

# Food banks in Shropshire

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SHROPSHIRE FOOD POVERTY  
ALLIANCE



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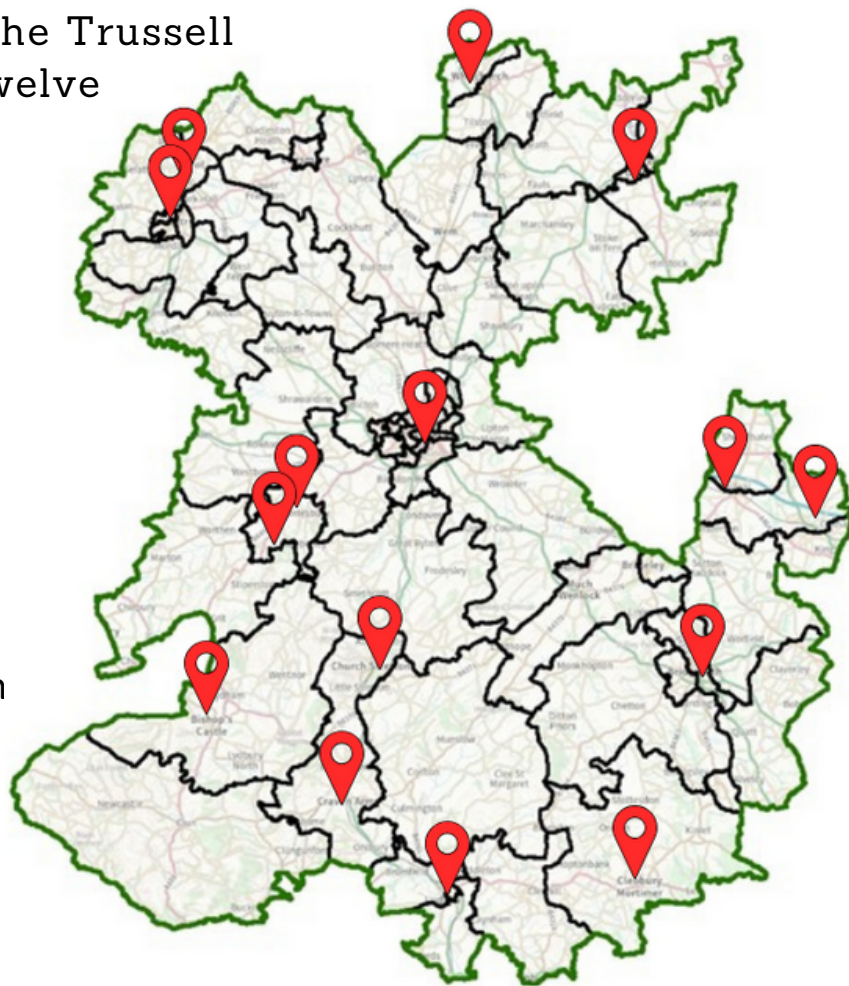
# Introduction

This brief report sets out the current climate for food banks in Shropshire. Post-pandemic and during the ongoing cost-of-living crisis heading into the winter of 2023. As the new coordinator for the SFPA, I wanted to observe how food banks are operating in an increasingly difficult environment. Moreover, what as an alliance we can do to support them.

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SFPA Coordinator

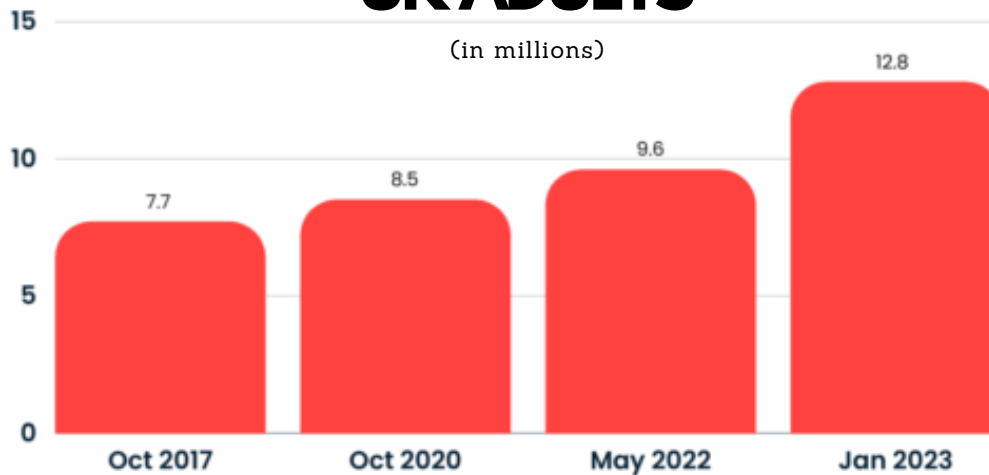
## Background to food banks in Shropshire

