

We are what we eat:

Transforming food aid in Westminster:

June 2023



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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 Westminster and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) undertook a project to review food resources and food aid¹ offered within the two boroughs (also referred to as the bi-borough). Our objective of this project 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 Considering residents in the bi-borough tend to be from diverse communities and typically source food from urban market stalls or other diverse food providers, this project additionally aimed to understand the extent to which the foods offered met residents' social and cultural needs.

Project Implications

As our primary mission of Healthwatch is to understand and amplify residents' experiences and needs in health and social care, Healthwatch Westminster and RBKC 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.

Methodology

Healthwatch Westminster and RBKC consulted other London Healthwatch teams, Public Health, Food and Energy Network, Citizens Advice Bureau, Westminster Council and Healthwatch Advisory Group members in the development and design of this project. After shortlisting numerous food aid organisations serving

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 to 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.

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 Westminster visited the food aid services provided by Abbey Centre Community Pantry (Monday 10 May 2023), North Paddington (Friday 19 May 2023), St. Matthews Food Bank (Wednesday 17 May 2023), Westbourne Park Food Pantry (Thursday 18 May 2023), and Westminster Chapel Food Bank (Monday 15 May 2023). All community visits took place on their weekly days of operation. A total of 58 survey responses from residents (n = 44) and service providers (n = 14) were obtained across the services.

Food aid organisations

The Food aid organisations involved in this project across Westminster and RBKC 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

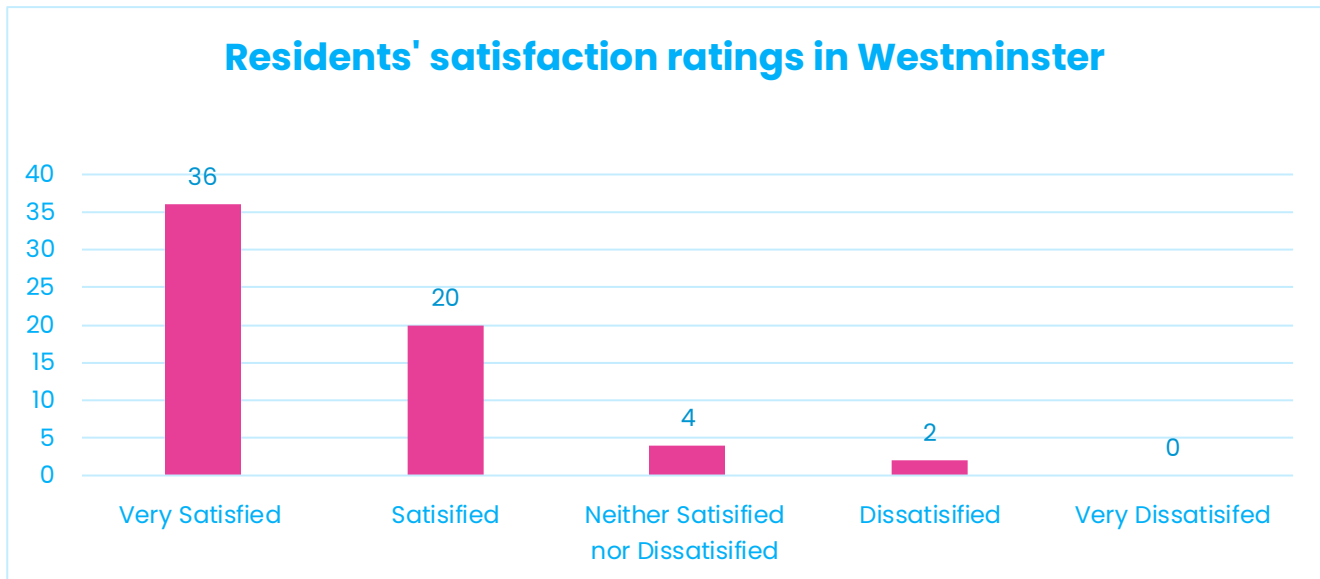
In bi-borough, the key demographics using the service were people aged 50-79, facing long-term health conditions, and facing high financial insecurity from white or other backgrounds (See Appendix).

