foodbanks for the first time.

In 2025 Bournemouth Foodbank was accessed 6,668 times and served at least 6,337 adults and 2,761 children. They distributed 75,514.51 kg of food through referrals from 221 agencies and care professionals from the town, and to other local foodbanks and agencies throughout the town. However, they did not always know the stories of these people, nor did they have an analysis of referral data that could tell them more about the changing demographics of foodbank access. This report summarises the findings of a project, led by Bournemouth Foodbank and supported by The Open University, that aimed to fill this gap. Bournemouth Foodbank have seen an overall 80% increase in demand for their service in five years, and the report provides an insight into how the landscape of food poverty has drastically changed after COVID-19.

Project background

The project was funded by The Open University's Open Societal Challenges programme. The OSC Programme attempts to respond to the most pressing societal challenges facing people across the UK and worldwide to transform lives. It promotes research directly focused on the themes of tackling inequalities, living well and sustainability which align with Bournemouth Foodbank's charitable objectives.

In collaboration with The Open University, Bournemouth Foodbank aimed to strengthen in-house research skills and enable robust data analysis in the field of food poverty, so that it can deliver better support to the communities it serves and create policy impact through empirically grounded recommendations. The OU team supported and mentored the community-led research, which sought to strengthen knowledge about the drivers, policy changes, logistical challenges and, crucially, people's experiences of food poverty.

Specifically, Bournemouth Foodbank sought evidence on:

1) the social drivers that have brought hundreds of new faces through their doors
2) the actions they, or local authorities, can take to combat food poverty
3) advocacy strategies.

The landscape of food poverty

Accessing Foodbank Support

No previous study analysing the referral database or incorporating interviews with foodbank users has been undertaken at Bournemouth Foodbank. This report presents findings from the first foodbank-led study exploring both the experience of accessing foodbank support and the longer-term impact of food parcels on recipients. In doing so, it complements and updates existing national research while providing a detailed understanding of local need.

Research consistently demonstrates that foodbank use is concentrated among groups experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. Loopstra (2017) found that foodbank users were more likely to be unemployed, living with a disability, raising children as single parents, or living alone, and were also more likely to report poorer dietary quality than the wider population. More recent evidence from Trussell (2025) indicates that inadequate income remains the primary driver of foodbank referrals across the UK.

Foodbank referrals are commonly associated with low income, debt, health-related challenges, benefit issues, and housing insecurity (Prayogo et al., 2017; Trussell, 2025). Children continue to be disproportionately affected by food insecurity, with almost two-thirds of food parcels distributed to households with children. The number of older people requiring support has also increased significantly, with food parcels distributed to people aged 65 and over rising sharply since 2019/20 (Trussell, 2025).

These patterns reflect broader inequalities in society. Foodbank use is particularly prevalent among unemployed people, benefit recipients, disabled people, single-parent households, working-age adults, families with children, and individuals from minoritised ethnic groups (Loopstra and Lambie-Mumford, 2023). The evidence suggests that foodbank use is closely linked to wider experiences of poverty and social disadvantage rather than isolated financial emergencies.

The growth in foodbank demand over the last decade further illustrates the scale of these challenges. Although foodbanks in the Trussell community distributed 2.89 million emergency food parcels in 2024/25, representing an 8% decrease compared with the record 3.1 million parcels distributed in 2023/24, demand remains historically high (Trussell, 2025). Food parcel distribution was still 51% higher than five years earlier and 164% higher than ten years earlier, indicating that food insecurity has become more widespread and persistent. Trussell's research estimates that 9.3 million people, including 3 million children, experienced severe hardship in the UK during 2022/23 (Trussell, 2025).

While many people access a foodbank only once, repeat use has become an increasingly important feature of demand. During 2024/25, almost 258,000 households received support from a foodbank for the first time. However, nearly half of all users (47%) required assistance on more than one occasion, suggesting that foodbanks are increasingly supporting people experiencing prolonged financial hardship rather than short-term crises (Trussell, 2025).

Taken together, these findings suggest that foodbanks are now responding to entrenched poverty affecting a growing number of families with children, disabled people, and older adults. As this report further demonstrates, reducing long-term reliance on foodbanks requires policy interventions that address the underlying causes of hardship, including stronger social security provision, measures to reduce child poverty, accessible local crisis support, and affordable housing.

Mounting Pressure on Foodbanks

The increasing demand for foodbank support has occurred alongside growing pressures on foodbanks themselves. Years of austerity and rising living costs have stretched the capacity of food aid organisations, creating challenges for both service delivery and long-term sustainability. As Nayak and Hartwell note:

"...while foodbanks play a crucial role in providing emergency food aid, they often face challenges in terms of supply shortages, limited food variety, and perpetuating dependency on food aid." (2023, p. 1)

At the same time, people seeking support may encounter barriers that limit access to food assistance. These barriers often stem from administrative requirements, such as referral vouchers, eligibility criteria, or assessment processes. Denning's (2021) ethnographic study of foodbanks in England found that some foodbanks restricted access to three visits within a six-month period, despite ongoing need. Such restrictions can leave people without adequate support and may contribute to lower engagement with food assistance services. Indeed, some evidence suggests that only around 20% of individuals who could benefit from foodbank support actually access it (Stephen et al., 2026).

Foodbanks therefore occupy a difficult position. They provide an essential source of assistance for people experiencing food insecurity while simultaneously facing rising operational costs, uncertainty around funding, and increased demand for services. Understanding foodbank provision requires consideration not only of how food is distributed but also of the wider social and economic conditions that generate the need for food aid.

These challenges are closely connected to the operation of the wider food supply chain. Before reaching consumers, food passes through multiple stages, including production, manufacturing, storage, packaging, transportation and retail. Throughout this process, inefficiencies can contribute to both food waste and surplus food, even as many households experience food insecurity. Food may be wasted through poor handling, while surplus food often results from overproduction or mismatches between supply and demand.

Foodbanks can help address these inefficiencies by redistributing surplus food that would otherwise go to waste (Rivera et al., 2023). However, foodbank supply chains are complex and depend on a diverse network of donors, suppliers, partner agencies and recipients (Sengul Orgut et al., 2025). Donations of surplus food are not always predictable, and the foods available do not necessarily align with the dietary requirements, cultural preferences or health needs of recipients.

Recent research has therefore highlighted the importance of matching food provision more closely to service users' needs. Morrow et al. (2024), for example, emphasise the value of understanding client food preferences and using this information to improve foodbank stock management while reducing waste. One recommendation is for foodbanks to collect regular feedback from users through food preference surveys and use this information to guide procurement, donations and collaboration with partner organisations.

Against this backdrop, the present study explored how food parcel provision could be improved from the perspective of foodbank users themselves and examined what future foodbank services might look like in meeting local needs more effectively.

Methodology

This research project combined qualitative and quantitative methods, namely interviews with foodbank users and analysis of voucher referral data, to better understand the demographics and experiences of people accessing Bournemouth Foodbank. At the time of the research, Bournemouth Foodbank distributed food parcels through St Georges hub, Citygate hub, Life House hub, St Luke’s hub, and St Mike’s hub.

Quantitative research

The quantitative analysis is based on Bournemouth Foodbank voucher data covering the period 2019–2026. The dataset comprises more than 45,000 foodbank vouchers, providing a robust evidence base for examining patterns and trends in foodbank use over time to create a picture of local need. Data is collected via vouchers issued by referral partners, such as health visitors, schools, social workers, and organisations such as Citizens Advice. Referral partners assess people for financial hardship before referring them to a foodbank.

The voucher contains information such as the age of the person being referred to the foodbank and how many adults and children are contained within their household. Each voucher therefore supports not only the referred person but all the people in their household. A voucher is issued to a person each time they use the foodbank, and the voucher is linked to the person through a unique client ID. Voucher data is collated in Trussell's Data Collection System (DSC) which holds data for approximately 14000 foodbanks. Each foodbank has access to their own data via the system. The data can be downloaded and then analysed manually in Excel or CSV files using, for example, pivot tables.

Qualitative research

The qualitative element consisted of 45 one-to-one interviews with people who have used one of Bournemouth Foodbank's hubs. Interviews took place between 5th March and 9th June 2026. Interviews were conducted by a community researcher who was recruited by Bournemouth Foodbank to lead the project. Posters and flyers promoting the research project were put in all five hubs and included a QR code for people to scan if they were interested in taking part. The community researcher also promoted the research in person at the hubs, giving people more information about the project and carrying out interviews at a time that was suitable for the participant.

Interviews were conducted at Citygate Community Hub, St George's Hub and the Life House hub. A small number of interviews were conducted online. Participants were recruited through Bournemouth Foodbank locations and were invited to take part on a voluntary basis. Participants were given a £10 supermarket voucher as a compensation for investing their time in the research. The sample was self-selecting, with no quotas applied. The research sought to capture a range of experiences from people currently, or recently, accessing foodbank support.

Interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent and the interview length ranged from approximately 10 minutes to 50 minutes in length. A semi-structured interview approach was used, allowing participants to talk openly about their experiences while ensuring that key topics were covered consistently across interviews. Interview recordings were transcribed, anonymised and analysed using a coding framework to identify common themes and experiences. The analysis of interview transcripts was undertaken through the creation of themes, which are repeated features or patterns in the data that capture something significant about the research question. Themes represent underlying meanings, experiences, perceptions, or ideas shared across participants.

Ethics

The research was conducted in accordance with Open University ethical requirements. Participants received information about the research and gave informed consent before taking part. Personal details were removed from transcripts and reporting, and findings are presented anonymously to protect participants' privacy.

Limitations

The findings reflect the experiences of people who chose to take part in the research and who were accessing foodbank services, or had recently accessed foodbank services, at the time of the study. The qualitative research aims to provide insight and understanding rather than to represent the views of every foodbank user. The interview sample differs from voucher data, with repeat users over-represented compared with the overall client population. Consequently, the qualitative findings should be interpreted as providing rich insight into experiences of sustained financial hardship rather than being statistically representative of all foodbank users.

The voucher data provides useful context on trends over time but does not explain the reasons behind those trends, which is why it's important to consider the data along with the findings from the qualitative research.

Quantitative data relating to the number of people who have used the foodbank, and how many times an individual has used Bournemouth Foodbank, is based on client IDs. The same person may have multiple client IDs if, for example, their name has been entered with different spellings or a referral agency has not identified that they were already registered on the system. Records are checked manually where possible, and duplicate client IDs are merged or removed when identified. However, some duplicates may remain, meaning the data may slightly overestimate the number of unique individuals accessing the service.

Findings

Analysis of quantitative data

Quantitative analysis was undertaken using Bournemouth Foodbank's data extracted from Trussell's Data Collection System (DSC). The analysis draws on both voucher records and unique client records, depending on the measure being reported. Throughout this section, N refers to the number of observations included in the specific analysis.

Overall Trends

Voucher issuance increased significantly between 2019 and 2024, rising from 3,661 vouchers in 2019 to a peak of 7,200 in 2024. The most substantial increase occurred in 2020, when voucher numbers rose by 38%, reflecting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which contributed to almost a quarter of referrals that year. Although demand declined slightly in 2021, voucher numbers remained well above pre-pandemic levels. A further sharp increase was recorded in 2022, when vouchers exceeded 7,000 for the first time. Demand then remained relatively stable through 2023 and 2024 before falling by 8% in 2025 to 6,668 vouchers. Despite this reduction, voucher levels in 2025 remained approximately 82% higher than those recorded in 2019, indicating a sustained increase in need compared with pre-pandemic levels.