- Shropshire has 15 food banks; three are operated by the Trussell Trust, with the other twelve independently run.
- The oldest food bank in Shropshire is Shrewsbury which is just under 20 years old. With many being opened in response to the pandemic.
- Majority of food banks in Shropshire are held in or organised by faith based organisations.
- Additional food banks in Telford and Wrekin, Herefordshire, and Worcestershire supporting Shropshire residents.



# National background

## 'OVER INDEBTED' UK ADULTS



### HOUSEHOLDS HEAVILY IN DEBT UP BY 66% SINCE 2017

National 'over indebted' UK adults from Debt Justice.

The cost-of-living crisis has not stopped. Whilst inflation has slowed and wages have grown, prices have remained high and unstable; people on the lowest incomes are disproportionately affected.

People are increasingly living with rising debts as they both fall behind on their bills, and use credit for daily living costs. The number of households struggling under heavy debt burden has increased by two thirds since 2017.

In Shropshire 347 people registered for The Debt Respite Scheme (Breathing Space)\* in 2022, higher than the national average. With Shropshire also being in the top 10 counties in the country for fuel poverty.

The continuing pressures on households means food, an essential part of daily and cultural life, is still too expensive for many.

\*Breathing Space gives temporary protection from creditors who are owed money. It includes: freezing most interest, fees and charges on debts; and pausing most enforcement action and contact from creditors. It's a short-term option, to give time and space to engage with debt advice.



A growing number of people are unable to afford a diet that is healthy and nutritious. The Food Foundation has found that the poorest fifth of UK households would need to spend 43% of their disposable income on food to meet the cost of the Government's recommended healthy diet, this compares to just 10% for the richest fifth.

The lack of affordable and nutritious food is leading to increases in diseases once considered a thing of the past, with rickets and scurvy both on the rise in the UK. Shropshire is 2nd in the West Midlands, and in the top 20 in the country for 0-5 year olds being admitted to hospital with dental cavities.

Food banks are a relatively new addition in the support system with the Trussell Trust operating 29 food banks in 2009 which has grown to just under 1,400 in 2023. This is alongside 1,172 independent food banks also in operation.

The rising cost of food creates a catch-22 situation for food banks. Increased prices of food and other financial pressures brought on by the cost-of-living crisis mean more and more people are slipping into food insecurity, thus increasing the demand for food banks.

Simultaneously as demand rises, donations fall, as people are less able to afford to make either food or financial donations. As a result, food banks are increasingly spending their reserves, on food to meet demand whilst unable to buy the amount of food they previously could.

**Food inflation at 12.1% in September 2023**  
Consumer Prices Index for food and non-alcoholic beverages



Source: Office for National Statistics

BBC

**UK food banks bring in counsellors and private GPs to help exhausted workers**

Guardian headline (3rd September 2023)

**Food bank volunteers to wear body cameras after being spat at**

© 12 July

BBC headline (12th July 2023)

Nationally food banks are reliant on volunteers, usually made up of retired people who can give their time. In many food banks, volunteers have been there throughout the COVID pandemic, but now being presented with more and more complex situations. This has led to some volunteers now having to step back from their role, with burnout and fatigue.

# Local picture

Shropshire, despite being a very rural county, generally mirrors the broad national picture, with increased demand and lower donations.

Whilst families made up the large proportion of demand during the pandemic, most food banks now report that a majority of demand comes from individuals, often those with disabilities or long term health conditions.

