

# Hidden Somerset

## Food Poverty



# Hidden Realities

There are over 25 foodbanks operating in Somerset from community centres, churches and other central points

An estimated one in five adults in Somerset are either experiencing hunger or have problems accessing sufficient food

The Trussell Trust reports that foodbank usage has doubled in the last five years across the south-west

In our VCSE Food Poverty Survey, 60% of community groups reported that their food projects were accessed by clients on a regular basis

Our VCSE Food Poverty Survey found that there has been a 63% increase in demand for community food projects and initiatives over the last two years

20% of our survey respondents reported Universal Credit recipients as their sole client, attributing this to the length of waiting time between payments

71,250 people in Somerset are worried about being able to provide enough food for their household

By the end of the academic year in 2021, 12,054 children were eligible for free school meals in Somerset, which is an increase of 10% since the start of the year

**"Having young people wait for you for food is heart breaking."**  
Youth Worker, Youth Unlimited



## Introduction

**Hidden Somerset** is a series of short reports looking at aspects of life in Somerset that are often hidden from view. By lifting the lid on the experience and insights of frontline grassroots charities that work at the heart of our communities, we aim to stimulate debate and understanding across a wider audience, helping to inspire new and more impactful philanthropy.

Food poverty in our county is a widespread, hidden issue. We don't know exactly how many people now rely on emergency food parcels, but the number has been growing for several years. Without access to nutritious food, our children's education suffers, and our health declines. It becomes difficult to live our lives with any kind of dignity.

The coronavirus pandemic highlighted this issue, but only because it made things much worse for so many more people. Understanding how we found ourselves in this position is not easy. We need to consider the immediate reasons someone requires a foodbank, but also the reasons for chronic food insecurity.

As our report shows, the complex issue of food poverty cannot be eliminated by foodbanks alone, although they are a vital part of the community response.

However, the coordinated efforts of our local charities, community groups and social enterprises can go a long way to solving the problem. They are uniquely placed to offer emergency help to people experiencing crisis, can support them to become more resilient, and build positive long-term changes in their lives. While others have a role to play, long-term solutions have to include strong community support.

We are very grateful to the 15 organisations that gave their time to help shape this latest Hidden Somerset report. They, and many others, played an invaluable role in addressing food poverty – long before the pandemic. Their importance has only grown over the last 18 months.

**Justin Sargent OBE**

Chief Executive, Somerset Community Foundation

# A hungry county

## How many people in Somerset are hungry?

It has been estimated in recently published research on food insecurity in the UK that one in five adults in Somerset are either experiencing hunger or problems accessing sufficient food due to poverty or poor accessibility.<sup>1</sup>

It should come as no surprise that foodbank usage has increased dramatically. The Trussell Trust, the largest network of foodbanks in the country, report that they have doubled the number of food parcels provided in the south-west region over the last five years, from 100,188 in 2014/15 to 201,971 in 2020/21. They operate two foodbanks in our county, one in Taunton and the other in Bridgwater. 17,404 food parcels were distributed from these two foodbanks alone in 2020/21, a 23% increase on the previous year.<sup>2</sup>

There are over 25 foodbanks operating in Somerset from community centres, churches and other central points.

**“We have experienced over the past two years a 32% increase in the number of people helped; a 52% increase in children helped and a 58% increase in food items given out. This is equivalent to 144,519 items of food.”<sup>3</sup> Mat Callaghan, Operations Manager at Lord’s Larder Food Bank, Yeovil**



**“Pre-pandemic, this group was one person’s responsibility. Now we have a team of volunteers, volunteer shoppers, and a much more organised store so that we are able to make up parcels easily. We have commandeered the skittle alley for more space.” SCF VCSE Food Poverty Survey respondent**

It is not only the foodbanks who report increased need. In total, our survey, which was completed by VCSE organisations in Somerset who tackle the issue of food poverty, found that there has been a 63% increase in demand for their services over the last few years.

