

## Research Briefing

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# Food poverty: Households, food banks and free school meals



## Summary

- 1 Food poverty
- 2 Food banks
- 3 Food poverty and the rising cost of living
- 4 Free school meals in England

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## Summary

In 2023/24 there were 7.5 million people, or 11% of the UK population, in households experiencing food poverty, including 18% of children. For the same year, Trussell (previously the Trussell Trust), a charity and network of foodbanks, supplied 2.89 million emergency food parcels.

This briefing provides statistics on food poverty in the UK, including food banks and free school meals.

## What is food poverty?

There is no widely accepted definition of ‘food poverty’. However, a household can broadly be defined as experiencing food poverty or ‘household food insecurity’ if they cannot (or are uncertain about whether they can) acquire “[an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways](#)”.

According to the Department for Work and Pensions’ (DWP) [Households Below Average Income publication](#), in 2023/24, 7.5 million people (11%) in the UK were in food insecure households.

Among the 14.2 million people found to be in relative poverty after housing costs, 25% were in food insecure households, including 33% of children. People in relative poverty live in a household with income less than 60% of the contemporary median income.

## Food bank use in the UK

Food banks are run by charities and are intended as a temporary provision to supply emergency food.

The DWP published statistics on food bank use for the first time in March 2023. In 2023/24, [2.8 million people in the UK lived in household which had used a food bank in the previous 12 months](#), a rate of 4%. This includes 8% of children, 4% of working-age adults, and around 1% of pensioners.

In 2024/25 Trussell supplied 2.89 million emergency food parcels, down slightly from 2023/24 when it supplied 3.13 million parcels, the highest number of parcels distributed by the network in a year.

## How the rising cost of living affects food insecurity

Food prices have been rising since the second half of 2021. [Food and non-alcoholic drink prices were 19.1% higher in the 12 months to March 2023](#), the highest since 1977. In April 2025, food inflation was 3.4%, but the long period of high food inflation affected households.

In March 2025, [66% of adults in Great Britain reported an increase in their cost of living compared with the month before](#), according to the ONS. Of these, 91% saw the price of their food shopping go up, and 40% had started spending less on essentials, including food.

The rising cost of living seems to be increasing household food insecurity. A [YouGov survey by the Food Foundation](#), a food poverty charity, found that in January 2025, 13.9% of households in the UK were ‘food insecure’ (ate less or went a day without eating because they couldn’t access or afford food).

[More than 655,000 people used a Trussell food bank for the first time in 2023/24](#), in addition to the more than 760,000 first time users in 2022/23.<sup>1</sup>

## Free school meals in England

In England, free school meals are a statutory entitlement available to eligible pupils. Local authorities are responsible for providing free school meals.

In January 2025, there were around [2.2 million pupils known to be eligible for free school meals, representing 25.7% of state-funded pupils](#). This eligibility rate has increased particularly sharply in the last few years (since 2018) and is the highest rate recorded since the current time series began in 2006.

This increase could be driven by many factors including macro-economic conditions, the coronavirus pandemic and the continued effect of [the transitional protections during the rollout of Universal Credit](#).

## Free school meals and educational attainment

On average, pupils eligible for free school meals achieve lower GCSE attainment than other pupils. This is based on achieving a “standard pass” in English and maths GCSE. Government statistics show that in 2024, [43.6% of](#)

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<sup>1</sup> On 24 September 2025 we corrected 655,000,000 people to 655,000 people in the summary section on page 5.

pupils eligible for free school meals achieved a standard pass in both English and Maths GCSE compared to 72.3% of pupils not eligible. This was an attainment gap 28.7 percentage points.

# 1 Food poverty

## 1.1 What is food poverty?

There is no widely accepted definition of food poverty, but a household can broadly be defined as experiencing food poverty if they: cannot (or are uncertain about whether they can) acquire “an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways”.<sup>2</sup>

Food poverty is often used as synonymous with **household food insecurity**.<sup>3</sup> Household food insecurity is defined in broadly the same way across several countries:<sup>4</sup>

- ‘Low food security’ means that the household reduces the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets.
- ‘Very low food security’ means that household members sometimes disrupt eating patterns or reduce food intake because they lack money or other resources for food.

Households can have low food security even when the UK as a whole has high food security, as discussed in Box 1 on page 10.

### Causes of household food insecurity

#### Income

Food poverty, or household food insecurity, is largely a symptom of low income. Food insecure households may not be able to afford the cost of enough good quality food, or the associated transport or delivery costs. In this way, food poverty is similar to other types of poverty.<sup>5</sup> As discussed in section 3, high food prices also contribute to household food insecurity.

One reason why food poverty is a particularly visible form of poverty is that food budgets are relatively elastic compared to other essential living costs. This means that cuts can be made to a food budget that cannot be made to

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<sup>2</sup> Child Poverty Action Group, [Living Hand to Mouth](#), 26 March 2019

<sup>3</sup> Sustain, [What is food poverty?](#), and Child Poverty Action Group, [Living Hand to Mouth](#), 26 March 2019.

<sup>4</sup> This definition is based on the Household Food Security Survey Module, developed by the US Department of Agriculture. Source: US Department of Agriculture, [Food Security in the US](#) (Accessed 1 September 2024)

<sup>5</sup> House of Lords Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment, [Hungry for change: fixing the failures in food](#), 6 July 2020, p41

other costs, like rent or fuel payments.<sup>6</sup> Helen Barnard from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, a poverty research organisation, suggested that food “is quite often one of the first things that people on low income start cutting back on or making trades about.”<sup>7</sup>

### Access to food

Household food insecurity can also occur when nutritious food is not available to households because of the area they live in, personal circumstances of household members, or external factors.

For example, in the first weeks of the coronavirus pandemic, households reported being food insecure because supermarket shelves were empty, or because they were shielding at home and could not arrange for food to be delivered. The Food Foundation found that, of the 8 million adults who experienced food insecurity in the first two weeks of lockdown, 50% were unable to get the food they needed due to shortages, 25% were unable to leave their homes and had no other way to get the food they needed, and 21% didn't have enough money to buy adequate food supplies.<sup>8</sup>

### Ability to prepare food

The ability and opportunity to prepare food also affects food security. Factors which could prevent this include disabilities, lack of infrastructure, the energy costs of cooking and the lack of skills or time.<sup>9</sup>

### Sharing food within households

Not everyone in food insecure households experiences it directly. Children in food insecure households do not always experience hunger or insufficient food, as parents often skip meals to ensure their children are fed.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Child poverty Action Group, [Living Hand to Mouth](#), 26 March 2019

<sup>7</sup> Submission to the Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment, [Hungry for change: fixing the failures in food](#), 6 July 2020, p41

<sup>8</sup> The Food Foundation, [A crisis within a crisis: The impact of Covid-19 on household food insecurity](#), 1 March 2021

<sup>9</sup> Defra, [United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021: Theme 4: Food Security at Household Level](#), 22 December 2021

<sup>10</sup> Child poverty Action Group, [Living Hand to Mouth](#), 26 March 2019

## UK food security versus household food insecurity

The Library Insight [Food security: What is it and how is it measured?](#) (February 2020) discusses UK food security.

Food security includes the ability of individual households to obtain food, but it can also be used at a national level to refer to **a country's ability** to feed itself. This means individual households in the UK can have very low food security, even while the UK as a whole has very high food security.

The government undertook a full assessment of UK food security in 2009/10, when it found that “by any objective measure, we enjoy a high degree of food security in the UK today”.<sup>11</sup> The [Agriculture Act 2020](#) introduced a duty on the government to report to Parliament on UK food security at least every three years.<sup>12</sup> The first UK Food Security Report (UKFSR) was published in December 2021.<sup>13</sup> The second UKFSR was published in 2024.<sup>14</sup>

### 1.2

## People in food insecurity

In 2023/24, 7.5 million people in the UK (11%) were in food insecure households in the UK, according to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)'s [Household Below Average Income](#) publication. This included 18% of children, 11% of working-age adults, and 3% of pensioners.<sup>15</sup>

The chart below breaks down food security by status (low and very low). 6% of working-age adults and 9% of children lived in households with **very low** food security in 2023/24.

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<sup>11</sup> Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, [Food security](#) (archived 2 April 2013). The Food Security Assessment was reviewed by the Coalition Government in 2012 and found to be still relevant; see Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [Food security](#), HC 243, 1 July 2014, para 5.

<sup>12</sup> Agriculture Act 2020, [section 19](#). The first report falls due “on or before [...] the last day before 25 December 2021 which is a sitting day for both Houses of Parliament”.

<sup>13</sup> Defra, [United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021](#), 16 December 2021

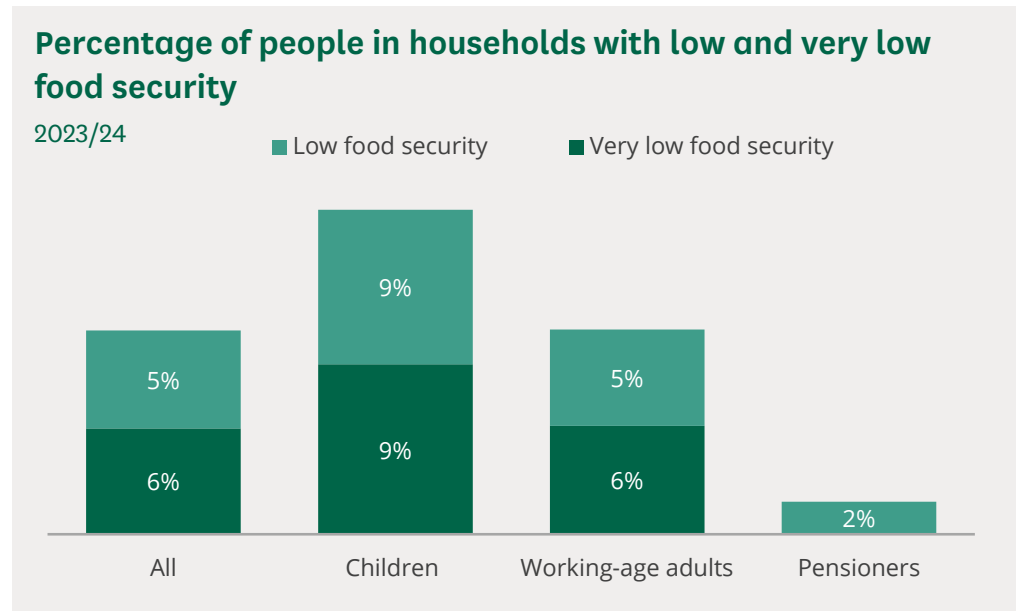
<sup>14</sup> Defra, [United Kingdom Food Security Report](#), 11 December 2024

<sup>15</sup> The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) announced it would add household food insecurity questions to the Family Resources Survey in 2019, and [data was first published in March 2021](#).

