

We are what we eat:

Transforming food aid in Kensington & Chelsea

June 2023



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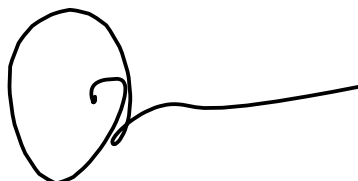
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Foreword from Service Manager

Healthwatch Westminster and RBKC leads have completed a fantastic report on the importance of our local foodbanks and the residents they serve. The findings of our leads in both boroughs have created a dynamic report based on the sustainability of our food aid services and how many residents the services reach.

Our foodbanks are the lifelines of our communities. Through our teams research, community engagement and collaboration; we have been able to get a real sense of how important food aid is and how we can reach more residents. This is crucial to our current social and economic environment, and has allowed Healthwatch Westminster and RBKC to curate meaningful connections and develop a base in some of the foodbanks on a more regular basis. I would like to thank the foodbanks for their support, and the residents who access them and took part. **We are here for you.**

Danni, O'Connell- Service Manager Healthwatch



Introduction

Overview

Healthwatch Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) and Westminster carried out a project to review food resources and food aid¹ offered within the two boroughs (also referred to as the bi-borough). Our objective was to examine the reach and effectiveness of the existing food aid provision strategy, with the overall aims to increase diversity, equity, and sustainability in food aid, promote nutrition and healthy eating, and eliminate food insecurity.² As people using food services in the bi-borough tended to be from diverse communities and typically sourced food from urban market stalls or other local food providers, we additionally wanted to understand the extent to which the foods offered met residents' social and cultural needs.

Project implications

As our primary mission at Healthwatch is to understand and amplify residents' experiences and needs in health and social care, Healthwatch RBKC and Westminster focused on gathering residents' experiences with and views on using food resources.

The data we collected contributes to our understanding of how organisations dedicated to combatting food insecurity are operating and faring. At this time, the country is undergoing a cost-of-living crisis, with those living in the most deprived areas of London experiencing the greatest impacts. Therefore, this is a timely and valuable opportunity for Healthwatch to identify barriers to accessing healthy, nutritious, and suitable foods and produce recommendations to improve equity and sustainability in health and nutrition.

¹ The appropriate language to refer to food support is disputed. Here, we use the terms "food resources" and "food aid" to refer to any services and programming that target barriers (financial, social, cultural, physical, etc.) to accessing food that is nutritious, balanced, and appropriate (in terms of dietary needs, health conditions, disability, culture, etc.) We use this in place of other terms including "food banks," "food pantries," "street kitchens," "community kitchens," "food poverty action plans," and similar terms.

² "Food insecurity" encompasses any experiences of barriers to accessing nutritious, balanced, and appropriate food. This is used in replacement of terms such as "food poverty," "food deserts," etc.

Methodology

Healthwatch RBKC and Westminster consulted other London Healthwatch teams, public health services, the Westminster Food and Energy Network group, Citizens Advice Bureau, Westminster Council and Healthwatch Advisory Group members to develop and design this project. After shortlisting numerous food aid organisations serving residents in the bi-borough, our staff visited these organisations in person to give out surveys to residents. The surveys explored areas such as what they enjoyed and did not enjoy, and the areas for improvement. We promoted the project via email, social media, and throughout our partnered organisations.

Another critical angle in this project was that of the food aid service providers. We developed a supplementary survey to explore food providers' and their staff's perspectives and feedback of food services in the bi-borough.

Healthwatch RBKC visited the food aid services provided by Notting Hill Methodist Church and Bay20 Community Centre on their weekly operation days, Tuesday (16 May 2023) and Thursday (18 May 2023) respectively. In total across the two services, we gathered 33 survey responses from people using the service (n = 22) and service providers (n = 11).

Food aid organisations

The food aid organisations involved in this project across RBKC and Westminster included: The Abbey Centre Food Pantry, Bay20 Community Centre, North Paddington Food Bank, St Matthews Food Bank, Westbourne Park Food Pantry, Notting Hill Methodist Church Food Bank, and Westminster Chapel Food Bank. Though not technically a food aid provider, we also engaged Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) in the project as it provides food vouchers to eligible residents in the bi-borough.