Table 1. Voucher numbers and trends 2019-2025

Year	Number of vouchers	% change from previous year	COVID-19 was a contributing factor
2019	3661		-
2020	5922	+38%	24%
2021	5399	-10%	12.5%
2022	7038	+23%	2.5%
2023	6975	-1%	0.3%

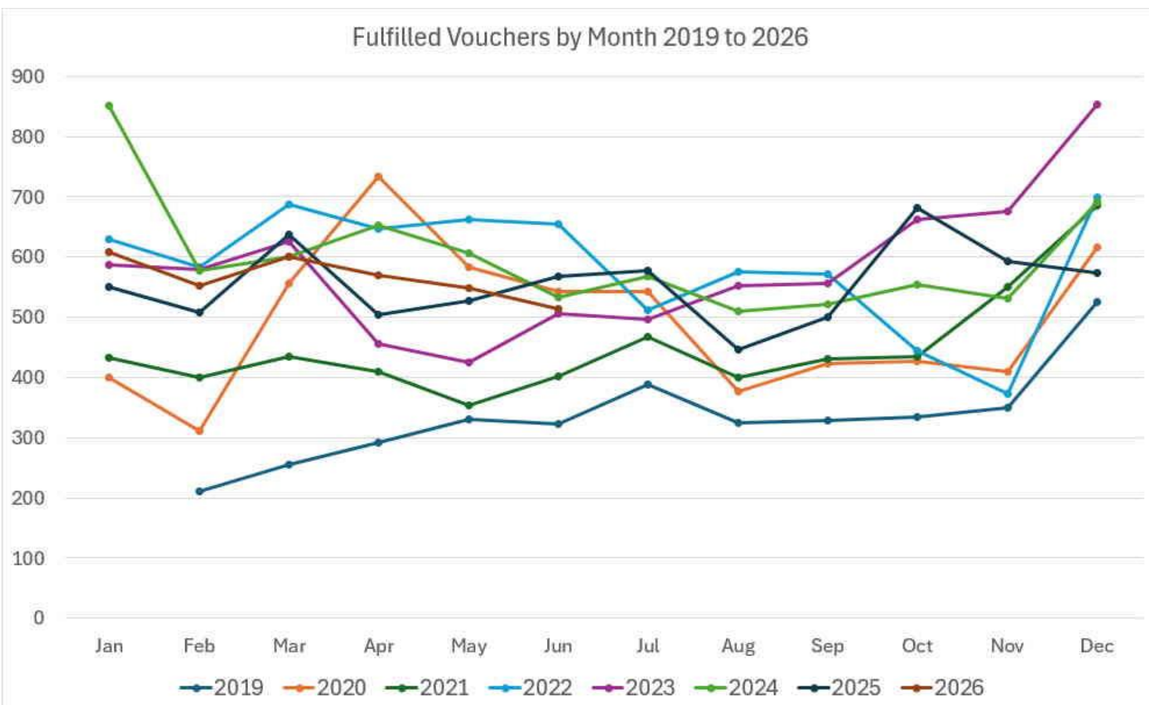
Year	Number of vouchers	% change from previous year	COVID-19 was a contributing factor
2024	7200	+3%	-
2025	6668	-8%	-

NB: The proportion of referrals for which COVID-19 was recorded as a contributing factor should be regarded as a minimum estimate, as it is unknown whether referral agencies consistently asked or recorded this information in all cases.

Seasonal Patterns

Analysis of monthly activity shows clear seasonal trends. December consistently records the highest number of vouchers, reflecting increased financial pressures during the winter period and holiday season and demonstrating that people often have to make choices about 'eating or heating'. March and January also tend to experience relatively high demand. The early months of 2026 suggest continued strong demand.

Figure 1. Fulfilled voucher by month 2019–2026



Age Profile and Geography of Voucher Recipients

Adults aged 31–65 continue to account for the majority of voucher recipients. Within single-person households specifically, the largest group in 2025 was those aged 46–65, representing 42% of single-adult recipients, followed by those aged 31–45 at 34%. Younger adults aged 18–30 accounted for 13%, while people aged 66 and overrepresented only 6%. This suggests that middle-aged adults, particularly those living alone, are disproportionately represented among those seeking support. The relatively low proportion of older recipients may partly reflect broader patterns of deprivation within the local area, as fewer than 7%

of BCP residents aged 65 and over live in neighbourhoods classified among the 20% most deprived nationally (BCP Council, 2025).

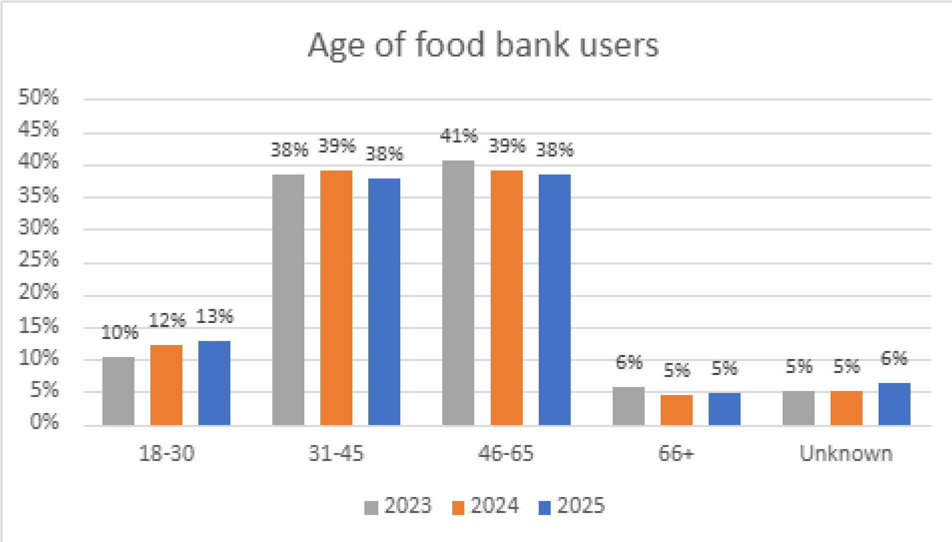
Rental prices in the BCP council area are affected by tourism and short-term rentals that can drive the values up and decrease long-term rental availability. This affects living costs and disposable income contributing to foodbank referrals. Additionally, in Bournemouth, reliance on the private rented sector is substantially higher than the BCP and national average. Almost six in ten households in Boscombe West and Bournemouth Central live in private rented accommodation (BCP Council, 2025), leaving many exposed to rising rents, insecure tenancies and housing instability.

The findings suggest a link between foodbank use and local deprivation. The highest numbers of fulfilled vouchers were recorded in East Cliff & Springbourne (3513), Bournemouth Central (1791) and Boscombe West (1696), which are identified by BCP Council as areas with the highest levels of deprivation

Table 2. Number of vouchers per Bournemouth areas (2024-2025)

BCP council areas	2024	2005	Grand Total
East Cliff & Springbourne	1877	1636	3513
Bournemouth Central	876	915	1791
Boscombe West	920	776	1696
Westbourne & West Cliff	533	483	1016
Boscombe East & Pokesdown	414	455	869
Queen's Park	424	376	800
Muscliff & Strouden Park	362	332	694
Winton East	362	323	685
Talbot & Branksome Woods	313	296	609
Moordown	255	215	470
Wallisdown & Winton West	260	201	461
Kinson	136	100	236
West Southbourne	72	140	212
Redhill & Northbourne	107	59	166
Littledown & Iford	34	60	94
Grand Total	**6945**	**6367**	**13312**

Figure 2. Age breakdown of foodbank users 2023–2025



Household Structure

Single-person households remain by far the largest household type accessing support. In 2025, 63% of all vouchers were issued to individuals living alone, a proportion unchanged from 2024 and slightly higher than the 60% recorded in 2023. The second-largest group consisted of households with two adults and no children, accounting for 13% of vouchers in 2025.

Families with children collectively represent a smaller but still significant proportion of recipients. Single-parent households made up around 11% of all vouchers in 2025, while two-adult households with children accounted for approximately 9%. Larger households with three or more adults or four or more children continued to make up only a very small proportion of referrals.

The data on fulfilled vouchers by ward (see Table 2) suggests that demand was concentrated in areas characterised by a high proportion of working-age adults and single-person households. East Cliff & Springbourne, Bournemouth Central and Boscombe West, which recorded the highest numbers of vouchers, had particularly large proportions of one-person households (71.1%, 82.4% and 72.7% respectively) according to the BCP Census 2021 (BCP Council, 2021), reflecting the predominance of single-adult recipients observed above. In contrast to the national picture reported by the Trussell Trust (2025), where families with children received the majority of emergency food parcels (63% in 2024–2025), the Bournemouth Foodbank data indicate that support was more commonly accessed by working-age adults living alone.

Table 3. Household structure and referrals per year, expressed in numbers and percentage 2023- 2025

Household structure	2023		2024		2025	
Single person household	4193	60%	4544	63%	4192	63%
Single parent/carer with 1 child	438	6%	359	5%	371	6%
Single parent/carer with 2 children	311	4%	275	4%	259	4%
Single parent/carer with 3 children	86	1%	92	1%	71	1%
Single parent/carer with 4 or more children	53	1%	42	1%	27	0%
Two adults, no children	853	12%	905	13%	870	13%
Two adults with 1 child	270	4%	269	4%	246	4%
Two adults with 2 children	212	3%	228	3%	188	3%
Two adults with 3 children	110	2%	107	1%	88	1%
Two adults with 4 or more children	71	1%	75	1%	84	1%
Three or more adults, no children	167	2%	122	2%	119	2%
Three or more adults with 1 child	57	1%	62	1%	57	1%
Three or more adults with 2 children	72	1%	61	1%	56	1%
Three or more adults with 3 children	17	0%	21	0%	15	0%
Three or more adults with 4 or more children	16	0%	17	0%	8	0%
Other/not stated	49	1%	21	0%	17	0%
Total Vouchers	**6975**		**7200**		**6668**	

Referral Reasons

The primary reason for voucher referrals in 2025 was rising costs of essentials, cited in 38% of cases. This represents a notable increase from 30% in 2024 and 33% in 2023, highlighting the continued impact of cost-of-living pressures and lower earnings. For example, in 2024 the median annual pay for all full-time employees working in the Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) area was estimated at around £35,000 which is below the England median figure of £37,600 (BCP Council, 2025).

Debt was the second most common factor, cited in one quarter (25%) of referrals in 2025, continuing an upward trend from previous years. Of the 25% who cited debt, 16% were priority debt.

Health-related issues were the third most common factor, with the ongoing impact of physical or mental health conditions cited in 17% of referrals. This reflects the current situation in the area. An increasing number of people in the BCP area are living with long-term health conditions (LTC): in 2024, 218,000 people, half the population had one LTC and 95,000 had three or more LTCs (BCP Council, 2025), preventing people from being economically active.

Several referral reasons remained relatively stable, including benefit delays, immigration-related financial exclusion, and increased costs associated with dependents. Meanwhile, referrals linked to insecure housing fell from 12% in 2024 to 9% in 2025.

