

An Evaluation of the Impact of the Household Support Fund in Nottingham:

A 'Lifeline' for the Most Vulnerable People and Families

Executive Summary

Nottingham has very high very levels of food insecurity:

- The city's residents have low financial resilience and both quantitative studies and anecdotal reports indicate thousands have been pushed into food insecurity through the cost-of-living crisis. (Appendix 1)
- A recent survey of Nottingham residents found 43% of adults said they had reduced or skipped meals in the previous week, corresponding to 121,000 people struggling to obtain enough food on a weekly (and some of them on a daily) basis. (NFRP 2023)

The Household Support Fund (HSF) has become a central pillar in Nottingham's response to food insecurity and other forms of poverty

- Nottingham City Council has received £15.626m through the HSF since it was launched in April 2021. The council has distributed the money to (i) support the supply of food to vulnerable households through food banks, social supermarkets and social eating spaces; and (ii) pay for energy and supermarket vouchers to distribute in partnership with advice centres, housing associations and charities.
- In the first half of the latest funding period, HSF4 (June-October 2023), Nottingham City Council has supported 64,741 households in Nottingham (NCC 2024).
- In the first half of HSF4, funding to food banks, social supermarkets and social eating organisations was worth £235,922. It has been used to buy food/essentials, which is estimated to have supported 11,784 food parcels/meals (NCC 2024).
- In the first half of HSF4, funding for supermarket and fuel vouchers has paid for almost 120,000 vouchers at a cost of £2.9m (NCC 2024).

Food banks cannot meet the demand for food from donations; the HSF plugs the gap

- Food providers and advice organisations say that the HSF has been vital in supporting vulnerable households and it has become increasingly important during the last 18 months as need has increased
- HSF funding has become a 'lifeline' for food banks and emergency food providers as demand has outstripped the organisations' supply of food. One of the largest food banks in the city says demand has tripled since the Covid pandemic, but donations have halved; only the HSF has kept them going by enabling them to buy large quantities of food to keep feeding people
- Two of the biggest food banks/food support organisations are buying approximately half of the food they distribute using funds from the HSF
- A 'hard stop' in HSF funding on March 31 could precipitate a crisis in emergency food provision, Nottingham food banks warn

Thousands of struggling households have been helped by supermarket and fuel vouchers funded by the HSF – and the need is still there

- The distribution of supermarket and fuel vouchers has been vital for families struggling to cope in the cost-of-living crisis. In the first half of the HSF4 round alone, almost 120,000 vouchers have been distributed (NCC 2024).
- The people of Nottingham need government support in an ongoing crisis, say welfare organisations. They ‘dread to think’ what will happen if the HSF is stopped at the end of March (NCC 2024).

Central government urged: Don’t stop the ‘lifeline’ offered by the HSF, keep providing the support, but at the same time consider how the money could be used more effectively

- Food bank funding should continue since a ‘hard stop’ now, in the midst of an ongoing crisis could precipitate a food crisis
- Food banks should also be able to use HSF funding to address the underlying causes of food insecurity, such as financial vulnerability, and funds should be available to support advice workers
- Local authorities should be given longer to spend funding to allow more strategic decisions to be made on its use
- Welfare groups say central government should target funding at people receiving means tested benefits, while the local authority should have a discretionary pot of funding to support those in hardship
- Welfare benefits and work should provide sufficient income to allow households to afford the essentials of life, like food and fuel

Methodology

This report is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with people working in the Nottingham food system in the summer of 2023, as part of a Policy Lab exploring collaborations to tackle food insecurity at the local level (Walker and Kankanagme 2023). Further interviews were conducted in December 2023 and January 2024. Anxiety about increasing demand for food and deepening poverty among vulnerable city residents was already prevalent last summer. In addition, emergency food providers were concerned about the system’s reliance on the HSF and the consequences of funding being curtailed. Those concerns were amplified during the second round of interviews this winter. Data on the distribution of HSF money has been supplied by Nottingham City Council.

Nottingham has very high levels of food insecurity

Nottingham has very high levels of food insecurity and the crisis has become increasingly severe through the Covid pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis that has followed. Nottingham is particularly vulnerable (Appendix 1): In terms of ‘gross household income per head’, the city is the poorest local authority area in the country. More than a quarter of residents live in private rented accommodation, the number claiming Universal Credit is twice the English council average and the city is ranked 11/317 authorities in the Index of Multiple Deprivation. Since 2021, the rising price of food, energy and housing rents combined with high inflation rates has dramatically exacerbated the precarity of residents and pushed many more people into food insecurity (see Figures 1&2), (Food Foundation 2023, NFRP 2023).