## Adult food insecurity estimates<sup>4</sup>

	Hungry (%)	Struggle (%)	Worried (%)
Mendip	3.35	8.46	10.13
Sedgemoor	3.51	10.12	13.01
Somerset West and Taunton	5.62	19.82	15.35
South Somerset	3.66	8.14	12.36
<b>Somerset</b>	<b>4.1</b>	<b>11.83</b>	<b>12.86</b>

These percentages may look small but the reality is that these figures represent thousands of people.

This is a growing problem across our county, but there are particular demographics of our communities which are more impacted than others. Nationally we know that single parent families, minority ethnic households, and people with disabilities are more likely to experience food poverty than others. Our survey and consultation with the VCSE sector reflects some of these trends. Overall, respondents told us the most pressing needs were among older people, single parents and those on Universal Credit. 20% of survey respondents reported Universal Credit recipients as their sole client and attributed this to the length of waiting time between payments. Many comments reflect the growth in the number of families seeking support:

**“Last year we saw a 44% increase in families requesting food support, with more requests from larger families, resulting in us helping 52% more children last year compared with 2019.”**

SCF VCSE Food Poverty Survey respondent

<sup>1,4</sup> Moretti, Angelo; Whitworth, Adam; Blake, Megan (2021) UK Food Insecurity Map <https://bit.ly/3xKSj4L>

<sup>2</sup> Trussell Trust (2021) End of Year Stats <https://bit.ly/3elg5gL>

<sup>3</sup> SCF VCSE Food Poverty Survey results, August 2021



### Hungry, and not just in the holidays

Food poverty in the home means that for many children their free school meal could be the only guaranteed hot food they eat all day. By the end of the academic year in 2021, Somerset had 12,054 children eligible for free school meals, an increase of 10% since the start of that year alone.<sup>5</sup> This means that nearly one in six of all children in Somerset are now eligible for free school meals.

But free school meals are only provided during the school term, which means that for 12 weeks of the year many children may be hungry. In other words, in a class of 30 children, five of them may experience hunger. Unlike many developed countries, the UK does not undertake an official measure of food poverty, so we do not know the full extent of the problem. Government provision in the summer of 2021 meant that families were able to access weekly £15 vouchers for holiday activities and food, although as one group reported in our survey: "...for a hungry teenager, this doesn't go far."

Voluntary sector organisations, whose primary role is not to directly address food poverty issues, are increasingly finding themselves tackling it as part of their wider work.

For example, Somerset Activity and Sports Partnership (SASP) coordinated the Happy Healthy Holidays Somerset programme, funded by Somerset County Council, which provided 6,000

children and young people who were eligible for free school meals with four weeks of activities, which included healthy meals. Parents will often eat less or skip meals entirely to make sure there is enough for their children to eat. Some people find they can only afford unhealthy food, which lacks nutrition. A report published by the House of Lords in 2020<sup>6</sup> said that low-income families were left with 'little or no choice' about diet, forced to eat unhealthy food or simply go without. Some live in homes with no facilities for cooking or storing meals. Many families are not able to create meals from scratch.

Food poverty widens both health and education inequalities. Being hungry means that children find it difficult to concentrate in school or to complete homework at home. As we have reported in previous issues of Hidden Somerset, attainment gaps between pupils from low-income families and other pupils exist through all key stages of education. Food poverty is inextricably linked to this.