Referrals linked to loss of support from friends and family were higher amongst those aged 18-30 and referrals linked to domestic abuse were higher amongst those aged 18-45.

The increase in referrals associated with essential living costs, debt, and unexpected expenses indicates growing financial strain among households, even as some housing-related pressures have become less prominent.

Image 1: Foodbank warehouse. Photo credit @Bournemouth Foodbank

Table 4. Voucher referral reason in percentage 2023-2025

Voucher referral reason	2023	2024	2025
Rising costs of essentials	33%	30%	38%
Debt (proportion of priority debt shown in brackets)	19% (13%)	24% (15%)	25% (16%)
Ongoing impact of physical or mental health condition	14%	14%	17%
Benefit delay	10%	10%	10%
Other unexpected expense	5%	6%	9%
Non-priority debt	6%	9%	9%
Insecurely housed	10%	12%	9%
Delay in or awaiting other income	5%	6%	5%
Unemployment following permanent work	2%	3%	3%
Cost of dependents has increased	3%	3%	3%
No access to financial support due to immigration status	3%	3%	3%
Benefit reduction due to sanction	3%	2%	2%
Change in work hours	2%	1%	2%
Loss of support from friends or family	2%	2%	2%
New physical or mental health condition	2%	2%	2%
Domestic abuse	2%	2%	1%
Awaiting first benefit payment for less than a month	1%	1%	1%
Benefit reduction due to change in eligibility	1%	1%	1%
Benefit deduction due to overpayment or benefit advance	1%	1%	1%
Unemployment following temporary work	1%	1%	1%
Change in relationship status	1%	1%	1%
Awaiting first benefit payment for more than a month	1%	1%	1%
Change in dependents	1%	1%	1%
Change in existing physical or mental health condition	1%	0%	1%

Note – Up to four referral reasons can be selected for each referral, so percentages add up to more than 100%. In 2025, no reason was stated by the referral agency in 16% of cases. This is a slight decrease compared to 22% in 2023 and 20% in 2024 but still accounts for missing information in more than one in ten referrals.

Key Messages

- Voucher demand remains substantially higher than pre-pandemic levels despite a decline in 2025.
- Single-person households consistently account for nearly two-thirds of all vouchers issued.
- Adults aged 31–65, particularly those living alone, represent the largest recipient group.
- Rising costs of essentials are now the dominant driver of referrals and have increased significantly since 2024.
- Debt and long-term health conditions continue to be major contributing factors to financial hardship. Priority debt was higher amongst those aged 66+. The ongoing impact of physical or mental health conditions was highest amongst those aged 45-64.
- Seasonal demand remains strongest during winter, especially in December.
- Specific drivers of foodbank use among young people: loss of support from friends or family higher amongst those aged 18-30, and domestic abuse higher amongst those aged 18-45.

The key findings from the quantitative data are in line with foodbank data across the Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole area.

Analysis of qualitative data

Themes from qualitative data

The table below summarises key themes and subthemes from the qualitative interviews along with quotes to illustrate the subtheme.

Table 5. Key themes and subthemes of qualitative findings

Key Theme	Subthemes	Illustrative Quote
Foodbanks as responses to structural poverty	Inadequate income and welfare support	*‘I'd say my incomings are going to be less than my outgoings.’*
	Structural instability	*‘I've just had to pay my previous paycheck all to move into where I am now.’*
	Crisis becoming chronic	*‘I'm breaking my back just to break even, basically.’*
Living with Persistent Financial Strain	Stretching limited resources	*‘I put gas on and electric or basically buy food.’*
	Managing food insecurity	*‘I haven't had any food for the last three days.’*
	Reliance on informal and formal support	*‘I'll go to free food places in the morning, I'll go to soup kitchens and that.’*
Intersections Between Health and Financial Hardship	Health limiting financial stability	*‘I can't work because obviously, medical issues are coming up more and more frequently these days because I'm getting older.’*
	Food insecurity affecting wellbeing	*‘If I had more money, I'd eat a lot healthier.’*

Key Theme	Subthemes	Illustrative Quote
Maintaining dignity in the context of food poverty and hardship	Emotional burden of needing support	*'It's very difficult to ask for help, very difficult.'*
	Respectful and non-judgmental support	*'They treated you as a person, and not a nobody.'*
	Desire for autonomy and choice	'It'd be quite good if, like, we chose what we wanted instead they've just given it to us.'
The Value of Compassionate and Holistic Support	Foodbanks as relational spaces	*'It's made me feel more valued.'*
	Holistic support and guidance	*'It's nice to come down here and have people from other agencies that you can talk to.'*
Experiences of Accessing Foodbank Support	Service experience	*'From what I've seen so far, it's perfect, and the customer service because they are lovely people.'*
	Ease of referral and access	*'Citizens Advice are great. I mean, you could just send them an email and they send a foodbank voucher.'*
The future of foodbanks	Improving dignity and flexibility	*'Vouchers are good because you can pick what you want in terms of your food.'*
	Expanding supportive provision	*'I think the foodbank could do a lot about raising awareness of healthy food and stuff.'*

Prevalence of themes are shown below in brackets to provide an indication of how widely each subtheme was discussed across participant interviews (N=number of interviews). However, lower frequencies do not necessarily mean that a subtheme is less important. While some subthemes were discussed by a large proportion of participants, others appeared less frequently but offered valuable insights into experiences or perspectives.

Near-universal experiences (core themes)

- Ease of referral and access (45)
- Crisis becoming chronic (44)
- Inadequate income and welfare support (43)
- Service experience (40)

Widely shared experiences (substantial themes)

- Respectful and non-judgmental support (34)
- Reliance on informal and formal support (33)
- Health limiting financial stability (32)
- Foodbanks as relational spaces (31)

More variable experiences

- Structural instability (25)
- Improving dignity and flexibility (24)
- Managing food insecurity (20)
- Desire for autonomy and choice (20)
- Holistic support and guidance (19)
- Food insecurity affecting wellbeing (18)
- Stretching limited resources (16)
- Emotional burden of needing support (14)

It is worth noting that whilst emotional burden of needing support only appears in 14 interviews, respectful and non-judgmental support appears in 34. Therefore, it does not necessarily mean people were not emotionally affected, it could indicate that participants spoke more readily about how staff treated them than about their own feelings of shame or stigma.

Limited

- Expanding supportive provision (8)

Expanding supportive provision could be a limited subtheme due to being more of a recommendation theme than an experience theme.

Qualitative Data Findings

The responses of participants have discussed the full cycle of foodbank use, from its drivers to the experiences and consequences of living with persistent financial strain, to support, service experiences, and opportunities for improvement.

Foodbanks as responses to structural poverty

Income inequality remains the underlying causes of foodbank use and participants' reliance on foodbanks was mainly connected to structural poverty rather than short-term crisis.

Inadequate income and welfare support

Participants spoke about their experiences of living on low or no income, reduced or no benefits (including sanctions), debt, unexpected expenses and increased cost of living. The shared experience of benefits or income not being sufficient to buy food as well as cover rent and bills is rooted more in structural economic insecurity and inadequate welfare provision than in individual budgeting failures.

Participants consistently described benefit payments as insufficient to pay basic living costs. Benefits were often almost entirely used up on rent, bills and other essential expenses, leaving little or nothing for food. Some participants described getting into debt just to meet basic needs.

> *The money I get in benefits doesn't even cover my bills. I'm constantly creating this little debt that's getting bigger, bigger and bigger and bigger. So just simple things like going to the shops and buying milk, egg and cheese, you know, the basics people would do, I can't do. It's a luxury now. It's literally a luxury if it's not reduced, and if it's not virtually free, I can't afford it.*

Other participants explained that rising housing costs and frozen housing support meant they had to use an increasing proportion of their benefits to cover rent.

> *My rent has recently just gone up as well, and being on Universal Credit, that doesn't really help, because they're frozen, the, you know, the housing element, and so I have to make up the extra, I have to make up 130 pound, basically, to make sure that I don't lose my home.*

Administrative delays and sanctions resulted in a crisis of food insecurity. One participant explained that it "took a whole month to get help from Universal Credit. So I had no money, no food." Another explained that they had been sanctioned after missing a mandatory phone appointment because their phone had been stolen. These examples illustrate how a lack of benefit payments can leave people without enough money to meet their most basic needs. Benefit delay was cited as the referral reason for 10% of vouchers issued in 2023, 2024 and 2025.

Even participants receiving regular benefit payments often described having little money left for food once essential bills had been paid. Some participants described having around £50-£60 left a month for food. Often the only area of spending that could be reduced was food, meaning participants routinely went without enough food for a significant proportion of the month.

> *I get paid tomorrow and all of that is going straight out on bills. I'm going to have next to nothing left by the time I've paid everything… It's like rent, bills, my phone bill, my travel, and that's about it. I just about have enough, I can get about a week's worth of food and then it kind of, that's it, I'm screwed for like 3 weeks.*

> *I've got 50 pounds to last me a month on food and everything.*

Overall, many participants described their experience of benefit payments that simply weren't sufficient to cover both essential household costs and to buy enough food.

Structural instability

Financial insecurity is shaped by unstable work and housing, as well as other difficult life circumstances. Moving costs, job loss and homelessness created immediate financial pressures, while care-leaving experiences, immigration status and limited experience of managing money further increased vulnerability.

Housing instability increases hardship. Participants described how the cost of moving created further pressure on their limited budget. One participant explained that they had "just had to pay my previous paycheck all to move into where I am now". Another participant had to use some of their benefits to help with the cost of moving.

> *…it was because I moved. I had to use some of my Universal Credit to pay for moving. Yeah, it was like 300 quid, and then I was behind with rent…*

For some, housing insecurity and employment instability were closely linked. One participant described how receiving a Section 21 notice caused so much stress that it contributed to a conflict at work and subsequent job loss.

> *I had a section 21 delivered on my doorstep. Within the week, I got stressed. I had a bit of an argument with a supervisor at work. Lost my job, so I had a two-bedroom property with all of my stuff, in which I collected over 40 odd years or whatever, and I had weeks to get out.*

Homelessness was a significant factor in participants' need for the foodbank. Several participants were either currently homeless, or had previously been homeless, and without the foodbank they would struggle to survive: "I was homeless, so actually needed food in the foodbank was one of those things I relied on to just eat and live".

Insecure housing was cited as the referral reason for 10% of vouchers issued in 2023, 12% in 2024 and 9% in 2025. As well as insecure housing and homelessness, job loss was also a factor which created severe financial difficulties for some participants. Regular contractual payments for household bills such as phone and TV contracts still had to be met and quickly became unaffordable once relying on benefits rather than paid income.

> *When you get laid off from a job, and then you get put onto Universal Credit. Don't forget that you're tied into phone contracts, you're tied into Wi-Fi boxes, and stuff like that. You know, pay monthly TV, you know, stuff like that. But I'm in binding contracts with them companies. I can't just say, "Oh, I've lost my job, and that I'm on Universal Credit now. I can't pay you". They still want their money.*

Unemployment following permanent or temporary work was cited as the referral reason for 3% of vouchers issued in 2023 and 4% of vouchers in 2024 and 2025.