Residents using the food aid services generally reported that they were appreciative of the support with the food provided, especially in times of vulnerability and financial insecurity. There was also positive feedback from the service providers on the diversity, sustainability, as well as the promotion of healthy eating of food resources. However, there were a considerable number of residents who felt the food resources should meet cultural, dietary, and healthy needs of the community they serve.

Most of the feedback referring to the attitude of staff was also positive, though there were a considerable number of concerns regarding quality and cost of funding of the service.

Residents' experiences

Among the 41 service ratings from residents (3 residents did not respond to the service rating question), 23 reported being 'very satisfied', whilst 13 reported being 'satisfied.'



The following quote was typical of experiences:



"Everything is good especially the staff, but I would like the food options to be more diverse."

"I was going to commit suicide and was walking along the street and curious about the Pantry building."



"More funding would empower customers to be more self-reliant. Limited funding makes it difficult to deal with people dealing with psychological distress and addiction."

For those with a less positive experience, the main concerns were the quality of the services, as well as the cost of funding of the services. Concerns regarding the quality of the service are linked to the lack of support for residents who do

not have the facilities and capability to cook. The limited range of food resources available for diverse communities were a particular area of concern, even for those who were otherwise satisfied with their experience. Some residents also described their concerns at being unable to access fresh proteins, compromising a healthy balanced diet. These themes are explored in more detail below.

Quality of the Services

Overall, there were 26 responses about the quality of the service. The care provided by staff was highlighted as a particular area of praise. Service providers and volunteers were praised for supporting the local community. However, in many cases, those who were dissatisfied, felt the service should cater to diverse communities more. This is because the data collected shows diverse communities access the service more often. Alternatively, some people felt the service favoured other communities.

Residents:

“Everything is good especially the staff, but I would like the food options to be more diverse.”

“It is easier to access Food Banks, it is hard to keep getting referrals every week. I do not like the pantry system a lot of time there is hardly anything there.”

“Reducing the waiting times because longer the waiting times, most items are finished.”

“Fairer distribution of items – service favours families and younger people”

Service Providers:

“Staff are also very cautious when handling food and control quality.”

“Most of the food I have seen bought in is chosen to meet the needs of the broadest number of people.

"Cost of living is too high and pantries offer a good alternative."

Further findings

When asked how food aid organisations could improve the service they provide to residents and the wider community, some residents were very appreciative of the free support they received and had reserved comments regarding improving the service. Several people suggested more funding for charity organisations to supply diverse food resources, sustainable support for residents and the wider community. This is to ensure better quality of service, and stronger support systems that make residents independent and healthy. This is pertinent given the findings that food resources from each visit to a food aid organisation generally lasted one week or below for the majority of residents, while only 4 residents reported that their resources lasted a month or above.

Residents:

"All free support is good enough."

"Providing fresh food, fresh meat and fresh vegetables."

" By having specific food for diabetes."

"Healthy food meaning less processed/salt/reducing sugar/GM Crop."

"Maybe healthy cooking sessions."

Service Provider:

" Energy costs have created a problem in that people are struggling even more to buy food and cooking increases the use of energy.

" Better budgeting for service users and better access to cooking facilities."

“Most of the food is donated which limits choice in this respect. Most charitable food initiatives do not have sufficient high quality fresh produce, buying this is expensive.”

“Providing information about low fuel cooking techniques, such as steaming vegetables over a boiling pan of pasta or potatoes.”

Limitations

A significant gap in this analysis was that only two out of the seven food resources in the project were located in RBKC. These two services were provided by the Bay20 Community Centre and the Notting Hill Methodist Church. Engaging a more balanced number of food resources for this project would provide a more comprehensive understanding of food aid and an opportunity to conduct a comparative analysis of food resources (from both residents and service organisers' perspectives) across the two boroughs of RBKC and Westminster.