## 'Low' and 'very low' food security

'Low food security' means the household reduces the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets.

'Very low food security' means household members sometimes disrupt eating patterns or reduce food intake because they lack money or other resources for food.



Source: DWP, [Households Below Average Income](#), Tables 9.1b, 9.3b, 9.5b, 9.7b

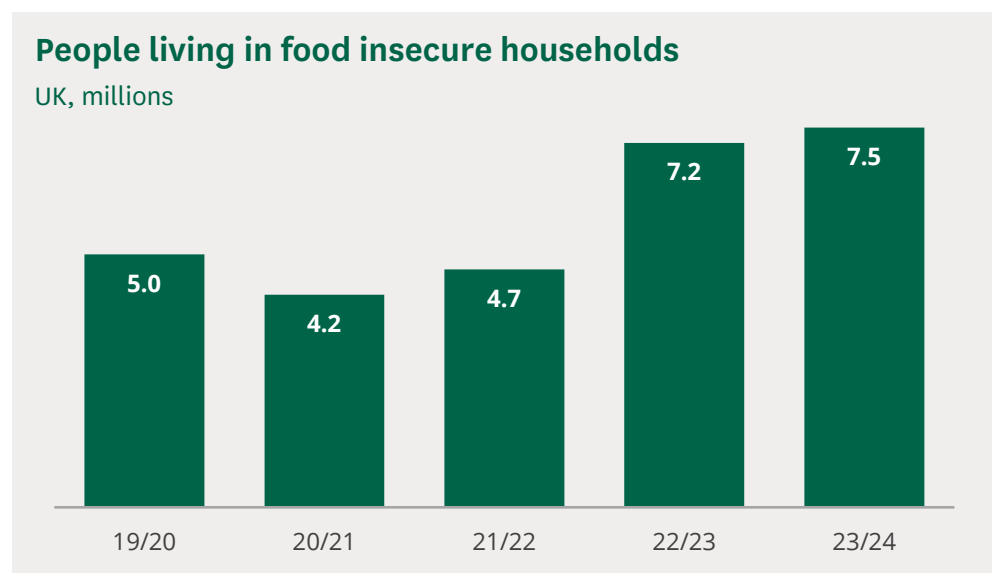
## 1.3

## Food insecurity over time

The DWP have been collecting data on food insecurity since 2019/20. The number of people in 'food insecure' households rose to 7.2 million in 2022/23, an increase of 2.5 million people since 2021/22. It rose again to 7.5 million in 2023/24.

The percentage of people in food insecure households rose from 7% in 2021/22 to 11% in 2022/23 and 2023/24. The percentage of children in food insecure households rose from 12% in 2021/22 to 17% in 2022/23 and 18% in 2023/24, and the percentage of working-age adults rose from 7% in 2021/22 to 11% in 2022/23 and 2023/24.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> DWP, [Households Below Average Income](#), Table 9.1ts



Source: DWP, [Households Below Average Income](#), Table 9.1ts

As discussed in section 2, the main reason for the increase in food insecurity was a sharp increase in food prices in 2022/23.

## 1.4

### Poverty and food insecurity

Since household food insecurity in the UK is largely due to low incomes, it is unsurprising that food insecurity is more prevalent in households in poverty.

In 2023/24, 3.5 million people in relative poverty after housing costs lived in food insecure households (households with either low or very low food security), including 1.4 million children.<sup>17</sup>

The chart below shows that 33% of children, 26% of working-age adults, and 7% of pensioners who were in relative poverty (measured after housing costs are considered) were living in food insecure households. Someone is in relative poverty if they live in a household with income less than 60% of contemporary median income. 14.2 million people were in relative poverty after housing costs in 2023/24. The median is the point where half of household incomes are higher, and half are lower.

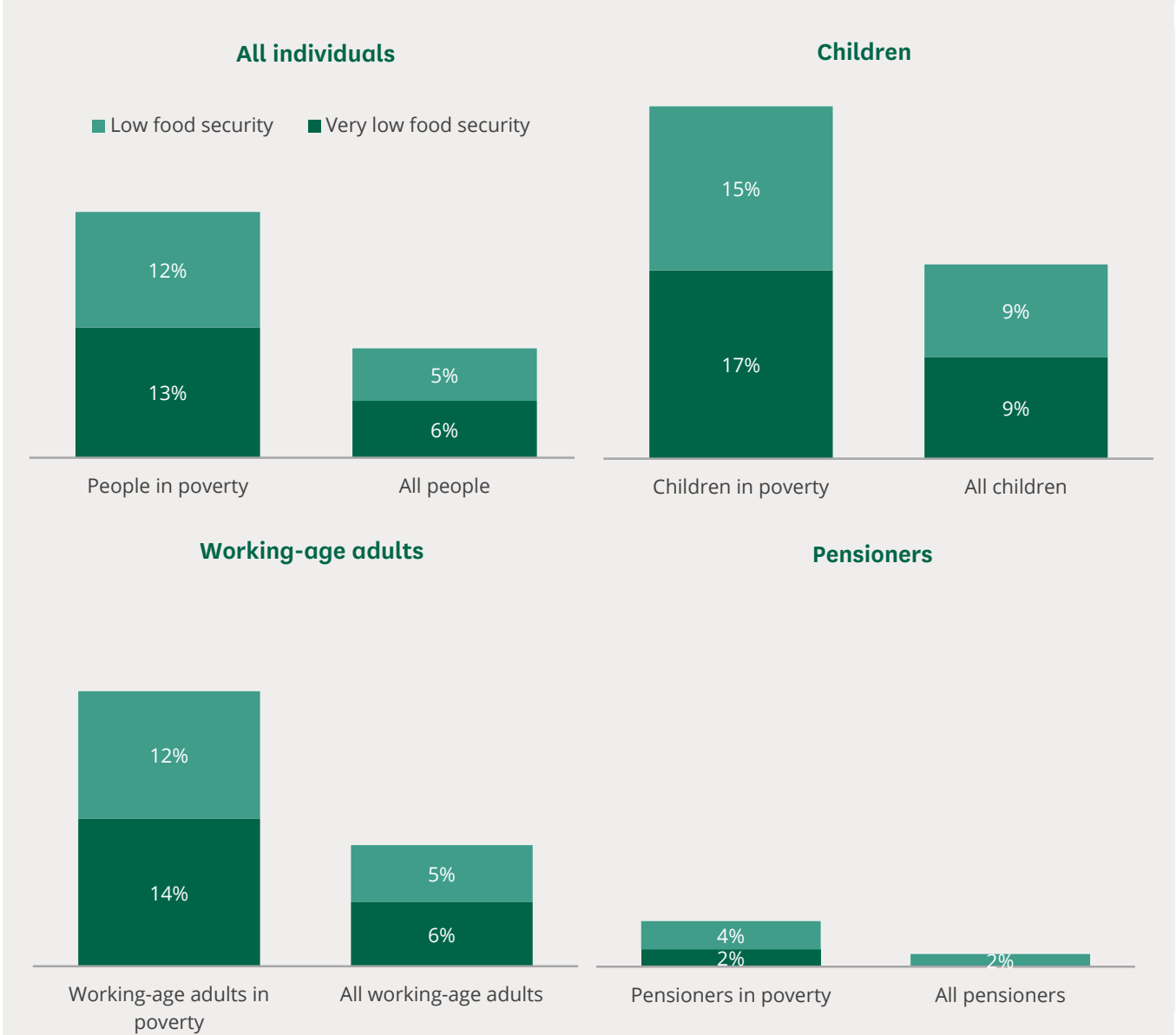
14% of working-age adults, 17% of children, and 2% of pensioners who were in relative poverty after housing costs lived in households with very low food security.

The Library briefing [Poverty in the UK: statistics](#) provides more information and statistics about poverty.