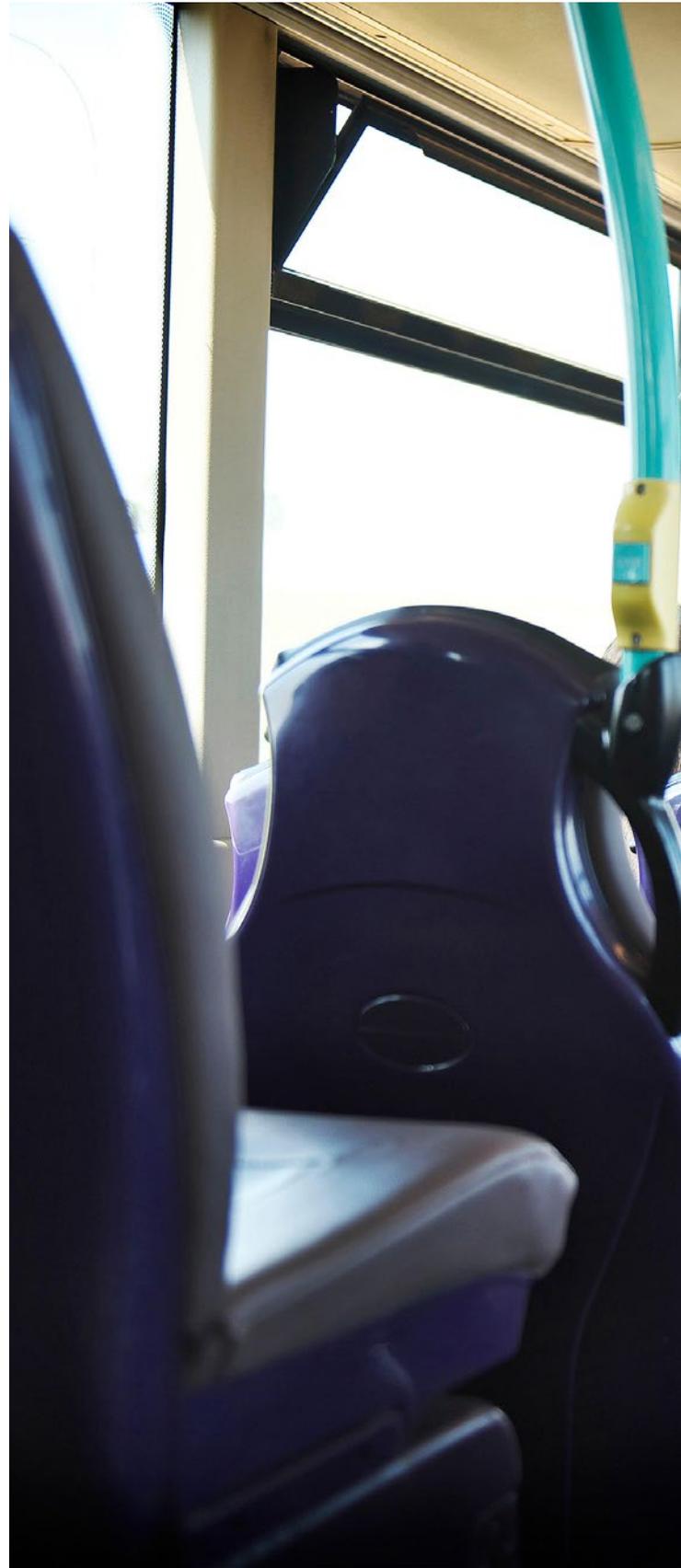
A youth worker at Youth UnLimited, who works across Sedgemoor and Somerset West and Taunton, told us in their (unpublished) InteGr8 project report: "The hardest part of this work is dealing with children and young people living in poverty – seeing them hungry. Having young people wait for you for food is heart breaking."

<sup>5</sup> Free school meals: Autumn term 2020/21 <https://bit.ly/3B9nLN4>

<sup>6</sup> Hungry for change: fixing the failures in food, 2019-20 <https://bit.ly/2ZLTDZO>

# A hungry county

continued



## The revolving door

Prior to the pandemic, groups were reporting to Somerset Community Foundation that there was an increase in so-called 'revolving door' clients: people who needed to access support repeatedly. This could be on a weekly or monthly basis, or dependent upon seasonal work, particularly those within the tourist industry. In our survey, 60% of respondents said they now worked primarily with these clients, with only 13% saying that the majority of their beneficiaries accessed support on a one-off basis.

**Food poverty is becoming more deeply rooted in our Somerset communities.**

**"Pre-pandemic, we responded to food parcel requests ad hoc and would be doing an average of three requests a month. Since the pandemic, this has increased to regular weekly distribution with a few ad hoc ones in between. This now averages at about 30 requests a month."**

SCF VCSE Food Poverty Survey respondent

In our survey, socio-economic factors were considered to be the primary root cause of food poverty. This included the loss of jobs and industry, the level of income from benefits, poor transport links and expensive housing.