Additionally, the findings regarding the food vouchers provided by Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) were inconclusive because the organisation had no mechanism to solicit feedback from its voucher recipients.

Recommendations

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

- Broaden the utility of food vouchers beyond chain supermarkets to include markets, urban food stalls, and other local diverse food sources
- Support food aid providers in feasibly and sustainably sourcing and offering diverse food that reflects the needs and backgrounds of residents. (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 (e.g., Dignify is a charity organisation that is 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 (e.g., 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 residents (e.g., North Paddington Food Bank's community kitchen clubs and fuel support services).
- Build capacity among food resource providers to store and offer fresh and healthy food options (e.g., access to refrigeration).
- Develop partnerships to expand food sources and collectively source diverse foods (e.g., 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 residents.
- Gain a better understanding of community food needs.
- Recognise any demographic changes 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 to set priorities for diversifying food.

- Conduct a comparative analysis to understand differences in food aid and food insecurity priorities across the two boroughs of Westminster and RBKC.
- 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 multi-sector collaboration 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 residents 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 supermarket food vouchers, fuel bank support, and baby bank support. To receive support from the foodbank, a referral form from one of their registered partners needs to be completed. 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

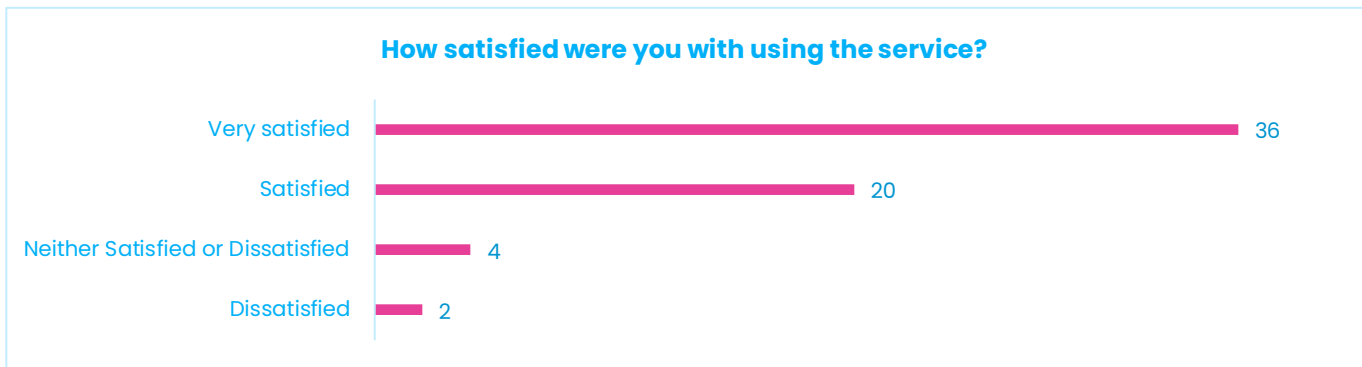
The [Westminster Chapel Food Bank](#) is a part of the Trussell Trust network, supporting Westminster residents on a referral basis. Aside from the food bank,

the organisations offer a range of community activities, such as the Warm Space and Chomp and Chat.