<sup>17</sup> DWP, [Households Below Average Income](#), 2025

## Percentage of people in households with low and very low food security

People in relative poverty versus all people, 2023/24



Source: DWP, [Households Below Average Income](#), Tables 9.1b, 9.3b, 9.5b, 9.7b

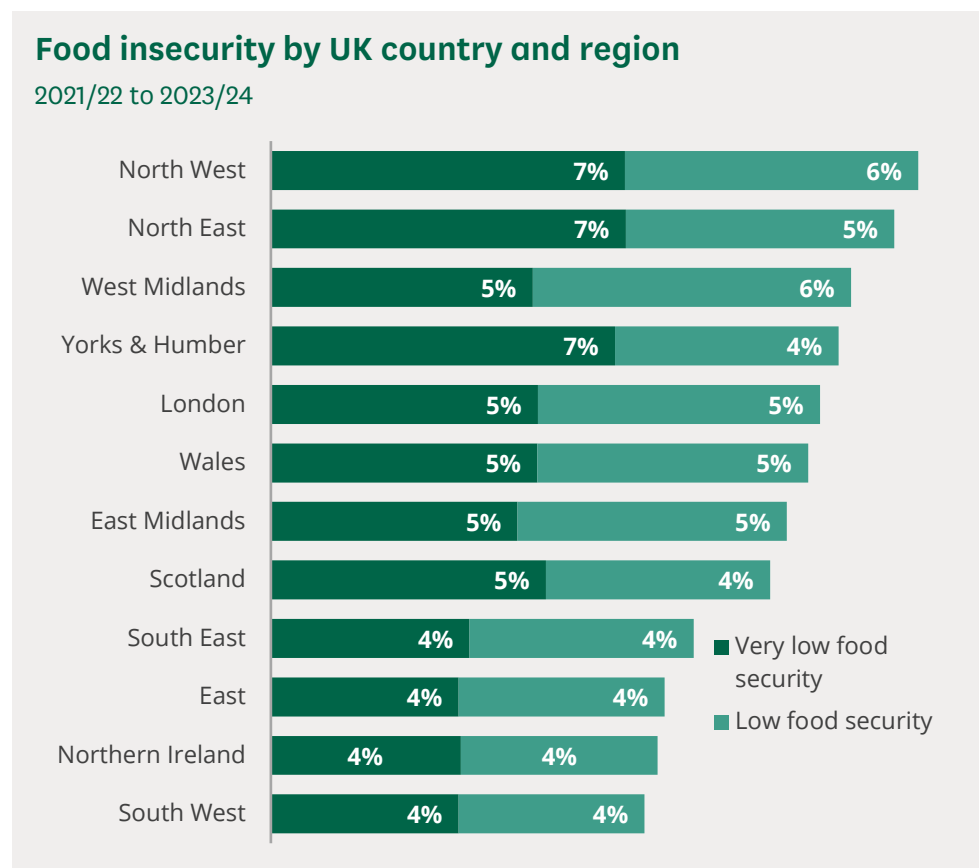
## 1.5

### Some groups are more likely to experience food insecurity

Since food insecurity in the UK is mostly due to households not being able to afford food, groups which are more likely to have low incomes are also more likely to be food insecure. The Library briefing [Income inequality in the UK](#) provides data on which groups have the lowest median incomes.

## Food insecurity by region

12% of people in the North West and the North East of England were in food insecure households in the three-year period 2021/22 to 2023/24. The South West had the lowest rate of people in food insecure households at 7%. Note that totals may not add up because of rounding.



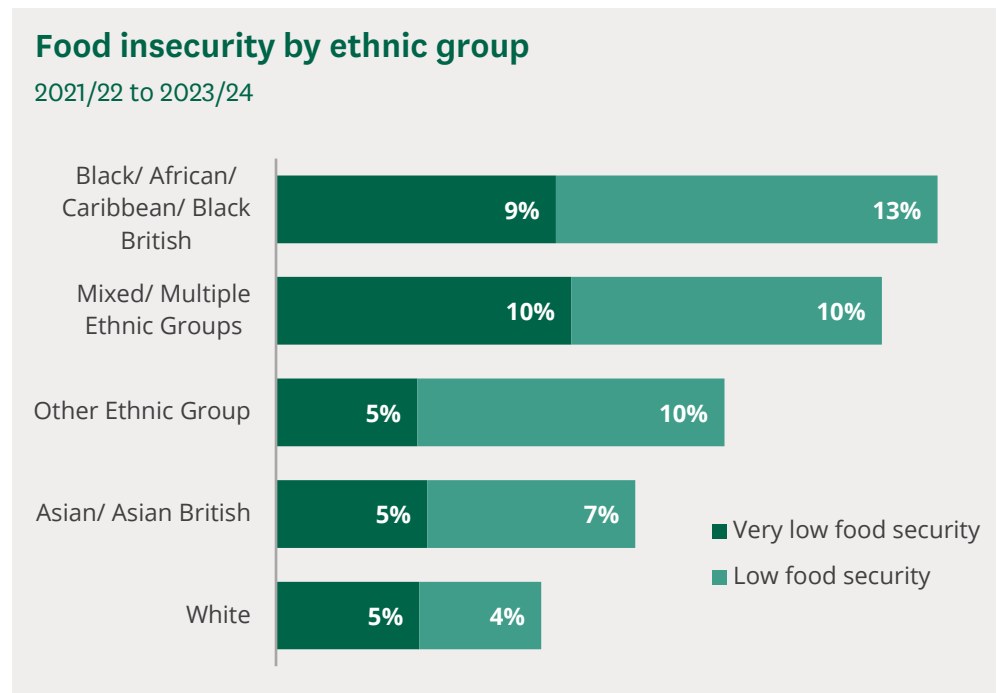
Source: DWP, Households Below Average Income, via [Stat-Xplore](#)

## Food insecurity by ethnic group

People in a household from a Black/African/Caribbean/Black British ethnic group were most likely to experience food insecurity (22%), followed by people in a household where the household reference person was from a Mixed or multiple ethnic groups (20%).<sup>18</sup>

The data in the chart below is for broad ethnic groups and is a three-year average of 2021/22 to 2023/24. Small sample sizes mean that data for more detailed ethnic groups would not be reliable.

<sup>18</sup> In the DWP's data, the ethnic group of the household is determined by the 'household reference person'. This is usually the person in whose name the accommodation is owned or rented, or the person in the household with the highest income.

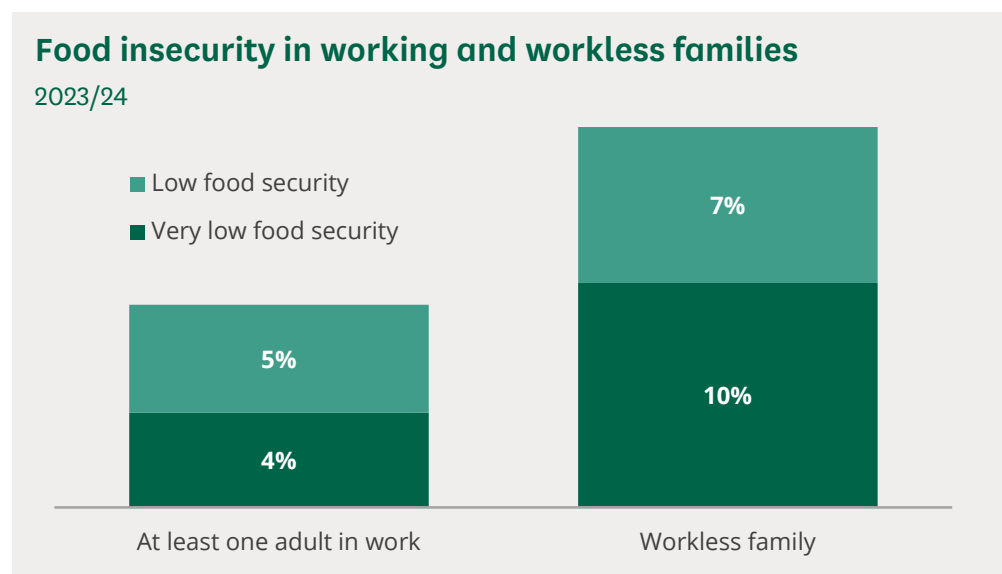


Source: DWP, Households Below Average Income, via [Stat-Explore](#)

## Food insecurity in working and workless families

Families in which nobody is in work are much more likely to have a low household income and more likely to experience food insecurity.

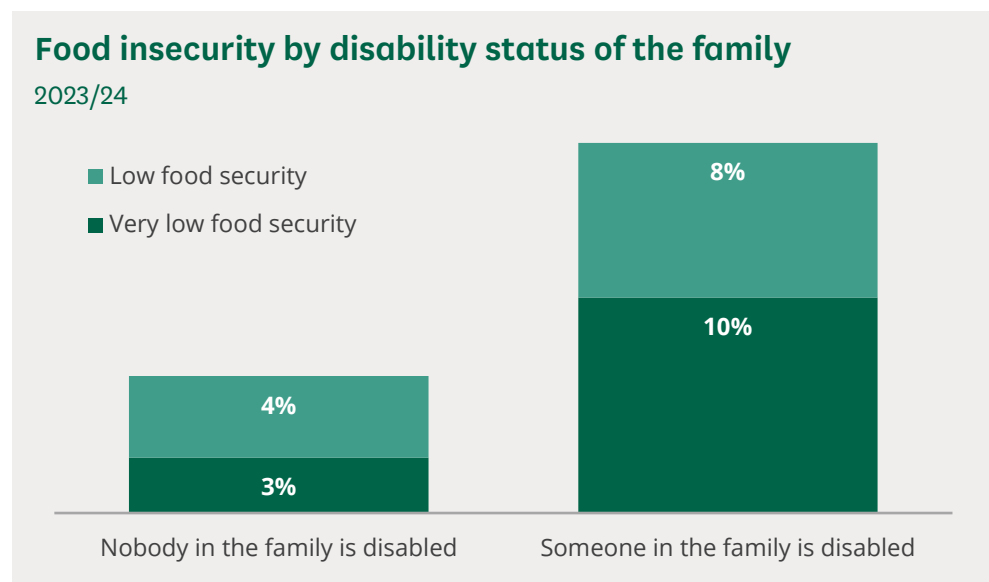
17% of people in families where nobody worked were in food insecure households in 2023/24, compared with 9% of people in families where at least one adult worked.



Source: DWP, Households Below Average Income, via [Stat-Explore](#)

## Food insecurity by disability status of the family

17% of people in families where someone is disabled were in a food insecure household in 2023/24, compared with 7% of people in families where nobody was disabled. Note that totals may not add up because of rounding.