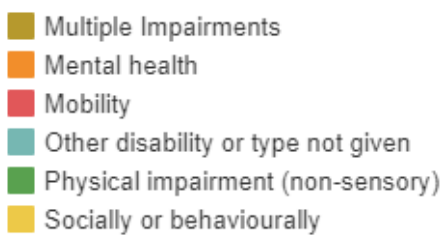
Citizens Advice Shropshire now has advisors placed within some food banks in the county. Citizens Advice Shropshire provides more data on the demographics of foodbank clients.

## Disability / Long-term health



Proportion of Citizens Advice Shropshire clients seen in a food bank setting and their health (where known).

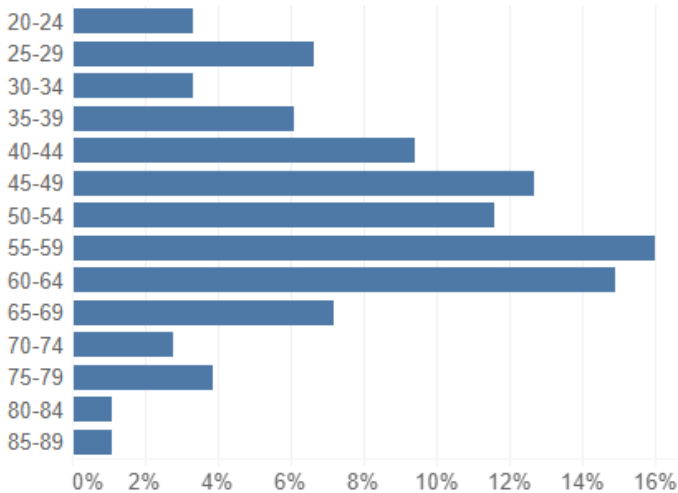
## Type of disability (% of disabled clients)



Types of disability of Citizens Advice Shropshire clients seen in a food bank setting who said they had either a long term health condition or disability.

As seen through the data collected by Citizens Advice Shropshire, the majority of those seen have some kind of long term health condition or disability. Often a mixture of different physical and mental health conditions.