Vulnerability is often compounded by broader structural circumstances beyond housing and employment. One participant had no income whilst waiting for the outcome of their immigration status, while another described struggling to manage money after leaving care, without the support or experience needed to budget independently. No access to financial support due to immigration status was cited as the referral reason for 3% of vouchers issued in 2023, 2024 and 2025.

Crisis becoming chronic

Increased reliance on foodbanks was reported as well as the need to use other food provision services. Foodbank use was often driven by ongoing hardship rather than short-term emergencies, with use of food provision services being relied upon regularly. This was compounded by wider economic pressures such as the rising costs of food, rent and energy bills.

Participants' accounts suggested that foodbank use had become a normal way of managing persistent financial shortfalls. For some, this was despite earning a reasonable wage.

> *I'm paid quite well for my job and it's just, basically I don't ever see any of it because I'm paying my debts back…I don't go out, like, you know, I don't get to do anything luxurious at all.*

Others described how the rising cost of food had changed what felt affordable.

> *It's a luxury to just go to the supermarket to buy yourself meat. It's a luxury to have that. It's a fact, everybody is just on bread or just the cheapest stuff ever. It's a bit sad, really, especially this day and age.*

One participant said that they should not have to be "looking at my next payday, thinking that's the next time I can go out and buy hot meals". Another participant explained that receiving a food parcel from the foodbank was a relief because it allowed money that would otherwise have been spent on food to be spent elsewhere.

> *I'm just grateful that there is food that I didn't have to pay for, because it means that that money that I'd usually spend on food I can pay other bills with. So that is a relief.*

One participant similarly described the foodbank as something to "fall back on" during financial difficulty, adding that without it they would not have been able to make a meal for themselves and their son that day. Foodbank support, therefore, was being used not only to address hunger, but to help make inadequate budgets stretch further to pay rent, bills and debt repayments.

Participants also described their reliance on foodbank support being due to increases in the cost of living. Several spoke about foodbanks as increasingly necessary, with one stating it was because "the price is rising, you know, cost of food and everything". Another participant felt the demand was so high, there needed to be more foodbanks.

> *There just needs to be more of them [foodbanks] Yeah, I think the demand is so high now for support and help. As the cost of living gets worse and worse, and we're pushed to really live within our means, I just think there needs to be more of it.*

Hunger was described as “a very big problem nowadays”, with participants suggesting foodbank use was part of a wider economic problem rather than an individual failing. Some accounts suggested that food insecurity was becoming increasingly difficult to manage without borrowing: “I applied for a credit card, and got one…only a 200-pound limit, but I can use that throughout the month till I get my universal credit…basically I'm gonna start living my life on borrowed money”. This illustrates how chronic food insecurity can lead to debt, with credit being used to bridge the gap for essential outgoings until the next payment of wages or benefits.

Some participants expressed their anger that charitable food provision had become so necessary, and what was required were wider systemic changes and help.

> *I don't know how you could be of more help. I mean, I think you're all doing as much as you can with what you've got. I think it's time for the government to step up and do something, quite honestly, instead of all these churches having to do it out of their own pocket.*

It is worth noting that a small number of participants discussed how their situation was improving and they were hopeful that they would not need to use the foodbank much longer or use it as often. This was mainly either due to the imminent commencement of Personal Independent Payments (PIP) or starting paid work.

Analysis of historic voucher usage shows that most clients require only short-term support:

- around 60% receive only one voucher;
- around 75–80% receive no more than two vouchers;
- around 85–90% receive no more than three vouchers.

Of the 45 participants who were interviewed, 20% had only used the foodbank once and just under one third (31%) had used it two or three times. Almost three in ten participants (29%) had used the foodbank 4-6 times, 7% had used it 7-9 times and 16% had used the foodbank 10 times or more.

The interview sample included a higher proportion of repeat users than is seen in the historic voucher data. As participants were recruited at foodbank sessions, people with ongoing need were more likely to be encountered during the fieldwork period.

Living with persistent financial strain

Participants tried to cope with food insecurity and developed coping strategies to stretch limited resources.

Stretching limited resources

Participants talked about their experiences of budgeting, rationing food, and cooking and buying strategies. Participants described poverty as requiring constant planning, adaptation and sacrifice to make limited resources last. Food shopping is primarily driven by low prices rather than convenience or quality. One participant explained that cost determined where they would shop even if that meant traveling further.

> *What forces my choices are the prices. If they're cheaper, then that's what I'll go, Yeah, even if it's like half an hour out on my way, if it's cheaper than the current shop I go to, then I'll go there.*

Another participant described always looking out for “those little bargains” in order to be able to “eat all right”. These accounts show how buying strategies are essential in trying to buy enough food on a very limited budget.

Some participants also described having to buy less food or not go shopping at all to try and stretch their money as far as they could: “It's all buy less or just not buy and see how far I can go”. Participants struggled to buy enough food and cope financially with other debts and bills. One participant was still repaying debt from a period of homelessness and explained that they had “cancelled as much as I can cancel” to try and make things easier but were still only “just keeping above water”. As demonstrated in the sub theme of crisis becoming chronic, once again, rationing food appeared to be part of an ongoing issue rather than a one-off or short-term response.

Strategies for stretching limited resources also included cooking strategies such as batch cooking or making meals as cheap as possible. Some participants described avoiding using the oven or hob as much as possible due to the cost of electricity and gas: “Yes. I want to use the oven. Yes. I want to use the hob but until I know how much I've got to pay in electric each month, I want to keep it down to a bare minimum at the moment.”

Participants also spoke about trying to make the food parcel last as long as possible and with careful managing it could last longer than the intended three or four days that it is intended for. Throughout these accounts, stretching resources involved careful planning and monitoring on a daily basis.

Managing food insecurity

Food insecurity affected both quantity and quality of food intake. Participants reported insufficient food quantity, poor food quality, lack of fresh items and skipping meals. Participants often described fresh food as being their preference, but it was more expensive than tinned food or processed food, making it unaffordable: “How the hell am I supposed to eat fresh fruit every day, fresh vegetables and stuff like that…it's impossible”.

One participant explained that they “try to buy local as much as possible” but this was “not very possible when you’re on a very small budget”. Participants’ food choices were often prioritised by what was affordable rather than what was healthy or fresh.

Participants also described skipping meals and periods of not eating enough. For some, this happened whilst trying to manage health conditions.

> *I'm proud, if I can't afford it, I just don't eat every day with my diabetes, because medication I take, you can't take it on an empty stomach and stuff. But what I'll do is I'll cheat, I'll have a couple of biscuits or something…some days I'll eat it. Some days I don’t.*

The link between food insecurity and health is explored further in the next section, ‘Intersections between health and financial hardship’.

Participants described not eating at all and in some cases going without food for days at a time. One participant explained how the foodbank helped keep them alive in the absence of any other food being available: “Well, it's kept me alive. So that's always good. There were some times, a few days where...I went to bed hungry, and I was like, this is, this is awful...going to bed hungry was awful experience”.

Some accounts highlighted the difficulty in deciding whether to eat now or save food for later. One participant described “literally sitting there staring at a can of soup, thinking, now, do I have this soup?”, illustrating the uncertainty involved when trying to make a limited amount of food last. For those with children, these decisions were not just about their own hunger, but wanting to protect their child from going without food: “If I was on my own, it would be different, you know. I cobbled together something, go without more, but you can't do that with a child.” Across many of the accounts, participants described food insecurity as not just eating less, but also having to make difficult decisions about what to eat and when.

Image 2: Social Canteen at Bournemouth Foodbank. Photo credit @Bournemouth Foodbank

Reliance on informal and formal support

Food insecurity caused reliance on foodbanks and other food provision services, and seeking informal help from friends and family. Survival often depends on combining multiple sources of support rather than relying on a single service.

For some participants, foodbanks and other food provision services were essential for survival. Participants used food provision services, not just in Bournemouth, but across the conurbation. One participant talked openly about how Routes to Roots, a homelessness charity in Poole, saved their life after they had gone without food and water for a prolonged period of time:

> *I mean Routes to Roots, saved my life. They really, really did. They do understand it, and I do thank them every day, and I thank the volunteers. They were fantastic, but actually saved my life. I sat*

> *down in that car park. I'm not eating five days or drinking. You can survive for weeks with no food, but you can't survive for weeks without food and water. So really, I was kind of, I was on the last legs.*

Many participants used other food provision services as well as Bournemouth Foodbank, often combining the foodbank with services that provided free hot meals. Using multiple food provision services helped participants to have enough food throughout the month: "I don't have to worry about…the last week before I get paid, or how I'm gonna eat, how I'm gonna do this, because usually I'll go to free food places in the morning, I'll go to soup kitchens and that".

Participants also described relying on friends or family for additional informal support. For some, this was in the form of money or a voucher for food shopping, whilst for others it was combining resources with friends to make food go further. Despite this, one participant described how the additional support didn't ensure an adequate diet.

> *I can go to a friend's house for dinner or like we'll put in three pounds and make a bulk meal that will get us through for a couple of days. But I've had pasta for the past week every day and it's literally pasta and the cheapest sauces you can find and that's what I've been living off of.*

These accounts highlight how living with persistent financial strain frequently meant relying on multiple sources of support including charitable provisions and personal networks.

Intersections between health and financial hardship

There is a cyclical relationship between health and financial hardship, with ill-health affecting participants' ability to maintain a stable income and food insecurity affecting physical and emotional wellbeing.

Health limiting financial stability

Experiences of caring responsibilities, mental health issues, physical disabilities, chronic illness, and alcohol or drug addiction affected food insecurity. Participants consistently described ill-health as a significant factor affecting their ability to maintain financial security. Poor health often reduced people's capacity to work, sustain employment, or manage their finances effectively, creating a cycle whereby health problems contributed to financial hardship, which in turn increased reliance on foodbank support.

Several participants explained that periods of illness resulted in reduced income or complete withdrawal from employment. For some, the transition from wages to benefits created an immediate gap between income and essential living costs: "I first started coming because I had gallbladder problems, so I was out of work, struggling with money, needed help with food".

Others described ongoing health conditions that restricted the types of employment they could undertake, limiting both their employment opportunities and earning potential: "I'm not working now, and due to my health, I'm trying to look for work. But it all depends on what work it is".

For participants living with long-term or permanent health conditions, financial hardship was often linked to an inability to return to work at all, although for some the hardship was partly mitigated by increased benefit payments through Personal Independent Payments.

> *I don't have to look for work, and I get a bit of extra money, yeah, because they know my health condition isn't changing. So there's no cure for FND. There isn't a cure for it. It's just managing your pain.*

Participants also described a range of other health-related barriers to financial stability, including mental health difficulties, mobility issues, chronic pain, disabilities, caring responsibilities, and experiences of addiction. These challenges often created practical barriers to employment whilst simultaneously increasing living costs and support needs. As a result, many participants found themselves relying on benefits that they considered inadequate to meet their basic needs.

These accounts illustrate how foodbank use was often linked to broader health inequalities rather than temporary financial mismanagement. For many participants, food insecurity emerged as a consequence of living with long-term health conditions that restricted opportunities to achieve financial stability.

Food insecurity affecting wellbeing

The impact of diet on health is wide-ranging, including stress and anxiety, and depression and low mood. Participants described food insecurity as affecting much more than hunger alone. Many explained that difficulties accessing sufficient and nutritious food had consequences for both physical and emotional wellbeing.