Source: DWP, Households Below Average Income, via [Stat-Xplore](#)

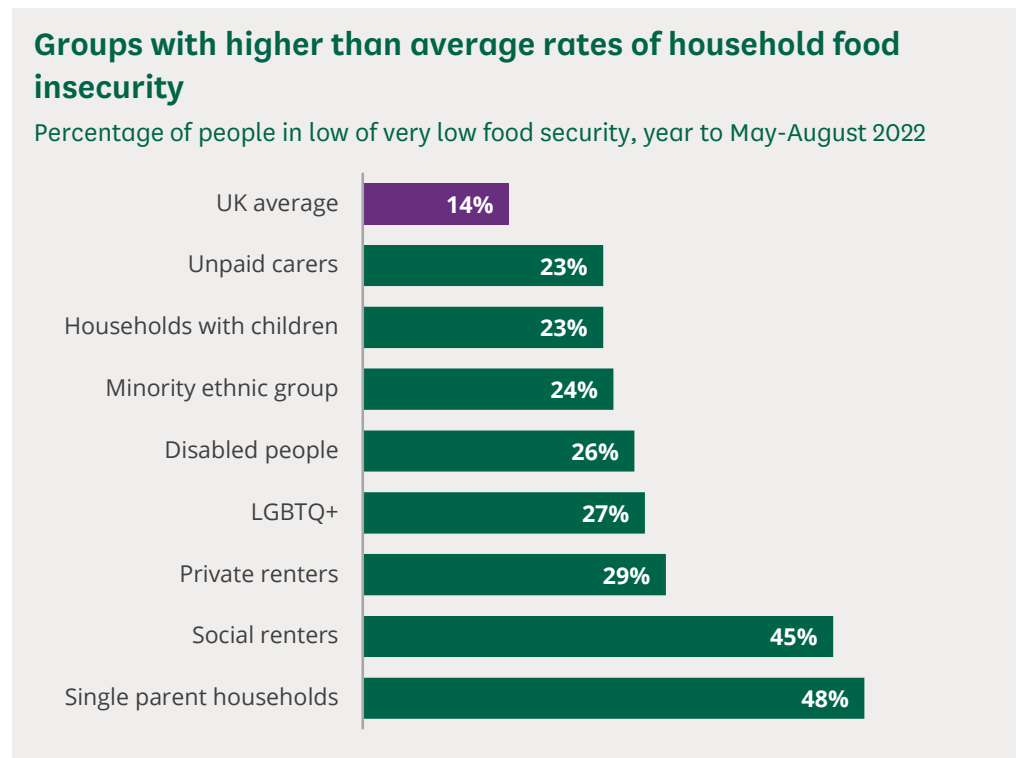
## Trussell survey findings

Trussell (previously the Trussell Trust) commissioned a survey in May to August 2022 about food insecurity, using the same definition as the DWP in the data above, but asking about people's experience of food insecurity in the previous 12 months instead of the previous three months. Trussell found that 14% of people in the UK experienced food insecurity in the year to May to August 2022.<sup>19</sup>

Some groups had higher rates of food insecurity than others, including households with children (especially single parent households), renters, LGBTQ+ people, disabled people, people from a minority ethnic group and unpaid carers.

The Trussell report [Hunger in the UK](#) provides more detail.

<sup>19</sup> Trussell, [Hunger in the UK](#), June 2023



Source: Trussell, [Hunger in the UK](#), June 2023

## 1.6

## Government food strategy for England

## National Food Strategy

In 2019, the then Defra Secretary of State, Michael Gove, commissioned “[an independent review to help the government create its first National Food Strategy for 75 years](#)”. The review was led by Henry Dimbleby, co-founder of Leon restaurants and lead non-executive director at Defra.<sup>20</sup> The National Food Strategy (NFS) was intended to cover “the entire food chain, from field to fork”, primarily in England. It intended to ensure the food system “delivers safe, healthy, affordable food; regardless of where people live or how much they earn”.<sup>21</sup>

[Part one of the review](#) was published in July 2020. It contained “urgent recommendations to support this country through the turbulence caused by the Covid-19 pandemic”, as well as to prepare for the end of the Brexit transition period in December 2020. It included a chapter on ‘jobs and hunger’, examining “the ways in which poverty can lead not only to people going hungry, but also to them relying on diets that are more likely to damage their health”, and made recommendations to government. Part two was published in 2022, and contained more recommendations, including a plan to “reduce diet-related inequality”.<sup>22</sup>

## Government food strategy for England 2022

As a response to the NFS, the then government published the [Government food strategy](#) for England in June 2022. This contained a chapter on healthier and sustainable eating, which highlighted trends in diet and obesity. It highlighted the NFS focus on “the Junk Food Cycle”, whereby “we have a predilection for calorie dense foods, which means food companies invest more time and money creating these foods, which makes us eat more of them and expands the market, which leads to more investment, which makes us eat more”.<sup>23</sup>

The government food strategy acknowledged that “overall, choosing the healthier option is often much more challenging, with the range of healthier choices often declining the poorer you are with additional barriers such as convenience and access hindering those on lower incomes from consuming a healthier diet”. It added that the link between deprivation and dietary outcomes was “also about having the equipment, cooking skills, and time to prepare and cook healthier food than more convenient alternatives, which

<sup>20</sup> Defra, [National Food Strategy - Call for Evidence](#) [accessed 1 September 2024]

<sup>21</sup> Defra, [Developing a national food strategy: independent review 2019 – terms of reference](#), updated 29 July 2020

<sup>22</sup> [National Food Strategy: The Report](#), July 2021, pp144-261

<sup>23</sup> [National Food Strategy: The Plan](#), July 2021, p 49

can be high in fat, salt and sugar, and may not be as readily available to those on low incomes”.<sup>24</sup>

The then government outlined actions it would take in this area, including: funding research into the link between ultra-processed food and obesity; trials of interventions in the food system; learning from the approaches taken by Local Food Partnerships;<sup>25</sup> and promoting a “whole school” approach to school food.<sup>26</sup>

On 7 March 2024, in response to a Parliamentary Question (PQ) asking [when it would publish a progress report against the food strategy goals](#), the then government did not say whether there would be a progress report, but instead referenced the Farm to Fork summit, a meeting between government and stakeholders:

The Government Food Strategy set out our vision for a prosperous agri-food sector. Last year's Farm to Fork Summit was the next step in growing a thriving British food and drink sector, which will put more British produce on supermarket shelves in the UK and around the world. This will also help us to deliver our clear ambition in the strategy to maintain production at current levels, where we produce domestically 60 per cent by value of all the food we need.

At the NFU Conference on 20 February 2024, the Prime Minister announced that we will make the UK Farm to Fork Summit an annual event.<sup>27</sup>

## Responses to the 2022 government food strategy

There were mixed reactions to the government food strategy when it was published in June 2022. The Local Government Association (LGA) said it had [missed an opportunity to address problems affecting access to food](#):

Everyone should have access to healthy and affordable food. The strategy response represents a missed opportunity to tackle the underlying causes of a variety of issues, many of which will continue to be exacerbated by the growing cost of living crisis. Unless the government takes urgent action, health inequalities will widen and its ambition to halve childhood obesity by 2030 will be missed.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, the Food Foundation said the strategy had “[missed the mark](#)”:

Hopes were high that the Government’s Food Strategy would set out a long-term plan for incentivising the food system to shift towards the provision of nourishing, sustainable and affordable food, and away from food which makes us sick. With the prices of food and fuel surging, this ambition is more urgent than ever, as more and more households who are struggling to pay the bills

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<sup>24</sup> Defra, [Government food strategy](#), 13 June 2022, 2.1.6

<sup>25</sup> Local food partnerships “help coordinate action on dysfunctions and opportunities for change in local food systems.” Sustain, [Report: The value of local food partnerships. Covid and beyond](#), 18 March 2022

<sup>26</sup> Defra, [Government food strategy](#), 13 June 2022, section 2.2.4

<sup>27</sup> Written Parliamentary Question, [National Food Strategy Review](#), UIN 16145, answered 7 March 2024

<sup>28</sup> Local Government Association, [LGA response to the Government’s food strategy](#), 13 June 2022

are put at even greater risk of diet-related disease. Disappointingly, today's publication mostly misses this mark.<sup>29</sup>

The Food and Drink Federation (FDF), which represents the food and drink manufacturing industry, [broadly welcomed the strategy](#) but said there was “more the government can do”. This included helping the food and drink sector invest in technology to increase productivity.<sup>30</sup>

The National Education Union (NEU) highlighted that the government's food strategy [excluded recommendations by Henry Dimbleby for free school meals](#) to be extended to all households receiving Universal Credit. The NEU described this as “an extraordinary decision, given rising costs and the government's promises to 'level up'”. The NEU added that:

Families receiving Universal Credit absolutely must be able to receive free school meals and we think the extension in eligibility simply can't wait. This policy will result in a great many young people going hungry, and this is a totally unacceptable position for a Government to take. Heads are also concerned that school funding isn't keeping up with the actual cost of free school meals, and this really matters if we want meals to be healthy and nutritious.<sup>31</sup>

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee published a report on [Food Security](#) in July 2023. It included a table showing which recommendations of the NFS had not been addressed by the government food strategy (page 13). The committee concluded that while the NFS offered “a detailed and considered analysis of the challenges facing our food system” and proposed “achievable actions”, the government food strategy had fallen short by contrast.<sup>32</sup>

## Health disparities white paper

In its June 2022 food strategy, the then government stated that “The Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC)'s forthcoming health disparities white paper will also set out further measures to reduce obesity by setting out our approach to working with the food industry to create a healthier food environment for all and investing in innovative approaches to address weight and diet related ill health”.<sup>33</sup>

In January 2023, in response to a Parliamentary Question on when the government intended to publish the health disparities white paper, Neil O'Brien, then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department of Health and Social Care said that the [Government would instead publish a Major Conditions Strategy](#):

On 24 January 2023 the Government announced that it will publish a Major Conditions Strategy and an interim report will be published in the summer. The

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<sup>29</sup> Food Foundation, [Our reaction to the Government's Food Strategy](#), 13 June 2022

<sup>30</sup> Food and Drink federation, [The FDF responds to the UK Government's food strategy](#), 13 June 2022

<sup>31</sup> NEU, [Government food strategy rejects extension of free school meals](#), 13 June 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [Food Security](#), 28 July 2023

<sup>33</sup> Defra, [Government food strategy](#), 13 June 2022, section 2.1.10

strategy will set out a strong and coherent policy agenda that sets out a shift to integrated, whole-person care. Interventions set out in the strategy will aim to alleviate pressure on the health system, as well as support the government's objective to increase healthy life expectancy and reduce ill-health related labour market inactivity.