### 'Food deserts' in rural areas

The UK has a problem with so-called 'food deserts', defined as an area populated by 5,000 – 15,000 people who have access to two or fewer big supermarkets. Many of these areas are dotted with smaller convenience stores – which are often more expensive and less likely to stock fresh, healthy supplies. It is estimated that around a quarter of these 'deserts' are in rural areas. In west Somerset, for instance, it can be a 40 minute drive to a large supermarket.

Andrew Forsey's Evidence Review for the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger<sup>7</sup> looked at the extent and geographical spread of hunger and food poverty. The review included a section on 'rural hardship' which identified several factors which may worsen the ability of low-income households in rural and coastal areas to be able to afford food. These factors included struggling with the higher costs of heating their homes; higher costs of transport; distance to work or Jobcentre Plus; and low-paid and seasonal employment. Evidence submitted to the review found some rural residents were living some distance from lower-cost supermarkets and could not afford the bus fare to travel into town to shop. The insecure and short-term patterns of employment in many rural areas means some households struggle to build up savings or resources to provide resilience during difficult times. Property costs are higher and comprise proportionately more of the family income which means families can be more vulnerable to shocks in their household budget.

Somerset is a largely rural county. Lack of an adequate public or community transport infrastructure, poor internet connections, expensive data and lack of education and employment opportunities mean that families and communities are isolated. Food poverty is a direct consequence of these rural challenges.

**"Food poverty cannot be tackled without addressing the causes. We are a rural and coastal area and bottom of the league table for Social Mobility. We've lost our two defining industries which paid well. The rest are small businesses, farming, retail or seasonal work. Funding which comes to groups like ourselves is palliative and always will be until there are proper transport links fit for the future, which enable people to access the centres where opportunities exist in terms of education and employment. They are trapped in poverty."**

SCF VCSE Food Poverty Survey respondent

<sup>7</sup> Evidence Review for All Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger, Andrew Forsey, 2015 [food-poverty-appg-evidence-review-final.pdf](https://www.wordpress.com) (wordpress.com)

# Community Solutions

## Bridgwater and Surrounding Communities: Food and Support Alliance

**“Bridgwater and Surrounding Communities: Food and Support Alliance is a diverse group of people from local voluntary, community, faith, NHS, council and social enterprises. Using our collective knowledge, experience, skills and different perspectives we’re able to support each other and better coordinate local resources.**

Last year people found themselves in circumstances they never imagined they’d find themselves in. We were still helping the expected group of people coping with difficult situations, many of whom regularly stumble between crisis and chaotic stability. The organisations within the Alliance deal with both food and wraparound support, such as money management, help at home, reducing loneliness and signposting to other services. But the pandemic shone a light on the difficulty people can suddenly find themselves in very quickly. Maybe they were waiting for benefits to come through or perhaps they were teetering on the edge or falling through the cracks.

**Desperate circumstances led many people to stand on the steps of a foodbank, never imagining it would come to that – they had been through everything at home and found themselves with an empty freezer and food cupboards; and now they didn’t know what they were going to feed their children for breakfast.**

During lockdown, food parcels were delivered by volunteer teams, Village Agents and other pop-up food services to people who were isolating, genuinely frightened to leave their homes. After a while we found that support was being duplicated, so we came together to form the Alliance, coordinating wraparound services to alleviate the need.

A food resilience pathway subgroup was set up to identify gaps and steady the progress of projects, to better inform where resources need to go, providing a more balanced provision. The Food Pathway has four key areas: 1. Easing crisis; 2. Enabling stability; 3. Empowering regeneration; and 4. Engineering change.

We used the four key areas to identify what we had and where there were gaps. The glaring gap was empowering regeneration through projects such as ‘Farm to Fork’ and ‘Spade to Spoon’ – community-led initiatives that look after the land and promote community growing projects. We now need to consolidate progress on crisis and stability food services, such as foodbanks and pantries, and move forward on regeneration, enabling residents to have sovereignty over their food destiny.”

