

# Consumer Insights Tracker: Chapter 4 Food affordability and insecurity

## 4.1 Food affordability and food prices

The report includes demographic analysis of the following measures of food affordability and food prices:

- levels of worry about food affordability
- cutting down on the size of meals or skipping meals for financial reasons
- use of food banks and food charities
- not being able to afford essential food shopping in the past month
- eating food past its use-by-date because could not afford to buy more food
- could not afford to eat a healthy balanced diet
- eaten cold food as not able to afford to cook hot food

Please note that while this chapter provides a summary of key demographic differences, more comprehensive details (including all significant differences between groups) can be found in the [FSA data catalogue](#).

### Consumer concerns about food affordability

In March 2023, over a third (35%) of participants reported being worried about food affordability, a significant increase from 31% in March 2022. This is also significantly higher than when tracking began in April 2020 (28%). In September 2022, two in five participants (40%) were worried about food affordability, the highest proportion recorded since tracking began (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Reported levels of worry about food affordability over time (April 2020 – March 2023)**

Data source: COVID-19 Consumer tracker April 2020-October 2021, Consumer Insights Tracker November 2021- March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75, Fieldwork dates and sample sizes available in Annex 1 and 2.

### **Summary of demographic groups**

In March 2023, the following demographic groups were significantly more likely to report feeling worried about food affordability:

- participants from households with at least one child present compared to households with no children present
- those from single person and larger households (3+) compared to 2 person households
- younger participants (16-24-year-olds and 25-34-year-olds) compared to older participants (55-75-year-olds)
- participants with a long-term health condition compared to those without a long-term health condition

Figure 2 summarises these demographic differences for March 2023.

When comparing demographic data from March 2023 to March 2022, there have been some significant changes. The proportion of people without children who are worried about food affordability has risen significantly, from one in four (25%) in March 2022, to three in ten (30%) in March 2023.

Demographic figures from March 2023 show that single person and large households (3+) are significantly more likely to be worried about food affordability, when compared with 2 person households. While a quarter (26%) of 2 person households are concerned about affordability, this increases to a third (35%) for single person households, 39% for 3 person households, and just over four in ten (42%) of those in larger households (4+).

Since March 2022, concern about food affordability has also significantly increased amongst males, rising 5 percentage points to 34% in March 2023 (29% in March 2022). There has been no significant change in concern amongst females.

When looking at changes according to different age groups over the year, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of those aged 25-34 who reported being worried about the affordability of food; 50% in March 2023 compared to 42% in March 2022. This now means that half of those aged 16-24 (51%) and 24-34 (50%) are worried about the affordability of food. There have been no other significant changes across age groups between March 2022 and March 2023.

Both those working and those not working are significantly more worried about food affordability in March 2023 compared to March 2022. There is no significant difference between the two groups.

As was the case in March 2022, figures from March 2023 show that people with a long-term health condition are significantly more likely to be worried about food affordability (41%) than those without a health condition (32%).

**Figure 2: Reported worries about food affordability; key demographic differences (March 2023)**

Data source: Consumer Insights Tracker March 2022-March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75, Fieldwork dates and sample sizes available in Annex 2 and 3.

**Consumer perceptions of food prices**

In March 2023, over three quarters (76%) of participants reported that their food shopping had 'got more expensive', in line with March 2022 (74%). The proportion reporting that their food had 'got more expensive' peaked at 80% in June 2022 and since then the proportion reporting this has remained relatively stable at around three quarters each month (excluding a significant drop to 69% in January 2023) (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Participants' perceptions of the price of their food shopping over time (March 2022 – March 2023)**

Data source: Consumer Insights Tracker March 2022- March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75, Fieldwork dates and sample sizes available in Annex 2 and 3.

## **4.2 Food insecurity**

### **Cutting or skipping meals for affordability reasons**

The Consumer Insights Tracker collects data on participants cutting down the size of their meals or skipping meals because they did not have enough money to buy food.

Findings from March 2023 show that over a quarter (27%) reported cutting down the size of meals or skipping meals for financial reasons. This is a significant increase from March 2022 (22%). In April 2020, when tracking began, 18% reported cutting down or skipping meals. Since then, there has been an increase, reaching peaks of 31% cutting down or skipping meals for financial reasons in June 2022 and October 2022 (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Participants who reported cutting down the size of meals or skipping meals 'at least once' or more in the month prior because they did not have enough money to buy food (April 2020 – March 2023)**

Data source: COVID-19 Consumer tracker April 2020-October 2021, Consumer Insights Tracker November 2021- March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75, Fieldwork dates and sample sizes available in Annex 1, 2 and 3.