In 2021, researchers at the University of Sheffield estimated that the city was in the highest quintile, nationwide, for food insecurity (Blake and Whitworth 2021). Using statistical techniques, they concluded 6% of Nottingham’s adult population (approx. 16,000 people) went ‘*hungry having skipped food for a whole day or more in the previous month*’. Furthermore, 11% of adults in Nottingham (approx. 30,000 people) were ‘*struggling to obtain enough food having skipped or shrunk a meal in the last month*’.

In 2023, a survey of Nottingham residents (see Figure 2), conducted on behalf of Nottingham Financial Resilience Partnership (NFRP 2023), found 43% of adults said they had ‘*reduced or skipped meals in the previous week*’, corresponding to 121,000 people struggling to obtain enough food on a weekly (and some of them on a daily) basis. While the studies are not directly comparable, the results suggest a dramatic increase in need, which would be consistent with the precarity of city residents and the experience of many food providers.

9.3 million adults (17.7% of households) experienced food insecurity in January 2023

Percentage of households experiencing food insecurity*:

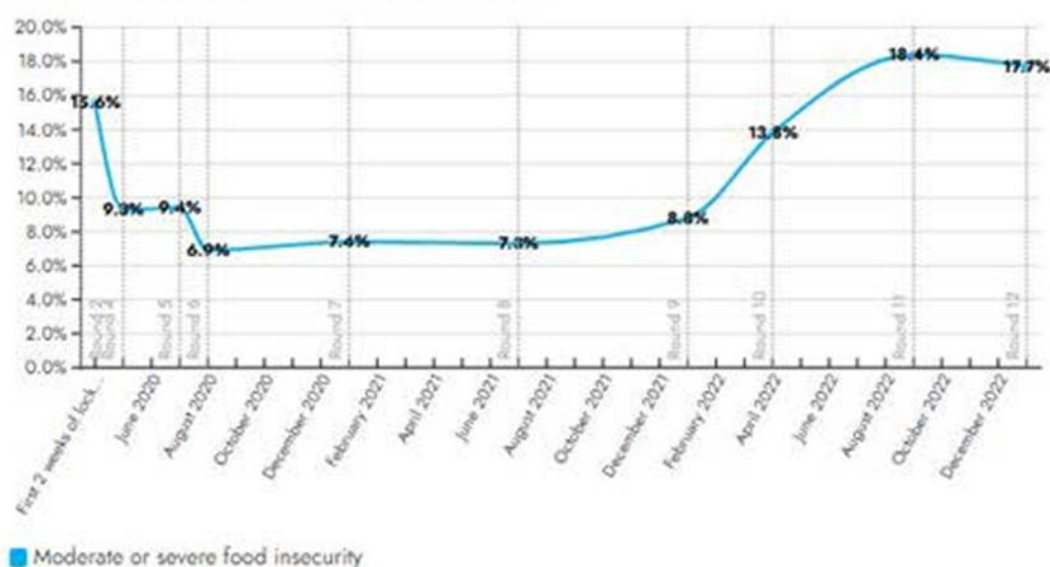


Figure 1: Households experiencing food insecurity (Food Foundation 2023)