**Heather Whittle  
Volunteer Alliance  
Development,  
Bridgwater and Surrounding  
Communities: Food and  
Support Alliance**



## The Food Forest Project A sustainable solution

**“The Food Forest Project acquires parcels of disused land, and with the help of local communities, seeks to combat issues such as social isolation, habitat depletion and accessibility of locally sourced healthy food, by planting food forests.**

The demographic that we aim to support are young and low-income households who have found themselves in a situation where they are unable to afford the cost of food. A number of our trustees had been impacted by this at some point in their lives, either directly or indirectly.

We knew there were people living in our local area who were using foodbanks and struggling to feed their families, and we wanted to set up a dignified system where they could join a community, or discretely access the food they require to maintain a healthy and balanced diet.

Many landowners want to see their land used for alternative things, but some lack the time and resources to reach out into their communities to seek initiatives. We were able to bridge that gap, and access land and landowners that were happy for us to open up their land and offer something inclusive to the community. To maximise the use of one of our food forests in Shepton Mallet, we’ve started setting up our permaculture market

garden to supplement the food grown within the food forest. This market garden grows sustainably produced, organic food which we give to our local foodbank, The Salvation Army.

**The food forests are for people to grow, forage or just to spend time in and enjoy.**

We know the foodbanks don’t tend to get donations of fresh and healthy produce, and a well-rounded diet is fundamental to the health and wellbeing of our communities. Healthy, organic food is expensive. There’s a whole swathe of society for whom it’s just not accessible and we want to address that issue by ensuring that it is accessible for everybody, irrespective of wealth and class.

Cheaper food is often ultra-processed, which has become a big issue, particularly for children. Studies show us that food that is high in additives, salt, fat and sugar has a negative impact on children; a poor diet is linked to problems with concentration in schools, ADHD, mental health and obesity. Unfortunately, it’s this food which is also affordable.

We want to make sure healthy wholefoods are getting to the people who need it most.”

**Tristan Faith  
Founder,  
The Food Forest Project CIC**



## Diversity Voice

### Offering a package of support

**“We champion intercultural understanding and provide support and services to migrants and other minority cultural groups in Somerset.**

People are often surprised at quite how diverse the population in Somerset is; at just one of our English clubs, people spoke 25 different languages. It's often assumed that language is the key barrier for people, but cultural understanding can be just as much of an issue. What's 'normal' to someone who's born here might not be as obvious to a person who has come from another country to make Somerset their home. Knowing where to buy less expensive food, using a foodbank or understanding the concept of self-help volunteering at community gardens and growing schemes may not be a 'thing' elsewhere.

Because of this, we tend to uncover food poverty issues when people come to us for other reasons. They might approach our immigration team or need first-language help with housing. So, we tend to offer a package of support which could include food vouchers on behalf of Bridgwater FoodBank, help with benefits, or explaining how people can help themselves. And our multilingual team can help with interpreting.

**The pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on some migrant communities, and we've seen a real increase in need since it started.**

On top of that, Brexit has led to the biggest changes to the immigration system in decades. We're spending a lot of time making sure people know what they're entitled to now, and we're working closely with other organisations. That's really important, as Somerset has an incredibly vibrant voluntary sector, and we're a bridge for people to access it.

We're a small team but fortunate that we're both experience-led and have more formal understanding of the issues. Almost all our staff have come to live in the UK from other countries, so our office is a multilinguistic, multicultural space. Because Somerset is a rural area, there's perhaps not the same historic provision of support to minority communities that you might find in an urban area.

We stop people falling through the gaps. Our key objective is to prevent social isolation and what that can lead to, and of course addressing food poverty is an important part of that.”