Findings

Summary

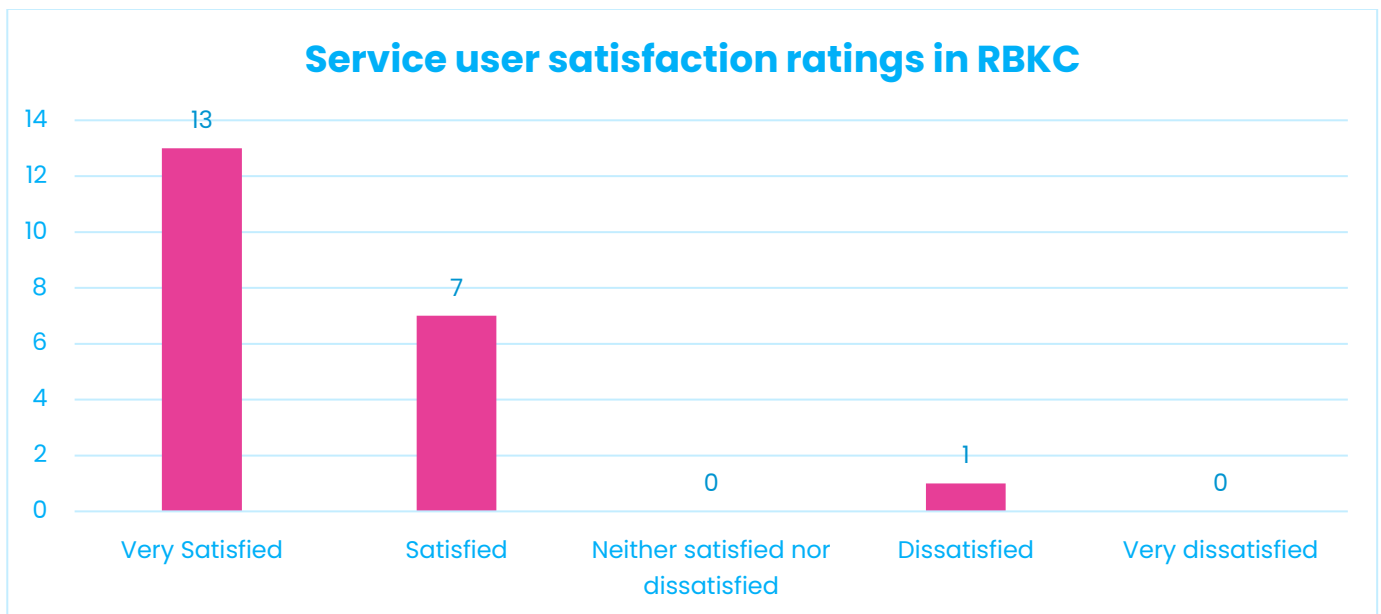
The majority of the food aid service users that we spoke to were aged 50-79 years and reported having long-term health needs. Over half of the residents we

spoke to described not having enough food to meet their basic needs (see Appendix for more details).

People using the food aid services generally reported positive experiences. However, some described concerns about there not being enough food offered, administrative issues with the services, and not enough foods catered to different needs and identities of residents (see Appendix for ethnicities breakdown). Staff and organisers of the food aid organisations shared mixed feedback. While they generally believed that the food provided by their organisations was diverse and reflected residents’ needs, there were still certain groups whose needs weren’t met. Several staff also suggested strategies to help residents achieve long-term food security, instead of relying on temporary food aid.

People’s experiences

Among the 21 service ratings from people using the services (1 person didn’t respond to the service rating question), 20 reported being either ‘very satisfied’ or ‘satisfied.’



Several people expressed appreciation and gratitude for the food support. One person at Notting Hill Methodist Church said:

“Service is very nice and welcoming.”

Another person reflected on the food selection at Bay20 Community Centre:

“Bay20 tries to gather community preferences; keeps an eye to diet needs. Not a lot of meat coming in, but some of it is halal. Most ingredients provided can make vegetarian meals that can be adapted.”