The strategy will tackle conditions that contribute most to morbidity and mortality across the population in England including, cancers, cardiovascular disease, including stroke and diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases, dementia, mental ill health and musculoskeletal conditions. Health disparities exist across a wide variety of conditions from cancer to mental health, and contribute to this variation in life expectancy.

The Major Conditions Strategy will apply a geographical lens to each condition to address regional disparities in health outcomes, supporting the levelling up mission to narrow the gap by 2030. As material for the Major Conditions Strategy will therefore cover many of the same areas as the Health Disparities White Paper, we will no longer be publishing it.<sup>34</sup>

## Current government policy

In March 2025, the current government set up a new [Food Strategy Advisory Board \(FSAB\)](#), to support its development of a new food strategy. One of the new food strategy's aims will be to "provide more easily accessible and affordable healthy food to tackle diet-related ill health". The FSAB has been initially established for two years, with its duration to be kept under review.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> PQ 128715, [on [Health: Disadvantaged](#)], 20 January 2023

<sup>35</sup> Defra, [Food Strategy Advisory Board](#), accessed July 2025

## 2

# Food banks

Unlike free school meals, discussed in section 3, food banks are run by charities and have only existed in the UK in their current form for around twenty years.<sup>36</sup> Organisations who run and coordinate food banks like [Trussell](#) (previously the Trussell Trust) and the [Independent Food Aid Network](#) (IFAN), say they intend food banks to be a temporary way to supply emergency food aid, not a long term solution to household food insecurity.<sup>37</sup>

The Library briefing [Food banks in the UK](#) provides statistics on the use of food banks, as well as the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, data for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and information on other food aid provision like meal providers, social supermarkets and breakfast clubs for school children.

## 2.1

# Official statistics on food bank use

The DWP published statistics on food bank use as part of HBAI for the first time in March 2023. In 2023/24, 2.8 million people in the UK lived in household which had used a food bank in the previous 12 months, a rate of 4%. This includes 8% of children, 4% of working-age adults, and 1% of pensioners.

Among those in relative poverty after housing costs, 11% lived in a household that had used a food bank in the previous 12 months, including 15% of children, 11% of working-age adults, and 2% of pensioners.<sup>38</sup>

People in relative poverty live in a household with income less than 60% of the contemporary median income.

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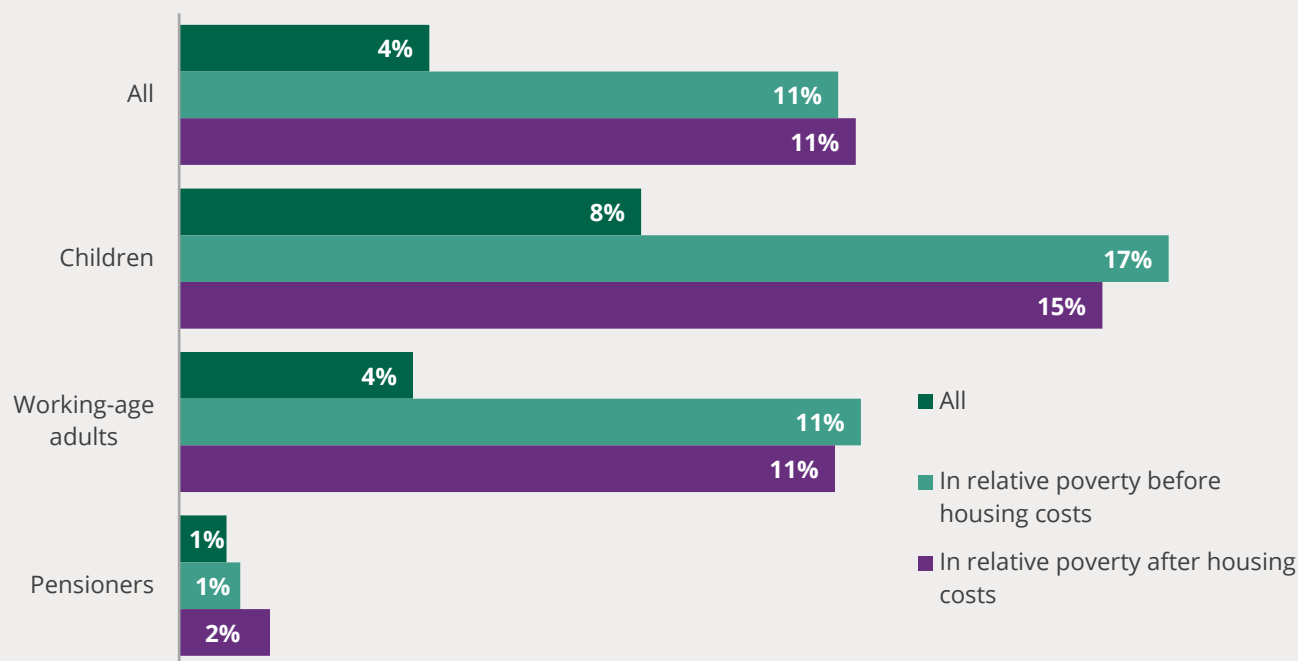
<sup>36</sup> Trussell, [Our Story](#) (Accessed 14 June 2023)

<sup>37</sup> Trussell, [Our Strategic Plan](#) (Accessed 14 June 2023, IFAN, [Home](#) (Accessed 14 June 2023)

<sup>38</sup> DWP, [Households Below Average Income, 2022/23](#), Tables 9.1b, 9.3b, 9.5b, and 9.7b

## People who have used a food bank within the last 12 months, 2023/24

Percentage of people by population group and relative poverty status



Source: DWP, [Households Below Average Income](#), Tables 9.1b, 9.3b, 9.5b, 9.7b

## 2.2

## Trussell data on food bank use

Trussell publishes data on the number of ‘three-day emergency food parcels’ it provides in its food bank network [twice a year on its website](#).

In 2024/25, Trussell supplied 2.89 million emergency food parcels, down from a record high of 3.13 million in 2023/24. As shown in the chart below, the number of emergency food parcels distributed by Trussell food banks has been mostly increasing since 2006/07 and increased sharply during the Covid-19 pandemic and during the period of high inflation in 2022 to 2024.<sup>39</sup>

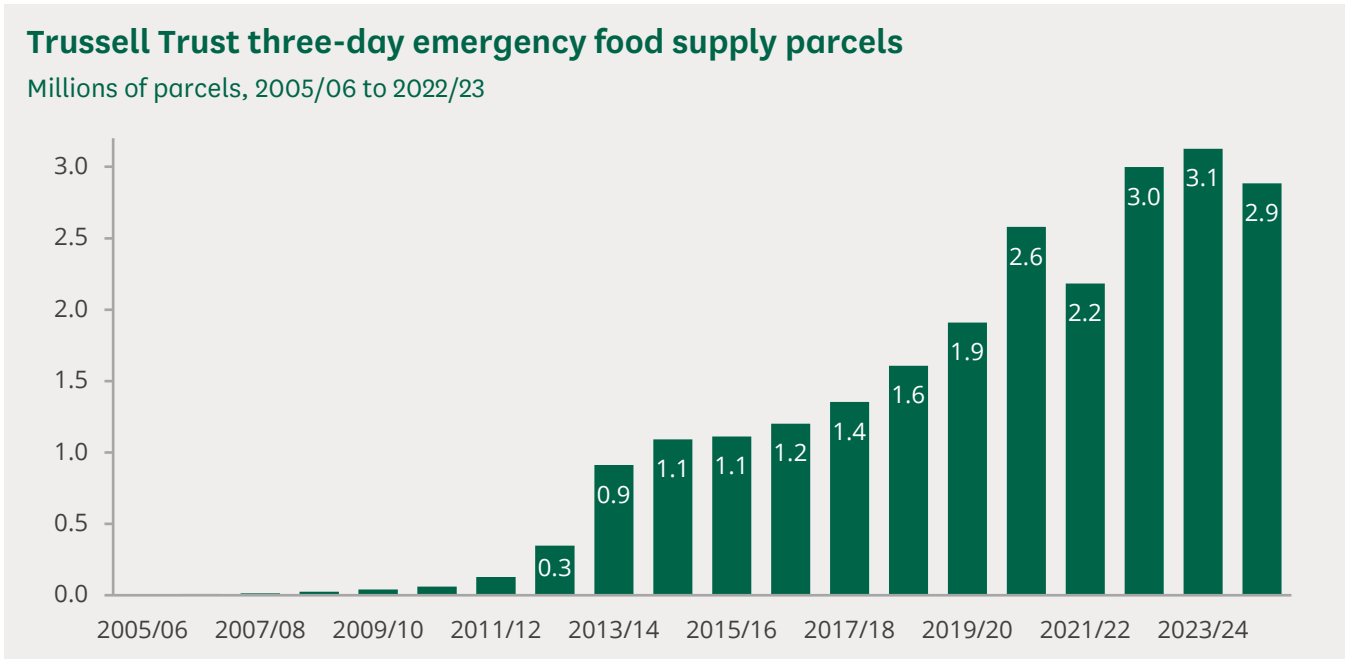
In 2024/25, 1.02 million emergency food parcels went to children.<sup>40</sup>

This data measures the number of food parcels distributed, not the number of individuals receiving them. It does not include all food parcels distributed in the UK because of the large number of independent food banks who also distribute food parcels but are not part of the Trussell network.

