



# Enough on their plates?

The food concerns and lived experiences of young adults in Northern Ireland.



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[consumer council.org.uk](https://www.consumer council.org.uk)

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# 1. Executive summary

In September 2024, the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland commissioned Cognisense to conduct a survey to examine food insecurity in young adults aged 18-30. Food insecurity is a widely used concept to describe "the inability to consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food for health, in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so." (Radimer et al., 1990)

Consumer Council research has identified that young adults are particularly vulnerable to being food insecure. However, there is a lack of research specifically on the issue in Northern Ireland. This research project seeks to address this knowledge gap and enable a better understanding of this important consumer group.

**Key findings from the research include:**

**Over two in five (41%) consumers aged 18 to 30 were experiencing food insecurity.**



## Food insecurity levels

- Almost half (49%) of consumers stated they were worried their food would run out before they got money to buy more. Over one in ten (14%) claimed this was 'often' the case and for over a third (35%) 'sometimes' the case.
- Nearly half (46%) of respondents stated it was 'often true' (13%) or 'sometimes true' (33%) that they, or people in their household, couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.
- Almost two in five (38%) stated that over the past 12 months they, or others in their house, had to cut the size of their meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food. Notable proportions claimed they took this action 'every month' (9%) or 'almost every month' (8%).
- Over a quarter (26%) stated that during the past 12 months they, or others in their house, went without food for an entire day because they didn't have enough money for food. For over one in ten (11%) respondents, this was an action taken 'every month' (5%) or 'almost every month' (6%).
- Nearly half (48%) of those who reduced their portion sizes or skipped meals suffered from having less energy as a consequence, with over a third (36%) claiming it made them low on confidence.

## Concern about finances

- Over three in five (61%) respondents were 'worried about being able to buy good quality food at an affordable price'. Amongst this proportion, 14% stated that whilst they were worried, they now worried less than they did a year ago. One in ten (10%) however claimed they were more worried compared to last year.
- Once all necessary payments have been made each month, around one in five (19%) consumers aged 18 to 30 had £20 or less left to spend or save, and just over a third (36%) had £60 or less left over.
- For 6% of respondents, their expenses were greater than their income in a typical month.
- Almost three in ten (28%) respondents stated they would be unable to afford to pay an unexpected but necessary expense of £100. Nearly half (48%) would be unable to afford to pay if the expense increased to £250, and almost two thirds (63%) if the expense was £500.
- In order to earn extra money due to financial hardship, around one in ten respondents had taken up self-employment (11%), gambling (9%) or social media activity (9%).
- Smaller proportions turned to stocks and shares or crypto (5%), sex work (3%), took a loan from an illegal lender (2%), or took part in drug or medical trials (2%).

## Meal types consumed

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71%

Over seven in ten (71%) respondents typically had a freshly prepared meal for their main meal of the day. Around one in five (21%) most often had a ready meal, with less than one in ten (7%) eating takeaway.

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Almost three in five (57%) respondents ate freshly prepared food on at least four or five occasions during the week, and under a third (29%) did so on two or three occasions. The most common reason for preparing a fresh meal was due to its healthiness (69%).



80%

Four in five (80%) respondents ate ready meals on at least a weekly basis. Around a third (32%) consumed a ready meal once a week, with similar proportions (33%) doing so on two or three occasions during the week.

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Almost two thirds (63%) of respondents ate takeaway food once a week, whilst around one in five (18%) did so two or three times each week.

63%

Convenience was the most significant factor behind the decision to purchase ready meals and takeaway food.



## Levels of confidence and barriers to preparing healthy food

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78%

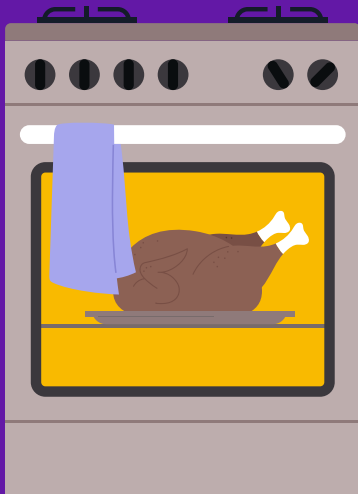
Almost four in five (78%) consumers aged 18 to 30 expressed confidence in their ability to prepare healthy foods from scratch. In contrast, 12% lacked confidence in their abilities.