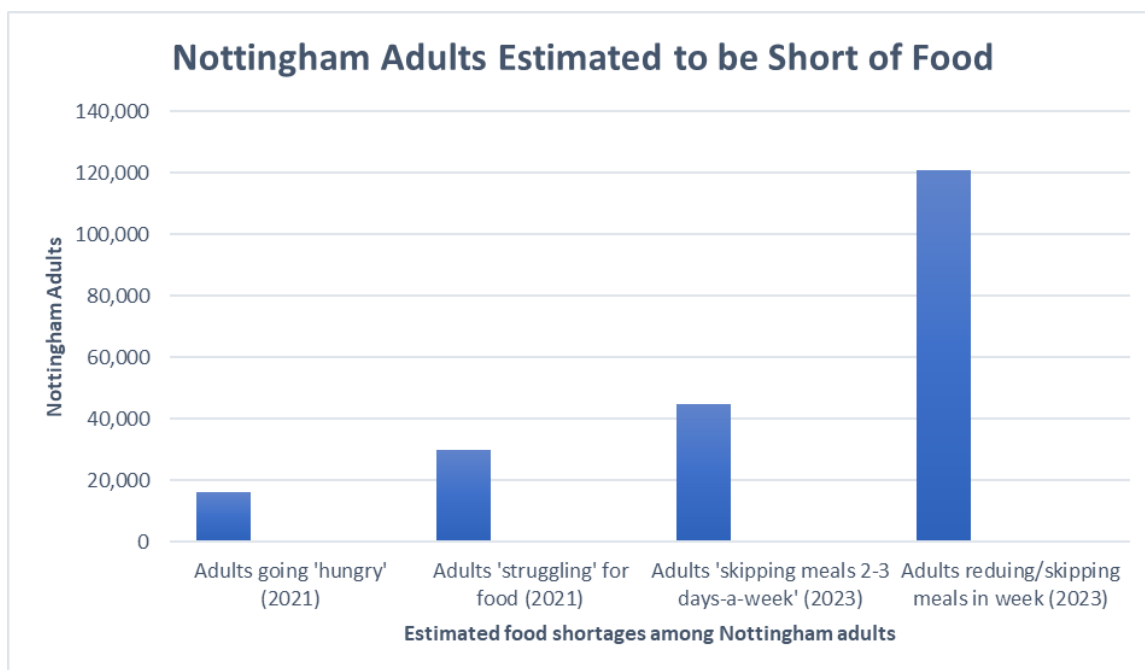


Figure 2: Nottingham food shortage: Modelled data (Blake and Whitworth 2021) and survey data (NFRP 2023)

During the last two years, food providers in Nottingham have seen very large increases in demand and they have struggled to keep up. At the same time, donations of food and money have reduced post-Covid as people have held on to their cash in the face of rising costs. Supermarket surplus has also become less reliable as stores cut waste and competition for the goods increases.

In Nottingham, the Household Support Fund has plugged that gap, and continues to do so. It has been a 'lifeline'. If the fund comes to a 'hard stop' on March 31, food providers in the city 'dread to think' what will happen to vulnerable families who rely on the food that money buys.

HSF supports thousands of vulnerable households

Nottingham City Council has been successful in securing funding via the Household Support Fund from the Department for Work and Pensions to support vulnerable households between 2021 and 2024. The fund was set up to provide support to households to meet daily needs such as food, clothing, and utilities during the Covid pandemic. The fund has been extended three times as low-income households continued to struggle post-pandemic, as energy and food prices increased dramatically during the cost-of-living crisis.

HSF Phase	Dates	Nottingham City Council Allocation
Round 1	Apr 2021 to Sept 2021	£1.414m
Round 2	Sept 2021 to Mar 2022	£3.556m
Round 3	Oct 2022 to Mar 2023	£3.556m
Round 4	Apr 2023 to Mar 2024: Funding1: June-Oct 2023 Funding2: Nov 23 – Mar 24	£7.1m

Source: Nottingham City Council (NCC 2024)

Household Support Funding was provided through county councils and unitary authorities. The councils had to develop their own plans to distribute the money. In Nottingham, the council created partnerships with trusted organisations, which already had relationships with some of the city’s most vulnerable people. The HSF was targeted with the help of these partners.

In the latest round of funding, HSF Round 4, Funding Period 1, the total amount of support provided via the programme was £3.165m which has helped 62,741 households (NCC 2024)

It is important to note that Nottingham City Council decided to assist people experiencing food insecurity by delivering financial support to food banks, social supermarkets and social eating projects, as well as offering supermarket and energy vouchers. This money was used to buy food and formed a significant part of the city’s response to food insecurity during the last three years. Many of the city’s food banks provide food to people with a referral, however, that is not the case across the board. Residents could also apply for support in the form of vouchers through partner organisations.

Partners		Distribution	
		Volume (Food parcels, meals/ vouchers)	Amount (£ Funding)
Food banks; Social supermarkets Social eating projects Fareshare	Funding supplied for the purchase of food/essentials to distribute to vulnerable households	11,783	£235,922
Advice Nottingham (including all 6 advice centres); Age UK; Independent Age; Welfare Rights; Nottingham City Housing Services Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing	Funding provided to support the provision of supermarket and energy vouchers	117,442	£2.9m

Source: Nottingham City Council (NCC 2024)

Nottingham City Council updates/programmes (NCC 2024)

- From November 1 the city council is increasing the monetary value of supermarket vouchers from £60, to £100 for a single person and £150 for a couple or family. Energy will increase from 2 x £49 to 3 x £49 for all applicants, to further support eligible residents across winter. Residents that have previously received energy vouchers since April will automatically receive vouchers again, supermarket vouchers will be distributed on an application basis.
- The council launched a programme to support residents with air-fryer cooking sessions, upskilling the knowledge and confidence of residents to prepare and cook healthy, nutritional meals. Residents will receive an air-fryer on completion of course, delivered by Metropolitan Thames Valley.