The main concerns with the food aid services we surveyed included not providing enough diversity in food resources (particularly relating to cultural and social needs); limited fresh protein foods; and not having enough food that didn't need to be cooked, for those who weren't able to do so.

One person explained there was not enough food provided:

“The service and the staff are good. The food is not as satisfactory and there is not enough of it. There should be more food to meet the demand; they stopped serving hot food after COVID, and they could start doing that again.”

We received mixed feedback about the quality of the food services. Some people praised the staff and service experience, whilst others pointed to administrative drawbacks such as not enough staff, long waits, and service inefficiencies. One person, who was asked how the services at Notting Hill Methodist Church could be improved, responded:

“Make it more organised and time efficient; better communication between Council and food bank; team could be better coordinated; and order of users [in the queue] is often unclear.”

Over 70% of the people we surveyed reported that the food they received from each visit to the food aid organisation typically lasted a week or less. This indicates that relying on a single organisation's weekly food aid provision may not be enough to meet people's food needs.

Perspectives from staff and organisers

The food aid services' staff and organisers generally expressed positive views about the diversity and sustainability of food their organisations offered, as well as the belief that the services promoted healthy and balanced diets. For example, staff at Bay20 explained:

“Bay20 tries to meet the needs of the North African community in the area. For instance, during Ramadan, they provide dates for meals. They also try as best as they can to meet other basic community needs.”

“It depends on the donations that are given to the food bank. The organisers try to balance it with the purchases they make to provide healthy options.”

Staff at Notting Hill Methodist Church explained the need for fresh food and food suitable for diverse dietary needs. One staff member highlighted the need to better communicate donation criteria to donors:

“While the food bank often has a wide range of foods from different cultures, there is a shortage of allergen-free and sugar-free items which are highly requested, and there is a lack of halal meats and fresh produce which is important for a healthy diet.”

“You could eat healthily from a food bank, but many long-life items provided are not as healthy as the fresh alternatives. More fresh foods should be sourced, and those who donate food often misinterpret instructions on what to give.”

One staff member emphasised the challenges brought about by the cost of living crisis and the aftermath of COVID-19 both for people providing and using the service. Several staff members described a need to support residents in gaining food security in the long term.

“[We need to] reduce the need for food banks: improve economy, better social care, more funding for social care, and better wages.”

“Government has the responsibility to reduce the need for food banks through housing and living wages.”

Limitations of findings

A significant gap in this analysis was that only two of the seven organisations in the project (Bay 20 and Notting Hill Methodist Church) were located in RBKC.

Engaging a more balanced number of food resources for this project would give a more comprehensive understanding of food aid and an opportunity to carry out a comparative analysis of food resources (from the perspectives of both people providing and using the service) across the two boroughs of RBKC and Westminster.

Additionally, we couldn't assess the food vouchers provided by Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) because the organisation didn't have a way to ask for feedback from residents who were given vouchers. s

Recommendations

1. Promote food diversity as part of a healthy and balanced diet

- Broaden food vouchers' applicability beyond chain supermarkets to include markets, urban food stalls, and other local food sources
- Support food aid providers in feasibly and sustainably sourcing and offering diverse food that reflects the needs and backgrounds of people using the service (see Appendix for demographics)
- Promote awareness of the health benefits of a nutritious, balanced and diverse diet in food insecurity strategies
- Identify and offer staple foods that are versatile and common to multiple communities (eg Dignify is a charity that's developing a recipe book of versatile meals that can be made with limited food supplies and affordable staple ingredients)

2. Increase funding towards food aid services

- Eliminate food aid organisations' financial barriers to sourcing and offering healthy and diverse food options
- Ensure that funding is distributed equitably amongst food aid providers, according to organisations' financial needs, service use rates, and demographics of people using the service (eg

relative deprivation, cultural and ethnic identities, dietary needs and health conditions, etc.)