**Tanya Lawler  
Chief Executive Officer,  
Diversity Voice**

## Quantock Foodbank

### Tackling hunger in rural communities

**“Quantock Foodbank provides food parcels to those in crisis. This isn't necessarily synonymous with food poverty – you don't have to be living in food poverty to suddenly find yourself in a crisis.**

It's an important distinction to make; the main provider for a family may become ill and unable to work and there isn't as much support as there used to be for people who are on sick leave. The whole family can quickly find themselves in difficulty. We saw this throughout the pandemic. In one case, a parent was on sick leave at the same time as their child's disability allowance was cut. They had a good stock cupboard which they relied upon until they had used it all and didn't know where to turn for help. I think they saw the foodbank number in one of our local community magazines, and eventually gave us a call.

When people self-refer, I ask if I can refer them to other agencies – sometimes it's straight away, sometimes it's after a few weeks.

What I'd love is for the foodbank to become a much smaller part of what we do.

We launched a Pantry Pilot in Watchet in July 2021. The focus is prevention of food poverty in an area of Somerset which is at the bottom of the league table for social mobility.

The Pantry aims to bridge the gap between total dependence on food parcels and total self-reliance, encouraging the client to take the first step towards independence and responsibility. For a small contribution of £3.50, which goes towards the overhead costs of the Pantry, we provide a nutritionally balanced bag of provisions, including fresh produce.

**Our aim from the very start was to cut down the amount of sugar in foodbank diets. We've never accepted donations of sugar. We also wanted to introduce better and healthier ambient temperature food including nuts and dried fruit, and we now have a local supplier providing us with fresh fruit, vegetables and eggs, ready to go out with the parcels each week.**

The truth is that our projects alleviate but may not tackle the drivers of food poverty. Nevertheless, the Quantock Foodbank will always be there for those in crisis when they really need us.”

**Marlene Mason  
Treasurer and Co-ordinator,  
Quantock Foodbank**

# Looking Ahead



## Tackle hunger now

Food poverty will not disappear overnight, and we will continue to need to fund emergency responses.

Continued support for foodbanks, holiday hunger schemes and other emergency food provision is necessary as the ongoing effects of the pandemic are still being experienced by many.

The causes of food poverty are complex but long-term solutions that include a coordinated approach from our local charities, community groups and social enterprises would help to provide evidence of the ongoing and increasing need of an issue of which we are only just uncovering. Funding for both direct project delivery and for collecting data and impact can help us to do this.

## Grow, cook and eat healthy food tomorrow

33% of the respondents to our survey considered community food initiatives to be an effective way of tackling food poverty. Food pantries, community food clubs, community fridges and so on provide an intermediary step, moving the most vulnerable away from the crisis.

However, the response to food poverty has to be much wider than that. We should seek to support projects that cover the whole range of related issues: cooking skills, family budgeting, home growing, education around healthy eating, provision of low cost or free appliances, community transport to access shops, or social activities involving cooking and growing. In fact, nearly half of the respondents to our survey considered the best solution to the challenge was helping clients to develop skills to make better use of food.

What we know is that an holistic response is required to ensure that our whole community has access to food.

**“Bring the community together with everyone lifting everyone up to the same level, through food and cooking and sharing meals. Philanthropists could come to the meals too – actually come to the projects they are supporting and meet people.”**

Julia Bedford, Director, Feed Avalon CIC

## Advocate for changes to end food poverty forever

Everyone has the right to food and the role of our sector is to advocate for this, even if it means having difficult conversations.

Charities such as Citizens Advice have a powerful voice for change on the national stage. Movements have been made to provide support in this area. There has been a recent call for a new food security minister who is not yet in post. There are calls for the £20 Universal Credit uplift, that was put in place temporarily at the very start of the pandemic, to be made permanent. Pressure is ongoing for changes to the five-week wait for benefits which has such a huge impact on low income families.

Mat Callaghan from Lord's Larder Foodbank, says: “A reduction in the wait time, between applying for Universal Credit and PIP Payments and receiving payment will take a third of our food requests away.”

Without a change it is likely that the revolving door of our foodbanks will just keep on turning.

That is what we think...but we are interested in hearing from you. Contact our Programmes Director, [val.bishop@somersetcf.org.uk](mailto:val.bishop@somersetcf.org.uk) with your thoughts and ideas or if you would like to know more about supporting our work.



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