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Over four in five (82%) 'grew up seeing food cooked from scratch on a regular basis'. In contrast, more than one in ten (14%) did not experience this when growing up.

82%

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Consumers who did grow up seeing food prepared at home were significantly more confident in their ability to prepare and cook healthy foods from scratch (86%) when compared to those who didn't (47%).

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46%

Almost half of young adults reported a lack of freezer space and 26% said there was not enough fridge space, which prevented them from keeping their food purchases lasting longer. A further 17% said they did not have enough storage containers and 10% felt they lacked knowledge of how to store food appropriately.

## 2. About the Consumer Council

**The Consumer Council is the statutory consumer representative body for Northern Ireland, responsible for protecting, empowering and representing consumers, and promoting their interests.**

We operate under our sponsor department, the Department for the Economy (DfE), on behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive.

- **We are an insight-led evidence-based organisation:**
- **Providing consumers with expert advice and confidential guidance.**
- **Engaging with government, regulators and consumer bodies to influence public policy.**
- **Empowering consumers with the information and tools to build confidence and knowledge.**
- **Protecting consumers by investigating and resolving consumer complaints under statutory and non-statutory functions.**
- **Undertaking best practice research to identify and quantify emerging risks to consumers.**
- **Campaigning for market reform as an advocate for consumer choice, welfare and protection.**

Our statutory powers cover consumer affairs, energy, transport, water and sewerage, postal services and food affordability and accessibility.

These legal responsibilities are drawn from legislation, licences given to companies working in Northern Ireland, and cooperation agreements set in memorandums of understanding. The work we carry out also aligns with a number of the Articles in the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland<sup>1</sup> (NI Protocol).



Our non-statutory functions educate, empower and support consumers against discriminatory practices in any market through advocacy work, as well as education and outreach programmes covering a broad range of topics including promoting consumer rights, financial inclusion and a more sustainable energy future.

We serve Northern Ireland's 1.9 million citizens and champion consumers in everything we do. We prioritise those who are disabled or chronically sick, who are of pensionable age, who are on low incomes and who live in rural areas.

We have responsibilities under the Rural Needs Act 2016 and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Our aim is to ensure government policies recognise consumer needs in rural areas and promote equality of opportunity and good relations across a range of equality categories.



<sup>1</sup> Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland, House of Commons Library

# 3. Methodology

The Consumer Council commissioned a survey of 730 Northern Ireland consumers aged 18 to 30 between September and November 2024 using both online and face-to-face methodologies. Quota controls based on official population estimates were employed during fieldwork and corrective Random Iterative Method (RIM) weighting was applied during data analysis. This ensured that the final sample was representative of this age group in terms of sex, socio-economic group (SEG) and area.

The quantitative survey was also supported by five qualitative interviews each lasting forty-five minutes. The composition of the interviews is detailed below:

Aged <b>18-30</b>	in third level education who may or may not be in part-time work or living in rented accommodation
Aged <b>18-30</b>	working full-time and living in rented accommodation
Aged <b>18-30</b>	in third level education or working full-time and living at home
Aged <b>18-30</b>	not in education or work and living in rented accommodation
Aged <b>18-30</b>	working in food or hospitality sector and living at home or independently

When reading this report, please note the following:

- Where differences by demographics have been referenced, these have been tested at the 95% confidence level.
- As a result of the rounding of figures or the use of questions for which multiple answers could have been given, the sums on charts may not always total 100%.
- Socio-economic group is a means of classifying respondents based on the employment status, occupation and working pattern (full-time/part-time) of the head of household. There are six socio-economic grades: A, B, C1, C2, D and E. For analysis purposes, these grades have been combined into the following groups: 'ABC1' (more affluent consumers) and 'C2DE' (less affluent consumers).
- The real names of respondents in the pen portraits have been changed to maintain anonymity.

As this research examines the food security levels of young adults, we were keen to align the methodology with that used by our colleagues at the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland in their Food & You 2 surveys. We would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their help with this.