### **Summary of demographic groups**

In March 2023, the following demographic groups were significantly more likely to report skipping meals or cutting down the size of meals because they could not afford food:

- those from households with at least one child present compared to households with no children present
- those from single person and larger households (3+) compared to 2 person households
- younger participants (16-24-year-olds and 25–34-year-olds) compared to older participants (55-75-year-olds)
- participants with a health condition compared to those without a health condition

Figure 5 summarises these demographic differences for March 2023.

**Figure 5: Demographic breakdown of participants reporting cutting down the size of meals or skipping meals ‘at least once’ or more because they did not have enough money to buy food (March 2022 and March 2023)**

Data source: Consumer Insights Tracker March 2022-March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75, Fieldwork dates and sample sizes available in Annex 2 and 3.

People with children were more likely to report skipping or cutting down on the size of meals, compared to those without children, in both March 2022 and March 2023. There has been no significant change over time on this measure for those with children (35% in March 2023 vs. 34% in March 2022). However, participants without children were significantly more likely to report this behaviour in March 2023 (22%) than in March 2022 (16%).

Demographic figures from March 2023 show that single person and larger households (3+) are significantly more likely to report skipping or cutting down on meals, when compared with 2 person households. While 19% of 2 person households reported this behaviour, this increases to 28% for both single person and 3 person households, while a third (33%) of those in large households (4+) reported skipping or cutting down meals because they did not have enough money to buy food. There have been no significant changes when comparing demographic data from March 2022 with March 2023.

In March 2023, males (28% vs. 23% in March 2022) and females (26% vs. 22% in March 2022) were both significantly more likely than a year ago to have skipped or cut down meals because they did not have enough money to buy food.

The proportion of participants aged 55-75 that reported skipping or cutting down on meals in March 2023 has significantly increased compared to the previous year (11% vs. 6% in March 2022). This was also the case for participants aged 35-44 (30% in March 2023 vs. 19% in March 2022). Younger people aged 16-24 (49%) and 25-44 (44%) are still more likely than people aged 55-75 to skip or cut down on meals, as was the case in March 2022 (52% for 16-24 and 37% for 25-44).

There has been a significant increase between March 2022 and March 2023, in both the proportion of working people (24% in March 2022 vs. 28% in March 2023) and the proportion of non-working people skipping or cutting down their meals (19% in March 2022 vs. 25% in March 2023).

Finally, in March 2023, over a third (37%) of people with a long-term health condition reported skipping or cutting down on meals because of affordability, significantly more than those without a health condition (21%). Comparing March 2022 and March 2023, there is not a significant difference among those with a health condition (32% in March 2022) or without a health condition (19% in March 2022).

## **Use of food banks and food charities**

In March 2023, 13% of people reported using a food bank or food charity, in line with the figure from March 2022 (15%). This is not significantly different to the 12-month average (15%) but is significantly higher than when tracking began in April 2020 (8%). Reported usage of a food charity or food bank has risen steadily over time and in May, August and September 2022 reached a figure of 17% (Figure 6).

### **Figure 6: Reported use of food banks or food charities over time (April 2020 – March 2023)**

Data source: COVID-19 consumer tracker April 2020-October 2021, Consumer Insights Tracker November 2021- March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75, Fieldwork dates and sample sizes available in Annex 1, 2 and 3.

From November 2021 the phrasing of this question changed from 'In the last month, how often, if at all, have you arranged for food to be delivered to your house through a food charity or food bank?' to 'in the last month, how often, if at all, have you used a food charity or food bank?'

## **Summary of demographic groups**

In March 2023, the following demographic groups were significantly more likely to report using a food bank or food charity:

- households with at least one child present compared to households with no children present
- those from larger households (3 and 4+) compared to smaller households (up to 2 person households)

- male participants compared to female participants
- younger participants (16-24-year-olds and 25-34-year-olds) compared to older participants (55-75-year-olds)
- participants in work compared to those not in work
- participants with a health condition compared to those without a health condition

Figure 7 summarises these demographic differences for March 2023.

