



POLICY BRIEFING

What will it take? Policy making for a food bank free future

OVERVIEW

More than 2.5 million people in the UK live in households that used a food bank in the past 12 months, according to data collected in 2024–25.¹

In July 2026, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported that 7.4 million low-income families had been unable to afford essential items in the past 6 months – the highest number since their cost of living tracker survey began in 2021.²

The manifesto upon which Labour were elected to power in 2024 included a commitment to end mass dependence on emergency food parcels. Delivering on this promise requires urgent action to address the fact that so many UK households have incomes that are insufficient to cover their essential living costs.

A cross-sectoral effort is required to bring about the change that is needed, with businesses, communities and individuals playing their parts. However, the UK government must lead the way through policy making that:

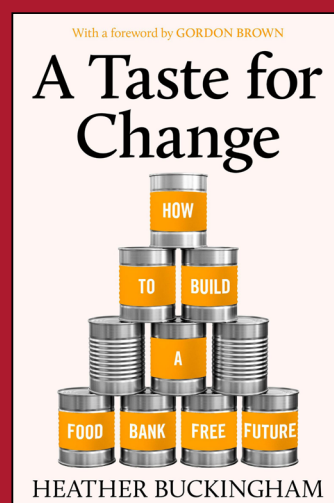
- Reduces the costs of housing and energy relative to incomes;
- Supports increased income from work for lower earners and people currently out of work;
- Strengthens our social security system so that it better protects people from being unable to afford the essentials.

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CONTEXT

High levels of food insecurity, deepening poverty and large numbers of households unable to afford the essentials are not just policy challenges: they represent significant human suffering that will have impacts for years to come. At the same time, the size of the social security bill attracts increasingly vocal concern, and economic inactivity for health-related reasons remains high.

The policy response must not be driven by fear or short-termism. The basic rate of Universal Credit is currently set without reference to living costs and falls below the cost of the essentials: cuts to social security would only deepen the harms people are currently experiencing. Rather, action is needed both to increase participation in paid work and to strengthen our social security system, if sustainable progress is to be made towards a food bank free future.



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FINDINGS

A Taste for Change sets out the key drivers behind food bank need:

- **High housing and energy costs:** In 2023–24, low-income private renters typically spent 48% of their income on housing.³ Typical household energy and gas bills rose almost 75% between 2020–21 and 2024–25 and are rising again.⁴
- **Insecure and insufficient income from work:** Limited flexible working can force lower earners to reduce their hours to balance work and family life, while insufficient or unpredictable hours make it harder to afford essentials.
- **Insufficient and difficult-to-navigate social security:** The basic rate of Universal Credit is not linked to living costs and falls below the value of a rudimentary basket of essentials, leaving people without enough to live on when they cannot find work or are unable to work.
- **Inequalities in mental and physical health:** Mental health conditions are four times as prevalent among people using Trussell food banks than in the general population.⁵ People in England's most deprived communities can expect to spend 18 fewer years living in good health than in the least deprived communities.⁶
- **Family separation:** Food insecurity is particularly high in single-adult households with children. Family separation can deepen poverty by reducing household income and increasing costs.
- **Rising food prices:** Although food remains cheaper in the UK than in other OECD countries, prices have risen steeply, putting particular pressure on low-income households, which spend a larger share of their income on food.
- **Social isolation:** This contributes to financial hardship through its negative impact on mental health, and because people are less likely to access support before they reach crisis point.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The final chapter of *A Taste for Change* sets out orientations for policy making towards a food bank free future in a range of policy areas, including social security, community, employment and health.

Ending the need for food banks is not a task for the government alone. We need to see more businesses becoming Real Living Wage employers and granting flexible working conditions and guaranteed hours to lower-paid staff. Civil society groups can make a difference by ensuring everyone has a safe, welcoming place where they can connect with others and access support before a crisis hits.

However, the most powerful levers for change sit with the UK government. Specific policy recommendations to reduce the need for food banks include:

- Reducing the impact of high rents on low-income households by bringing Local Housing Allowance back in line with the 30th percentile of local rents, and committing to maintain this;
- Introducing an Essentials Guarantee to ensure that the basic rate of Universal Credit always covers the cost of the essentials, together with an independent process to regularly recommend the Essentials Guarantee level.⁷

Additionally, the government has an important responsibility to set the tone for how we talk about people who are unable to work or are receiving social security. Politicians are urged to avoid overusing terms like 'hard-working families', and to balance them with language that gives value and dignity to people who cannot work because of their health, and people providing unpaid care. Shifting the discourse in this way is crucial to building public and cross-party political support for the changes needed to build a future in which no one needs to use a food bank.



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