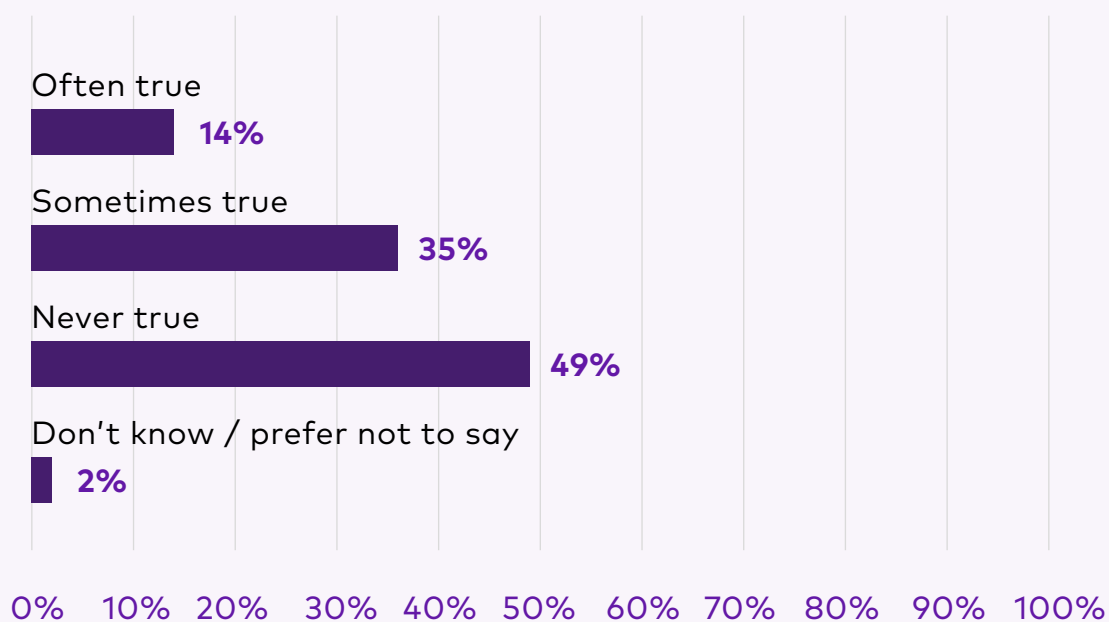


## 4. Food insecurity levels

### 4.1 Concern that food would run out before getting money to buy more

Almost half (49%) of consumers aged 18 to 30 stated they were worried their food would run out before they got money to buy more. Over one in ten (14%) claimed this was 'often' the case and for over a third (35%) 'sometimes' the case (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Thinking about the last 12 months, please state how often the following statement was relevant to you, or people in your household: I was worried whether my/our food would run out before we got money to buy more



Base: all respondents (n=730)

Concern that food would run out before getting money to buy more was more likely amongst:

