



# Northern Ireland Emergency Food Providers Survey

**Consumer Council for Northern Ireland  
August 2024**

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## 1. Introduction

The Consumer Council conducted a survey in April 2024 of emergency food providers in Northern Ireland.

Emergency food providers is the name we use in this report to describe various organisations that provide food support to vulnerable people, whether that is a food bank, a social supermarket or a community fridge. The purpose of the survey was to explore various issues including:

- the level of food support provided by emergency food distributors
- services provided in addition to food support
- facilities available to workers
- knowledge of certain schemes that could benefit clients/service users

The survey was completed by 42 different food providers out of the 86 known organisations providing emergency food support which it was sent to.

## 2. About the Survey (Methodology)

The first stage of this survey was conducted to identify emergency food providers currently operating in Northern Ireland. To do this an initial scoping stage was carried out online, where food providers' details and contact information were collected.

Following this, our survey was sent to all the known emergency food providers. This was done via post, with a copy of the survey enclosed and also by email which provided a link to an online survey, to accommodate all respondents. The platform SurveyMonkey was used to create the online survey and it was open for responses from April to June 2024.

The majority of the survey questions were centered around establishing the type of and level of support provided to service users by emergency food providers.

Some questions were also asked concerning food distributors' attitudes to receiving training and what information they would benefit from receiving. This was aimed to inform content design and delivery for food bank 'train the trainer' sessions for food bank workers and volunteers, which the Consumer Council are continuing to provide in 2024-25.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1 Type of food provider

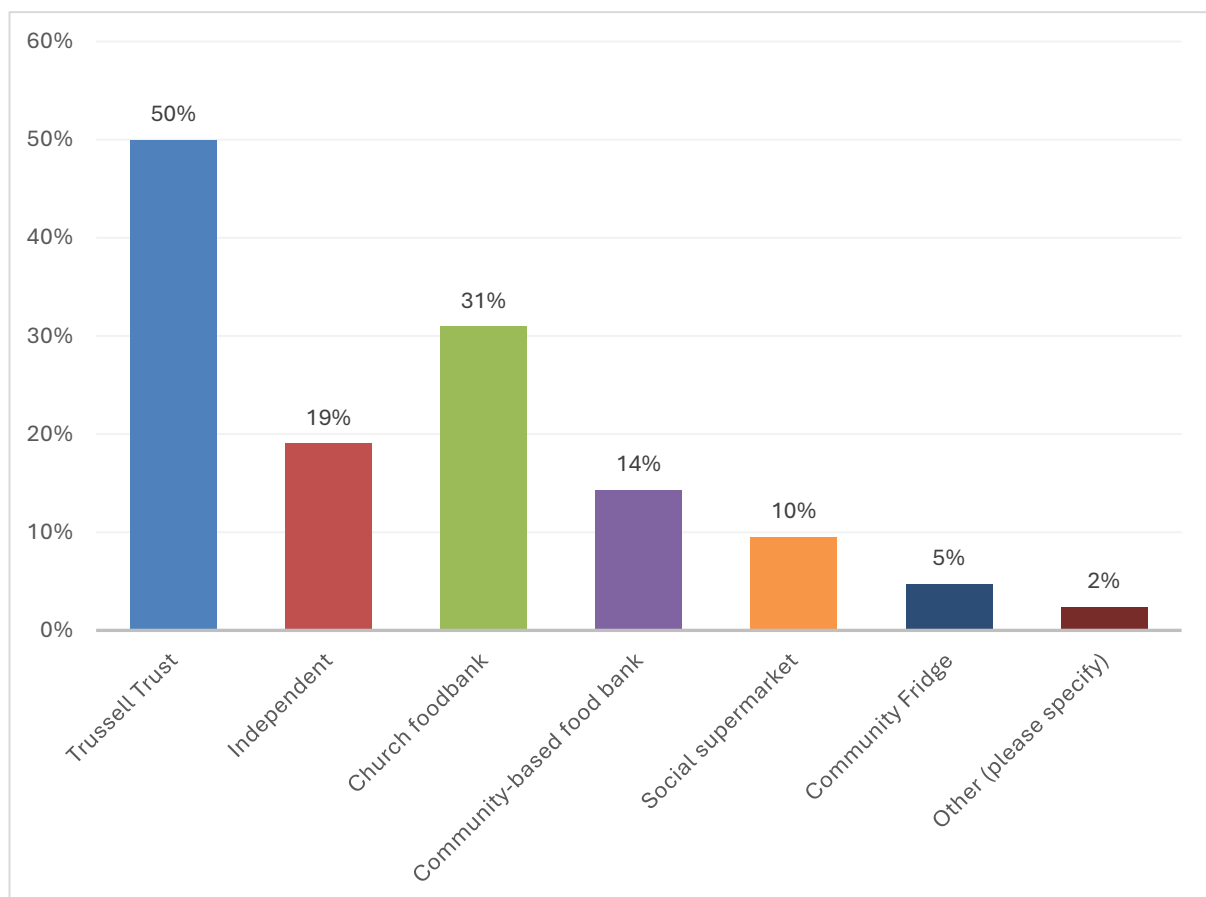
The participants were first asked what type of food provider they were responding on behalf of.