In March 2023, two in five (20%) participants with children in their household reported using a food bank or food charity, a figure significantly higher than households without children (9%). This difference is smaller than in March 2022 (27% with children vs. 9% without children).

Figures for March 2023 show that the proportion of participants living in a larger household (4+) that reported using a food bank or food charity has significantly decreased since March 2022 (16% in March 2023 vs. 23% in March 2022). However, participants living in larger households (3 and 4+) continue to be significantly more likely to use a food charity or food bank (15% and 16% respectively) compared to those living in two person households (9%) and single person households (9%).

When looking at the demographic data for gender in March 2023, men are significantly more likely than women to use a food bank or food charity (17% of men vs. 9% of women). There has been a significant decrease in the proportion of women using a food bank or food charity since March 2022 (12% vs. 9% in March 2023).

Significantly fewer younger participants (aged 16-24) reported using a food bank or food charity in March 2023 (24%) compared to March 2022 (37%). Participants aged 16-34 were still significantly more likely to report using a food bank or food charity than participants aged 35-75 in both March 2022 and March 2023.

In March 2023, those in work were significantly more likely to have used a food bank or food charity (15%) compared to those not working (8%). However, since March 2022 there has been a significant decline in people who are in work and report using a food charity or food bank (15% compared to 18% in March 2022), whilst the proportion of non-working participants has remained stable.

Data from March 2023 shows that those with a health condition are significantly more likely to have used a food bank or food charity compared to participants without a health condition (17% vs. 10% of those who do not have a health condition).

**Figure 7: Reported use of food banks and food charities by key demographic groups (March 2022 and March 2023)**



Data source: Consumer Insights Tracker March 2022-March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75, Fieldwork dates and sample sizes available in Annex 2 and 3.

### **Unable to afford essential food shopping**

March 2023 findings show that over a quarter (26%) of people reported not being able to afford their essential food shopping in the past month. This figure has remained relatively stable since the question was first asked in September 2022 (28%) (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Participants who reported not being able to afford their essential food shopping in the past month (September 2022 – March 2023)**

Data source: Consumer Insights Tracker September 2022-March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75, Fieldwork dates and full sample sizes available in Annex 2.

### **Summary of demographic groups**

In March 2023, the following demographic groups (Figure 9) were significantly more likely to report not being able to afford their essential food shopping last month:

- households with at least one child present compared to households with no children present
- those from single person and larger households (3+) compared to 2 person households.
- younger participants (16-24 year-olds and 25-34 year-olds) compared to older participants aged 35 or over
- participants with a health condition compared to those without a health condition

### **Figure 9: Participants who reported not being able to afford their essential food shopping in the past month by key demographic groups (March 2023)**

Data source: Consumer Insights Tracker March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75, Fieldwork dates and sample sizes available in Annex 2 and 3.

### **Eaten food past its use-by date because could not afford to buy more food**

In March 2023, over a quarter of people (28%) reported eating food past its use-by date because they could not afford to buy more food. The proportion of people who reported this behaviour peaked at a third (33%) in October 2022. This declined in November 2022 and has remained stable over recent months (Figure 10).

### **Figure 10: Participants who reported eating food past its use-by-date because they could not afford to buy more food in the past month (September 2022 – March 2023)**

Data source: Consumer Insights Tracker September 2022-March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75, Fieldwork dates and full sample sizes available in Annex 2.

### **Summary of demographic groups**

In March 2023, the following demographic groups (Figure 11) were significantly more likely to report eating food past its use-by date because they could not afford to buy more food:

- households with at least one child present compared to households with no children present
- those from single person and larger households (3+) compared to 2 person households
- younger participants (16-24-year-olds and 25-34-year-olds) compared to older participants aged 35 or over
- participants in work compared to those not in work
- participants with a health condition compared to those without a health condition

**Figure 11: Participants who reported eating food past its use-by-date because they could not afford to buy more food in the past month by key demographic groups (March 2023)**

Data source: Consumer Insights Tracker March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75, Fieldwork dates and full sample sizes available in Annex 2 and 3.

### **Could not afford to eat a healthy balanced diet**

In March 2023, around a third (32%) of participants reported that they could not afford to eat a healthy balanced diet. The proportion of people reporting this peaked in October 2022 (36%) and since then has remained relatively stable at around three in ten (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Participants who reported they could not afford to eat a healthy balanced diet in the past month (September 2022 – March 2023)**

Data source: Consumer Insights Tracker September 2022-March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75, Fieldwork dates and full sample sizes available in Annex 2.