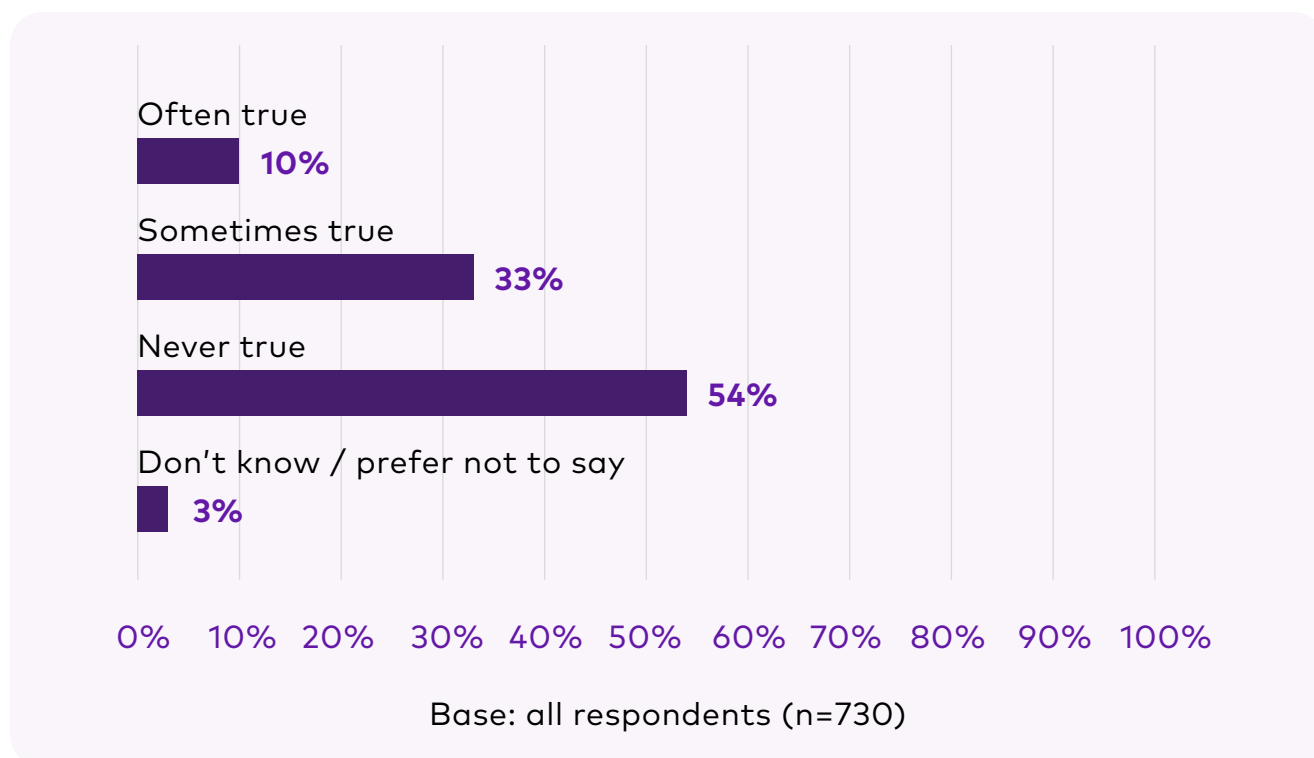
- Those from a less affluent (C2DE) socio-economic group (58%) when compared to those from the more affluent (ABC1) group (40%).
- Those with a disability (75%) when compared to those not disabled (44%).
- Those not in employment or studying (67%) when compared to those in education (46%) or with full or part-time employment (46%).
- Those residing in urban areas (55%) compared to those in rural locations (38%).
- Those renting from a private or social landlord (66%) compared to those living at home with parents, guardians or other family members (41%).
- Those suffering from food allergies or intolerances (67%) compared to those who were not (47%).



## 4.2 Consumers whose food didn't last and had no money to buy more

Over two in five (43%) claimed the 'food they bought just didn't last, and they didn't have money to get more'. For one in ten (10%) this was 'often' the case, and for a third (33%) 'sometimes' the case (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Thinking about the last 12 months, please state how often the following statement was relevant to you, or people in your household: The food that I bought just didn't last, and I didn't have money to get more



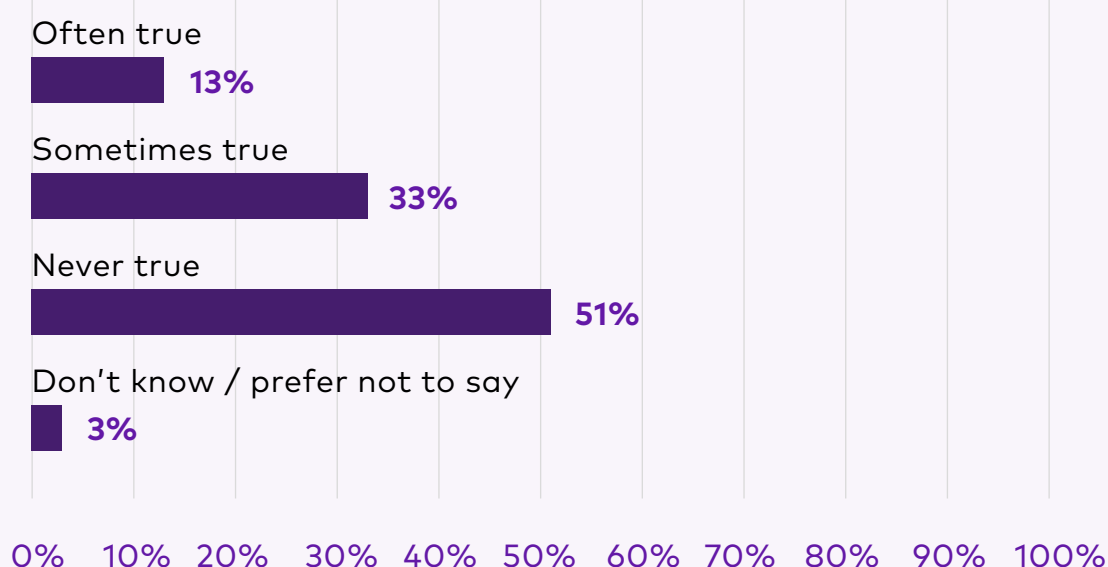
Running out of food without having money to buy more was more notable amongst:

