

Brighton & Hove Food Projects call on Government to respond to Cost of Living crisis



We are a coalition of 44 community organisations supporting people in poverty who rely on us for food. We are the Brighton & Hove Emergency Food Network.

In 2022, Food Foundation national research tells us that food insecurity is the highest it has ever been, this echoes our local data and the experiences of those volunteering in the city's food banks, social supermarkets and meal projects.

We have seen the need for food support increase year on year. Our citywide network has grown from 6 organisations providing 220 weekly parcels in 2013, to 37 organisations supporting 5870 people with 1430 parcels and 2650 meals weekly in 2021.

"The amount of people that come to use our services has increased week on week. The stress levels of the families and individuals are so high. The feeling of always having to compensate and never having enough and not having the basic feeling that everyone should have of feeling fed, safe and warm in their own home."

Reyna, Old Boat Community Centre

During the last two years of the pandemic our network coordinated efforts to feed people through a very difficult time and we met the needs of people in our city. We are really alarmed at what will happen from April as energy prices increase, the current funding via the Household Support Fund from national government to local authorities ends and food prices continue to rise. We are concerned that we will not be able to cope with the increase in demand for our support.

For a long time, the narrative has been that people choose between heating or eating – we are now in the situation where people can't afford to do either as benefit levels or low / insecure wages do not meet household living costs. We in the community sector cannot continue to be the only line of defence in preventing people from experiencing malnutrition. People need income levels that allow them to meet their basic needs.

"30% increase in client numbers last year and 18% year to date. What is concerning is to see clients who we had managed to stabilise their position and not need our services - return to us this year. Also, an increase in those who have never ever needed support - 20 to 30 years in work - now being thrown into the system."

Mike, Brighton Food Bank

Whilst we support the national poverty campaigns that are focusing on measures to help specific groups e.g. pensioners, refugees, families, people with disabilities, working people and those on benefits we are concerned that this is missing the bigger picture. We all eat and it is not just one group that are experiencing poverty. Day in day out we are seeing people of all ages and backgrounds who are at risk of malnutrition, homelessness, poor educational attainment, mental and physical health breakdown. The costs of preventing this happening are less than the costs of the consequences.

We are writing to you ahead of the Spring Budget to urge you to put in place a package of 12 measures to address the immediate situation for all people experiencing poverty. Find our action points overleaf.

We urge that:

- a. The **uplift in benefits that is tabled for the Spring Budget is in line with the true cost of inflation** (7% or higher) not the 3.1% tabled that was based on data from September last year before the current reality was known.
- b. **The £20 uplift to Universal Credit is reinstated** – in recognition that the additional household costs that it was designed to help cover have not reduced post pandemic.
- c. **The five-week waiting period for new Universal Credit payments is removed.** Nearly half the people supported by the Trussell Trust food banks last year were seeking support because of their debt to the government. Stripping out the UC in-built delay that forces you to take an advance payment and repay (at a rate not set by you) would go a long way towards preventing this situation. We also support other measures in the Trussell Trust Report on Govt debt.
- d. **Action is taken regarding Local Housing Allowance rates to unfreeze them** so that housing benefit keeps pace with inflation.
- e. **The Household Support Fund mechanism is continued beyond 1st April 2022.** This has been used effectively in Brighton & Hove to target people in work a group that are much harder for national government to support as they do not benefit from changes to Benefits Rates. Resourcing Local Authorities to target and co-ordinate local support should continue.
- f. More work is done to **increase update of Pension Credit.** Between 30 and 40% of pensioners in poverty who are eligible for this support do not currently receive it and as a passport to other support an increased uptake will help those impacted by fuel price increases.
- g. The **permitted work rate is increased** to allow employers to increase the wages of people with disabilities employed on this basis.
- h. With increasing numbers of asylum seekers and refugees needing food bank support measures should be taken to **remove the No Recourse to Public Funds rules** that mean that people can't access local authority or government support and must rely on charity.
- i. More **action is taken to prevent children growing up in food poverty.** Nearly half of food insecure families do not receive a Free School Meal because the income threshold is set too low. We recommend increasing this and implementing the other recommendations from the Food Foundation Right to Food Campaign plus a holistic programme of support that focuses on preventing child poverty e.g. restoring the child element in universal credit, increasing child benefit by at least £5 a week (it has lost 23% of its value since 2010) and lifting the two-child limit, which will otherwise push 300,000 children into poverty and one million more into deeper poverty by 2023/24.
- j. The **budget statement addresses two of the well-known barriers as to why parents can't work more hours** - childcare and travel costs and removes the benefit cap, which largely affects lone parents with young children who are least able to escape the cap through work.
- k. **Immediate action is taken to address fuel poverty.** If analysts are correct by October there could be 8.5 million people in poverty. We ask that current proposals 'heat now pay later' are replaced with a non-repayable grant for the broader set of vulnerable customers, that support builds on existing schemes e.g. extending eligibility to winter fuel payments rather than creating new schemes that people will find hard to access and that specific attention is paid to prepayment customers many of whom already regularly live without electricity or gas because their meters have run out of credit before their next money comes in. Longer term action to improve the most energy inefficient homes needs to be prioritised
- l. Given that increases in food and energy bills are the same no matter what your age that **the minimum wage for young people aged 18 or older is raised** to the same level as the over 23s (currently 18-20yr olds is £6.83 and over 23s £9.50)