<sup>39</sup> Trussell, [End of year stats](#)

<sup>40</sup> Trussell, [End of year stats](#)

The distribution of Trussell food parcels varies around the UK. The chart below shows the figures across the UK regions and countries for the financial year 2024/25.



Source: [Trussell, End of year Stats, 2025](#)



Source: [Trussell, End of year Stats, 2025](#)

## Reasons for food bank referrals

Trussell records the reasons people are referred to a Trussell food bank. In 2024/25, the top reasons for being referred were:

- income or debt (72%)
- health (22%)
- issues with benefits (17%)
- insecure housing (7%)
- change in work hours or unemployment (6%)
- immigration status (5%)
- change in personal circumstances (4%)
- domestic abuse (2%).<sup>41</sup>

## 2.3 How many food banks are there in the UK?

There is no database of all UK food banks, but data from Trussell and the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) can help us estimate how many are in the UK.

Trussell has the UK's largest network of food banks. It includes 1,711 food bank centres in all four nations of the UK as of 2024/25. IFAN is the UK network for independent (non-Trussell) food aid providers. There are at least 1,172 independent food banks in the UK today.<sup>42</sup>

Added to Trussell's 1,646 this makes over 2,883 food banks in total.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Trussell, [End of year stats 2024-25, UK factsheet](#). Trussell provided a multiple choice questionnaire to referral partners, who could select up to four responses. Data has been recoded to combine categories.

<sup>42</sup> [IFAN on Trussell and independent food bank numbers](#). This is an underestimate of the number of food banks in the UK. For example, the figure does not include food banks operating from schools, mentioned in the [National Governance Association Report](#) of 2 September 2019.

<sup>43</sup> [IFAN on Trussell and independent food bank numbers](#)

## 3

## Food poverty and the rising cost of living

Rising prices are affecting household budgets, and more households are experiencing food insecurity.

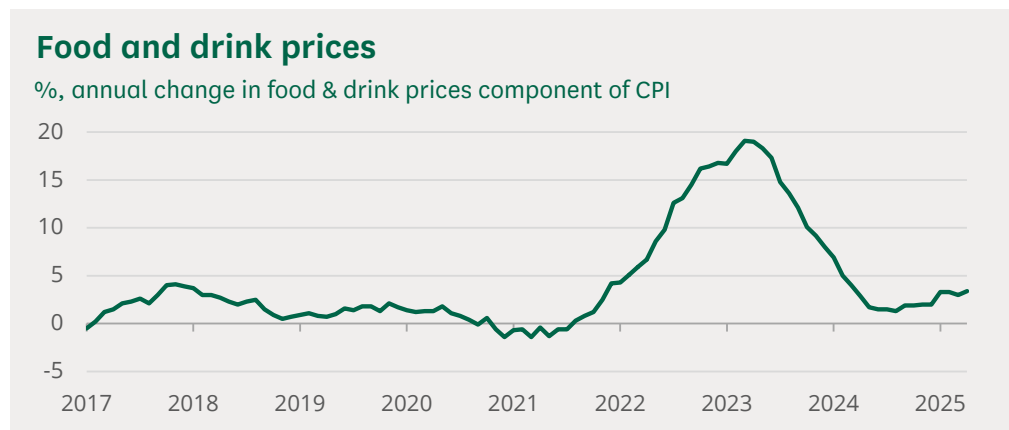
The Library briefing [Rising cost of living in the UK](#) provides more detail on rising prices and their impact on households, particularly low-income households.

## 3.1

### Food prices peaked in March 2023

Food prices in the UK rose steeply from the second half of 2021. UK food and non-alcoholic drink prices were 19.1% higher in March 2023 compared to the previous year, based on the CPI measure of inflation.<sup>44</sup> This was the highest rate of increase in food prices since 1977 according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS).<sup>45</sup>

The rate at which food and drink prices rose has been slowing, and food inflation reached 1.3% in August 2024 before slowly increasing again.



Source: ONS, Food and non-alcoholic drink component of CPI, series [D7G8](#)

<sup>44</sup> ONS, [Consumer price inflation, UK: July 2024](#), 14 August 2024, Table 5 and ONS, Food and non-alcoholic drink component of CPI, annual rate of change, series [D7G8](#)

<sup>45</sup> ONS estimates (ONS, [Consumer price inflation, UK: May 2023](#), 21 June 2023) based on ONS extended historical inflation series ([Consumer price inflation, historical estimates and recent trends, UK: 1950 to 2022](#), May 2022)

## 3.2

# The cost of living crisis has increased household food insecurity

This period of very high food inflation has taken its toll on households, with some eating less and using food banks.

## People are cutting back on food shopping in response to rising prices

In April 2025, 72% of adults in Great Britain reported an increase in their cost of living compared with the month before, according to the ONS. Of these, 92% saw the price of their food shopping go up, and 40% had started spending less on essentials, including food.<sup>46</sup>

## Some people are eating less

A YouGov survey by the Food Foundation, a food poverty charity, found that in January 2025, 13.9% of households in the UK were 'food insecure' (ate less or went a day without eating because they couldn't access or afford food). This compares with 14.8% in January 2024, 17.7% in January 2023 and 8.8% in January 2022.<sup>47</sup> 12.6% of people reported eating less or skipping meals, 8.6% had not eaten when they were hungry, and 4.6% said they had gone a whole day without eating in the month to January 2025.<sup>48</sup>

As shown in the chart below, household food insecurity has been rising since August 2020, and the percentage of households reporting eating less or skipping meals peaked in September 2022.

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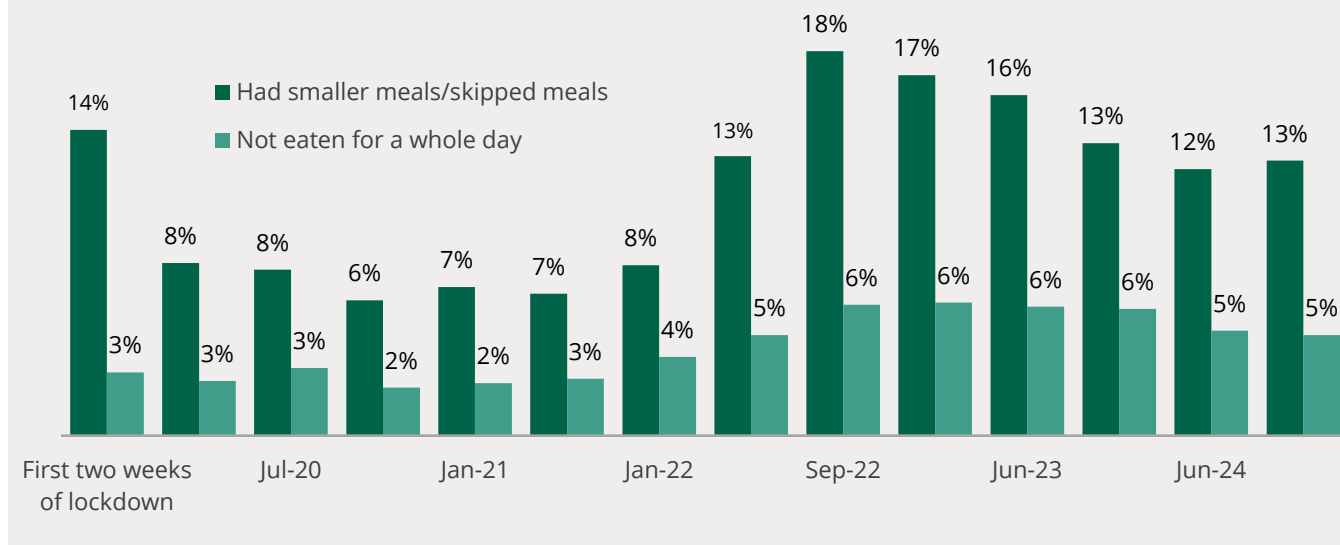
<sup>46</sup> The data is for 2 to 27 April 2025, compared to the previous month; ONS, [Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain](#), 16 May 2025

<sup>47</sup> Note that the Food Foundation's definition of food insecurity is slightly different to the DWP's definition.

<sup>48</sup> Food Foundation, [Food insecurity Tracking](#), Round 16, (accessed 9 May 2025)

## Households experiencing food insecurity

Percentage of households experiencing food insecurity in the month before



Source: Food Foundation, [Food insecurity Tracking](#), Round 16

## Food bank use increased

As outlined in section 2.2, emergency food parcels distributed by Trussell increased sharply during the period of high inflation, reaching a record of 3.13 million food parcels in 2023/24, before falling to 2.89 million in 2024/25.

567,235 people used a Trussell food bank for the first time in 2024/25, in addition to more than 655,000 first time users in 2023/24 and 760,000 in 2022/23.<sup>49</sup>

Citizens Advice helped 17,957 people with food bank referrals in April 2025, down from a peak of 22,438 in January 2024 and up from 13,205 in April 2022.<sup>50</sup>

The Independent Food Aid Network surveyed its food banks in April and more than half of respondents said they saw increased need between September 2024 and February 2025. Every food bank reported supporting people who were visiting a food bank for the first time and 68% had seen an increase in the need for regular support.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Trussell, UK Factsheet, [Emergency food parcel distribution in the UK: 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024](#)

<sup>50</sup> Citizens Advice, [Cost of living dashboard](#), Slide 3 (accessed 27 May 2025)

<sup>51</sup> Independent Food Aid Network, [IFAN Data, April 2025](#) (accessed 27 May 2025)

## 4 Free school meals in England

In England, free school meals (FSM) are a statutory entitlement available to pupils that meet the eligibility criteria **and** whose parents or carers make an application. Local authorities are responsible for providing free school meals.