Participants frequently highlighted the importance of food for maintaining both mental and physical health. For some, receiving food support helped alleviate emotional distress associated with food insecurity.

> *Food is the kind of thing that lifts you out that thing. So it's no small thing, you know. So, so food, getting some food, and getting that is, kind of like, is the massive thing.*

Participants also linked food insecurity to anxiety and the constant mental burden of worrying about where their next meal would come from. Some explained that securing food provided stability, allowing them to focus on other important issues.

> *If you're living day to day, the last thing you want to be thinking about is when you're going to get some food. If I've got a can of beans and some bread in the tent, I could go to the council and speak about something else, instead of constantly thinking, how am I going to get dinner tonight.*

Others described how access to food was essential for managing existing health conditions. Participants living with conditions such as diabetes emphasised that periods without food posed serious risks to their health: “It saved us literally. I'm diabetic as well, so you've literally, it has saved us on the street, because… I would have had another hypo”.

Another participant described how having a medical condition which required a specific diet found it difficult to balance dietary requirements with financial constraints: “Yeah, dietary is a nightmare. There's a lot I can't eat that will flare up, okay, but when you're on a budget, you're on a budget, you've got to eat what you can eat”.

Food insecurity was also associated with concerns about nutritional quality. Participants commonly expressed a desire to eat healthier diets but felt constrained by affordability. Fresh fruit, vegetables and other healthier options were often perceived as financially inaccessible, particularly when compared to cheaper processed foods.

> *It's difficult to go to a supermarket and spend money on food. One, it's very expensive. And two, you're sort of forced to eat the cheaper options, which are ultra processed and contain lots of chemicals and additives and everything else that is not good food.*

> *So with being on a low income, it's really scary, sort of like trying to make sure that I get all the correct nutrients and things, and don't try and just fill up with, you know, junk food.*

While participants generally expressed appreciation for foodbank support, many acknowledged that emergency food provision was not designed to provide a complete long-term nutritional solution.

> *Makes me feel very grateful for when I do have money. I actually spend it wisely on the food I know I'm going to eat because living off a foodbank is not the best way to go. You're not getting the right vitamins, you're not getting the right nutrients.*

> *It's not really unhealthy foods. It's not the best. But I don't think a foodbank ever is supposed to be the best. It's supposed to make it last.*

Several participants described the physical consequences of prolonged periods without adequate food. Experiences of hunger were linked to fatigue, difficulty concentrating, disrupted sleep, and declining physical health.

> *If I couldn't come here, sometimes I wouldn't eat… I've been a week, nine days without eating before. It's painful, yeah, you can't sleep. You can't concentrate on anything else.*

For a number of participants, inadequate access to food had visible impacts on their physical health, including weight loss: “I'm really underweight at the moment, living off foodbanks”. However, other participants reflected that without access to food support their health would have deteriorated significantly: “I'd probably be, you know, skin and bones right now if I didn't have this”. Some participants also described food support as having a significant positive impact on their quality of life. One participant said it had impacted their life "hugely in an amazing way" because "I've been able to eat".

Overall, participants' accounts demonstrate that food insecurity has consequences extending far beyond hunger. The findings suggest a cyclical relationship between health and financial hardship, whereby poor health increases vulnerability to poverty, while inadequate access to sufficient and nutritious food undermines both physical and mental wellbeing. Foodbank support therefore played an important role not only in addressing immediate food shortages, but also in helping participants protect their health and maintain a degree of stability during periods of severe financial hardship.

Image 3: Food donations. Photo credit @Bournemouth Foodbank

Maintaining Dignity in the Context of Food Poverty and Hardship

Although financial hardship often created feelings of embarrassment, shame and loss of independence, many participants described positive experiences with foodbank services that helped preserve their sense of dignity and personal value.

Emotional Burden of Needing Support

Participants experienced a sense of stigma, loss of independence and concerns about being judged. As one participant notes "It's embarrassing coming sometimes". Participants described needing foodbank support as emotionally difficult, particularly when it represented a significant departure from how they had previously viewed themselves.

> *It's made me think, oh no, I've been seen appearing at a foodbank…it's not the sort of thing I'd ever imagined, but it's only the last few years, and it's because I got a child.*

> *It just makes you feel low, but it is what it is. Not everybody's got money, you know, it's very difficult, it's very hard at the moment. So sometimes I feel ashamed just to come here.*

For some, asking for help challenged deeply held values surrounding independence, self-reliance and the ability to provide for themselves and their families. One participant reflected "It's very difficult to ask for help, very difficult". Even when support was urgently needed, participants often described reluctance to seek assistance.

> *It can be emotional and hard coming somewhere like this needing that much help.*

> *At first, I didn't want to, at first, I didn't want to come to the foodbank because of pride. And, you know, I felt embarrassed…So for like, the first couple months, I wouldn't come.*

Some described foodbank use as something they never imagined they would experience, particularly if they had previously been financially secure or employed.

> *I used to have a three bedroom, four storey townhouse, and that with two cars on the driveway, and everything like that, and I lost it all just like that…you're only one pay check away from being in my position.*

Despite the stigma associated with foodbank use, some participants explained that the experience was better than they were expecting, and it helped knowing they were not the only one who was struggling.

> *It's not as bad as everyone thinks, needing the help that like the Foodbank, because I know there's that whole stigma…it is for anyone that needs help, not just…homeless people.*

> *I was really anxious and nervous at first. I don't know why. It was, like the shame of it, but then coming in and just even chatting to other people that were coming in as well made it easier, because you think I'm not the only one. It's not just me, and you can have a cup of tea and a biscuit and a chat.*

Overall, the emotional burden of food insecurity extended beyond hunger, encompassing feelings of vulnerability, dependency and uncertainty about the future. These experiences highlight how poverty can affect psychological wellbeing as well as material circumstances.

Respectful and Non-Judgemental Support

In contrast to the emotional difficulties associated with seeking help, participants overwhelmingly described foodbank staff and volunteers as kind, respectful and compassionate.

Participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of how they were treated during interactions with staff and volunteers. Compassionate support often helped reduce feelings of embarrassment and made accessing help feel less intimidating.

> *They never judge. They never talk down to you or anything like that, which is a big thing for me personally, because I hate to say I'm proud…I get uncomfortable even talking about stuff…especially as a family man.*

Many participants described staff as friendly, approachable and genuinely interested in their wellbeing. As one participant reflected “They treated you as a person, and not a nobody”. Being greeted warmly and treated respectfully appeared to have a significant impact on people's experiences of accessing support. One participant said “I felt calm. I felt safer”.

For some participants, these interactions were particularly meaningful because they contrasted with previous experiences of feeling ignored or judged elsewhere.

> *Most of the time you just feel judged. So it's nice to come in here and you're not judged.*

> *You've made me feel comfortable and I feel safe coming back here. Yeah, there's not many places that do that, that apparently, say they're working for the community. Unfortunately, you know, they can be quite judgmental sometimes, but not here.*

Participants appreciated staff who took time to listen, engage in conversation and offer emotional support rather than simply providing food.

> *Easy and calming, I would say, because you go in there and they make you feel welcome, they don’t exclude you, judge you. They just bring you in, ask you questions, do what they can…within their power to help you.*

> *Lovely and very easy, very helpful people, especially the first time I went there, it was almost time for them to close. They still let me in, very patiently listened to me, offered what they have and asked me what I wouldn't want or what I prefer.*

Accounts suggested that respectful treatment helped restore dignity during periods when participants felt particularly vulnerable: “When you're in a situation like I am in, you just need somebody to be kind. That's all. And they are very, very kind". Respectful and non-judgemental support emerged as one of the most widely shared experiences. These findings demonstrate that the way support is delivered is often as important as the practical assistance itself. Compassionate interactions helped participants feel valued, respected and recognised as individuals rather than as recipients of charity.

Desire for Autonomy and Choice

Participants expressed desire for more fresh healthy food, greater choice, and flexibility and control over the food they received. Many participants appreciated food support but felt that having more choice would improve both dignity and practicality.

Participants commonly expressed a preference for selecting foods that reflected their dietary requirements, personal preferences and household needs:

> *The only thing I found not to be sufficient is the milk…because seeing as you have a child who will take cereal every morning, then they're only offering one packet…*

Choice was often viewed as an important aspect of independence and normality. Participants explained that choosing food for themselves would allow them to exercise greater control over their diets whilst reducing waste from receiving items they were unable or unwilling to use: "It'd be quite good if, like, we chose what we wanted instead they've just given it to us".

Participants also wanted increased access to fresh and healthy food options. Some felt that having greater choice would improve their ability to prepare nutritious meals and manage specific health conditions or dietary requirements.

> *And I do appreciate the service. But it's like, you'll get a bag of pasta, a couple of tins of fruit, and like maybe 2 tins of tuna. And then that's kind of it. And then I'm going back again for the same thing. So that's why I end up living off the same kind of food the whole time.*

Overall, participants valued support that enabled them to maintain a sense of autonomy and independence. The findings suggest that food assistance may be experienced more positively when individuals are able to exercise choice in ways that mirror everyday food shopping and household decision-making.

Image 4: Volunteer sorting donations. Photo credit @Bournemouth Foodbank

The value of compassionate and holistic support

Participants described the foodbank as much more than a place to access emergency food. Participants consistently described the value of compassionate relationships, emotional support and a welcoming environment, alongside practical guidance and connections to wider services. Together, these experiences suggest that the support provided by foodbanks extends far beyond meeting immediate food needs, it helps people to navigate wider challenges and improve their overall wellbeing.

Foodbanks as relational spaces

Participants experienced the foodbank as a welcoming and safe space that offered emotional support alongside practical help. Foodbanks are places where relationships can be built and maintained due to shared experiences or the possibility to share one's own experience. The importance of relationships built at and through the foodbank was a recurring theme. Participants frequently highlighted a sense of belonging and community at the foodbank:

> *Being here is like being treated like family. Yeah, I come in here, and if I have an issue, they will do what they can within their, you know, within their limits or what they're capable of to help*.

For some participants, the foodbank was important for social connection and reducing feelings of isolation and loneliness. One participant described how it made them feel "more valued" whilst another explained how provided a support network and helped them to open up.

> *Sometimes I really withdraw myself and who don't go out we don't speak to people…But with people like this, I feel like I can just open up…giving me a whole different sort of support network afterwards as well.*

Several participants also described how their experience had inspired them to volunteer themselves: “Because I saw how they were with me. I want to be helpful for someone else…then I started actually volunteering here”. One participant explained that volunteering was a way of giving back while knowing that support would still be available if they needed it again:

> *That's why I'm kind of talking about doing voluntary work. Because it's kind of like, it's where it's helped me out. It's kind of like I'm getting to position now where I'm kind of moving away from maybe needing it, but I know that it would be there if I needed it.*

Several participants described the positive impact the foodbank had on their mental wellbeing. One participant reflected that they had “always walked away with a smiling face”; whilst another explained that the kindness they experienced had transformed how they felt during a very difficult period: “I was very angry with everything and just simple kindness and a little help and a little talking and it changed my life”. For others, knowing that food was available reduced the constant worry associated with financial hardship and allowed them to focus on other aspects of their lives.

