

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

Why people stopped using the foodbank: a small-scale study

March 2026

Executive Summary

This small-scale study explored what happened to former Good Company clients who had regularly used the Foodbank but had not returned for at least six months. Through 22 in-depth interviews, we examined whether people's financial situations had improved or if there were other reasons why they were no longer coming to the Foodbank. The key findings are:

Most participants (17 of 22) were better off financially than when they last visited the Foodbank, although only two were "living comfortably", with the rest still feeling financially precarious. Significant improvements were typically driven by major life changes, such as securing employment or moving to more affordable housing, often supported by Good Company and other local agencies. Smaller gains came through resolving benefit claims or debt advice.

Five participants remained under significant financial strain and faced ongoing challenges, including caring responsibilities, problem debt, benefit delays, and high private rents. Critically, this group had stopped using the Foodbank, due to losing touch with referral agencies, uncertainty about eligibility, or anxiety about returning - not because their need had gone away.

Feedback on the Foodbank was overwhelmingly positive, with participants consistently praising the kindness and non-judgemental approach of staff and volunteers, as well as valuing the additional support such as clothing, bedding and energy top-ups.

Emergency food provision remains vital, but lasting change is most likely when people receive ongoing, tailored support, particularly around employment, housing, debt and benefits, alongside a strong network of family, friends and trusted local organisations.



Background

Good Company operates five food bank centres in Banstead, Epsom, Ewell, Leatherhead and Tadworth, alongside a wide range of other prevention and participation projects. Last year, we distributed food to around 6,500 people, a 38% decrease compared with 2023. Most of this reduction has come through a fall in the number of households regularly coming back to the Foodbank, whilst the number of first-time users has remained fairly steady. This decline in repeat clients suggests that our strategy to tackle the root causes of poverty is working.



The purpose of this research project was to follow up with clients who used to visit the Foodbank frequently, but have not been back to one of our centres for six months or more. This is useful to know, as we currently have very limited information about what happens to people after using our service. We wanted to find out if an improvement in people's financial situation meant they no longer needed the Foodbank, or if there were other reasons for them not coming back. Understanding what has happened to former clients – and especially what made the difference to them if they are now better off – will help us to know how best to support other people using the Foodbank.

Approach

We focused on a sub-group of clients who have visited the Foodbank on multiple occasions, but not for at least six months. There is a risk with re-contacting people who have moved on from needing support, who may not want to re-live a difficult time in their lives. So, we restricted the sample to those who had been to the Foodbank within the last 12 months (but not in the last six). This also ensured that their experience of using the Foodbank was relatively recent, enabling them to provide a more accurate recollection of what happened at the time and since.

This gave us an initial list of 142 former clients. We were advised to exclude 48 of these, due to specific concerns about re-contacting them. This left us with just under 100 potential interviewees, who were selected randomly, whilst ensuring a broad mix by gender, location and family type.

This research was conducted in three stages:

- 1 An initial text message to let people know that we would be calling them, with the opportunity to opt out.
- 2 A short "service user improvement" phone call to ask about their experience of using the Foodbank, lasting approximately five minutes.
- 3 With informed consent, a separate and more in-depth phone interview about their financial situation before and after using the Foodbank, lasting approximately 15 minutes. A copy of the topic guide is available on request.

Participants in the third stage of the research were offered a £20 e-voucher to thank them for taking part. Detailed notes from the phone interviews were recorded and analysed using a simple matrix in Excel.

Sample

We completed 26 “service improvement calls” in October and November 2025, and 22 of these former clients agreed to be interviewed in more depth about their experiences since last visiting the Foodbank. This sample includes a representative mix of clients by sex (5 men, 17 women), household type (9 single parents, 5 single adults, 4 couples with children, 1 couple without children, and 3 multi-adult households) and life experiences.

When asked why they first came to the Foodbank, people mentioned a wide range of contributing factors. Most clients faced multiple issues - 3 on average - most commonly to do with benefits, debt (9 each), poor health, cost of living, additional caring responsibilities (8 each), and employment (6). Domestic abuse was the main reason in five cases.

The people we interviewed had made an average of 15 visits to the Foodbank - ranging from 4 to 72 - going as far back as 2019. All but two clients had received other practical support via Good Company, such as children’s clothing, energy assistance, debt advice, and household items - and five had received long-term assistance from one or more of our support workers for between seven months and three years.

Key Findings

The majority of clients were now doing better financially.

Most of the clients we interviewed - 17 out of 22 - said they were a “lot better off” (7) or a “little better off” (10) than when they last visited the foodbank more than six months previously. Two people said they were now “living comfortably”, but most of this group are “coping, but not comfortable”. Their financial situation is still quite precarious in many cases – “scraping by”, “money is tight” being typical responses when asked how they are getting on. One person said he is better off than before, though still finding it difficult – “It’s still not great, but we’re heading in the right direction, and there’s not as much stress about how I’m going to feed my children.” He is waiting for his son’s DLA to come through and is applying for Carer’s Allowance, which will further ease their financial situation.