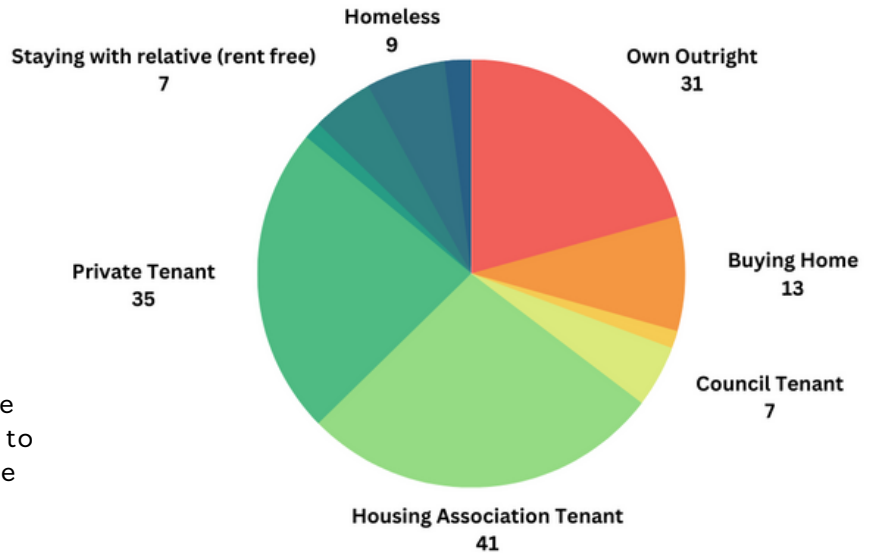
## Age



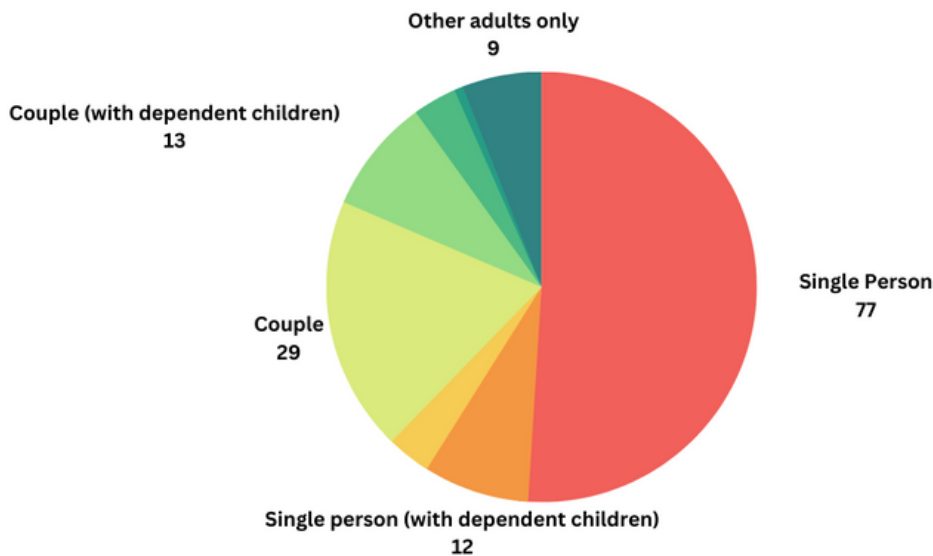
The majority of food bank clients are working age, likely due to the support older people receive from the state retirement pension and pension credit.

The age profile of clients speaking to Citizens Advice Shropshire advisors in food banks.

Overwhelmingly those seeking support at food banks are those in some kind of rented accommodation.



The housing tenure (where known) of clients speaking to Citizens Advice Shropshire advisors in food banks



As mentioned by food bank co-ordinators there has been an increase in individuals seeking support.

The household makeup (where known) of clients speaking to Citizens Advice Shropshire advisors in food banks

# A tale of two food banks

**Key Element:** Two food banks in Shropshire may close in the coming year; Albrighton and Gobowen. Albrighton due to lack of demand and Gobowen due to height of demand.

Whilst most of Shropshire food banks are feeling the impact of increased demand and reduced donations, there is one exception; Albrighton.

Here, a small, church-run foodbank may potentially close due to the *lack* of demand. During the pandemic six regular food parcels were being delivered a week however this has now stopped, with seemingly no explanation for the drop in demand. The average rate is now two to three parcels a week, with many weeks where no parcels are needed.



St Mary's Parish Centre in Albrighton, out of which the food bank operates.

What is important in Albrighton is the role the food bank now plays in the community. Under the auspices of the foodbank, other groups have been launched: a community lunch, a mother and toddler group, and a singing group.

These groups have been more successful with their engagement and demand. Whilst not focused on food poverty these services are trying to resolve another issue, that of social isolation.



The community lunches are regularly attended by older, single people, and those who have little social contact. The lunches create an opportunity to forge social links and the simple act of sharing a meal has led people to start their own social groups. Research has shown that a lack of friendships in older people can be a potential cause of malnutrition.

So whilst the community lunches are not directly focussing on food poverty, the effect it is having cannot be underestimated. It has already been decided in Albrighton that if the foodbank were to close, these community groups would continue to operate.



Preeshenlle United Reformed Church in Gobowen out of which the food bank operates.

In stark contrast is Gobowen food bank, which may close because they are unable meet their demand. It is a relatively small food bank, with 10 volunteers, delivering an average of 28 parcels a week, for approximately 80 people. They serve a relatively large area, which has grown following the closure of nearby St. Martins' food bank.

Gobowen foodbank struggles to get support from the local community, and is running on a week-to-week basis whilst looking for funding. It hopes to stay open until Christmas 2023, but this is not certain, as it is currently spending around £600 per fortnight to make up the shortfall.

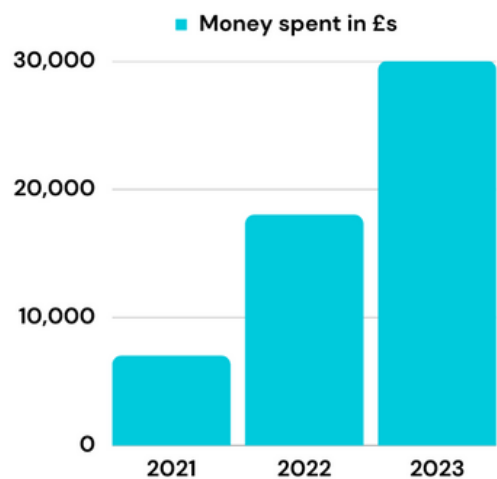
# The cost of demand

**Key element:** Food banks are spending increasing amounts on additional food to meet their demand.

The challenge of meeting increases in demand and the fall in donations is best demonstrated by showing the amount of money food banks are spending on additional food.