The Trussell Trust have a large network of food banks across Great Britain and Northern Ireland, therefore it was expected that the majority of responses would be from the Trussell Trust. However, over recent years there has been a proliferation of independent foodbanks, many of which are church, and community based.

Figure 1 shows that half of respondents (50%) were from Trussell Trust, with the second largest group being church foodbanks (31%). Almost one in five (19%) reported they were independent and 14% said they were a community-based foodbank. A smaller number of respondents reported they were a social supermarket (10%) and a community fridge (5%).

(Note: Some participants will have indicated that their food provider falls into more than one of the above categories e.g. Independent and church based).

**Figure 1: What type of food provider are you?**



### 3.2 Length of time food provider operating

Of the food providers who responded to the survey, over half (52%) had been operating for more than ten years. Over a third (36%) said they had been operating between five and ten years, while 12% had been operating less than five years. None of the food providers have been opened within the last year.

### 3.3 Busiest time of the year

**Figure 2: Are there certain months of the year where you notice an increase in the distribution of food parcels?**

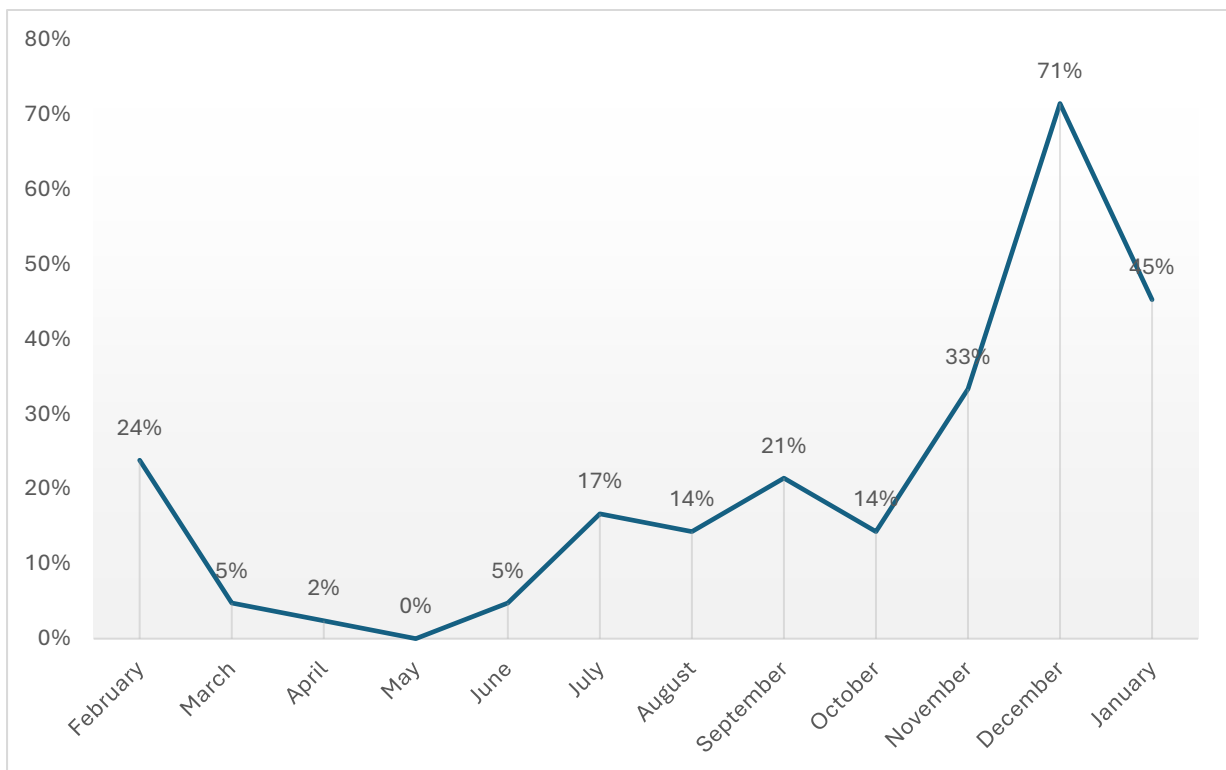


Figure 2 shows that the winter months are the busiest time of the year for food providers.

The months of November (33%), December (71%) and January (45%) were recorded as months when providers noticed the greatest demand for the distribution of food parcels.

The months between March and June were less likely to see increased demand however 36% of food providers responded they were busy throughout the year (not included in table above).

### **3.4 Tracking and reporting of food parcels distributed**

When asked if they tracked the number of food parcels they distributed, 95% of food providers responded that they did, with only 5% not recording this information.

The type of information collected varied, however most food providers indicated they collected the following information:

- number of food parcels given out (86%)