How are you coping financially at the moment?	How has your financial situation changed since last visit to Foodbank?				
	Worse off	About the same	A bit better off	A lot better off	TOTALS
Difficult	1	4	1	0	6
Coping, not comfortable	0	0	9	5	14
Comfortable	0	0	0	2	2
TOTALS	1	4	10	7	22

Those who were a lot better off achieved this through a significant life change, usually with external support on a range of issues.

Nearly all who reported being “a lot better off” had experienced a substantive change in their life circumstances, such as a getting a new job (4 of 7), moving to cheaper accommodation (3), or both (1).

Those who were a lot better off had typically been connected to support from a range of different agencies, depending on the challenges they were facing. For example, they may have received financial help (e.g. debt/benefits advice, or support with housing, employment and/or well-being (e.g. access to counselling)). Susan’s story shows how a combination of financial assistance, employment advice, and access to well-being support through her GP enabled her to find a job and significantly improve her financial situation.

Susan’s story “A lot better off than before”

Susan lives with her adult children and rents from a housing association. When her marriage broke down, she lost her job at the same time and found herself solely reliant on Universal Credit. She fell into significant debt, including around £4,000 in rent arrears, and her anxiety - which she hadn’t experienced since her early twenties - re-surfaced.

With support, Susan has turned her situation around. Her housing support worker was “amazing”, helping her access a Discretionary Housing Payment to clear her rent arrears, rewrite her CV, and prepare for job interviews.



She now works at a local supermarket and has paid off her debts. Her GP helped her access therapy to manage her anxiety, and her family and friends rallied around her during the hardest times.

The Foodbank played a vital role, too. Knowing her cupboards were stocked with essentials — and receiving meat vouchers at Christmas — took “a huge weight off her shoulders”. Without that support, she says she wouldn’t have been able to eat properly. Susan’s advice to others in a similar position is simple: reach out, because support is out there.

Those who were a bit better off had received support to maximise their income, typically through benefits, but had not achieved financial security.

Among those who said they were “a bit better off”, all bar one had made a successful claim for additional benefits (mainly PIP* or DLA*) or resolved a problem with an existing claim. Several had also received debt advice, and one person’s partner had increased their income from self-employment. These changes meant they were no longer in crisis - but, with one possible exception, were not sufficient to make them financially secure. Frankie’s story (see overleaf) is typical of this group.

*Personal Independent Payment (PIP) and Disability Living Allowance (DLA) are both disability-related benefits.

Frankie's story "A bit better off than before"

Frankie is a single mother with young children, who relocated to a different part of Surrey after her landlord reclaimed her previous home. Fleeing an abusive relationship, she faced significant challenges. Her partner's income disappeared, leaving her financially vulnerable at a time when her children were too young for her to work.

A social worker referred Frankie to the Foodbank, where she received food and children's clothing through Stripey Stork. This support came at a critical time when she was feeling lost. As Frankie put it, "It made a big positive difference - knowing someone was there when she needed them most".

Over the past year, Frankie's situation has gradually stabilised. When her son was diagnosed with autism, she was advised by social services to apply for disability benefits.

She now receives DLA for her son and Carer's Allowance and PIP for herself, which have helped with day-to-day living expenses.

However, she continues to face real pressures — rising rent, energy bill arrears, and limited access to affordable shops in the area she now lives in.



Those who were no better off had not been offered or had not successfully engaged with the additional support they needed. They were still struggling with issues such as debt and mental health.

A significant minority of clients - 5 in our sample of 22 - were no better off than when they last came to the Foodbank, and all said they were finding it "difficult" to manage financially. All except for one person in this group (including Leonard - see his story overleaf) had not seen an improvement in their financial situation. Some had received short-term assistance (such as an energy top-up), but had not received support leading to a long-term change in their situation. One member of this group had increased their income (by successfully claiming a higher rate of PIP), but this was offset by ongoing debt problems.

Where people's financial situation had not improved significantly, they faced various challenges that made it harder for them to escape poverty:

- Caring for children with special needs or older relatives was a barrier to finding paid work.
- Benefit delays pushed people into debt, which had a prolonged impact on their finances.
- Negative experiences of local services deterred people from seeking the support they needed.
- High private rents or unexpected costs put additional pressure on already tight budgets.



This group, who reported being no better off, had stopped coming to the Foodbank, because they lost contact with their referral agency, did not think they were allowed to keep using it, or were too anxious to do so - not because they no longer needed it. For example, one client was being referred to the Foodbank by her health visitor, but this ended when she was discharged from their care, as there were no longer any concerns about her children.

Four of these clients have been back to the Foodbank at least once since we interviewed them. Even among those who said they were better off, one is still using a different food bank and another said they would have come back to our food bank if they had been able to get a voucher.

Leonard's story "About the same as before"

Leonard lives on his own in private rented housing. He has mental health issues and, on his income alone, found himself unable to afford food - particularly during the winter, when his energy bills jumped by around 50%. His situation was made harder last year when he was moved from ESA to Universal Credit, leaving him with a five-week wait for the first payment and very little to fall back on.