- Those from a C2DE background (51%) when compared to those from the ABC1 socio-economic group (35%).
- Those with a disability (66%) when compared to those not disabled (29%).
- Those not in employment or studying (58%) when compared to those in education (42%) or with full or part-time employment (40%).
- Those residing in urban areas (48%) compared to those in rural locations (33%).
- Those renting from a private or social landlord (58%) compared to those living at home with parents, guardians or other family members (38%).
- Those suffering from food allergies or intolerances (60%) compared to those who were not (41%).

### 4.3 Consumers who can't afford to eat balanced meals

Nearly half (46%) of respondents stated it was 'often true' (13%) or 'sometimes true' (33%) that they, or people in their household, couldn't afford to eat balanced meals (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Thinking about the last 12 months, please state how often the following statement was relevant to you, or people in your household: I couldn't afford to eat balanced meals



Base: all respondents (n=730)

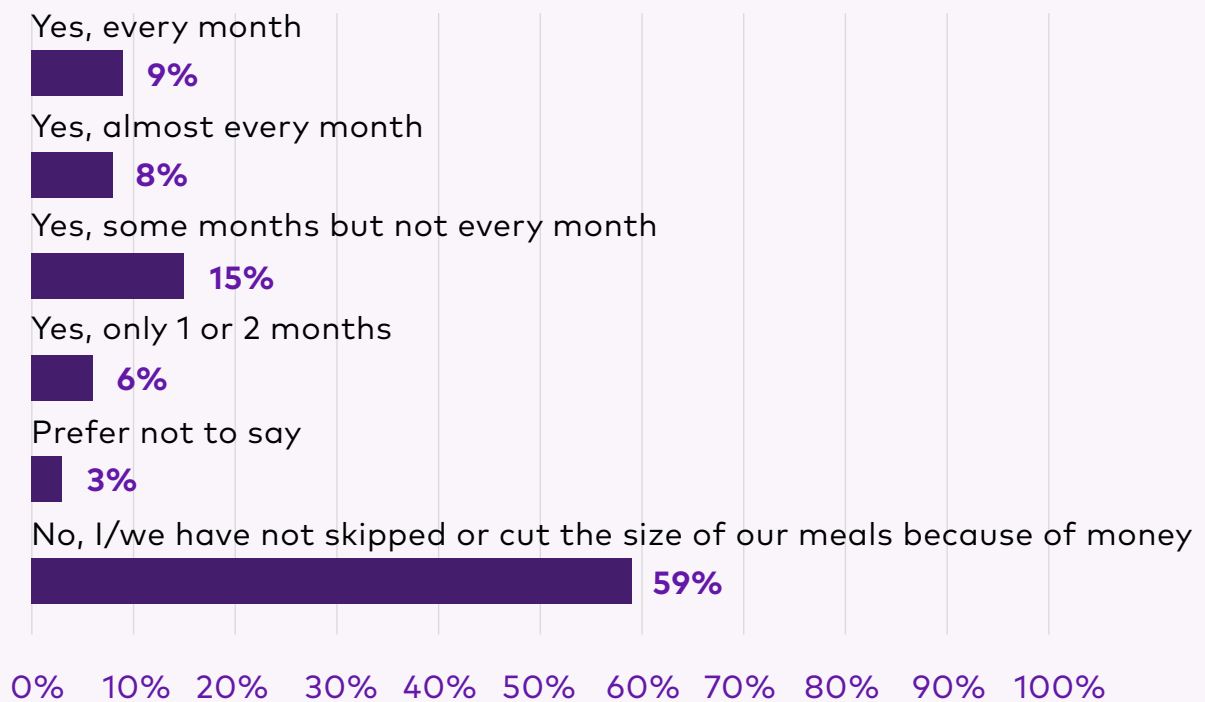
Consumers that 'often' or 'sometimes' couldn't afford to eat balanced meals were again more likely to be:

- Those from a C2DE background (52%) when compared to those from the ABC1 socio-economic group (39%).
- Those with a disability (65%) when compared to those not disabled (42%).
- Those residing in urban areas (53%) compared to those in rural locations (32%).
- Those renting from a private or social landlord (59%) compared to those living at home with parents, guardians or other family members (41%).
- Those suffering from food allergies or intolerances (57%) compared to those who were not (44%).