> *It's made my life easier…it gives me less to think about. So when I get a foodbank voucher, I know that I don't have to worry…I know that I can then go focus on other things that I need to focus on…that's that type of impact it's had in my life. Is just giving me more free time, you know, rather than worrying, oh yeah, where's my next meal coming from?*

Together, these accounts show how much participants valued the foodbank as a relational space, where other people provided kindness, emotional support and a sense of belonging.

Image 5: Garden Rooms Cafe community meal. Photo credit @Bournemouth Foodbank

Holistic support and guidance

Participants described foodbanks as places where they could access practical advice, guidance and referrals to other services. For many, this support helped them address wider issues such as benefits, debt, housing and employment, while also increasing their confidence to seek help.

Several participants described receiving support that had improved their financial circumstances. One participant explained that the foodbank had helped them apply for Personal Independence Payments (PIP), access additional support from their GP and begin addressing their debts.

> *They got me on PIP, got me a doctor's more support from my doctor surgery, and helped me start clawing my way out of the big old one, you know, with my debts. So, you know, yeah, it's impacted me in more ways than just giving me food and fattening me up.*

Another participant described receiving help to apply for PIP through Citizens Advice after previously struggling to do so alone:

> *They were all so helpful, bent over backwards... I didn't know I could get my PIP, things like that. Didn't know about PIP because I'd done it myself. No, they've got that done with me. So did that with them and Citizens Advice... and I ended up getting my PIP because of... just coming for a food parcel.*

Others valued knowing that different agencies regularly visited the foodbank, making it easier to access support in a familiar and welcoming environment. As one participant explained, "there's always somebody at some point in the week for every situation." People described how staff and volunteers signposted them to support they had not previously known were available.

> *It's nice to come down here and have people from other agencies that you can talk to, because that's a big thing, reaching out for help, you know. And like I said, the volunteers are great at sort of referring you or giving you information you need on where you need to go support.*

For some participants, this wider support resulted in significant changes to their circumstances. One participant described how the signposting they received help them to secure permanent accommodation, and the careers advice was also very beneficial.

> *It's helped me be housed. So I came in here initially, I was in supported accommodation… a lot of them gave me very good contacts… and I was able to go through that process and get the rent deposit scheme and everything. And now… I am in private rented accommodation. I have got a roof over my head… Skills and learning were great. They introduced me to Prospects… Their careers advice, yeah, which has been really helpful.*

Another participant similarly reflected on the progress they had made since accessing support through the foodbank: "So much has been sorted. So much more has happened, but making progress to things I wouldn't have done, I would not have done, I wouldn't have been able to deal with it without their support". Participants described how this support increased their confidence to ask for help. One participant explained that before attending the foodbank they "didn't know where to go" or who to ask, but that the support they received had "given me more confidence in asking for help".

Some participants also described gaining practical skills through attending the foodbank. One participant reflected that receiving a variety of food had encouraged them to learn new ways of cooking.

> *Given the food that you get at Foodbank, teaches you how to make so many different types of meals, because where you get some random stuff in there, you gotta learn to mash it all together and make some meals out of it… so if anything teaches you life skills.*

Participants valued knowing that support was available beyond their immediate need for food. One participant, reflecting on a year of homelessness, described the reassurance of finding a place where they could access both practical and emotional support.

> *Being homeless for a year in this town is diabolical…as soon as I found this place…life just got better in a fraction, because I knew that I could get food, I know I could get the advice that I needed, and I know that there was help there if I needed it.*

This account illustrates how participants experienced the foodbank as more than a place to receive food. Knowing that advice, support and a welcoming environment were available provided reassurance during periods of significant hardship.

Experiences of accessing foodbank support

While participants described significant financial hardship, their experiences of accessing Bournemouth Foodbank were overwhelmingly positive. Across the interviews, people consistently described the service as welcoming, efficient and easy to access. The way support was delivered was often as important as the food itself, with participants valuing being treated with kindness, respect and dignity. Practical barriers to accessing the service were mentioned infrequently, suggesting that the referral process, access and service worked well.

Service experience

Participants described their experience of the overall service, including the friendliness of staff and volunteers, the speed and organisation of the service, the quality and variety of food parcels, and the accessibility in terms of location and opening hours.

Participants consistently described staff and volunteers as welcoming and compassionate. Many explained that they felt listened to and treated as individuals rather than simply recipients of emergency food support. As one participant reflected, *"You're not just a number. You feel like you're cared for."* Another commented that "they're genuine about what they want to do…they want to help people. Everybody needs help sometimes."

Participants spoke about volunteers checking on their wellbeing, offering reassurance and creating a welcoming environment.

> *Everyone's so nice and they generally seem to want to make sure you're okay… I'm always like, 'Oh, I'm so sorry,' and they're always like, 'Nothing to worry about. That's what we're here for.' Everyone's so kind.*

Similarly, another participant explained:

> *I cannot fault the staff here. I really can't, because they always make you feel welcome. They always ask how you are. How's your day been, you know, is there anything we can help you with?*

Several participants also valued the flexibility of the service. Rather than receiving a standard parcel with no choice, people appreciated being able to swap unwanted items for food they would use, also helping to reduce waste.

> *One good thing I say about this foodbank...that I've not ever experienced in another foodbank, is if you don't like something, they'd rather you tell them and swap it and give you an alternative than take the food at home and sit in your cupboard, or go to waste, basically...I think that's a good initiative that could be put across to a lot of foodbanks.*

Participants generally felt the food parcels provided sufficient food and a good variety of items. Several commented that they included nutritious foods and everyday essentials: “There's always enough for at least three decent meals...you always get some breakfast, some milk, some sugar, and if you want anything extra, you can swap things about”.

One participant reflected that the variety of food had positively influenced their diet.

> *It has actually helped me eat a little bit healthier...you've always got some sort of veg... it's a good way to get what you need, like nutrition wise.*

Others highlighted how small additional items could have a meaningful impact on wellbeing during difficult periods.

> *They’ve got...extra bits, once I got a candle, some concealer...I went home, put my candle in the bath, had a cup of tea, and had a little pamper session...it's just the small things like that...when you haven't got a lot, goes a long way.*

Image 6: A Community Meal. Photo credit @Bournemouth Foodbank

Ease of referral and access

Participants described their experiences of the referral process and the practical accessibility of the service, including opening times, transportation and location.

Participants generally found the referral process to be straightforward and responsive, with support available when it was needed. In the main, participants received vouchers quickly, and there were very few experiences of delays or administrative difficulties in accessing emergency food support.

> *I filled an online form with Citizens Advice...quite quickly, within a day or two, even the same day if you're lucky, you get a voucher code.*

Another participant similarly explained:

> *Citizens Advice are great...you could just send them an email and they send a foodbank voucher within 48 hours, which is really good.*

Few participants identified significant barriers to accessing the foodbank. The main practical issue related to opening times, especially if people were working during the day. One participant suggested that weekend provision could improve accessibility for some people: “I mean, it's just the basics, just variety opening times...I've not heard of any foodbanks open on a weekend”.

Overall, participants' accounts suggest that referral arrangements and service accessibility were working well for most people, with relatively few reporting difficulties in accessing support when they needed it.

The future of foodbanks

Although participants were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences of Bournemouth Foodbank, many reflected on how food support could continue to evolve. Rather than focusing solely on emergency food provision, participants described their desire for increased choice, dignity and independence, alongside broader forms of support that could help address the underlying causes of financial hardship.

Improving dignity and flexibility

Participants talked about wanting more flexibility through supermarket vouchers, greater choice, and expanding alternative food provision services such as community supermarkets and pantries. Participants consistently valued approaches that promoted independence, normality and personal choice.

The most frequently discussed suggestion was the use of supermarket vouchers. Participants felt that vouchers would allow households to purchase food that reflected their individual needs, preferences and dietary requirements, reducing food waste and improving the overall usefulness of support.

> *I'll shop for what works for my family...there's some dignity in me deciding that I'll go to this shop and I'll buy one, two, three things.*

I would maybe consume more milk than another family or another family will consume more beans than the other family. So people know what their choices and preferences look like...I think the vouchers would sort out all those issues.

Vouchers are good because you can pick what you want...you know you're going to eat it.

Many felt that being able to choose their own food would make the experience feel more normal and less stigmatising. As one participant explained, "it'd be nice to be able to choose your own food."

Participants also highlighted how vouchers could improve access to fresh food and enable people to make healthier choices: “I would get fruit and veg to start with...and then I would choose either meat or fish...because you can make batch cooking out of them”.

Several participants suggested that supermarket vouchers would allow people to shop more economically by taking advantage of reduced-price items: “You can go when they're reducing things...you can get...a lot more food for a lot less money.”

However, views on vouchers were not unanimous. Some participants questioned whether vouchers would provide equivalent value to food parcels, particularly given rising supermarket prices.

It all depends on the amount, or really, because supermarkets can be expensive...So a lot of people come to foodbanks because they can't afford it.

If they're going to give you a £10 allowance, I'd rather come here, because you get more food.

Others expressed concerns that vouchers could be misused by a minority of recipients: “This organisation is here to help people eat, not give them money...people will abuse that easily.”

Overall, participants recognised both the potential benefits and practical challenges of voucher-based support, suggesting that increased flexibility should be balanced with safeguards to ensure support reached those who needed it most.

Expanding support provision

Participants talked about their aspirations for foodbanks to continue developing as places that offer wider forms of support, including practical advice, healthier eating initiatives, community-based food provision and opportunities to build longer-term resilience. Participants valued support that extended beyond emergency food provision alone.

Several participants reflected that earlier access to advice could have prevented financial problems from escalating. One participant described how specialist support with household bills may have avoided years of debt.

> *If I had someone to physically come into and speak to about my issue with my electric, I would probably not be in debt...I would have managed my electric bill...years ago.*

Others suggested that foodbanks could play a greater role in promoting healthy eating and practical food skills.

> *The foodbank could do a lot about raising awareness of healthy food...not just be a place I think the foodbank could do a lot about raising awareness of healthy food and stuff. Not just be a place you come pick it up, but be a place that actually talks about what's healthy, what's not, because a lot of people just don't know.*

Many participants spoke very positively about their experience of 'Waste Not Want Not' in Poole, a Social Supermarket member-based community shop that is intended for individuals and families that are struggling to maintain a nutritious diet due to financial hardship. Rather than viewing it simply as another source of affordable food, participants described it as a model that combined low-cost shopping with greater choice, dignity and community connection. Being able to contribute a small payment, choose their own food and shop in a supermarket-style environment helped recreate a sense of normality while reducing the stigma often associated with emergency food provision.

> *It's more like a community cafe space...you still pay a little bit of money. It feels like the supermarket...so I prefer to go there, because I still feel like I'm contributing and I can pick what I want. And yeah, it just makes you feel like you can still go shopping...And I kind of missed that...I didn't think I ever would miss food shopping, but apparently I do.*

Participants also valued the social aspects of the model, describing it as somewhere people could meet others in similar circumstances while maintaining their independence.

> *I think it's more of a community vibe. You know, you're not just going into a supermarket picking up and interacting with the person on the counter. There's loads of people there, people that potentially are in your situation, better or worse or Yeah, you know, it's just a better social community aspect, and it's doing a great thing, saving food as well.*

Another participant reflected that contributing towards their shopping helped preserve dignity: "People want help, but they want to help. They want to feel good doing it, not just taking stuff." Several participants explicitly suggested that similar schemes should be expanded: "I think you should do another Waste Not Want Not where it's community. If you're in the community, you need it...it's there for you."

