

More than the essentials

February 2026





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Foreword

"I feel quite privileged to have listened to people's feelings."

-Healthwatch Dudley Volunteer

Healthwatch Dudley listen to people's experiences of health and social care. We take their feedback to people who can enact positive change.

As the cost of living crisis continues to impact people and families across Dudley borough, Black Country Foodbank (BCFB) commissioned us to discover what additional support people who use foodbanks want and need.

Healthwatch Dudley attended four BCFBs regularly from January to December 2025. We connected with local people, provided signposting and valuable information. We also listened to people's experiences of health, social care, and other services.

The initial goal of this project was to identify the support and guidance that could help local people move out of financial hardship and move on from relying on foodbanks to provide essentials for themselves and their families.

However, over the course of this project it became clear that the majority of people who use BCFB do not do so on a short-term basis to get through a point of crisis. Instead, many people experience long-term financial hardship and foodbank use has become a long-term solution to providing for themselves and their family.

Ill-health or disability was a common reason for long-term foodbank use. Welfare provided to people with unavoidable health conditions was often insufficient to meet basic needs.

Another group of people who regularly attend foodbanks are asylum seekers and refugees. Without permission to enter employment, these groups of people struggle to survive on the money provided to them while they move through the asylum process.

There are other organisations that provide food and essentials to people in the area. This means that people who use BCFB only form part of the picture; food insecurity is widespread and persistent and a co-ordinated response is needed to address people's needs.

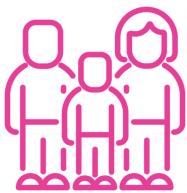
Significant changes in provision for people who use foodbanks is needed to reduce overreliance on foodbanks.

Key points

- Advice and information can provide positive outcomes for foodbank users.**
- Placing support services in foodbanks can reach people who are not accessing support elsewhere.**
- Within the wider context of increasing costs of living and insufficient welfare benefits, people may still find themselves in financial hardship despite advice and information.**

Key data

54 sessions across 4 foodbanks



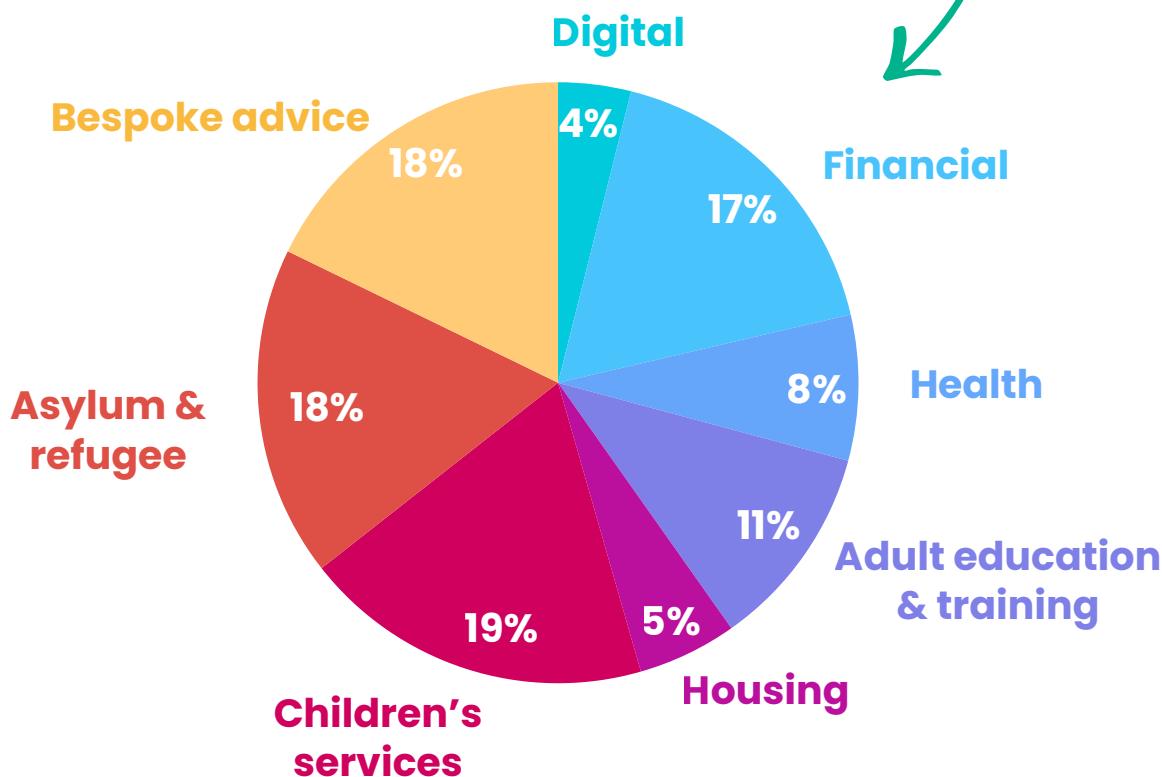
281

People listened to or supported

"Thank you so much for what you do!"