#### 4.4 Frequency of cutting meals sizes or skipping meals due to lack of money

Almost two in five (38%) respondents stated that over the past 12 months they have had to cut the size of their meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food (Figure 4). Notable proportions claimed they took this action 'every month' (9%) or 'almost every month' (8%).

Figure 4: In the last 12 months how often, if ever, did you or any person in your household cut the size of your meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food?



Base: all respondents (n=730)



Consumers that did not have to cut their portion sizes or skip meals over the past 12 months due to a lack of money were more likely to be:

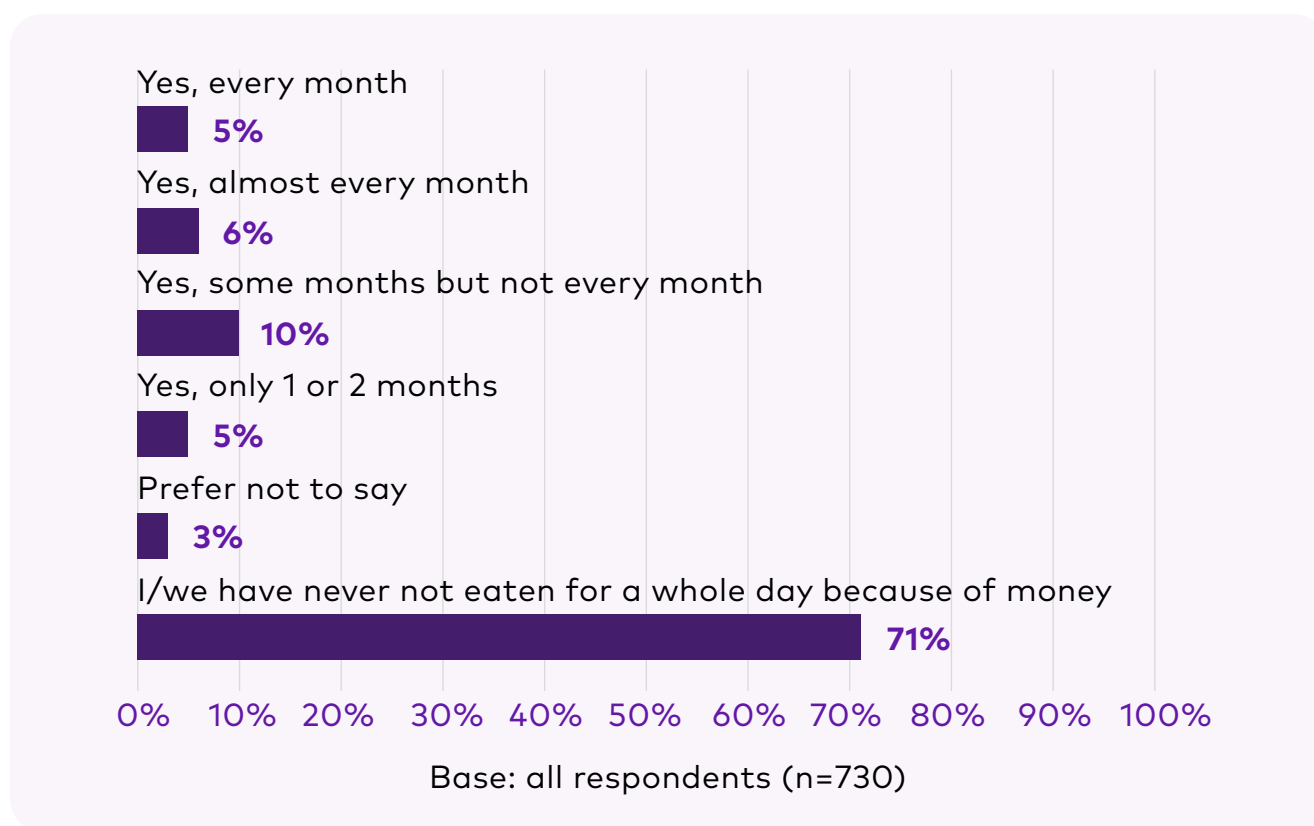
- Those without a disability (64%) when compared to those that did have a disability (37%).
- Those residing in rural areas (67%) when compared to consumers in urban locations (55%).
- Those in full or part-time employment (64%) relative to those not in employment or education (49%).
- Those living at home with parents, guardians or other family members (64%) compared to those renting from a private or social landlord (46%).
- Those not suffering from food allergies or intolerances (61%) compared to those that did (44%).