- Bridgnorth food bank is spending approximately £1,000 a week to meet demand.
- Shrewsbury is spending a minimum of £1,000 a week.
- Oswestry is on course to spend £30,000 in 2023, up from £18,000 in 2022, and £7,000 in 2021. An increase of over 300% between 2021 and 2023.

**Money spent on additional food by Oswestry food bank**



Even in smaller food banks they are having to spend large amounts to meet their demand.

- Church Stretton food bank is spending £500 a week and is on course to spend £25,000 this year. This is up from 2018 when just £500 was spent on additional food for the year.
- Ludlow food bank is also on course to spend approximately £25,000 this year on extra food.
- Bishop's Castle food bank is spending £800 a month on additional food.

# Changing access

**Key Element:** Increased demand and lowered donations means access to emergency food becomes stricter.

As a result of these pressures, most food banks are changing the way they operate, becoming stricter on what is being given out, and the number of times someone can receive support. A prime example of this is at Craven Arms, where the food bank previously allowed an unlimited number of people to access support, but have now tightened up their criteria on referrals. It is clear this decision was not taken lightly, but it was made in the hope of keeping the food bank sustainable for the future and being there to help people in the long run.

**Re: New Referral System from July 1st 2023**

From 1st July we will be changing the way the referral system works. There are a lot of reasons for this such as:

- The cost of running the food bank - there is no government support for us.
- Reduced donations given to us of food and money.
- The increased demand for the food bank with many people coming every week for months and even years.

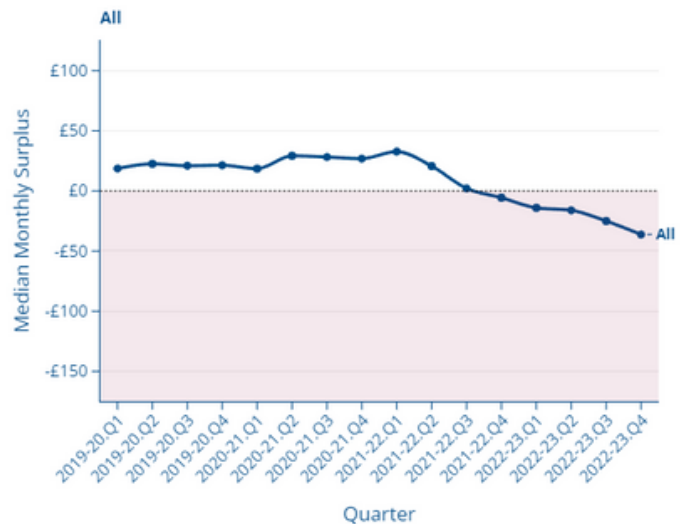
The food bank is intended for emergency use. So from July, we will give out a maximum of 6 collections in 6 months with a maximum of 3 on each referral.

The slip given to food bank customers at Craven Arms informing them of the changes to the system and the reasons why.

# Negative budgets

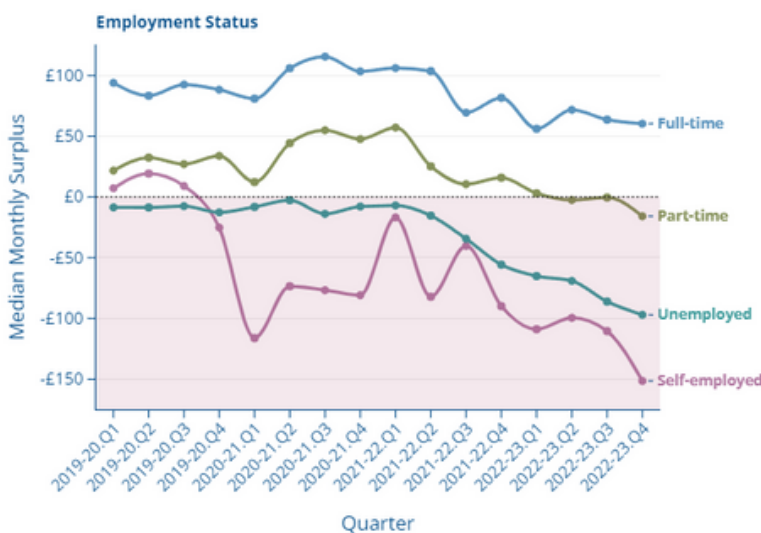
**Key Element:** A rise in negative budgets amongst low income households means they are unable to afford essentials.