- number of people fed by food parcels (74%)
- the total number of household members helped by food parcels (76%)

There was also a considerable number that collected the following details:

- individuals who collected the food parcels (64%)
- households receiving food parcels (57%)
- the total volume of food given out (57%)

We also asked how often food providers produced reports or statistics using the data they collected. The most common answer was monthly (57%) followed by quarterly (40%) and annually (31%).

Some food providers said they produced this information weekly (24%) and daily (10%). Only 2% said they did not collect this data so did not produce reports on the level of food support provided.

### **3.5 Signposting to other services**

Respondents were asked how knowledgeable they and their co-workers were of other services and advice agencies that service users may benefit from. The large majority were confident in their understanding and awareness of the relevant schemes to support clients; very knowledgeable (28%), fairly knowledgeable (55%).

However, 18% felt they had limited knowledge of other services and agencies that support vulnerable people. This is an area that the Consumer Council would like to work on to support food bank workers in helping their service users.

### **3.6 Healthy Start Scheme**

The Healthy Start scheme is in place to help eligible families who are pregnant or have children below the age of 4 years old. The scheme supports families to buy nutritious food important for the development of young children, including fruit and vegetables, and milk.

The Consumer Council seeks to promote this scheme in outreach sessions as around half of those currently eligible for the scheme do not avail of it.

We asked emergency food provider workers about their awareness of the scheme and found that over a third (35%) of respondents were aware. However, a third

(33%) were unaware, and 28% said they did not know about the scheme but would like more information about it.

Even though some food banks were aware of the scheme, only one respondent actually had experience referring clients to it. This could have been due to a number of reasons, including a lack of encountering families that were eligible for them to refer.