- Supporting residents with access to white goods through Nottingham City Councils Approved Provider Framework and community-based organisations.
- Supporting older residents and residents with disabilities with funds for taxis to help them access supermarkets and integrate residents within communities.
- High quality and wide-reaching marketing and communication campaigns across the city to increase visibility and knowledge of the Household Support Fund. This will be complimented through sharing of other support mechanisms available to residents over winter.
- Development of a legacy resource sighting a framework of support offered throughout the city post funding to support with the potential close of programmed locally.

HSF4 Spending and Impact (to date) (NCC 2024)

Nottingham has provided the following support to vulnerable residents as part of the current HSF4 scheme. The total amount of support provided via the HSF4 Funding Period 1 is £3.165m, which has helped 62,741 households. This equates to a spend to date of 45% with 55% remaining between October and the end of March 2024. (NCC 2024)

Support	Description	Volume	£ Amount
FSM Support	Council issued £2.02m of FSM supermarket vouchers since April 2023 to eligible children	92,047	£2,024,700
Supermarket Vouchers	Provided £328,000 of supermarket vouchers through community-based support organisations to vulnerable residents	17,177	£328,658
Energy Vouchers	Provided new applicants with 2 x £49 energy vouchers	3,018	£295,764
Energy Vouchers	Automatically issued additional vouchers to previous applicants (subject to benefits check) with another 2 x £49 energy vouchers	4,868	£477,064
Food Bank Support	Continue to provide extra funding to food banks for food/essential supplies to support referrals for the most vulnerable residents.	11,383	£150,922
Mobile Social Supermarket	Provide funding for food/supplies for Mobile Social Supermarket visiting deprived wards	400	£5,000
Social Eating Project Support	Fareshare to partly subsidise memberships for city-based social eating projects to help them sustain support with extra funding for essential items and also for new member organisations joining in the year.		£80,000
Disability Support	To work with Disability Support to provide supermarket vouchers to disabled residents who may not be able to access other provision via the existing network or community partners.	332	£10,000

Source: Nottingham City Council (NCC 2024)

The Impact of the HSF in Nottingham:

1. Food Banks and Emergency Food Providers

Food Banks and emergency food providers in Nottingham are currently dependent upon the HSF to meet the demand for food; if it is withdrawn there may be a crisis

Nottingham's food banks were largely self-sufficient but they have experienced a large fall in donations and demand has risen dramatically during the last 18 months. For the city's food banks, the HSF has been vital in enabling them to meet the needs of city residents and if it is withdrawn, they fear they may be forced to turn people away, or some could even close.

*I hope we will be here this time next year, but I don't know. Looking ahead it is going to be really tough. As time has gone by the HSF has become more important to us. Historically we have not been in favour of public money going into buying food, but given the situation over the last 18 months we are in a different world now. We are in desperate territory. Looking ahead we will have to look at cutting the number of people we can support... because we will not have the food. **Interviewee#1***

*'We've seen a drop in donations to the food bank between 30 and 40% over the last year. We think that's related to the cost-of-living increases and donors no longer being able to afford to donate so much. We've kind of been compensated for that because of the Household Support Fund monies that the city council's been able share' **Interviewee#2***

*'Since the beginning of last year [the city council] has provided some of the money distributed as grant funding to food banks and advice centres [through the Household Support Fund] ... My concern with that is some point down the line that government funding is going to stop and we're going to have to go back to educating the public of the need to contribute to food banks. And that could prove problematic.' **Interviewee#3***

Donations to food banks and providers have fallen dramatically in Nottingham, so there is now a big gap between what they receive and what they have to give out (Walker and Kankanamge 2023)

- The impact of Covid has had a profound effect, according to food providers. Food banks have been heavily reliant on church congregations for donations and church attendance fell sharply during the Covid pandemic and is yet to recover (Thornton 2023). Opportunities to meet church and community groups to appeal for food have reduced. As well as a fall in congregation, an experienced food bank manager also described how behaviour has changed and there is now less opportunity to network with, and appeal directly to, donors at meetings and talks.
- The cost of living has impacted those people who previously gave to food banks. Food banks were almost entirely reliant on public donations, but now people are struggling those who were being generous are holding on to their money. (People who donate to food banks are predominantly from middle- and low-income groups and more likely to not be in work or retired (YouGov poll January 12, 2021)).
- Food providers report supermarkets are reducing waste and there is increased competition for the products that are available.