## 4.5 Frequency of not eating for a whole day due to a lack of money

Just over a quarter (26%) of respondents stated that over the past 12 months they have had to go without food for a whole day because they didn't have enough money (Figure 5). For over one in ten (11%) respondents, this was an action taken 'every month' (5%) or 'almost every month' (6%).

Figure 5: In the last 12 months how often, if ever, did you or any person in your household not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food?



Consumers that did not have to go without food for a whole day over the past 12 months due to a lack of money were more likely to be:

- Those without a disability (74%) when compared to those that did have a disability (46%).
- Those residing in rural areas (82%) when compared to consumers in urban locations (66%).
- Those in full or part-time employment (76%) relative to those not in employment or education (62%).
- Those not suffering from food allergies or intolerances (74%) compared to those that did (56%).

## 4.6 Food insecurity levels

In order to calculate food insecurity levels, respondents needed to answer in the affirmative to three or more of the five statements below:

Thinking about the last 12 months, please state whether the following statements are relevant to you, or people in your household:

I was worried my/our food would run out before we got money to buy more

The food that I bought just didn't last, and I didn't have money to get more

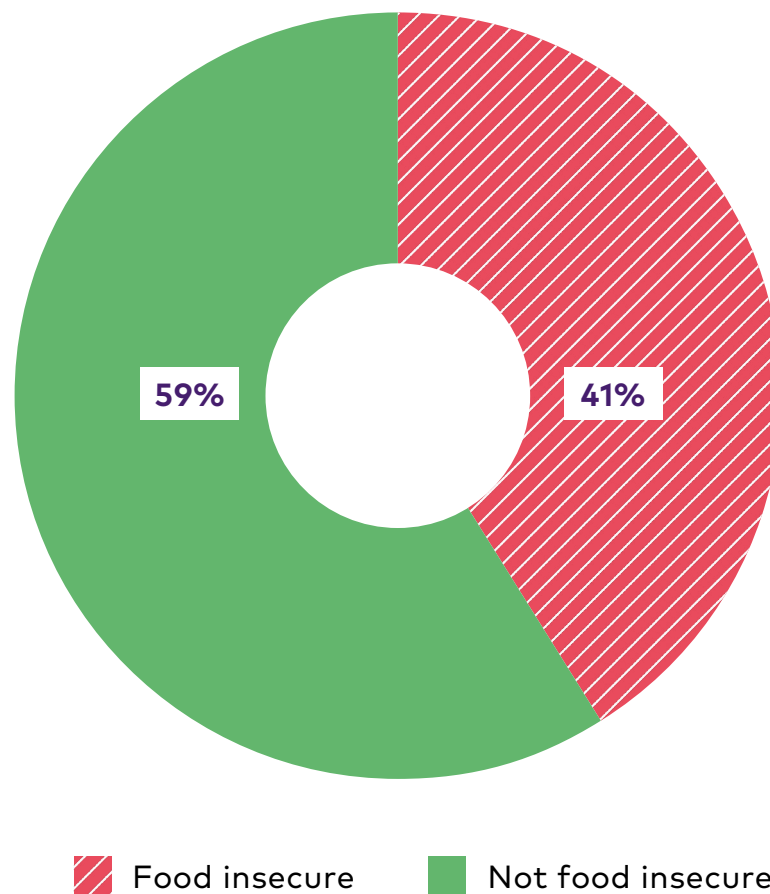
I couldn't afford to eat balanced meals

I cut the size of my/our meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food