When Leonard came to the Foodbank, he was signposted to an energy workshop at a local community venue, where he received a £50 voucher, heated blanket, and air fryer, along with some tips on reducing his energy costs. He went to Citizens Advice about an outstanding debt with his energy supplier, but wasn't able to resolve this issue - meaning Leonard is still repaying this debt without even knowing how much he owes.

While summer brought some relief from high energy bills, Leonard was anxious about the winter months ahead and expected to face the same pressures again. His financial situation remained largely unchanged. He was not in work and was still finding it difficult to get by.

People's experiences of using the Foodbank were very positive, and helped connect them to wider support, as well as meeting their immediate need for food and other essentials.

Feedback on the experience of using the Foodbank was universally positive: people said the staff and volunteers were friendly, helpful and non-judgemental, and they valued the additional support that many of them were offered, such as children's clothing, bedding and energy top-ups.

This practical support helped them through a difficult time in their lives and made them feel cared for and less isolated. However, no one's ongoing financial situation changed for the better simply because they received food provision and other crisis support. This only happened as a consequence of other positive changes in their underlying circumstances, usually with additional help from Good Company and other agencies.

Positive outcomes were most evident where there were one or more key agencies involved, providing consistent support and advice over an extended period, alongside practical help via the Foodbank. Housing associations and other agencies including Citizens Advice, Christians Against Poverty (CAP) and Good Company's own support workers, played a vital role, by helping people with debt, benefits and other underlying issues that had led them to need the Foodbank.

The Foodbank were really welcoming. I was absolutely petrified when I first went - didn't know where to go or what to do. But once I was there, the volunteers were so nice... When I went back, they knew me and greeted me by name. People were genuinely interested in me and my well-being.

Although my income hasn't gone up, I am managing to spend much more carefully after going on a CAP money course and getting help with my debt with [the energy supplier]. That's why I haven't needed to come to the Foodbank. I feel more in control now.

The importance of a strong support network was a key factor in helping people cope during difficult times, with even small acts of kindness making a real difference.

Having a strong support network was another common factor in the stories of people whose situations had improved, and was often lacking among those who were still finding it difficult. Supportive family and friends were able to provide both financial and emotional support when needed, helping to increase people's resilience in the face of adversity.

I got lots of support via the Advice Café. One person helped me with benefits and got me Carer's Allowance, so the benefit cap has been lifted.

My mother-in-law was very helpful with buying appliances, including a cooker and a big chest freezer so I can buy in bulk and batch cook. She also helped me to get all my debts under control, so I'm not paying off council tax arrears.

Other key individuals and organisations had also made a significant difference to the lives of people we spoke to, by the way they treated them when they were in financial hardship. Examples included a friendly neighbour, a school that helped with the cost of school uniform, a local business that responded to someone's specific needs, and a doctor who listened to their patient. All these small acts of kindness played a valuable role – directly or indirectly - in helping people to rebuild their lives.



Quite a few people made an explicit link between their financial and mental wellbeing. Living in poverty negatively affected their mental health, which in turn made it harder to manage on a tight budget. The opposite is true of those whose financial situation had stabilised, enabling them to think and plan ahead more clearly, take control of their finances and make positive life choices.

“My main support now is from friends, who've been there for me - someone to talk to, support me emotionally. When I was struggling, all the financial stuff is pushed to the side. Now I feel better emotionally, I can take control of the situation, and look at what money is coming in and out.”

Recommendations

The Foodbank should consider whether – and, if so, when and how - to re-contact regular clients who have stopped coming to the Foodbank for an extended period of time, to see whether their financial situation has improved. This would help us to monitor longer-term outcomes and identify the minority of clients who may still need support.

We may also need to review how we communicate to referral agencies - and maybe also to clients - around the number of vouchers they are allowed. Some agencies appear to have told people that they are only allowed to come a certain number of times, even though we do not have a strict limit on this.



We should continue to offer and connect people to support with underlying issues that are driving their need for the Foodbank, such as benefits, debt, housing, and under-employment, working alongside other local agencies. Access to affordable housing and flexible employment opportunities are particularly important in helping people to become more financially secure.

Creating opportunities for people to have positive social interactions and feel connected to others, is another vital aspect of a holistic support package, especially for those without a support network of family and friends. This should ideally be built into the service offer – for example, by delivering services within a community setting or intentionally building community between service users, where appropriate.

About Good Company



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Good Company was founded in 2022 and grew out of Epsom & Ewell Foodbank, which was set up in 2012 in response to local need. As food insecurity became more entrenched in our community, we have developed creative, long-term solutions to poverty - support work, poverty truth commissions, pantries, energy workshops, and other prevention projects, alongside Epsom & Ewell Refugee Network.

Good Company aims to be a force for good, bringing people and organisations together in pursuit of our vision for a poverty-free future in Surrey without the need for food banks, where everyone in our community has the opportunity to lead a good fulfilling life.