Now, in Nottingham, the Household Support fund is making up for the shortage of donations.

'A massive thing that people need to know [about food donations]... is everything is down because people haven't got enough money to live on. Now I would say donations are down by 50%, at least... I would say about five or six weeks ago we were spending £1000 a week to cover [the cost of food]; at the minute probably £300 to £400- a-week.' **Interviewee#2**

'We are primarily public-donations-based, although because of the cost-of-living crisis we are for the first time ever, in the last 12 to 18 months, we are now buying [food] that's been resourced through public donations of money and grant applications and also the Household Support Fund. It's difficult to see how we would be sustainable if it wasn't for that. We do have an ethical objection to spending money on food, particularly public money, because we don't think that's the right route to go down... The people who donate to us are struggling with the cost of living as well. So, donations are a challenge. We gave out 3.5 tonnes of food in April. And we had in 1.5 tonnes, so there's a deficit there.' **Interviewee#6**

'Food banks are dealing with extreme situations and... donations are going down so people are having significant supply issues at the moment, very significant ...' **Interviewee#5**

A hard stop in HSF funding would cause a crisis in the food supply for people experiencing poverty in Nottingham and food banks could close

Food banks and providers in Nottingham are very concerned about the impact of a sudden end to funding through the HSF. While many in the community and voluntary sector are uncomfortable about using public funds to buy food to give to people in poverty, and they would like to see a more sustainable system in which people are able to purchase food for themselves, they also fear an end to HSF funding on March 31, 2024.

We are concerned because we have become reliant on funding over the last couple of years and when that money runs out, we are going to have to work a lot harder to increase the amount of donations we get...

If the HSF is coming to a hard stop that could cause a crisis at some food banks. That would be something people would struggle to cope with in many cases.

Instead of just stopping the HSF, can we use the experience during a period of review and take a hard look at the best way of using that money in the long term The sensible thing would be an interim period. In the longer term there needs to be a sensible look at how to support people in need. **Interviewee#2**

For some providers the situation is starker. They fear that they may be forced to close, or at the very least they would have to stop supporting some of their existing clients.

'We've been going for 12 years and I would say the current situation is pretty dire. We are seeing unsustainable levels of demand... January was the highest in 12 years, February, the highest in 12 years. That was beaten again in March...

We would not want to be permanently reliant on Government handouts... but in more than a decade we have never seen anything like this. We have gone from being reliant on the generosity of [local people] to meet the demand of those who are sent to us to now, [now] we

are looking at turning people away. If we want to continue to support the poorest people, who are in food poverty, we have to find some way to keep going until this crisis is over.

Our projections suggest that at the end of this financial year we will be £20,000 short of where we need to be [even with the current HSF payments]. After March there will be a couple of choices: Do we spend cash reserves until we run out of money or do we restrict the number of people coming? And where do we find extra donations. It is uncharted territory.

Interviewee#1

Other providers say they ‘dread to think’ what will happen if the HSF is cut off at the end of March, because families rely on them to supply food.

*The HSF has been a lifeline in ensuring that we can continue to support those in our community that are struggling most. Withdrawing this support will reduce our capacity and have widespread consequences for the most disadvantaged families in Nottingham. **Interviewee#6***

*Food banks are literally filling the gap that should be provided for with public funds. The HSF has been really helpful to buy the food and the food banks are going to miss that cash. There needs to be money to sustain them. **Interviewee#8.***

2. Supermarket and Fuel Vouchers

Supermarket and Fuel Vouchers have made a massive difference in Nottingham

Supermarket and fuel vouchers have made a huge difference and households will suffer if they are withdrawn

Almost 120,000 supermarket and fuel vouchers have been given out in Nottingham during the first half of HSF 4 (June-October 2023), alone. Some of the support is closely targeted, for example, supermarket vouchers are supplied to families where children qualify for free school meals and energy vouchers are subject to benefits checks. The vouchers have made a huge difference to vulnerable households in the city, say support organisations. Indeed, after vouchers go out the demand at city food banks falls, suggesting they have a direct, albeit transitory, impact on food insecurity.