Since the pandemic and the following cost-of-living crisis there has been a rise in negative budgets. A negative budget is one in which people who, despite expert advice, do not have enough money to cover their essential bills. Pre-pandemic advisors could often help low-income households maximise their income, now even with expert advice people are unable to afford their essentials.



Monthly surplus for all households over time since 2019

For people faced with this situation, cutting back on food is often their response, and it can push them to call upon a local food bank for help.



Surplus income by employment status

Negative budgets are affecting people across society in low income households, with working people also affected.

Negative budgets are a problem for food banks with limited resources, they have to assist more people, for longer periods, with no resolution to the client's situation.

# Impact on volunteers

**Key Elements:** The rise in people on negative budgets and in various complex situations e.g. substance abuse, homelessness create challenging situations for volunteers.

Foodbank clients need access to a broader range of support services at an early stage in their foodbank journey

There has been an uplift in benefits inline with inflation, however this has been unable to keep up with increasing costs.

Until wages and benefits are able to keep up with costs more and more people



will have no choice but to rely on charitable food and the goodwill of the volunteers who run the food banks.

The consequences of people relying on food banks over prolonged periods, and the pressures of living with negative budgets are also having an increasing impact on the volunteers and coordinators.

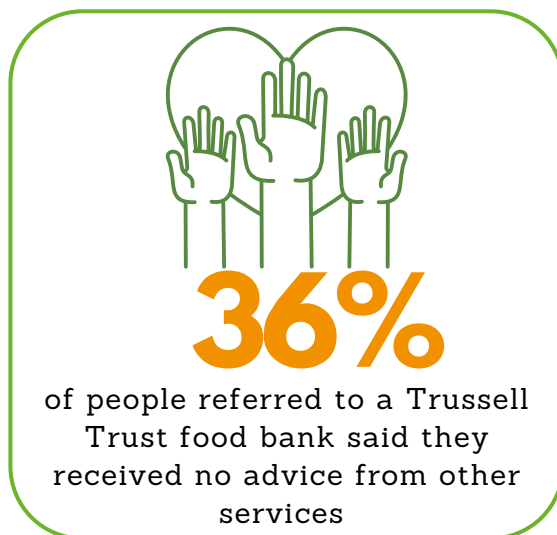
Across Shropshire there is a sense that pre-pandemic, food banks were seen as a temporary, whilst someone got 'back on their feet'. The food parcel would solve an immediate problem. Now, food banks are often the first port of call for people presenting with wide-ranging, and complex issues, including; poor mental health, domestic abuse, homelessness, and substance abuse. This long term and complex reliance is stressful for volunteers and coordinators. If more support was built around food banks it could alleviate this stress and potentially mean food bank clients are able to seek alternative and relevant support sooner.

A majority of food bank volunteers are retired, or in some cases, young people just helping out during the school holidays. Neither group are likely to have had the training or expertise that may well be needed in these situations.

Since the pandemic, with a shift towards remote working, support and advice from many agencies in Shropshire is often being offered over the telephone or the internet. Meaning food banks are one of the few ways in which people can get help face-to-face. For example, people who previously may have been seen by a specialist support worker are now presenting at a food bank.

To tackle this, most food banks now have an offering of other support, with blood pressure checks, domestic abuse advisors, housing advice, Samaritans, and Citizens Advice advisors as examples of what can be made available. The SFPA have been working with a range of agencies to encourage the availability of support in foodbank sessions, but this varies from foodbank to foodbank.