3. Improve collaboration between food aid providers to pool resources, knowledge and funding

- Foster collaboration between food resources and cooking clubs or charity fuel organisations to address barriers to cooking for service users (eg North Paddington Food Bank’s community kitchen clubs and fuel support services)
- Build capacity among food aid providers to store and offer fresh and healthy food options (eg access to refrigeration)
- Develop partnerships to expand food sources and collectively source diverse foods (eg partnerships with local cultural organisations, markets, and restaurants)
- Clarify food donation criteria with donors

4. Develop systems for food aid services to track and monitor how their service is used

- Implement strategies to track and monitor rates of service use and demographics of people using the service
- Gain a better understanding of people’s food needs
- Identify any demographic patterns that may call for a change in food sourcing strategies
- Use data to evidence need for funding or partnership for diversified food sourcing

5. Further research into food insecurity strategies in the bi-borough

- Identify inter-ethnic or inter-cultural disparities in order to set priorities for diversifying food
- Carry out a comparative analysis to understand differences in food aid and food insecurity priorities across the two boroughs of RBKC and Westminster
- Analyse food aid provision by geography, population density, and other demographic indicators to identify high food insecurity

areas and priority populations, which will inform strategies in funding, resources, and food provision

6. Develop long-term strategies to eliminate food insecurity and decrease reliance on temporary food aid

- Support and build capacity of food aid organisations to offer or connect people to long-term solutions alongside providing temporary food aid
- Develop strategies to address the root causes of food insecurity, including financial insecurity, housing insecurity, poor health, unemployment, barriers to education, disability-related barriers, stigma and discrimination, etc.
- Foster collaboration across different sectors to create multi-pronged solutions to food insecurity and its root causes

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the team members at Healthwatch RBKC and Healthwatch Westminster for their contribution to this project, as well as the organisations and individuals that supported us in its co-development.

This project would not have been possible without the collaboration of the food aid organisations discussed in this report, and the staff and service users that shared their valuable experiences and perspectives with us.

The Abbey Centre Community Pantry

The [Abbey Centre Community Pantry](#) is available to residents living in Westminster, or with children attending school in Westminster. They provide

access to affordable food for residents with a weekly subscription fee of £4.50. This provides an average of 10 items, saving residents on retail food items worth £30.00 or more. The pantry provides fruit, vegetables, store cupboard items, cleaning, and hygiene products.

Bay20 Community Centre

[Bay20 Community Centre](#) offers a weekly street kitchen on Thursdays, alongside diverse services to support vulnerable residents in the borough, such as the elderly, children, homeless populations, and people affected by mental health. Some weekly activities include meditation, boxing, and well-being sessions.

Citizens Advice Bureau Westminster

[Citizens Advice Westminster](#), a member of the national Citizens Advice service, provides free and confidential advice to residents on anything from debt and benefits to immigration and housing. They additionally provide resources to combat food insecurity such as supermarket vouchers.

The North Paddington Foodbank

The [North Paddington Foodbank](#) supports residents in Westminster from low-income backgrounds with food support, emergency income for food, information and advice, and other resources. To receive assistance, residents need a referral from one of the organisation's registered partners. The Food Bank offers support for up to six weeks within a six-month period, though this can be extended.

Notting Hill Methodist Church

[Notting Hill Methodist Church](#), a member of the Trussell Trust, is available to residents living in Kensington and Chelsea on a referral basis. They provide residents with access to food and sanitary items on Tuesdays and Fridays every week. They also accept donations of non-perishable and sealed items from the community any weekday between the hours 9am – 4pm.

St Matthews Food Bank

[St Matthews Food Bank](#) is a non-referral service that provides food aid, regardless of religion. Individuals can take up to 10 items, accompanied by takeaway tea and coffee. They also accept donations of sealed non-perishable and household items.