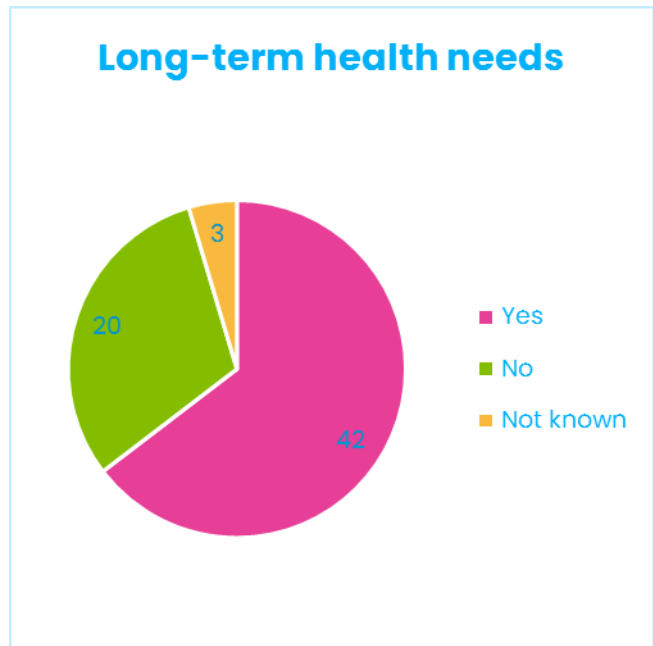
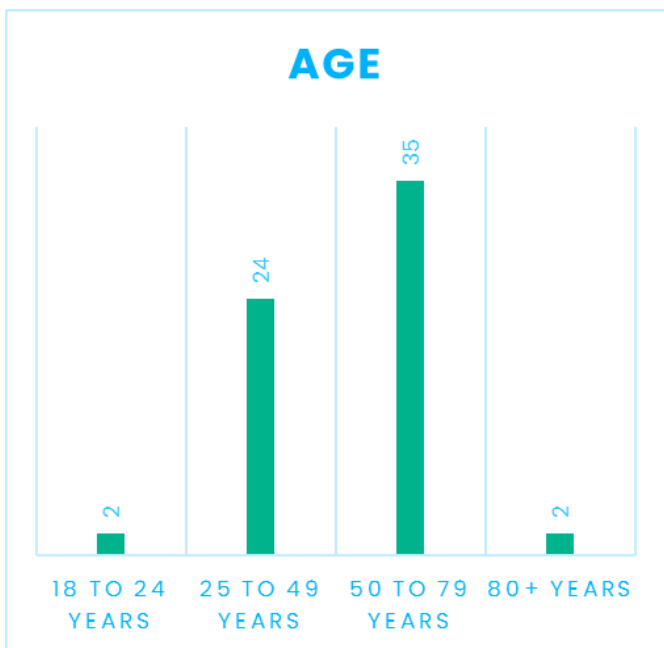
Appendix

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.

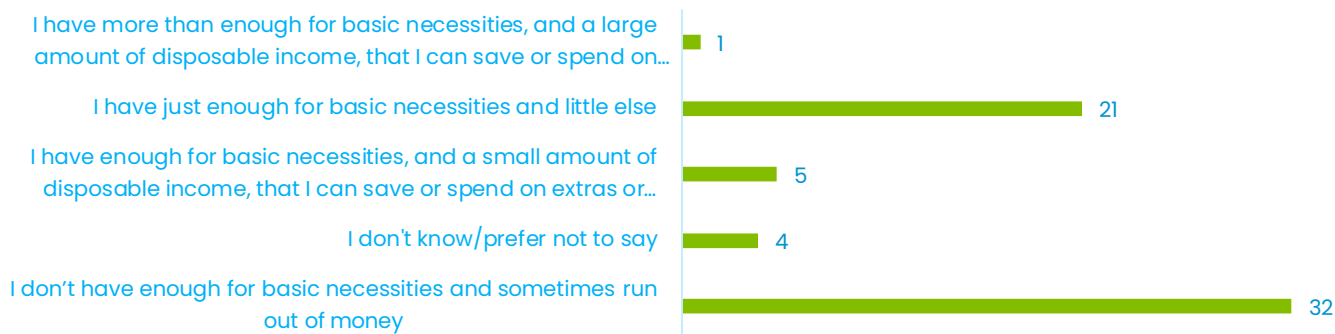
Resident satisfaction across food aid services