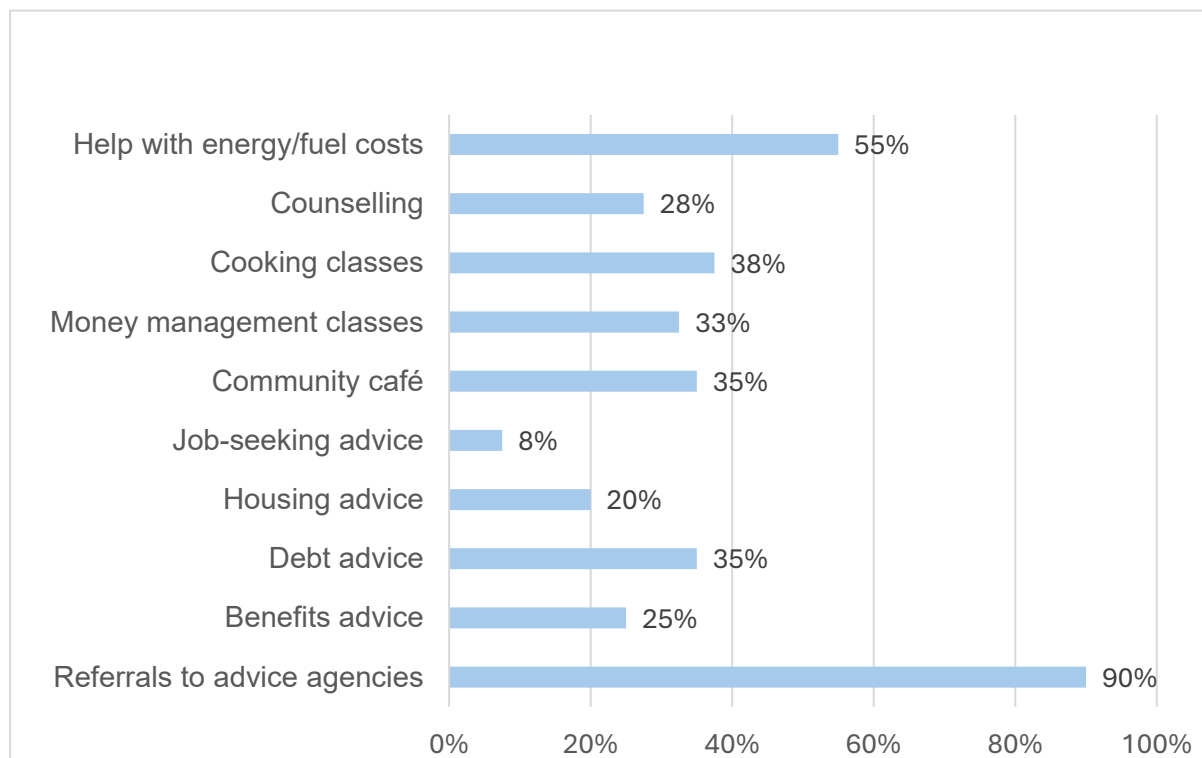
### 3.7 Other services provided in addition to food parcels

The food providers which took part in the survey supported their service users in a wide range of ways in addition to providing them with food parcels, the most common of which was referring them to other relevant advice agencies (90%).

Other common services provided include advice on energy and fuel costs (55%), cooking classes (38%), debt advice (35%), setting up a community café (35%) and setting up money management classes (33%).

Some services which were less commonly provided included advice on benefits (25%), housing (20%), and job-seeking (8%). Only 5% said they did not offer any other services in addition to food support.

**Figure 3: Do you offer other advice and/or services in addition to food parcels?**



### 3.8 Desire to provide other services

Emergency food providers were given an opportunity to say if they would like to help service users in additional ways to food support but were not currently able to for various reasons.

One church food bank said:

“Would like to run meal plans e.g. putting items in to cook a meal and recipe for. We do this in a small way but unable to do all the time due to man power.”

A number of respondents indicated they would like to help clients make sure they are getting all relevant entitlements by providing benefits advice.

It was also acknowledged that people approaching emergency food providers for support also have additional worries about other household expenses. This is evidenced by the fact that a number of respondents stated they would like to give more support on energy costs such as electricity, gas, petrol and diesel.

Other responses showed a desire to provide counselling, help for immigrants, and also those struggling with addiction.

Some food providers said they didn't feel any need to provide other services in addition to food support. This was because there are other support organisations specialising in these areas, who were better placed to help service users. This shows a recognition that through signposting, food providers can ensure service users' needs are addressed even if it is by an external organisation.

### 3.9 Facilities

We asked food providers what facilities they have available when seeking to provide additional support to their service users. The top responses were that food providers had:

- printed resource leaflets on site to give out (85%)
- the ability to refer people to other agencies (85%)
- a discreet meeting place (75%)

Other less common but still significant responses include:

- time for face to face support (55%)
- space for activities (45%)
- a computer/laptop/tablet for use by the volunteer with the client to access comparison tools/assist with online applications etc. (45%)



### 3.10 Largest challenges

The survey asked food providers to briefly describe the largest challenges they faced as they sought to help vulnerable people by providing food support.