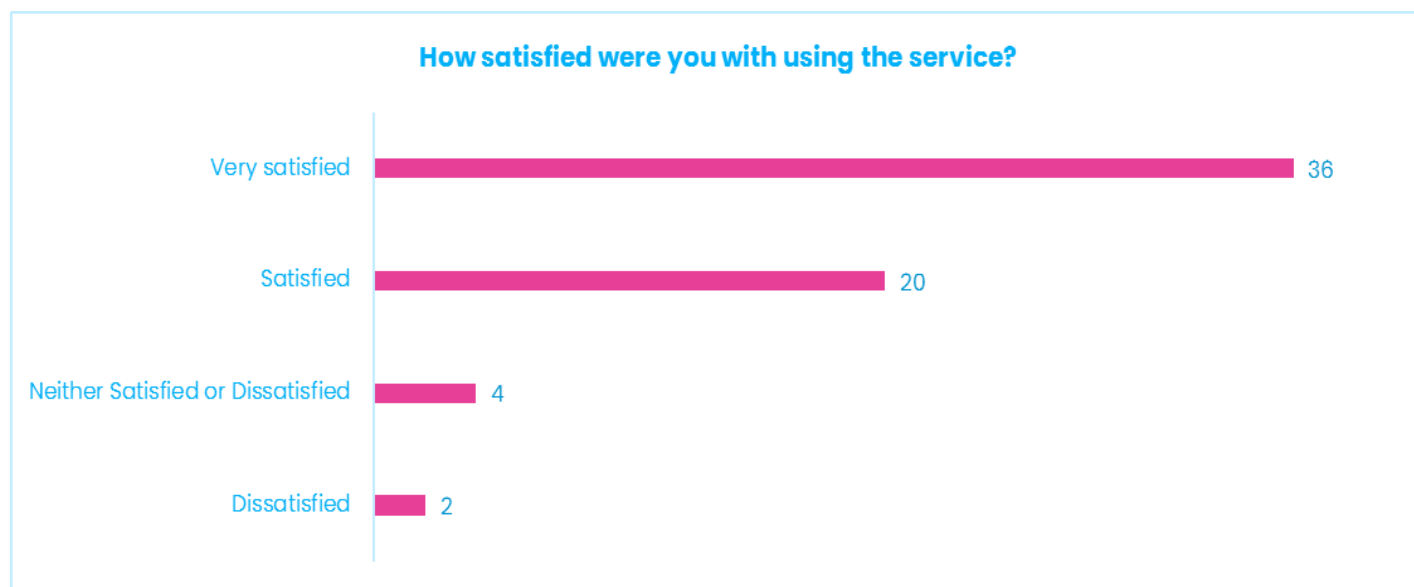
Westminster Chapel Food Bank

The [Westminster Chapel Food Bank](#) is a part of the Trussell Trust network, supporting Westminster residents on a referral basis. Aside from the food bank, the organisation offers a range of community activities, such as the Warm Space and Chomp and Chat.

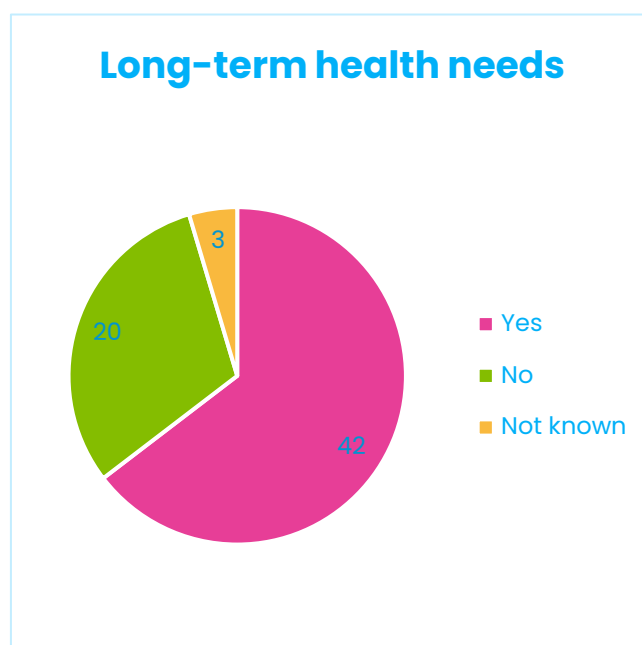
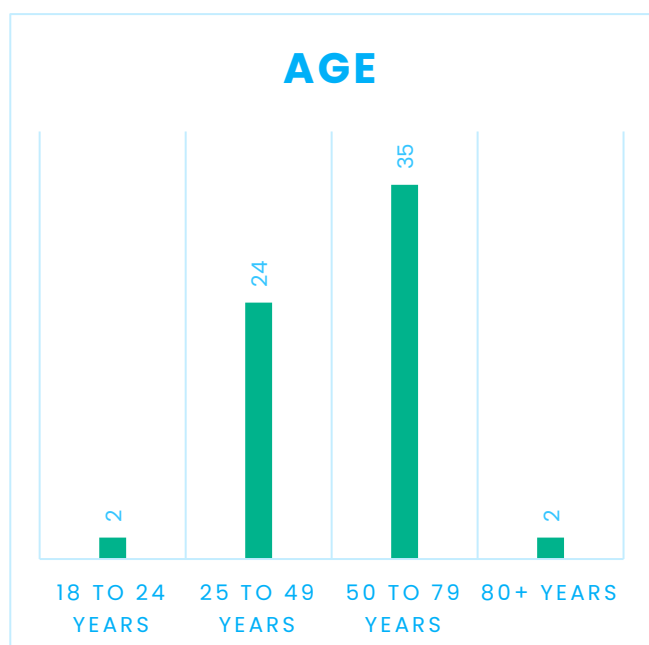
Appendix