391

Pieces of advice, signposting or guidance provided.



Meeting the need

36.1% of the Dudley population are at the highest risk of food insecurity.¹

BCFB has 12 foodbanks across Dudley borough which provided over 270,000 meals in 2023 to 2024. Organisations can provide people who are experiencing financial hardship with a BCFB voucher. This voucher entitles clients to three days of food for their household from a BCFB. When available, BCFB will also provide other essentials such as hygiene and washing products.²

As demand for foodbanks increases,³ BCFB has been growing to meet this need. BCFB are also partnering with other organisations to provide additional support to clients. This includes funding from Dudley Council Household Support Fund to provide people with slow cookers that provide economical, budget-friendly meals. Initiatives like this showcase the need to adapt provision to meet changing needs.

In addition to BCFB there are a number of other organisations across the borough that address poverty and food insecurity across the borough. BCFB only see a proportion of the need in Dudley borough.

Local organisations that address food insecurity and poverty include:

- **Brierley Hill Babybank**
 - Provides support and essentials for families with babies.
- **Giving Hands Mission**
 - Provides food, clothing, toiletries and household items to people living in poverty and deprivation.
- **Provision House - Food club and social supermarket**
 - Membership-based project that provides groceries to families who need to save money on food bills.
- **Springs Church Community Grocery Stall**
 - A community grocery store that provides low-cost groceries.
- **St Thomas Church and Community Centre**
 - Foodbank based in a community centre.
- **The Real Junk Food Project**
 - Provides surplus food on a 'Pay as You Feel' basis.
- **Manna House Pantry (Your Local Pantry)**
 - Subscription-based access to food based in Halesowen.



There has also been a rise in the number of mobile applications that address food waste and food poverty to meet current social trends.

Reasons for foodbank use

Self-reported reasons for foodbank use



Local people told us of the circumstances that led to them using foodbanks. Each situation was unique and often complex. However, key themes emerged.

Systemic benefit issues

We heard from people who had experienced significant challenges with welfare systems. Issues included initial applications being rejected without clear advice or guidance and complex applications with limited support. Many people who rely on Universal Credit and disability benefits now find that this money no longer covers the cost of essentials.

Low income

Some individuals were in part-time work or low paid jobs and found their income was insufficient to meet essential needs, demonstrating that employment alone is not always a guaranteed route out of poverty.

Cost of living

The rising cost of essentials such as food, energy and housing was raised by most of the people we spoke to, sometimes cited as the sole reason for accessing a foodbank.

Complex circumstances

Homelessness, substance abuse disorder, psychological issues and lack of support systems, were recurring themes. For some people these issues were co-existing and resulted in competing or conflicting interventions from different services. This creates a cycle of instability where accessing services becomes almost impossible.

Long-term foodbank use

"You need two foodbank vouchers a month to supplement benefits."

-Focus group attendee



Foodbank use has increased and repeat foodbank use is becoming more common for people in Dudley borough.

Throughout this project we heard from people who would use a foodbank weekly, as part of their regular routine, to feed themselves and their family.

BCFB intended to be a short-term intervention that helps people through financial crisis.

The cost of living crisis, increasing rents, and changes to welfare have led to people relying on BCFB for long-term support.

The purpose of this project was to connect with people experiencing financial crisis and identify information and opportunities that could help them move on. Whilst we were able to help some people, for others it was not possible to change their circumstances.

Disabilities, long-term health conditions and caring responsibilities can impact a person's ability to maintain employment and support from wider systems becomes essential to meet their basic needs.⁴

"This one foodbank is more modern but the other one is good with the fresh veg. I like these ones because you can have a coffee and they have other fresh food."

-Nethertonfoodbank user

Long-term foodbank use serves as a lifeline for some residents. However, the variety of food provided may not meet long-term nutritional needs, particularly for those with long-term health conditions.