### **Summary of demographic groups**

In March 2023, the following demographic groups (Figure 13) were significantly more likely to report not being able to afford to eat a healthy balanced diet:

- households with at least one child present compared to households with no children present
- those from single person and larger households (3+) compared to 2 person households
- younger participants (16-24-year-olds and 25-34-year-olds) compared to older participants aged 35 or over
- participants with a health condition compared to those without a health condition

### **Figure 13: Participants who reported they could not afford to eat a healthy balanced diet in the past month by key demographic groups (March 2023)**

Data source: Consumer Insights Tracker March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75, Fieldwork dates and full sample sizes available in Annex 2 and 3.

### **Eaten cold food as not able to afford to cook hot food**

Findings from March 2023 show that one in five (20%) people reported eating cold food in the past month because they could not afford to cook hot food. The figure was highest when the question was first asked in September 2022 (25%). This declined in November 2022 and has remained stable between December 2022 and March 2023, with March 2023 (20%) significantly lower than September 2022 (Figure 14).

### **Figure 14: Participants who reported they have eaten cold food because they could not afford to cook hot food in the past month (September 2022 – March 2023)**

Data source: Consumer Insights Tracker September 2022-March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75, Fieldwork dates and full sample sizes available in Annex 2.

### **Summary of demographic groups**

In March 2023, the following demographic groups (Figure 15) were significantly more likely to report not being able to afford to cook hot food:

- households with at least one child present compared to households with no children present
- those from single person and larger households (3+) compared to 2 person households
- male participants compared to female participants
- younger participants (16-24 year-olds and 25-34 year-olds) compared to older participants aged 35 or over
- participants in work compared to those not in work
- participants with a health condition compared to those without a health condition

**Figure 15: Participants who reported they have eaten cold food because they could not afford to cook hot food in the past month by demographics (March 2023)**

Data source: Consumer Insights Tracker March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75, Fieldwork dates and full sample sizes available in Annex 2 and 3.

### **Consumer behaviours to reduce energy bills and save money**

A new question was added to the Consumer Insights Tracker in September 2022 to monitor any behaviour changes related to the cooking and storing of food in response to rising energy bills and the [Energy Price Guarantee \(EPG\)](#). The EPG, introduced from 1 October, was designed to set a cap on standing charges and prices per unit of gas and electricity. In addition, the government implemented the Energy Bills Support Scheme (EBSS), giving all households a non-repayable grant of £400 as a credit from their energy supplier to be paid over six months from October 2022 to March 2023. The consumer behaviours included in this new question were based on behaviours reported in media outlets and anecdotal accounts.

The survey did not include questions that measured the direct impact of EPG or EBSS on consumer behaviour and therefore it is not possible to link these findings to any of these specific policies or schemes.

In March 2023, over six in ten (63%) participants reported using cheaper cooking methods (such as a microwave, air fryer or slow cooker) instead of an oven, to reduce energy bills and save money. This peaked at two thirds (67%) in October 2022 and stabilised from November 2022 until March 2023.

In March 2023, around a quarter of participants (26%) reported reducing the length of time they cooked their food and a similar proportion (25%) reported lowering the cooking temperature. Both of these figures are significantly higher compared to when tracking began in September 2022 (29% and 28% respectively) but have remained stable since November 2022.

**Figure 16: Participants who reported: making changes to how they cooked food in the last month (September 2022 to March 2023)**

Data source: Consumer Insights Tracker September 2022-March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75. Fieldwork dates and full sample sizes available in Annex 2.

Participants are also asked if they have changed the settings on their fridge and/or freezer so that food is being kept at a warmer temperature – more than one in five (22%) took this action in March 2023. This figure peaked at 27% when the question was first asked in September 2022 but has declined over time and was significantly lower in March 2023 (22%) (Figure 17).

In March 2023, 14% of participants reported turning off a fridge or freezer that contains food. This figure peaked at 18% in September and October 2022, and since then there has been a significant decrease in people taking this action.

**Figure 17: Participants who reported changing how they store food in a fridge or freezer in the last month (September 2022 to March 2023)**



Data source: Consumer Insights Tracker September 2022-March 2023, Online, England, Wales and NI, adults 16-75. Fieldwork dates and full sample sizes available in Annex 2.