Participants also highlighted the value of local food pantries, which similarly offered greater access to fresh food. One participant who had used the pantry in Boscombe described how much they appreciated fresh food.

> *I was really lucky…I think it was the second time I came here and at the pantry…there was so much fresh fruit and things…And oh, there was lovely, easy peelers and avocados and everything, you know, so grateful. That's what I needed.*

Participants also valued the pantries as feeling like a more familiar shopping experience.

> *It would just be nice to see the pantries a bit more because I think as well as coming to a foodbank, it's a bit more normal to go to a supermarket…it's that normal behaviour that you're doing. You feel the same as everybody else.*

Overall, participants wanted to see a future of food provision extending beyond emergency food parcels, towards models that combine affordable food, practical support and community connection, while also giving people greater choice and helping to preserve dignity and independence.

Conclusion

This study provides important insight into the changing nature of food poverty in Bournemouth and the experiences of people accessing Bournemouth Foodbank. By combining analysis of referral voucher data with in-depth interviews with foodbank users, the research demonstrates that foodbank use is rarely the result of a single crisis. Instead, it is most often driven by wider structural factors, including inadequate incomes, rising living costs, insecure housing, debt, ill health, and limitations within the welfare system.

The quantitative findings show that demand for Bournemouth Foodbank remains substantially higher than before the COVID-19 pandemic, despite a slight decline in voucher numbers during 2025. Single-person households, particularly adults aged 31–65, account for most referrals, while rising costs of essentials, debt, and health conditions have become increasingly significant drivers of need. These findings suggest that food insecurity is no longer concentrated among a small number of vulnerable groups but is affecting a broader section of the population, including people in employment and individuals accessing charitable food support for the first time.

The qualitative findings corroborate the quantitative findings whilst revealing the human stories behind these statistics. Participants described living with persistent financial strain, often making difficult decisions between paying bills and buying food. Many reported that food insecurity had become a chronic feature of everyday life rather than a temporary emergency.

Health and financial hardship were closely intertwined, creating reinforcing cycles of disadvantage. Poor health often limited people's ability to work and maintain a stable income, while financial insecurity and inadequate access to food negatively affect physical and mental wellbeing. Participants described how these factors compounded one another, making it difficult to improve financial circumstances and health.

At the same time, the research demonstrates the significant value of Bournemouth Foodbank beyond the provision of emergency food parcels. Participants consistently praised the kindness, compassion, and non-judgemental approach of staff and volunteers. Many described the foodbank as a safe and welcoming space where they felt respected, valued, and listened to. The findings suggest that the relational and holistic aspects of support are often as important as the food itself, helping people to maintain dignity and connect with wider sources of advice and assistance during periods of crisis.

Participants also identified opportunities for service development. Greater choice and flexibility in food provision, increased access to fresh and nutritious food, stronger links with wider support services, and models that promote autonomy and independence were all viewed positively. These suggestions reinforce a growing recognition across the sector that responses to food poverty should seek not only to meet immediate need but also to enhance dignity, wellbeing, and long-term resilience.

Overall, the findings indicate that foodbanks continue to play a vital role in protecting people from hunger and severe hardship. However, the experiences shared by participants make clear that charitable food provision alone cannot address the underlying causes of food insecurity. Reducing reliance on foodbanks will require wider action to tackle low incomes, unaffordable housing, debt, poor health, and gaps in the welfare system. Alongside this, there is an opportunity for foodbanks, charities and other support services to work more closely together, pooling expertise and resources to provide more coordinated, efficient and holistic support for people facing financial hardship.

While Bournemouth Foodbank provides essential support and compassionate care to thousands of people each year, lasting change will depend upon coordinated action from local authorities, policymakers, service providers, and national government to address the root causes of poverty and ensure that everyone has sufficient income to afford the essentials of life.

Recommendations

The findings reinforce that foodbank use is primarily driven by inadequate incomes rather than a lack of food. While foodbanks provide an essential safety net, reducing the need for emergency food provision requires action to address the underlying reasons for poverty. This is consistent with Trussell's vision of ending the need for foodbanks by ensuring everyone has sufficient income to afford the essentials.

Alongside wider policy change, there are also opportunities to strengthen foodbank support by promoting greater choice, dignity and flexibility, and by working more closely with partner organisations to deliver coordinated, holistic support.

Embed Food Insecurity within Local Public Health and Poverty Strategies

The research clearly demonstrates that food insecurity affects physical health, mental wellbeing, nutrition and quality of life. Equally, poor health often contributes to financial hardship and food insecurity.

Bournemouth Foodbank should work with local partners to support a more preventative approach to both health inequalities and poverty through:

- Recognising food insecurity as a public health issue
- Improving pathways between health services and food support providers
- Developing targeted interventions for people with long-term health conditions, disabilities and mental health challenges
- Supporting and championing Trussell's campaign for an Essentials Guarantee within Universal Credit, to ensure no one needs a foodbank to survive

Develop Dignity-Focused Models of Food Support

Participants consistently valued the kindness, respect and non-judgemental support they received from foodbank staff and volunteers. However, many also expressed a desire for greater choice and autonomy.

Bournemouth Foodbank is considering plans for a limited pilot scheme giving eligible clients supermarket vouchers rather than food parcels. The vouchers would be given alongside wider financial advice and support. In addition to this, Bournemouth Foodbank should continue to explore:

- Community and social supermarket models
- Choice-based food provision
- Develop a supermarket voucher/cash first type model. Expanding other community food initiatives that promote dignity and independence
- Continue to provide welcoming, compassionate and non-judgemental environments, recognising that emotional support, trusted relationships and effective signposting are valued alongside food provision

These approaches can help meet immediate needs while reducing stigma and supporting personal choice and independence.

Improve Access to Healthy and Affordable Food

Many participants reported difficulties accessing fresh and nutritious food due to cost. Several described relying on cheaper, heavily processed foods despite understanding the health consequences.

Bournemouth Foodbank should work with local partners to:

- Increase access to fresh produce through community food initiatives.
- Develop stronger partnerships with supermarkets, growers and food redistribution schemes
- Promote affordable healthy eating initiatives
- Support cooking, nutrition and food skills programmes where appropriate

Improving access to nutritious food should form part of wider efforts to reduce health inequalities.

Strengthen Financial Inclusion, Debt and Welfare Support

The majority of participants described food insecurity as arising from insufficient income rather than poor budgeting. Debt, rising living costs and housing costs repeatedly emerged as drivers of hardship.

Bournemouth Foodbank has recently secured funding from Money Matters to strengthen its financial resilience support. Delivered in partnership with Faithworks, the project will provide dedicated staff across Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole to help people maximise their income, access welfare benefits, manage debt and improve financial resilience through tailored advice and support.

Building on this investment, Bournemouth Foodbank, Faithworks and local partners should continue to strengthen integrated pathways through:

- Welfare rights advice
- Benefits support
- Debt advice services
- Financial inclusion support
- Energy advice and fuel poverty interventions

Where possible, advice services should be delivered alongside food support, enabling people to address the underlying causes of financial hardship.

Improve Support for People Experiencing Housing Insecurity

Housing pressures featured prominently throughout the research. Rent increases, homelessness, temporary accommodation and moving costs frequently pushed households into food insecurity or made existing hardship significantly worse. Participants experiencing homelessness or living in temporary accommodation often described additional barriers to accessing, storing and preparing food, further increasing their vulnerability.

These findings are particularly relevant in Bournemouth, where reliance on the private rented sector is substantially higher than the BCP and national average. Almost six in ten households in Boscombe West and Bournemouth Central live in private rented accommodation, leaving many exposed to rising rents, insecure tenancies and housing instability.

Bournemouth Foodbank should continue to work together with local partners to:

- Strengthen homelessness prevention services

- Improve referral pathways between housing teams, homelessness teams and food support providers
- Strengthen tenancy sustainment support, including advice on rent arrears, budgeting, income maximisation and access to financial assistance to help prevent tenancy breakdown
- Develop targeted support for people moving into, or living in, temporary accommodation, recognising the additional challenges they face in accessing and preparing food. Identify households facing housing-related financial hardship earlier, enabling timely support before financial pressures escalate into homelessness or food crisis

Strengthening housing stability has the potential to reduce food insecurity, improve health and wellbeing, and prevent the financial shocks associated with homelessness and tenancy loss.

Create a Shared Data and Intelligence Framework

Foodbank voucher data provides valuable insights into patterns and trends in local need, while lived experience research offers a deeper understanding of the drivers and impacts of food insecurity. Bringing these sources together creates a stronger evidence base for strategic planning, service improvement and early intervention.

Bournemouth Foodbank should continue to work with local partners to strengthen the collection, sharing and use of data on food insecurity. This should include:

- Improving the completeness and consistency of referral data, particularly the recording of reasons for referral
- Building on existing arrangements for sharing high-level foodbank data with local partners to develop a more coordinated approach to intelligence gathering and analysis
- Regularly monitoring referral trends, demographic changes and geographical patterns of need to identify emerging pressures at an earlier stage
- Combining quantitative data with lived experience evidence to inform local strategies, service planning and policy development
- Producing regular local reporting on food insecurity to support evidence-based decision making and evaluate the impact of interventions

This collaborative approach aligns with the ambitions of the Dorset Pledge by encouraging organisations to share insight, strengthen partnership working and use evidence to improve outcomes for local communities. A shared data and intelligence framework would enable partners to identify emerging challenges earlier, target resources more effectively and develop coordinated responses to the underlying causes of food insecurity.

Place Lived Experience at the Centre of Service Design

Throughout the research, participants provided valuable insights into both the causes of food insecurity and opportunities for improving support. Their experiences demonstrate the importance of involving people with lived experience in shaping policies and services intended to support them.

Bournemouth Foodbank should establish mechanisms that ensure people with lived experience influence and co-produce the design, delivery and evaluation of local food poverty and anti-poverty strategies and support.

The recent award of Trussell funding for a Community Power Project provides an opportunity to embed this approach. The project will start by January 2027 and aims to support people with lived experience of financial hardship to shape the systems that affect food insecurity, housing, benefits and income, while developing peer-led and inclusive advocacy. This should be used to strengthen community-led engagement, ensuring that people with direct experience of poverty are represented in local and national decision-making and are able to influence the policies and services that affect their lives.

Placing lived experience at the centre of service design will help ensure support is more responsive, accessible and effective, while strengthening collective action to address the underlying causes of poverty.

Strengthen a Shared Long-Term Approach to Reducing Food Insecurity

The central finding of this report is that foodbank use is increasingly driven by persistent poverty rather than short-term emergencies. While emergency food provision remains essential, reducing reliance on foodbanks requires sustained action to address the underlying causes of financial hardship, including inadequate incomes, insecure employment, unaffordable housing, debt, poor health and gaps in the social security system.

Building on existing partnerships and local initiatives, Bournemouth Foodbank, statutory services, voluntary organisations and community partners should work together to strengthen a coordinated, long-term approach to reducing food insecurity across Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole. This should focus on preventing financial crisis wherever possible, while ensuring people experiencing hardship receive timely, person-centred support.