There were a number of impacts of the cost of living crisis keenly felt by the emergency food providers. Many noted that there had been an increased demand on their services due to the price of food rising. This was combined with a reduction in public donations due to the wider public also feeling the squeeze on their finances. These influences have resulted in many food providers noting that the demand for help is outstripping supply.

Having adequate volunteers to maintain services was also described as a challenge by a number of food providers. A few stated that recruiting younger volunteers would ease the pressure on older workers who may not be able to help as much as they once did.

Identifying vulnerable people within the community was also a struggle. Some respondents noted there is particularly a rural apathy to seeking assistance and others said there remains a stigma of poverty. Due to this, people needing support can be reluctant to make their need known to the food provider.

A number of food providers also noted there is an increased number of asylum seekers who are seeking assistance. Connected to this is the issue of language, with one provider stating that the language barrier can be a great challenge when seeking to support people for whom English is not their first language.

Other challenges mentioned by emergency food providers include:

- not knowing where to signpost clients for additional support
- inappropriate referrals to the food provider
- the complexity of issues that clients are seeking support with
- delivering food to those who can't collect it
- not having adequate facilities to help people
- the emotional toll on volunteers

### 3.11 Topics most interested in hearing more about

For the purpose of ensuring the Consumer Council's upcoming food bank workshops are useful, the survey asked what topics food providers would most like to know more about. (Please note respondents could only select the topic they would *most* like to know more about, so they couldn't select more than one answer).

Energy was the topic which most food providers expressed interest in, with over a third (36%) saying they would like information on cutting bills, tackling fuel poverty, dealing with self-disconnection and repayment plans.

Over a fifth (22%) said they would most like information on food, for example tips for making food last longer and details of food support schemes available.

A further 11% said they would most like to hear more about money, for example tackling illegal money lending, safer ways to borrow, access to cash etc.

There was a significant number (22%) that selected the “other” option when asked what topic they would most like to hear more about. Most participants who selected this did so to signify that they could not select one of the topics above the others but would like to hear an overview of all the topics of energy, food and money matters.

It should be noted 8% said they wouldn't like more information on any of the topics which were described in the survey.

### **3.12 Permission to use contact information**

The survey concluded by asking the emergency food providers if they would be happy for the Consumer Council to use their contact information in a variety of different ways.

There were high levels of enthusiasm, with almost nine in ten (89%) saying they would be happy to receive free information and resources from the Consumer Council.

Almost four in five (78%) emergency food providers said they would be happy for the Consumer Council to publish their contact information online to help consumers find their nearest food bank easily.

A similarly high number (75%) said they would be happy for the Consumer Council to provide free training in their area.

## 4. Conclusion

The emergency food providers survey gave the Consumer Council valuable insights about the type and level of food support available for consumers in NI.

The increase in demand that food providers reported over the winter months paints a stark picture about the squeeze families feel during this period.

While most food workers described themselves as being either very or fairly knowledgeable (83%), there remained a proportion (18%) who were not confident in their knowledge of schemes and services to signpost clients to.

The Healthy Start scheme is designed to help eligible families afford good quality food like fruit and vegetables for their children. Most workers (60%) had not heard of this scheme, therefore the Consumer Council is making it a priority to raise awareness of it in particular when engaging with emergency food providers.

Another key finding was that many food banks provide support to people beyond simply providing food. Signposting to other advice agencies was by far the most common method of supporting people in addition to providing food. However, participants also reported providing a range of different services, including providing advice on energy/cooking costs, money management, debt, housing and benefits. Some also provided cooking classes and counseling to support people in vulnerable situations.

In order to provide these services, it was useful to know the facilities that are available to these organisations. Most respondents have resource leaflets onsite to give to clients, and a discreet meeting place to speak to people about their needs.

When asked what the top three challenges that food providers were facing, there were many recurring themes. The most common was the increase in demand for their food support combined with a lack of supply due to the rising cost of food and the drop in donations from the public.

Other prominent issues included finding vulnerable people in the community that most needed food support, which requires overcoming the stigma that prevents some from asking for help. Being able to find adequate volunteers to help those people was also described as a challenge.

Having an understanding of these issues will help the Consumer Council by informing our continuing work with emergency food providers, and in doing so, raise awareness of how we can help them help their clients, and perhaps, we hope, lighten some of the load.