"We are all really, really, really, tired. We have all put our entire hearts and souls and guts and muscles into trying to make this work. I genuinely feel this is a really heart-breaking situation for everybody [...] We have got really vulnerable people relying on us and we have to do the right thing for them"

Rachel, BrightStore

Food banks see people week in week out who are in deep and ongoing poverty. Volunteers are becoming burnt out and increasingly anxious that they will not be able to support the increased numbers in need in the months ahead. We are fearful of the wider context e.g. as everyone feels the impact of the cost-of-living increases donations to food banks will plummet as those who could previously afford to buy food to give won't be able to. All of this at the same time as grants for those that provided food support during the pandemic are stopping and our own costs of running are going up.

We ask that there is a proper enquiry into the role that food banks, informal food aid, pantries etc have ended up playing in plugging the gaps in the welfare state to understand the risks and implications of this informal safety net held together by volunteers failing due to immense pressure.

Alongside these measures we propose to deal with the immediate Cost of Living crisis we look forward to seeing the Food Strategy White Paper as we believe this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for the UK Government to set out a single visionary plan to transform England's food system for our health, the economy, and the planet and embed a right to food as a national policy.

Yours Sincerely,

Brighton & Hove Emergency Food Network

Brighton & Hove Food Partnership
Balfour Mutual Aid Food Bank
Bevendean Food Bank
Black & Minority Ethnic Community Partnership Food Bank
Brighton Cauldron
Brighton Food Bank
Brighton Light Trust
Brighton Unemployed Centre Families Project
Brighton Women's Centre
BrightStore
Case Central
Chomp (One Church)
Clarendon Food Bank
Cornerstone Community Centre Food Bank
Craven Vale Food Bank
East Brighton Food Coop
Food & Friendship
Fresh Start Community Association
Hangleton & West Blatchington Food Bank
Hollingdean Food Bank
Impact Initiatives
Lunch Positive

Moulsecoomb Community Market
Mutual Aid Vegan Food Bank
Old Boat Community Corner Pantry
Pankhurst Pantry
Phoenix Food Hub
Real Junk Food Project
Salvation Army Brighton Congress Hall
Salvation Army Hove Food Bank
St Anne's Day Centre
St John the Baptist Food Bank
St Mary Magdalen's Church
Sussex Homeless Support
Sussex Surplus
The Bevy
The Gathering Place Food Bank
The Purple People Kitchen Food Bank
The Villas Food Bank
Voices in Exile
Weald Allotments Community Fridge
Whitehawk Food Bank
Woodingdean Community Food Hub
Youth Advice Centre Food Market

"The cost of living has gone up - food is more expensive, and I am expecting fuel bills to rise by 50%. My salary will not rise by 50%. So things will be even tighter. Veg and meat are more expensive than convenience food. It's much cheaper to shop at Iceland and fill your freezer with unhealthy food"

Chomp Lunch Club family

"We are experiencing an unprecedented number of people who are living with HIV attend our services and seek outreach for food support. Managing any long-term medical condition is reliant on meeting the most basic of needs, which the cost of living increase has consistently and vastly undermined. [...] People's pain is real, suffering frequently feels insurmountable, their fear for the future profound."

Gary, Lunch Positive

'James has a learning disability and comes to Food and Friendship lunch club on a Thursday. He told me today he has no food in his house so he has to come to lunch club to eat.'

Caroline, Food & Friendship