Some, such as Cleobury Mortimer, are unable to get advisors from other agencies to visit their sessions, which means that the support offered to vulnerable clients can be dependent on the agencies within their local food bank.

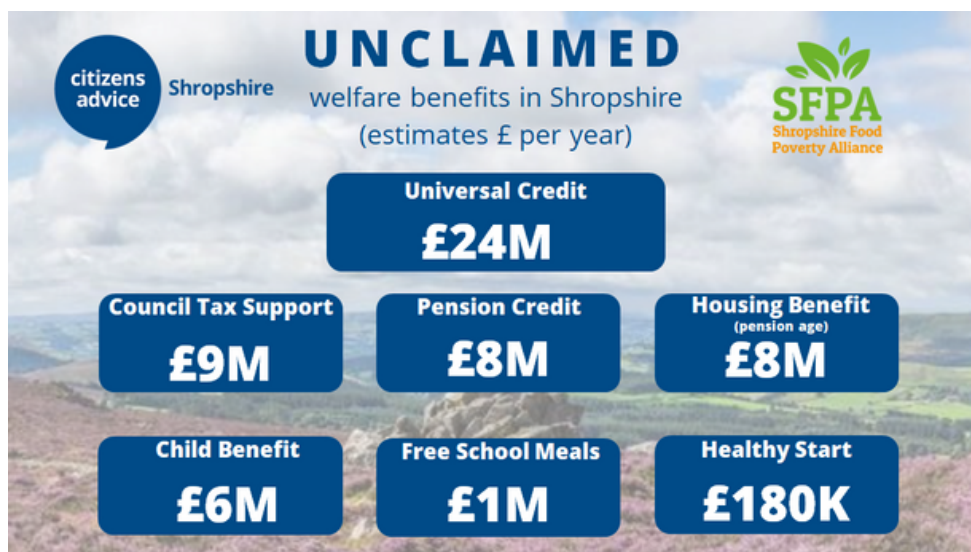


# Recommendations



## Income Maximisation

Our research estimates there is up to £24 million in unclaimed in Universal Credit, £9 million in Council Tax support, and £8 million in unclaimed Housing Benefit (pension age) per year, in Shropshire alone. This research is based upon the Policy in Practice methodology in: 'Missing out: £19 billion of support goes unclaimed each year'.



This analysis shows there is a need to raise awareness in Shropshire of how incomes can be maximised. We need to create an understanding with the public, especially users of food banks, that there may be additional income they are entitled to or budget changes they could make. In the hopes of relieving some of the pressure on food banks and with the aim, it can protect some from falling into food poverty.

Whilst not an option open to all those in vulnerable situations, e.g. those on negative budgets, it could alleviate the financial pressures for others. Food bank coordinators noted that when benefit recipients received the cost-of-living payments the demand went down, demonstrating the power and importance of a cash-first approach.



## Partnership Working

A food banks' role is changing, once viewed as a rarity they are becoming part of British daily and cultural life, and the institutions expected to help the most vulnerable in society.

The shift in the role of food banks has coincided with the expansion of services offered by food banks e.g. access to face-to-face Citizens Advice advisors, blood pressure checks, housing advice, etc. This support offered to clients works well and offers clients a wraparound service that supports people with their underlying issues which is leading to food insecurity.



However, the complexity of needs now presenting at food banks means there is more that needs to be done. The geographically patchy nature of support offered means there are vulnerable clients not getting the same level of wraparound support as others.

What this does provide, however, is an opportunity for partners across the system to work more closely together. For example, those accessing support from food banks overwhelmingly have long term health conditions or disabilities. This is a place in which health care providers can forge valuable links with potentially underrepresented communities.

The SFPA can help to forge these links by co-ordinating the support available to those using the food banks through the valuable links we have created with the food banks across the county.





## Continued Support for food banks

Finally, the biggest challenge facing food banks is the drop in donations and the rise in demand. Donation levels are often affected by national and international influences on

people's income. As this report has shown food banks are under increasing strain and there is a risk that food banks will not be available in some parts of the county. We recommend this situation is closely monitored by those across the system and organisations consider what support they can offer to their local food bank.

The Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance will continue to provide infrastructure support to food banks and sharing information about the challenges food bank and food bank clients face.



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