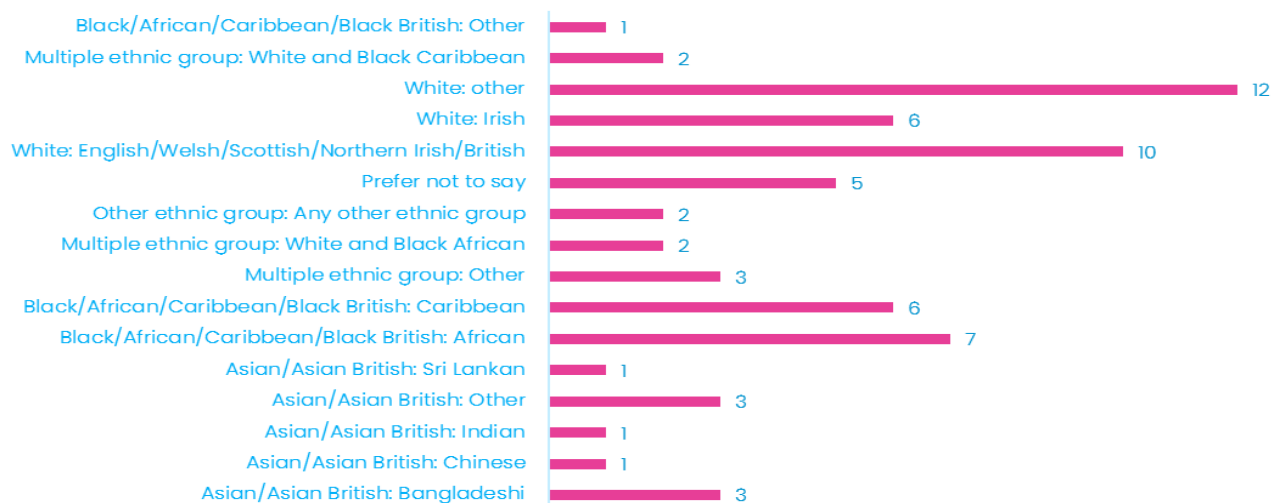
Demographics



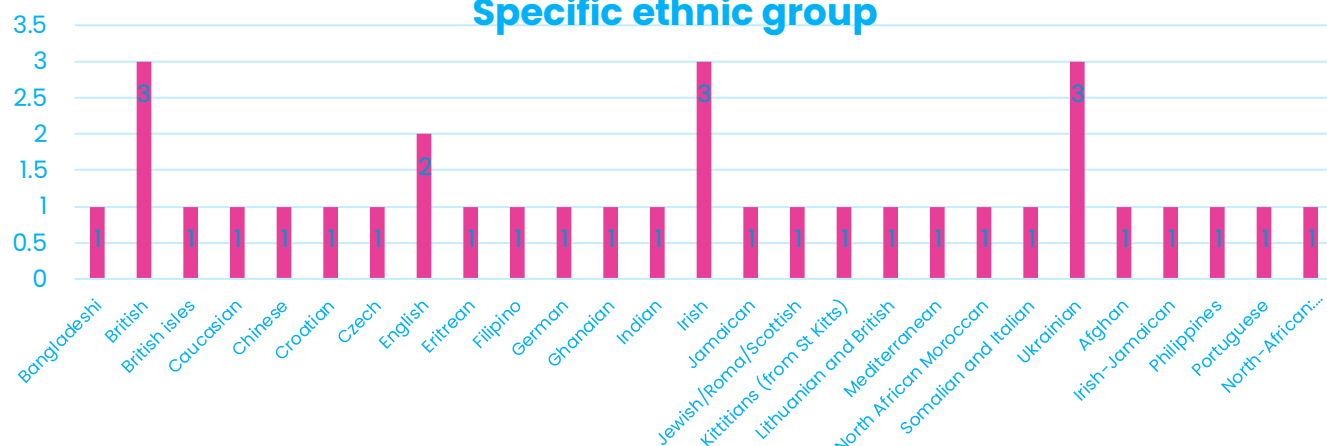
Financial status



Ethnic group



Specific ethnic group






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