Health & disability

"The best way to lose weight is to have no money because you can't eat."



Amy's story

*"I have low income from ill-health and I am out of work.
I always had a physical job.
Then I got injured and I don't have any qualifications."*

We heard how the onset of illness or disability that leaves someone unable to work can lead to financial crisis.

We also discovered that people with disabilities experienced additional barriers to support.

10 years ago, Amy owned her own home, ran a successful business and did it all while being a single mom. Then, she fell ill and “lost [her] house, [her] business, everything.”

Now, she lives with a long-term health condition and is unable to work. She relies on financial support from Universal Credit (UC) and Personal Independence Payment (PIP). However, as someone who has a hidden disability, she feels that she gets judgement from healthcare professionals and other services. This makes it difficult for her to access support that she needs.

Amy's story highlights how quickly someone can come to rely on the support of foodbanks to meet their basic needs.

Disability & long-term health conditions

"I can't work because of my disability. It's a hidden disability so I get a lot of judgement from people and professionals."

-Kingswinford foodbank user



People who have a disability or long-term health condition are more likely to live in poverty.⁵

We spoke with people who have long-term health conditions that regularly rely on foodbank use to make ends meet.

However, the food provided at BCFBs is intended to see people through a short-term financial crisis. We heard that being unable to afford fresh food, such as fruit and vegetables, negatively impacted people's health.

Some BCFBs have partnered with external businesses, shops and communities in order to provide fresh produce, bakery items and eggs. This fresh food was greatly appreciated by the people who attended.

"I have a long-term health condition, which means I need to take care of myself. I can't live off tinned food forever, so I come to Kingswinford; they have fresh food."

-Kingswinford foodbank user

People explained how they struggled to access other services that could support their health. This includes primary care services and opportunities for physical activity.²

"There is a health hub in Netherton Park, but it's not open."

-Focus group

Mental health & wellbeing

"My mind goes to dark places. I need to buy food but I need mobile phone data more so that I can distract my mind [with digital media]. I can't afford everything so I need to choose."

-Kingswinford foodbank user



People who use foodbanks rated their general health as an average of 3.25/5

Mental health issues arose throughout the project in a number of ways:

- Poor mental health impacts a person's ability to earn or manage money leading to **financial hardship**.
- Using a foodbank led to feelings of **shame and stigma**.
- People struggle to access mental health support. These **access needs are exacerbated by financial barriers**.

"It's hard to find someone that actually cares."

-Kingswinford foodbank user

The primary goal of this project was to provide information and signposting, not to act as a support service.

However, by providing a listening ear and not limiting the conversation to one specific topic, people told us that this helped their wellbeing.

This feedback demonstrates that simple interventions, like a place to talk and be heard, may have a positive impact on people's wellbeing.

Wider issues with mental health support cannot be disregarded. We heard of long wait times and inflexible support.

One woman told us her daughter had been on the waiting list for mental health support for six years.

People who struggle with co-existing conditions, told us they were "passed from pillar to post" when seeking support.

Conditions like substance abuse disorder and mental health are treated separately by different services, and barriers like lack of transport or digital access were multiplied.

Changes to disability benefits

In March 2025 the Government announced it would be restricting eligibility for PIP and reducing the health-focused element of Universal Credit⁶.

BCFB clients expressed fear and concern as soon as these changes were announced and requested information on how this would impact their income.

"It doesn't cover my rent, let alone anything else.

I'm getting into debt and I don't know what to do."

-Netherton foodbank user

The Government has now announced that it will be reassessing the changes to PIP and will be consulting with people with lived experience.

The impact of changes and reductions in benefits caused distress for many BCFB users. We witnessed confusion and frustration that systems are complex, and this complexity is worse for people who have additional needs or are digitally excluded.

People who are experiencing food insecurity are more likely to have a disability.



26% of the general population have a disability.⁷



48% of people experiencing food insecurity have a disability.⁷

March 2025

Government announces proposed cuts to PIP and disability benefits.

Foodbank users with disabilities expressed distress and concern about being able to meet basic living expenses or essential support and treatment.

Nov 2025

Government announces review of changes to PIP.

Foodbank users express remaining mistrust of 'the system' and maintain concerns about financial stability.

Access to health & care services

"It costs £5 to go to the hospital and back, that's a week's worth of food."