*People are desperate and people are struggling. Most of the debt clients we see have a deficit in disposable income. We have no doubt that people need some financial help from the government. **Interviewee#8***

*When supermarket vouchers went out, we did have a sharp drop in people coming to the food banks. When you put money into people’s pockets, I don’t have proof, but it does appear to significantly reduce people coming into food banks, at least temporarily. **Interviewee#6***

*If the HSF ended it would be devastating for the community and families. Those people are already living in poverty. People are worried about how they feed their children, whether they can afford enough gas to make a meal or whether they can put the washing machine on. Without HSF I don’t know what would happen. I dread to think. **Interviewee#7***

Impact of ending the HSF on March 31

Emergency food providers and support organisations, which have been involved in issuing supermarket and fuel vouchers, are fearful of what will happen if Government withdraws the HSF on March 31, 2024.

As the discussion above demonstrates, food insecurity has increased alarmingly in Nottingham since the Covid pandemic. Increasingly, the HSF has plugged a gap and offered support to the most vulnerable households.

However, emergency food providers are concerned with institutionalising food aid. They believe people should be able to have a secure lifestyle and buy the food they need, whether they are earning money or in receipt of welfare benefits. Some argue for an interim period in which the HSF is maintained in its current form, while new approaches are considered.

Similarly, support organisations, which have been involved in the distribution of food vouchers, are concerned that they do not necessarily reach all of the people who need them, since households had to apply for some vouchers. In one case, up to 300 people were queuing to obtain vouchers from an advice centre.

They are better than no support, however, we believe that there should have been an automated [system for] all clients in receipt of means tested benefits. The local authority should have a small pot [to] administer for those in hardship, but not in receipt of means-tested benefits. There is a huge need for financial support from government to those people who are really struggling and on means tested benefits, [but we also] believe that some of those struggling the most and not receiving support will not know about their entitlement to this help and will not have received this financial support. Interviewee#8

The broader issue is, is [buying food] the most effective way of using the money. Can it be used more strategically because It's a sticking plaster. It would be more beneficial in the long run if more of our funds were used to fund advice workers. Interviewee#2

Recommendations: Keep HSF, Review it, Improve It

The community and voluntary sector in Nottingham want the HSF to continue so that people in poverty continue to receive government support at a time of ongoing crisis, but they think it could be provided more effectively. Among the suggestions are:

- Provide funding to local authorities within a longer time frame to allow more strategic decisions to be made on how it is spent
- Allow financial support to food banks to be spent on more wraparound activities such as financial advice and support, which would address some underlying issues of food insecurity
- Ensure that welfare benefits are sufficient for people to afford the essentials, such as food and fuel, to have a secure lifestyle
- Targeted payments should be made centrally to all clients in receipt of means tested benefits. At the same time the LA should have a fund available for those in hardship, but not in receipt of means tested benefits, such as the low paid, or people with no recourse to public funds

*Instead of just stopping the HSF, can we use the experience during a period of review and take a hard look at the best way of using that money in the long term The sensible thing would be an interim period. If you just stop the funding it could cause a crisis. In the longer term there needs to be a sensible look at how to support people in need. **Interviewee#5***

*The HSF helps, it is better than nothing, but it is a sticking plaster. It shouldn't go, but there should be a better way of doing it. **Interviewee#8***

Charles Walker January 2024

Charles is a Research Fellow at Nottingham Trent University. This report was written in a voluntary capacity with the support of Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham Financial Resilience Partnership, members of the Nottingham food system and Nottingham City Council

Appendix 1

Low Financial Resilience in Nottingham			
Indicator	Nottingham	United Kingdom	Source
Index Multiple Deprivation	11/317 authorities	-	ONS 2019: Index of Multiple Deprivation
IMD Domain: Income	21/317 authorities	-	ONS 2021: Index of Multiple Deprivation
Gross Weekly Pay (Full-Time)	£557.8	£642.2	ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2022
Gross Disposable Household Income per head	£13,952 (2020)	£21,440 (2020)	ONS 2022 Regional gross disposable household income, UK: 1997 to 2020
Residents with no qualifications	10.9%	6.6%	ONS Annual Population Survey 2021
Numeracy Index	99 th Percentile (Higher number = poorer numeracy)	-	National Numeracy
Monthly Private Sector Rent Rise – 2-bed 2020 to 2023	13%	12% (English LA average)	ONS/LGA
Universal Credit	40,403	22,676 (English LA average)	DWP/LGA
%Private Renters	28.6%	19% (England)	
Social Mobility	310/324 Local authorities (2016)	-	Social Mobility and Poverty Commission

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