The [Education Act 1944](#) made it a duty of all Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to provide school meals for those who wanted them. For a brief period under the post-war Labour Government, the full net cost of all school meals was met by the Government. However, this proved costly and LEAs were allowed to charge for meals while still providing some meals free to disadvantaged pupils. The eligibility criteria for free school meals have varied since they were introduced.

Since 2014, all infant school pupils (reception, year 1, and year 2) in state-funded schools in England are eligible for free school meals.<sup>52</sup>

Additional background information is available in the House of Commons Library briefing paper [School meals and nutritional standards](#).

### 4.1 Current eligibility criteria

Children's' eligibility for free school meals depends on their parents or carers meeting certain criteria (outlined below) **and** making an application for free school meals.

If a pupil receives FSM in a given school year, they remain eligible until they finish their current phase of education (primary or secondary). This excludes [infant pupils that receive meals under the universal policy](#) (reception, year 1, and year 2). This system is known as 'transitional protection'.

During the coronavirus pandemic, [eligibility for free school meals was extended](#) to some groups of children who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF). In March 2022, the Government announced that this extension would be permanent.<sup>53</sup>

Parents or carers currently meet the eligibility criteria if they receive any of the following:

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<sup>52</sup> House of Commons Library, [School meals and nutritional standards](#), May 2024

<sup>53</sup> Department for Education, [Providing free school meals to families with no recourse to public funds](#), 9 June 2022; UK Parliament, [Update on Children with no recourse to public funds: Statement UIN HCWS714](#), 24 March 2022

- Income Support
- Income-based Jobseekers Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- the guaranteed element of State Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit (provided they are not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190)
- Working Tax Credit run-on (paid for 4 weeks after a person stops qualifying for Working Tax Credit)
- Universal Credit (from 1 April 2018 **only in cases with household income of less than £7,400 a year**,<sup>54</sup> with [transitional protections](#) for existing claimants)

### Expansion of eligibility criteria

In June 2025, the government announced it would be expanding the eligibility criteria for free school meals. From September 2026, all children in families receiving Universal Credit will be eligible for free school meals, removing the £7,400 income cap. The government has said this means over half a million more children will be eligible. Once the changes come into force, transitional protections will end.<sup>55</sup>

## 4.2

### Number of pupils known to be eligible

The Department for Education (DfE) publishes [information on pupils eligible for FSM](#). In January 2025, there were around 2.2 million pupils known to be eligible for FSM, representing 25.7% of state funded pupils.<sup>56</sup> This eligibility rate has increased particularly sharply in the last few years (since 2018) and is the highest rate recorded since the current time series began in 2006. In January 2018, 13.6% of state-funded pupils were eligible for FSM.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> After tax and not including any benefits

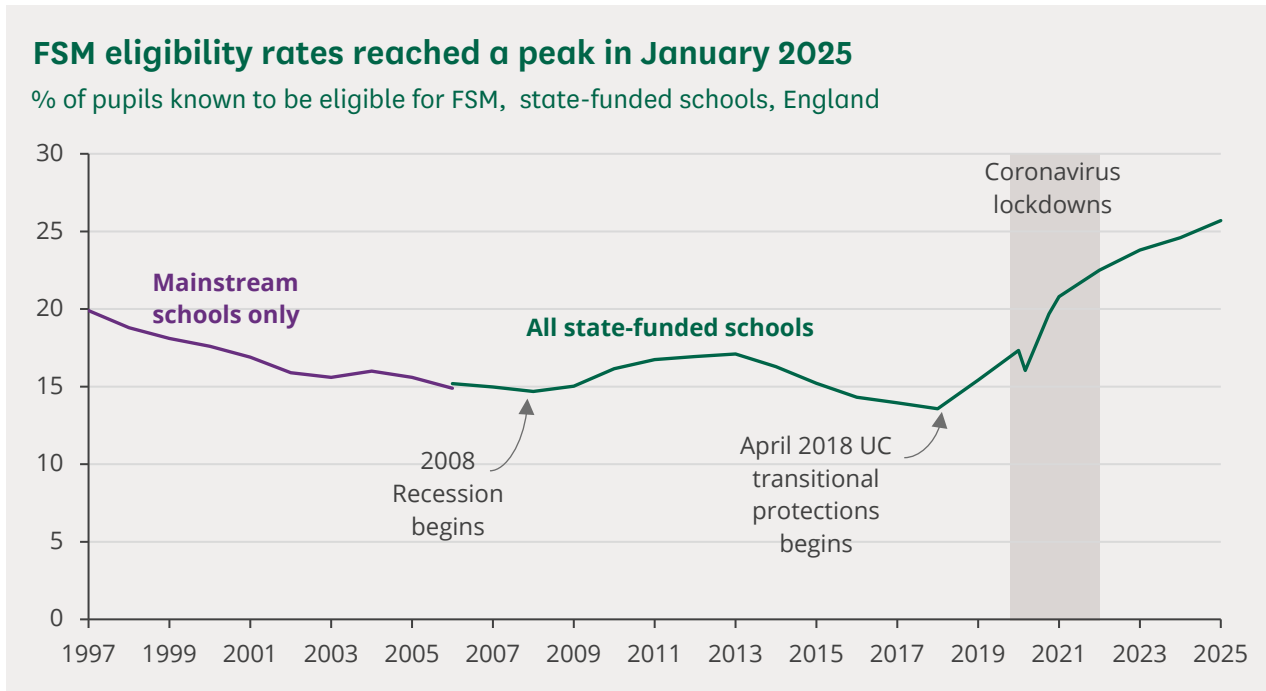
<sup>55</sup> DfE press release, [Over half a million more children to get free school meals](#), 4 June 2025

<sup>56</sup> DfE, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics 2024/25](#), 5 June 2025, main text

<sup>57</sup> As above

This increase could be driven by many factors including macro-economic conditions, the coronavirus pandemic, and the continued effect of [the transitional protections during the rollout of Universal Credit](#).<sup>58</sup>

The chart below shows that eligibility rates in all state-funded schools (including special schools and [alternative provision](#)) increased following the 2008 recession then followed a downward trend from 2013. Rates increased again following the introduction of the Universal Credit (UC) transitional protections from April 2018 and continued to increase throughout and following the coronavirus pandemic.



Notes: The two series are not directly comparable. Data is as of January each year (excluding 2020 which is as of January and October). Eligibility requirements for underlying benefits have changed over the period. “All state-funded schools” excludes alternative providers from 2006 to 2010. UC: Universal Credit

Sources: DfE, [schools pupils and their characteristics](#): various years; DfE, [Free school meals Autumn term 2020](#)

<sup>58</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies, [The policy menu for school lunches: options and trade-offs in expanding free school meals in England](#), 29 March 2023

24.7% of pupils at state-funded primary and 25.8% of pupils at state-funded secondary schools were eligible for FSM in January 2025. However, the highest rates by far were in non-mainstream settings. Just under half of pupils in state-funded special schools (49.2%) were eligible, as were 63.2% of pupils in state-funded alternative provision settings.<sup>59</sup>

<b>Pupils know to be eligible for FSM</b>		
January 2025, state-funded schools, England		
	% eligible	Number eligible (nearest 1,000)
Primary	24.7	1,126,000
Secondary	25.8	949,000
Special schools	49.2	81,000
Alternative Provision schools	63.2	11,000
<b>All schools</b>	<b>25.7</b>	<b>2,172,000</b>

Source: DfE, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics 2024/25](#), 5 June 2025, [custom table](#)

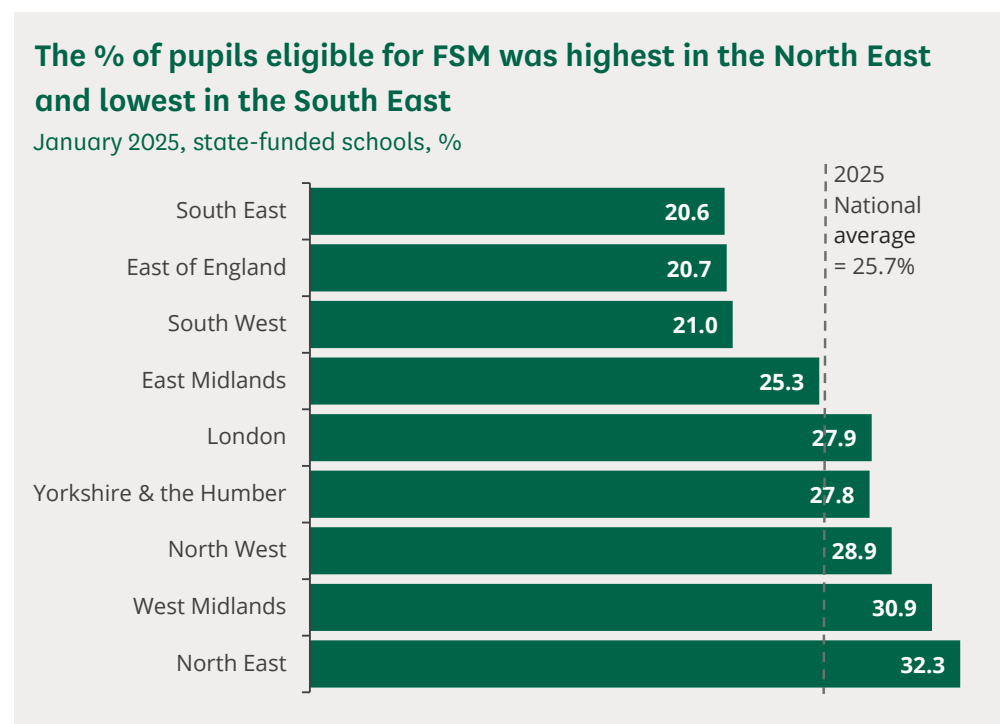
## Regional and local variations in pupils eligible for FSM

In January 2025, the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM in England was 25.7%.<sup>60</sup> However, this is an average and masks considerable regional and local authority variation.

