

Supporting families accessing food banks



“People are telling us they’re skipping meals so they can feed their children. That they are turning off essential appliances so they can afford internet access for their kids to do their homework.

“How can this be right in a society like ours? And yet food banks in our network tell us this is only set to get worse as their communities are pushed deeper into financial hardship. No one’s income should fall so dangerously low that they cannot afford to stay fed, warm and dry.”

Emma Revie, chief executive, The Trussell Trust

We are all increasingly aware that many in our society are struggling to meet the rising costs of living – including families with young children. The phrase “heat or eat” is often used to describe families juggling extreme demands on their income. Recent figures show that in the year 2021/2022, The Trussell Trust distributed more than 2.1 million emergency food parcels with more than one in three of those going to families with children.

Bearing these figures in mind, it is likely that for many early years settings across the country, there will be families attending who are in need of assistance. With our open, non-judgemental approach to building positive relationships with parents and carers, early years providers are ideally placed to support them to understand the help that is on offer.

Across the country, there is a network of food banks run by either local or national organisations – but if you’d never used one before, would you know where to start?

A food bank offers free emergency food and other essentials that have been donated by local shops, businesses and members of the public. Much of this food is tinned or dried but fresh food will sometimes be offered too. To tackle issues such as period poverty, toiletries are also included when needed. Often there are local notices publicising what types of items are needed displayed in shops, community centres, family or children’s centres and on social media. These donations are particularly vital at times of year when there is increased demand such as during the school holidays.

You usually need to be referred to a food bank before you can use it – for example, through the local Citizens Advice, family support workers from the local family or children’s centre, a GP surgery, Job Centre, care professionals or by a social worker. The circumstances that mean families are accessing food banks vary, but may include redundancy, unexpected bills, a delay or change to benefit payments, ill health and low income or debt.

The referrer will usually ask some questions so that they can ensure that the family is getting all the help they need. It may be that there is additional support that can be offered such as debt counselling services, benefit advice, financial advice around budgeting or support with mental health and wellbeing issues – all of which can support

the family in finding solutions.

Once a family has been referred, they will get a voucher and details about their local food bank. This voucher can then be exchanged for an emergency food parcel. Depending on what is available at each food bank, and their level of need, a family may be able to visit more than once.

Worryingly, food poverty is becoming a frightening reality for more and more families. Although it is an issue that is less hidden than it was, for many there is still a stigma attached accessing this support. This is why it is so important to have an open and understanding relationship with the families attending your settings, so that they can receive the help they need in a timely way, without judgement.

Useful organisations

- The [Trussell Trust](#) supports a nationwide network of food banks. They also offer a [Find a Food Bank](#) service.
- [Citizens Advice](#) may be able to help you to find independent food banks near you.
- The [Independent Food Aid Network](#) (IFAN) has more than 500 foodbanks are registered.
- Charitable food distribution network [FareShare](#) doesn’t give food to individuals, but does distribute food that would otherwise go to waste to charities, school breakfast clubs, community cafes and lunch clubs for older people.
- UK charity [FoodCycle](#) works to connect communities reducing loneliness and food poverty by bringing people together in welcoming spaces to share food and company. They use surplus food in these community dining spaces and everyone is welcome.

Baby banks

Across the country, there has been an increase in the number of baby banks being set up to support families with young children to provide the essentials they need. At a time that should be filled with joy at the arrival of a new baby, many worried families in different circumstances are now turning to these services for help.

This could include families who are refugees, those who are struggling to adjust to changes to their benefits, those who are experiencing domestic violence, homeless families, families experiencing the effects of unemployment and working families who are stretched beyond their financial means by the cost-of-living crisis. All of these families will be welcomed with understanding and without judgement.

Little Village, which runs a baby bank network in the London area, surveyed 90 baby banks in 2022 and found that:

- **98%** believe that 2022 will be their busiest year yet.
- **94%** say that the children they support do not have adequate clothing or shoes, such as not having a winter coat, or wearing too small shoes.
- **74%** warn that the families they support do not have access to basic hygiene products such as soap, bubble bath and toothpaste.
- **79%** say that the children they support do not have a safe place to sleep – for example babies sleeping on towels, sofa cushions or co-sleeping with parents and siblings

Baby banks aim to help families by collecting good quality pre-loved baby items and passing them on to those in need. In this way they can provide essentials such as cots, toys, clothes and toiletries. Everything is cleaned, sorted and safety-checked before being redistributed. Many baby banks use social media sites such as Facebook to publicise the services they offer, but also to make donors aware of the items that are currently in high demand.

Families are referred onto their local baby bank by midwives, health visitors, family and children centre support staff, social workers and other support agencies.

Further information

Information about local baby banks is often available on social media. Alternatively, [Little Village](#), which runs baby banks in the London area, also has an interactive map which lists many that are running around the country.