We've summarised the survey responses across the food aid organisations visited by Healthwatch RBKC and Westminster. Note the data includes food aid services in both RBKC and Westminster.

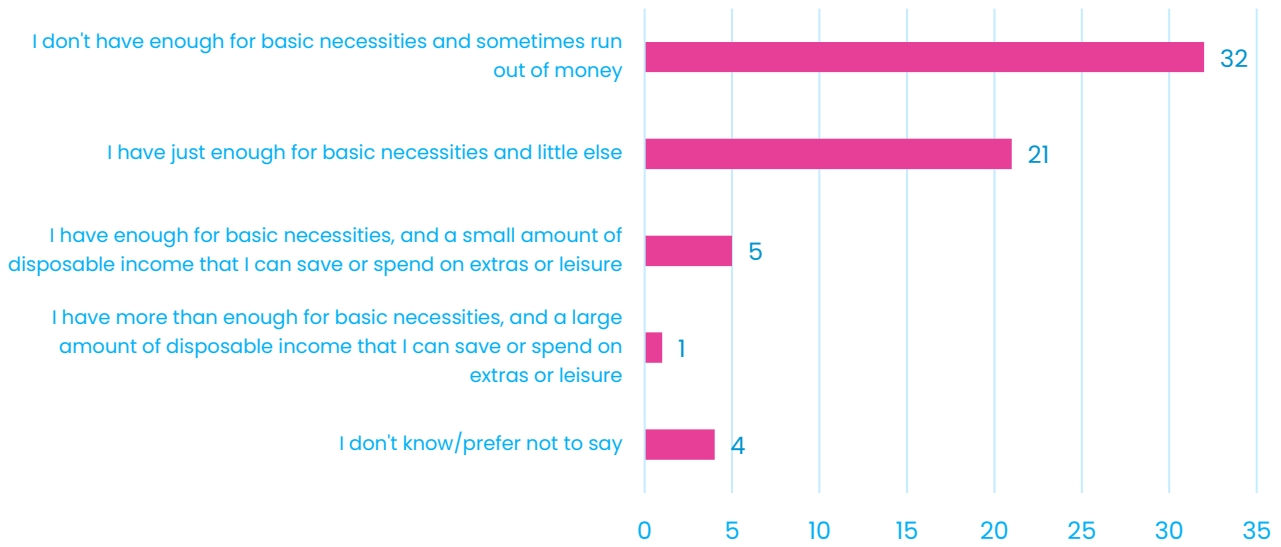
Satisfaction ratings across food aid services