-Netherton foodbank user

We supported people to access primary care services including GPs and dentists.

Barriers to access to primary care are well documented.^{8,9} We found that financial crisis exacerbated these barriers to care.

Throughout the project we signposted people to various health and care services, primarily to their GP, pharmacist, dentist, NHS 111 or emergency department.

In some cases we called a service on behalf of a client when they did not have access to a phone, were experiencing psychological distress or were unable to communicate over the phone.

Whilst not in the scope of the project, having support in booking appointments or speaking to services was invaluable to the people we supported.

Barriers that impacted people's ability to book appointments included:

-  English as a second language
-  No access to a mobile phone
-  Not knowing how to book appointments
-  Not knowing what to say in an appointment / how to explain the problem in a limited amount of time
-  Not being able to read letters or text messages
-  Anxiety

Financial struggles

***"We have to make a decision
between essential things.
It's pay for heating or pay for food."***



Benefits

"These online forms are so confusing."

-Focus group attendee



Households stuck in a negative budget carry average debts of nearly £10,000.¹⁰

"The foodbank voucher supplements the benefits."

-Focus group attendee

People told us that the welfare system often does not provide a sufficient safety net. With delays, insufficient benefits and complications leading to prolonged financial hardship.

We heard how the application process for Universal Credit and disability benefits can be complicated and inaccessible.

"I applied for Universal Credit nine months ago but I was rejected. There wasn't any help or advice, I was just rejected."

"I applied again and was approved, nothing had changed, I must have just said the right thing this time. If I had got help nine months ago I wouldn't be here today."

-Kingswinford foodbank user

Applying for benefits requires people to have access to a computer, and the ability to understand and complete the application process. This presents a barrier to those who have additional needs or who are digitally excluded.

"The forms are not accessible. I have dyslexia and I can only fill out the form with other people helping me."

-Kingswinford foodbank user

When benefits are successfully awarded, the payments often don't cover basic living costs. One woman told us after she began receiving UC after losing her job found that ***"it's not enough"***.

Approximately four million people across England and Wales were in a negative budget (where essential living costs exceed household income) in 2024/2025.. Many of these people are claiming benefits.¹⁰

“Just having people to speak to about the benefits system would be good.”

Jackie is receiving Universal Credit after losing a full-time job earlier this year. She is working part-time at a nursery and does not get paid during school holidays.

“It made me feel greedy to apply for benefits, I have worked since I was 16. But I am 60 now, and as much as people say they don’t discriminate, no one wants to hire a 60 year old.”

She said it took her three months to obtain housing support, after being passed back and fourth between Universal Credit service and Dudley Council. Dudley Council now pays her housing support.

It transpired that Universal Credit included housing support, they now have said that she is in arrears of approximately £1800 and owes this. All of her Universal Credit was stopped for five months.

“They said I had been overpaid. Instead of talking to me, they’ve stopped it all. Not communicating is a big issue, I’ve had to take out a credit card – I’ve never had one in my life.”

“Universal Credit is not making any repayments on the debt they say I owe. But without that, or any benefits in the meantime, I don’t know how they expect me to pay it back. Even if I knew it would be a few sticky months to pay back the debt, it would be okay. I’m not getting anything and I don’t know what to do.”

“When you go online to Universal Credit, it shows what you should get. The system shows the monthly payments I should be getting. It’s got to be a simple answer, am I entitled to Universal Credit or not?”

Barriers

"Coming to a place to get support might cost me £5 on the bus. When I need help, I might not have £5 that day so I won't be able to get to support."

-Focus group attendee



Digital exclusion

"He's 75 so he doesn't have an email."

