

Dorset Foodbank Referral Guidance

In collaboration with Dorset Council

Purpose

This is designed to support all referrers in making effective, compassionate, and context-aware referrals to foodbanks across Dorset. It aims to promote long-term solutions for households experiencing food insecurity, while helping to reduce dependency on emergency food provision.

Dorset's foodbanks are charitable organisations, staffed by volunteers. Each foodbank operates differently, however they share a common mission: to provide short-term support while households are assisted to address the underlying causes of their need. This guidance applies to all who refer Dorset households to foodbanks, ensuring that referrals are made with respect, consistency, and a focus on dignity and empowerment.

1. Your Role as a Referrer

- **Being clear about the purpose:** Foodbanks provide short-term emergency support - they are not a long-term solution.
- **Being a connector:** Your role is to link individuals to the right support, including foodbanks and other services that address root causes of need (e.g. debt, housing issues, poor mental health).
- **Using your judgement:** Consider the full picture of someone's situation before making a referral.

2. Making a Good Referral

A good referral is:

- **Timely:** Avoid late-week or last-minute referrals (where possible) to ensure support is available. Remember foodbanks are staffed by volunteers who are unable to offer an out of hours service
- **Contextual:** Provide assurance that you are working with the person or signposting them to support with wider issues.
- **Collaborative:** Where appropriate, discuss the referral with the client and the foodbank – particularly if an extension of foodbank support is required.
- **Supportive:** Plan for follow-up—do you have information you can share about other local support beyond that of the foodbank?
- **Local:** Please refer client to the project that meets their need and is most local to them

Include in your referral:

- Client's current situation and immediate needs
- Any serious risks or safety concerns.

- Other services already involved.
- Contact information (with consent) if delivery is required (not all projects deliver)

It is crucial that you work to your own data protection policy when sharing personal and sensitive information and consider what information you are permitted to share.

3. Promoting Alternatives and Building Resilience

Encourage clients to:

- **Use social supermarkets/affordable food clubs** if they can afford to - [Food Banks and Affordable Food Projects in Dorset](#)
- Support them to **access advice** around budgeting, debt, and welfare
- **Engage with community support** (e.g. cooking groups, peer support).

4. Navigating Local Differences

Each foodbank in Dorset operates differently—know your local model:

- Length of support
- Type of food provided
- Referral process
- Collection or delivery – if a project can do either, encourage collection, as foodbanks often provide support to other services, through conversation

5. Managing Challenges

- **Set expectations early:** Be clear that foodbank support is temporary.
- **Be prepared:** Some clients may feel entitled or become frustrated—stay calm and empathetic.
- **Protect yourself and others:** Share serious risk information when needed.

6. Strengthening Relationships

- Build connections with your local foodbank—this helps tailor support and improves outcomes. This can be particularly helpful for local schools.
- Share learning and feedback—what’s working, what’s not?
- If you’re moving roles, help pass on knowledge to your successor.

7. Language and Tone

- Use **clear, compassionate language** when talking about food support.
- Avoid jargon—speak in a way that builds trust and dignity.
- Encourage **shared responsibility**: “Let’s work together to find the right support.”

8. Quick Checklist for Referrers

- ✓ Have you explored alternative community food support? [Affordable food](#)
- ✓ Is this referral timely and well-informed?
- ✓ Have you planned follow-up support? You can refer direct to Citizen’s Advice here [Third Party Referral Form - Citizens Advice In Dorset](#)
- ✓ Does the information you are sharing align with your data protection policy?
- ✓ Some projects deliver, some cannot, so please check this before referring
- ✓ If you are unsure about anything, please contact the foodbank first