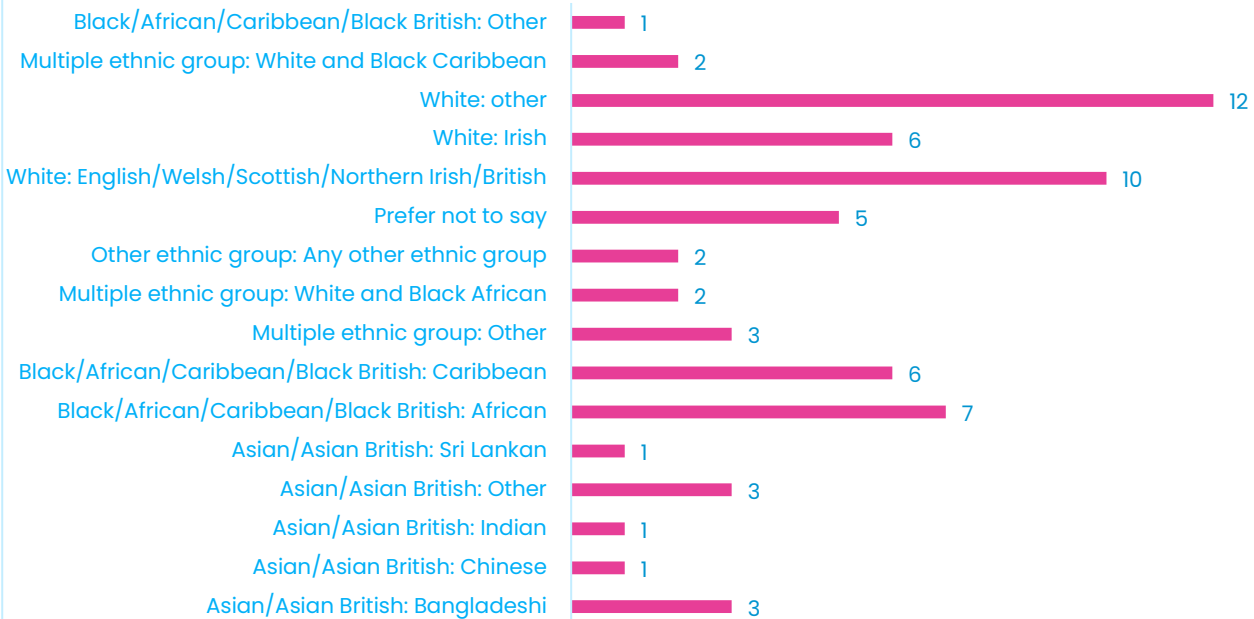
Demographics of people who use food aid services



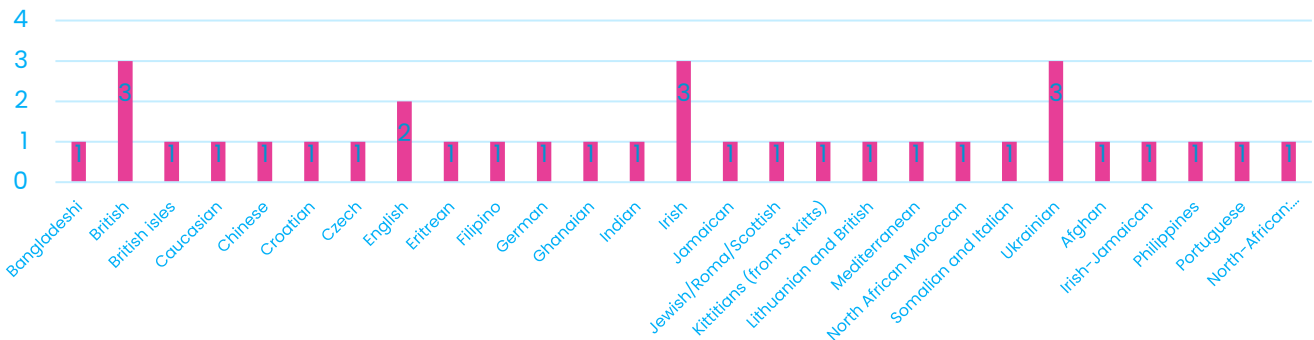
Financial status



Ethnic group



Specific ethnic group





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