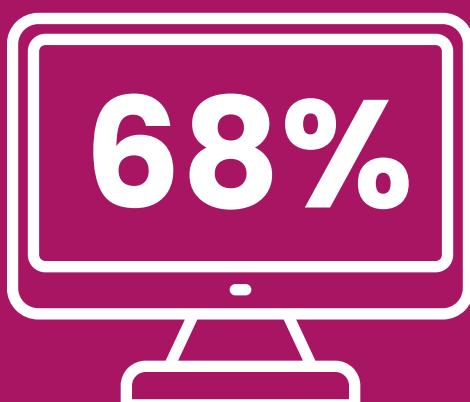
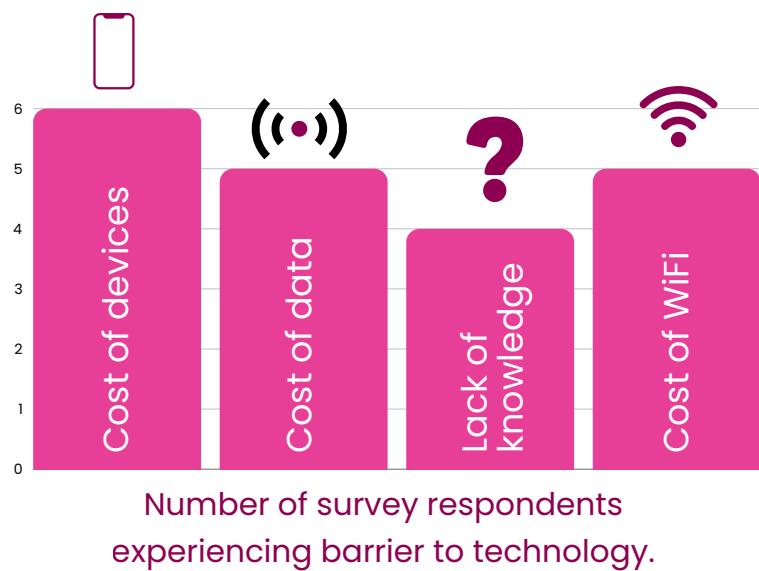
-Focus group attendee

Digital exclusion represents a significant barrier for Black Country Foodbank users, exacerbating existing financial and social challenges by limiting access to essential support services.

The central barrier identified across the board is cost, reinforcing the link between financial hardship and digital exclusion.

Barriers to using technology

People who completed our survey told us of what barriers impact their ability to use technology, with cost being a primary factor.



of people who completed our survey do not have access to a computer.

This systemic lack of digital access and affordability makes engaging with government support systems extremely difficult.

"My Nan doesn't even have a mobile phone, how is she meant to get support?"

-Focus group attendee

The high cost of transport further compounds this problem, as clients may struggle to afford travel to access free digital services located outside their immediate community.

Transport

"It costs £6 to get to Iceland on the bus, that's £6 worth of food."

-Kingswinford foodbank user

116 people provided a bus pass



7524 individual journeys

The cost of public transport emerged as a significant barrier, creating social isolation and preventing access to essential services. This includes travelling to hospital appointments, job interviews, or even reaching larger, more affordable supermarkets. The cost, which may seem small to some, represents a major financial trade-off for those in hardship.

"It costs £5.70 to go to the hospital and back. It might not sound like a lot to some people but that's two days of food for me."

-Dudley central foodbank user

Multiple people told us of the need to balance the cost of public transport with the cost of food.

Cheaper supermarkets tend to be further out of communities, forcing people to decide between paying for transport to more affordable food options or buying essentials at a higher price from a local shop.

When providing people with information on local services and support, often transport was a barrier to access.

"There's all this stuff but I can't get there."

-Focus group attendee

What could seem like a simple trip for someone with access to a car, could be a 50 minute walk for others.

We were able to provide some foodbank users with a four-week bus pass. The impact of the access to transport was immediate and invaluable. However, the scheme was limited and longer-term solutions are needed.

Gareth's story

Gareth was experiencing significant mental health struggles and had weekly support meetings to attend. These meetings were a 50 minute walk away, which felt impossible on days when his mental health was poor. In addition to not having access to transport, he could not afford a mobile phone to call and inform services when unable to make an appointment.

He told us that he was at risk of being discharged from support services for non-attendance. His mental health was very poor when we met him as he told us he had been unable to afford his medication.

We provided Gareth with a bus pass so that he could access his appointments, spoke to his support workers to explain the situation and informed him of the **National Data Bank** so he could get free data for his phone.

We also provided Gareth with information on NHS prescription charges and exemptions.

In the coming weeks we saw Gareth again and his mood had continued to improve and he attends the foodbank for social connection as well as for essentials.

"Thank you, you've been a godsend."

-Gareth

National Data Bank¹¹

The National Data Bank is a scheme run by The Good Things Foundation. It provides free mobile SIM cards for people who can't access the internet.

This scheme can provide some relief to people who are experiencing financial hardship and lack of access to mobile data.

Bus Passes – Transport for West Midlands¹²

The passenger incentive scheme developed by Transport for West Midlands (TfWM) provides people in need with four weeks of free bus travel.