As shown in the chart below, the North East of England recorded the highest eligibility rate in absolute terms (6.6 percentage points above the national average). The South East region had the lowest rate (5.1 percentage points below the national average).

<sup>59</sup> DfE, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics 2024/25](#), 5 June 2025, main text

<sup>60</sup> As above



Source: DfE, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics 2024/25](#), 5 June 2025, [custom table](#)

There is much more variation in eligibility rates between local authorities (in absolute terms) compared to regions. In January 2025, Manchester was the local authority with the highest eligibility rate (47.2%), and Isles of Scilly recorded the lowest rate (3.2%).

### Local Authorities in England with the highest and lowest rates of FSM eligibility

January 2025, pupils attending state-funded schools, %

Highest			Lowest		
1	Manchester	47.2	1	Isles of Scilly	3.2
2	Islington	45.8	2	Wokingham	10.2
3	Hackney	45.0	3	Rutland	12.9
4	Camden	44.8	3	Bracknell Forest	12.9
5	Birmingham	44.7	5	Central Bedfordshire	14.0
6	Middlesbrough	43.3	6	Richmond upon Thames	14.1
6	Tower Hamlets	43.3	7	Surrey	14.8
8	Westminster	42.1	8	Windsor and Maidenhead	14.9
9	Blackpool	42.0	9	Kingston upon Thames	15.2
9	Wolverhampton	42.0	10	Westmorland and Furness	15.3

Source: DfE, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics 2024/25](#), 5 June 2025, [custom table](#)

The proportion of pupils eligible for FSM increased in the vast majority of local authority areas, between January 2024 and January 2025.<sup>61</sup>

Some areas had larger increases than others. Birmingham, Newham and Tower Hamlets saw the largest increases (all above 3 percentage points compared to January 2024). Many of the largest increases were in areas which already had above average eligibility rates.

### Ethnicity of pupils eligible for free school meals

The ethnic group with the highest proportion of pupils receiving free school meals in January 2025 was Travellers of Irish Heritage (around 67.3% of whom were eligible compared to the national average of 25.7%), followed by Gypsy/Roma pupils (51.2%).

Indian and Chinese pupils had the lowest eligibility rates (both at 7.5%). White British pupils were broadly in line with the national average (24.6% of this group were eligible for FSM).<sup>62</sup>

## 4.3

### GCSE attainment

On average, pupils eligible for FSM have lower GCSE attainment than pupils that are not eligible.<sup>63</sup> There are many measures of GCSE attainment. One measure is the proportion achieving a “[standard pass](#)” in both English and maths GCSE (9-4 grades in both English and Maths GCSE which is roughly equivalent to achieving A\*-C under the previous letter grade system).

The difference in attainment between pupils not eligible for FSM and those that are, is known as the “attainment gap”.

In 2024, 43.6% of pupils eligible for FSM achieved a standard pass in both English and Maths GCSE compared to 72.3% of pupils not eligible. This was an attainment gap 28.7 percentage points.<sup>64</sup>

As shown in the chart below, the attainment gap in the standard pass rate has remained broadly the same in recent years. However, the size of the attainment gap varies for different groups of FSM-eligible pupils. For example, the attainment gap in the standard pass rate for FSM eligible pupils attending school in London is much smaller compared to other regions.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>61</sup> DfE, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics 2024/25](#), 5 June 2025, [custom table](#)

<sup>62</sup> DfE, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics 2024/25](#), 5 June 2025, [custom table](#)

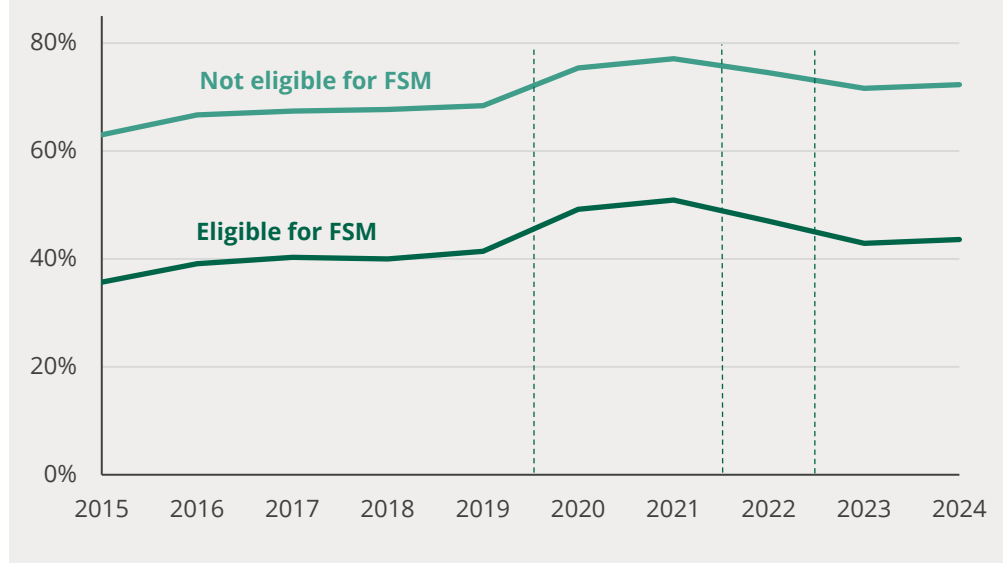
<sup>63</sup> DfE, [Key Stage 4 performance 2023/24](#), 27 February 2025, main text

<sup>64</sup> DfE, [Key Stage 4 performance 2023/24](#), 27 February 2025, [custom table](#)

<sup>65</sup> DfE, [Key Stage 4 performance 2023/24](#), 27 February 2025, [custom table](#)

## 'The "attainment gap" between FSM pupils and the national average has remained broadly stable

% of pupils achieving "standard pass", state-funded schools, England



Note: Due to the coronavirus pandemic and the changes in exams in 2020, 2021, and 2022 caution should be taken when making comparisons over this period. Breaks in the series are illustrated by dotted vertical lines in the chart above

Source: DfE, [Key Stage 4 performance 2023/24, custom table](#) 27 February 2025, and earlier years

Pupils eligible for FSM attending school in London had much higher attainment than the other regions (57.7% achieved a standard pass compared to 43.6% across all FSM pupils). In addition, the gap between FSM-eligible and non-FSM-eligible pupils in London was the smallest (20.0 percentage points compared to the national average of 28.7 percentage points).

The West Midlands showed lower performance than London but had the second highest attainment of pupils receiving FSM and the second smallest attainment gap (43.3% achieving a standard pass and an attainment gap of 26.3 percentage points).

The attainment of pupils eligible for FSM was lowest for pupils attending schools in the South East and the attainment gap was also the largest (38.9% achieving a standard pass and an attainment gap of 34.8 percentage points).<sup>66</sup>

There is also variation in the attainment of FSM eligible pupils based on their ethnic group. In 2024, pupils of Asian ethnicity receiving FSM had much higher

<sup>66</sup> DfE, [Key Stage 4 performance 2023/24](#), 27 February 2025, [custom table](#)

attainment than other major ethnic groups, with 62.2% achieving a standard pass.<sup>67</sup>

The attainment of FSM eligible pupils of White ethnicity was lower than any other major ethnic group (36.5% achieved a standard pass), and the gap between FSM eligible and non-FSM eligible pupils of White ethnicity was the largest by far (34.4 percentage points).<sup>68</sup>

As in previous years, female pupils eligible for FSM achieved higher attainment than eligible boys (46.1% achieved a standard pass compared with 40.7% of boys). The attainment gap between girls receiving FSM and those not, was also slightly smaller than for boys (28.4 percentage points compared to 28.7 percentage points).<sup>69</sup>

## 4.4

### Free school meals funding

Funding for free school meals has not been ring-fenced since 2011. Funding is available to schools through the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), and through the Universal Infant Free School Meal Grant for pupils in years reception to year two. The DfE publishes DSG allocations on an annual basis, but breakdowns of certain items (such as FSM) are not published. This means it is not possible to identify the amount of funding actually spent on free school meals.

However, it is possible to create a **rough estimate**.

The National Funding Formula (NFF) FSM factor value for financial year 2024-25 was £490 per pupil (£480 in 2023-24).<sup>70</sup>

NFF allocations are operating in an “indirect” format where the allocations are notional. Local authorities can adjust these notional allocations according to local formula, this means the NFF allocations may not be what schools receive. In addition, as outlined above this funding is not ring fenced and so schools may choose to spend different amounts on free school meals.

In January 2025 there were around 2.2 million pupils known to be eligible for benefit-based free school meals.<sup>71</sup> On this basis, and using the £490 figure above, the cost of providing free school meals in 2023-24 can be estimated at just over £1.06 billion.

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<sup>67</sup> From 2023, the DfE includes Chinese in the Asian broad ethnic group category. Breakdowns by detailed ethnic group and FSM status are not published

<sup>68</sup> DfE, [Key Stage 4 performance 2023/24](#), 27 February 2025, [custom table](#)

<sup>69</sup> DfE, [Key Stage 4 performance 2023/24](#), 27 February 2025, [custom table](#)

<sup>70</sup> DfE, [National funding formula for schools and high needs 2024 to 2025. Schools block technical note](#), October 2023, p14

<sup>71</sup> DfE, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics 2024/25](#), 5 June 2025, [custom table](#)

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