This shared approach should bring together the recommendations outlined in this report through coordinated partnership working, shared intelligence, person-centred support and a continued focus on preventing poverty alongside responding to crisis

This approach aligns with Trussell's vision of ending the need for foodbanks by ensuring everyone has enough money to afford the essentials. By combining compassionate crisis support with coordinated action to prevent poverty, local partners can help create a community where fewer people experience food insecurity and fewer households need to rely on emergency food provision.

Closing Thoughts

The recommendations set out in this report recognise that reducing food poverty requires both immediate actions to improve support for people experiencing hardship and long-term commitment to addressing its underlying causes. Strengthening partnerships between statutory services, voluntary organisations and local communities will be essential to delivering more coordinated, person-centred support that promotes dignity, financial resilience and independence.

Foodbanks play a vital role for those facing crisis, but lasting change will depend on preventing people from reaching crisis in the first place. By working collectively to tackle the causes of poverty, Bournemouth has an opportunity to move beyond food insecurity and create a place where everyone has the resources they need to live well.

References

BCP Council (2021) *Ward profiles dashboard* [Power BI dashboard]. Available at: https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiZDI4MzhlNTgtNDAxZC00NjZjLThkMTMtZmI0NmNhNDA4M2ViIiwidCI6ImM5NDYzMzEzLTM1ZTEtNDBlNC05NDRhLWRkNzk4ZWM5ZTQ4OCJ9 (Accessed: 17 August 2026).

BCP Council (2025) *Our People, Our Place: Key facts, figures and insights*. Available at: https://www.bcpcouncil.gov.uk/about-the-council/statistics-data-and-census/our-people-our-place-key-facts-figures-and-insights (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

Denning, S.(2021) "Three Foodbanks in a Decade of Austerity: Foodbank Affective Atmospheres." *Antipode* 53 (4), pp. 1018–37. https://doi-org.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/10.1111/anti.12716.

Loopstra, R. (2017) 'Household characteristics and nutritional vulnerability of people using UK foodbanks', *The European Journal of Public Health*, 27(Suppl. 3). https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckx187.482

Loopstra, R. and Lambie-Mumford, H. (2023) 'Foodbanks: Understanding their role in the food insecure population in the UK', *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, 82(3), pp. 253–263. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0029665123002720.

Morrow, B.F., Davis, L.B., Jiang, S. and McCormick, N. (2024) 'Optimizing food pantry stocking through client preferences: a novel elicitation and classification process', *Journal of Humanitarian Logistics and Supply Chain Management,*14 (4), pp. 399-418.

Nayak, R. and Hartwell, H. (2023) 'The future of charitable alternative food networks in the UK: an investigation into current challenges and opportunities for foodbanks and community markets',*Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 7, 1187015.https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2023.1187015

Prayogo, E., Chater, A., Chapman, S., Barker, M., Rahmawati, N., Waterfall, T. and Grimble, G. (2017) 'Who uses foodbanks and why? Exploring the impact of financial strain and adverse life events on food insecurity', *Journal of Public Health*, 40(4), pp. 676–683. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdx133.

Rivera, A.F., Smith, N.R. and Ruiz, A. (2023) 'A systematic literature review of foodbanks' supply chain operations with a focus on optimization models', *Journal of humanitarian logistics and supply chain management*, 13(1), pp. 10–25. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/JHLSCM-09-2021-0087.

Sengul Orgut, I., Davis, L.B. and Ivy, J.S. (2025) 'Foodbank Supply Chain and Operations in a Data-Driven World: Objectives, Challenges, and Opportunities'. In: Berenguer, G., Sohoni, M.G. (eds) Nonprofit Operations and Supply Chain Management. Springer Series in Supply Chain Management, vol 25. Springer, Cham. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-74994-0_12.

Stephen, A., Petre, O., Kyle, J., Thies, F. and Allan, J.L. (2026) 'Understanding factors affecting engagement with food-related services in areas of deprivation: A mixed-methods approach', *Journal of Health Psychology*, 31(8), pp. 3379–3394. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/13591053251404162.

Taylor, N., Boyland, E. and Hardman, C.A. (2024) 'Conceptualising food banking in the UK from drivers of use to impacts on health and wellbeing: A systematic review and directed content analysis', *Appetite*, 203, p. 107699. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2024.107699 (Accessed: 28 July 2026).

Trussell (2025) *Emergency food parcel distribution in the UK: April 2024–March 2025*. Available at: https://cms.trussell.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-07/eys_UK_factsheet_230725.pdf (Accessed: 28 July 2026).

Appendices

Appendix 1. Full breakdown of vouchers per month 2019–2026

Colour coding has been applied across each row to facilitate year on year comparisons. Within each row, green indicates the lowest value and red indicates the highest value.

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	Grand Total
Jan		399	433	630	588	852	551	609	4062
Feb	210	311	400	583	579	578	508	553	3722
Mar	256	557	435	688	625	600	637	601	4399
Apr	291	734	409	646	455	653	505	570	4263
May	330	583	354	662	425	607	528	549	4038
Jun	322	542	401	655	506	534	568	514	4042
Jul	389	542	468	512	496	567	577		3551
Aug	324	377	399	575	553	510	447		3185
Sep	328	423	431	571	556	522	501		3332
Oct	335	427	434	444	662	555	681		3538
Nov	350	410	550	373	676	531	592		3482
Dec	526	617	685	699	854	691	573		4645
Grand Total	3661	5922	5399	7038	6975	7200	6668		44626

Appendix 2. Participant Demographics

A total of 45 interviews were conducted. As one interview was undertaken jointly with a couple who both use the foodbank, the final sample comprised of 46 participants.

Characteristic	Category	Number of participants
Gender	Female	17
	Male	29
Age	18-30	9
	31-45	17
	46-55	1
	46-65	19
Disability	No disability	14
	Mental disability	8
	Physical disability	3
	Learning disability	3
	Mental and physical disability	18
Ethnicity	Asian British	1
	Black African	3
	Black British	1
	Mixed White and Black Caribbean	1
	White British	30
	White English	6
	White European	2
	White Other	1
Housing	Flat – Private Rented	5
	Flat – Housing Association	6
	Flat – Local Authority	1
	Flat - Unspecified	5
	Bedsit	2

Characteristic	Category	Number of participants
	House	1
	HMO	6
	Supported Accommodation	12
	Hostel	1
	Temporary B&B/hotel	4
Household	Staying with friend/family	1
	Lodger	1
Household	Single person	36
	Living with partner	6
	Living with child/ren	3
	Other	1
Caring responsibilities	Yes	10
	No	36
Work/Benefits	In work – full time	2
Work/Benefits	In work – part time	1
	In receipt of benefits – UC	30
	In receipt of benefits – UC and PIP	10
	No income/benefits	3
Household income	Up to £12,750	37
	£12,750 - £25,000	7
	£25,000 - £35,000	2
Education level	No formal qualifications	8
	One to four GCSE passes (grade A* to C or grade 4 and above) and any other GCSEs at other grades, or equivalent qualifications	9
	Five or more GCSE passes (grade A* to C or grade 4 and above) or equivalent qualifications	10
	Apprenticeships	1
	Two or more A Levels or equivalent qualifications	7

Characteristic	Category	Number of participants
	Higher National Certificate, Higher National Diploma, Bachelor's degree, or post-graduate qualifications	7
	Other qualifications, of unknown level	4

Disabilities specified included ADHD, anxiety, asthma, autism, bi-polar, borderline personality disorder, cancer, colitis, Crohn's, depression, dyslexia, diabetes, functional neurological disorder, osteoarthritis, PTSD, thrombosis, schizophrenia, and spinal stenosis.

Appendix 3. Interview Script

Relationship with food:

1) Tell me a bit about you, your family and what generally influences your food choices. For example, do you have dietary preferences or restrictions (gluten free/dairy etc)?

(to continue the question) Are your choices and needs influenced by health concerns, religious beliefs and environmental factors (for example, are you concerned about the origin of your food (local/imported))?

(more) what cooking facilities they have from nothing through to Kettle / Air fryer/ shared kitchen or full facilities.

History and access:

2) When did you use the foodbank first?

3) What were the circumstances for you/your family that led to you being referred to the foodbank?

4) Did you know about the foodbank before your referral?

5) How easy was it to get a referral?

6) How many times did you use it in the past 12 month?

(additional questions for people who only accessed the foodbank once) why was that the case? (no need anymore/issues with access etc)

Experience of foodbank services:

7) Can you describe how was the experience of accessing the foodbank for you?

8) Was it easy to get there and be supported? (did you have to use public transport, get a lift etc)

9) Was the parcel adequate to your needs? For example, to your food preferences and restrictions as discusses in the first question?

10) Anything about your experience that you thought could be addressed, changed and improved?

11) Have you used our Money Advice or Debt services or any other local organisations that we told you about?

12) Do you use any other food provision services? (If so, what do you think of them? Are they useful?)

Future:

13) There are a lot of considerations about changing the provision of foodbank services. For example, giving users grocery or food vouchers. What do you think about that?

14) Do you have any ideas of how foodbanks and other food service provisions could be more helpful to people? What changes would you like to see?

15) Has use of the foodbank had other impacts in your life beyond the provision of the service?

Personal information:

- Gender:
    - M
    - F
    - (self-define)

- Age bracket
  - 18-30
  - 31-45
  - 46-65
  - 66+
- Any disability? y/n

  Mental or physical
- Ethnicity
  - Arab
  - Asian or Asian British (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Any other Asian background)
  - Black, Black British, Caribbean or African (Caribbean, African, any other Black, Black British, or Caribbean background)
  - Mixed or multiple ethnic groups (White and Black Caribbean, White and Black African, White and Asian, any other Mixed or multiple ethnic background)
  - White (English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British, Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveller, Roma, Any other White background)
  - Any other ethnic group
- How would you describe your housing?
- How many people live in your household:
  - Single person
  - Live with partner
  - Children (if so how many and what age)
  - Parents/relatives
  - Other
- Do you have any caring responsibilities?
- Not in work/in work
  - FT or PT, zero hours
  - Type of work
  - In receipt of benefits y/n
- Household income brackets:
  - Up to 12,750
  - 12,750 – 25,000
  - 25,000 – 35,000
  - 35,000-50,000
  - More than 50,000
- Educational level
  - no formal qualifications
  - one to four GCSE passes (grade A* to C or grade 4 and above) and any other GCSEs at other grades, or equivalent qualifications
  - five or more GCSE passes (grade A* to C or grade 4 and above) or equivalent qualifications
  - apprenticeships
  - two or more A Levels or equivalent qualifications

- Higher National Certificate, Higher National Diploma, Bachelor's degree, or post-graduate qualifications
- other qualifications, of unknown level

"Foodbanks play a vital role for those facing crisis, but lasting change will depend on preventing people from reaching crisis in the first place."

Download a digital copy of this report

Suggested Citation

Durrant, C., Marino, A., Baitimbetova, M., Nita, M. and Tipi, N. (2026) *Beyond the Food Parcel: Understanding Food Insecurity in Bournemouth*. Bournemouth Foodbank and The Open University.

Information

Bournemouth Foodbank

www.bournemouth.foodbank.org.uk

The Open University

www.open.ac.uk

Copyright