As part of our project, **we distributed vouchers for free bus travel** to 116 foodbank users and volunteers. They took 7524 individual journeys, accessing health care services, colleges and employment opportunities.

Refugees & asylum seekers

15% of the information we provided related to support for refugees & asylum seekers.



Refugees & asylum seekers

"This is a great day now."

-Asylum seeker, provided with information on social clubs, asylum advice and a bus pass to access resources.

Community tensions

Some people who used foodbanks expressed their thoughts that financial support should not be allocated to people who are refugees or seeking asylum.

"Everyone is struggling right now. It's hard to look out for other people when you're struggling. You have to look out for your own."

-Foodbank user

Increasing community tensions, which rose during the summer of 2025 with a number of protests, may have contributed to these views.

Throughout this project, we met with people from the refugee and asylum seeker community that had few resources and limited support and knowledge of local services.

1.4 million people, including 175,000 babies and children, are affected by immigration policies that puts many at greater risk of food insecurity.¹³

Abi's story

Abi had recently been moved to the area from a different town. She was awaiting a school transfer for her daughter. She was also wanting to find English classes.

We helped her compose emails to the local school and the local council. There had been miscommunication between the old and new schools.

We provided information on ESOL classes. However, when she attended the opening hours differed from what was advertised online. These journeys cost a lot of Abi's money in bus fares.

Abi's story highlights how people can 'slip through the cracks', especially when there is a language barrier.

There is a gap in provision for identifying people in need and sharing information on services to support those new to the community,

This experience led us to develop a resource that collated information on the local area and services that could offer support.

Employment, education & training

*"What people need is
money, and jobs,
everything has gone up."*



Employment

"I send all these applications, but I don't hear nothing. I might as well be talking to a wall."

-Netherton foodbank user



Unemployment was a driving factor for low income. While some people are actively seeking work, others experience barriers that prevent them from paid employment.

"I have years of experience, and I'm a good worker. But without the certificates now, you can't get a job. I haven't been in this situation before."

-Dudley central foodbank user

Having a job does not always guarantee financial security. 40% of households that are in a negative budget (where essential living costs exceed household income) have at least one person in work. We heard frustration that wages often don't meet living costs.

"I look at some of these jobs...they don't pay enough to live off. It's not worth it."

-Kingswinford foodbank user

The job search and application processes can be demoralising for people.

"I have a route, I walk round all the factories [looking for work] and I have all the apps on my phone: CV library, Indeed, LinkedIn."

-Netherton foodbank user

Even when people are enrolled in employment programmes they still find it hard to find employment. One person said they were on the 'Restart scheme' but they said it was still "difficult to get a job."

Education & training



"I need a computer for school."

-Netherton foodbank user

We heard how a lack of qualification can make it more difficult for people to find employment, however people struggled to access training and education opportunities.

Barriers included:

- A lack of appropriate opportunities
- Cost of transport
- Lack of time or courses that could fit around childcare
- Cost of education

Training that was provided by the Job Centre was seen as insufficient and not tailored to individual needs and goals.

"The job centre provides training on interview preparation but nothing else."

-Netherton foodbank user

Gemma's story

Gemma had previously worked as a mental health professional in her home country. Upon moving to the UK for her family's safety, she gained the right to work, but her qualifications were not recognised here. She spoke to us about the difficulties of finding a job and wanting to train so that she can use her skills to help people.

Gemma was grateful to have someone who "actively listened" and recognised her unique situation, personal challenges and goals.

"I love what you're doing here!"

-Gemma

We provided her with information on volunteering opportunities, to gain experience in mental health in the UK. We also helped her to find online courses so she can keep her mind active and gain more qualifications. Since speaking with us she has gained an emergency first aid certificate, begun volunteering with a helpline and has gained some online certificates.

Moving forward

“You need to use places that are already there and let us run it, we know what we need.”



Someone who listens

"The information you gave me saved my life!"

-Netherton foodbank user



'More than the essentials' demonstrates that for those facing financial crisis, having a person to listen and respond is as essential as the food parcel itself.

"Thank you for actively listening."

-Netherton foodbank user

Some of the people we spoke to were unsure of what help they needed, if they were eligible for any support, or where to begin.

Complex, contradicting and overlapping concerns, can make getting help more difficult. 'More than the essentials' allowed foodbank users the space to openly discuss their concerns, and we would work together to identify solutions.

"I feel stuck and they're not listening."

-Netherton foodbank user

We provided a woman with information on various services for help at home, social support and financial information. A week later she informed us that she had seen the Queens Cross Network, was having a stair and grab rails fitted and the fire service was checking her alarms. With the right information, she was able to solve multiple issues in just a few days.

"In just three days it's 100% better."

-Netherton foodbank user

Having a safe, welcoming and non-judgemental service where people can feel comfortable discussing complex concerns can offer the support and much-needed information in a difficult time.

Community hubs

"We want community spaces like youth clubs."

-Focus group attendee

93%

of people who attended Cornwall Community Hubs **had improved mood¹⁴**.

A solution that arose from conversations with service users and evaluation of the data collected was the development of community hubs.

"We need places for people to support each other."

-Focus group attendee

People expressed a desire for a 'one-stop-shop' where they can speak to people face-to-face for advice and information. We heard from one foodbank user who had witnessed the success of a similar service in another area.

"They have a community café where all these services come and the local people can speak to someone. It helps when you don't know where to go."

-Dudley central foodbank user

People wanted spaces to enable them to support each other. Again, we heard anecdotes of similar successful projects.

"My mum used to be part of a community association. They would get together and help each other."

-Focus group attendee

Community support was seen at Netherton foodbank, where the space was arranged for people to stay and talk with each other. People would share information, provide emotional support and social connection.

"I like it here, we all sit together, whether you are using a foodbank or not."

-Focus group attendee

Providing space and guidance that allows local people to support each other could build community resilience and increase access to support. A similar model has been implemented in Cornwall where a network of hubs provide essential place-based support. They benefitted from shared knowledge, peer support, and increased capacity to provide support to the community.¹⁴

Moving forward

The rising cost of living and the inability for both wages and benefits to meet this rise has led to more people experiencing persistent financial crisis.

People who have communication needs, are digitally excluded or have disabilities experience more barriers to accessing support that can ease financial hardship.

A co-ordinated response to address complex challenges is needed to improve the experiences of people who access foodbanks in Dudley borough.

Working together

Following this project we are bringing together people and organisations from the voluntary, community sectors, local authority and health and social care to develop a co-ordinated response to food insecurity and its wider impacts on health and wellbeing.

We are organising a conference to share the findings from this project, encourage networking and provide a platform for collaboration.



Encouraging change



We are developing proposals and will be encouraging BCFB and other partners to implement the recommendations made in this report, including:

- Peer support networks
- Community hubs
- Improving access to information
- Commitment to realise access needs for health, social care and financial services.

“Together as a team, Black Country Foodbank will use Healthwatch Dudley’s report findings and recommendations to reflect on our current offer and identify meaningful changes. We know we can’t do this alone, so we’ll work closely with partner agencies and welcome support from across the community to help us adapt and strengthen our services, ensuring we better meet the needs that local people have told us matter most.”

-Keeley Jones, Deputy CEO and Operations Manager

Thank you

Thank you to the people who use BCFB who engaged with us and shared their stories, feedback, and ideas. Their voices paint a clear picture and highlight areas for change.

We thank BCFB for commissioning this piece of work. 'More than the essentials' has allowed us to hear from people who might otherwise not have shared their experiences and enabled tangible impact on the lives of local people.

'More than the essentials' would not be possible without volunteers. Healthwatch Dudley volunteers provided support within foodbanks and behind the scenes completing data entry and fact checking information. BCFB volunteers displayed real passion for supporting others and providing a safe, judgement-free space for local people to access essential support.

"I volunteer at foodbank and church - they support me - they are everything."

-Foodbank user and volunteer at Primrose Hill Community Church

Notes

- *The majority of feedback in this report came from a focus group and informal conversations.*
- *This project has highlighted the importance of consistent engagement with communities and adopting an adaptable and personalised approach when discussing difficult topics.*
- *We provided online and paper surveys to collect additional feedback, however people felt more comfortable sharing in-person after building a rapport.*
- *All names and identifying details have been changed to protect the anonymity of people who use foodbanks.*
- *Quotes may have been edited for clarity and conciseness.*

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healthwatch Dudley



**Committed
to quality**

Healthwatch Dudley is committed to providing a quality service, from how we collect data, to the information we provide. Every three years we perform an in-depth audit, in conjunction with Healthwatch England, to ensure we meet this high standard.

If you would like this report in another language or format please contact us.

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