I/we did not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food



Figure 6: Food insecurity analysis



**Over two in five (41%) consumers aged 18 to 30 were experiencing food insecurity (Figure 6).**

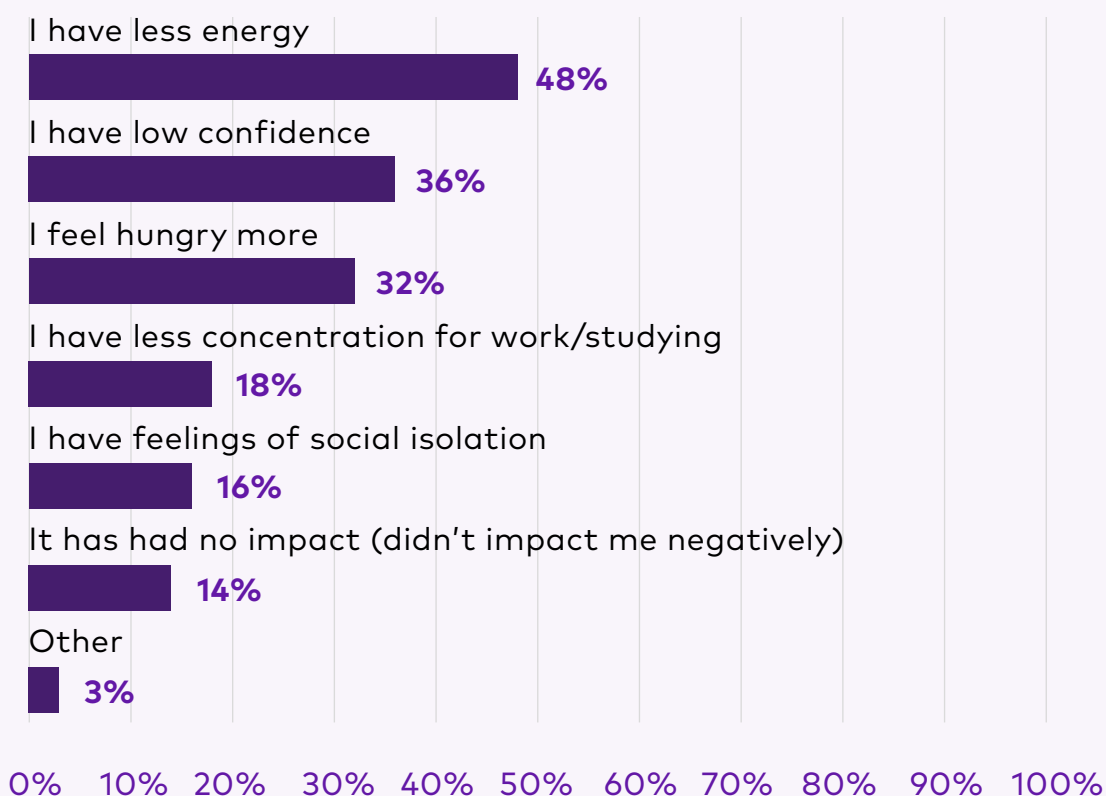
Respondents that fell into the food insecure category were more likely to be:

- Those from a C2DE background (47%) when compared to those from the ABC1 socio-economic group (35%).
- Those with a disability (69%) when compared to those not disabled (36%).
- Those residing in urban areas (48%) compared to those in rural locations (28%).
- Those residing in Belfast city (49%) when compared to other areas.
- Those not in employment or studying (54%) when compared to those in education (39%) or with full or part-time employment (39%).
- Those renting from a private or social landlord (55%) compared to those living at home with parents, guardians or other family members (34%).
- Those suffering from food allergies or intolerances (60%) compared to those who were not (39%).

## 4.7 How reducing portion sizes or skipping meals has impacted consumers

Almost half (48%) of those who reduced their portion sizes or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food suffered from having less energy as a consequence (Figure 7). Around a third claimed it made them low on confidence (36%) or made them feel hungry more (32%).

Figure 7: If you have made changes like reducing food portion sizes or skipping meals because of the price of food, how if at all, has this impacted you?



Base: all respondents who have made changes like reducing food portion sizes or skipping meals because there was not enough money for food (n=276)

Those who were low in confidence were more likely to come from lower income C2DE households (44%) when compared to those from the ABC1 socio-economic group (25%).

## 4.8 Reasons other than money for reducing meal sizes or skipping meals

Figure 8: If you have cut the size of your meals or skipped meals in the last 12 months, were there any other reasons not related to the price of food that contributed to you doing this?





Other reasons for reducing the size of meals or skipping meals not related to the price of food included having irregular mealtimes which resulted in rolling two meals into one (19%), or because the consumer was in a low mood (17%) (Figure 8).

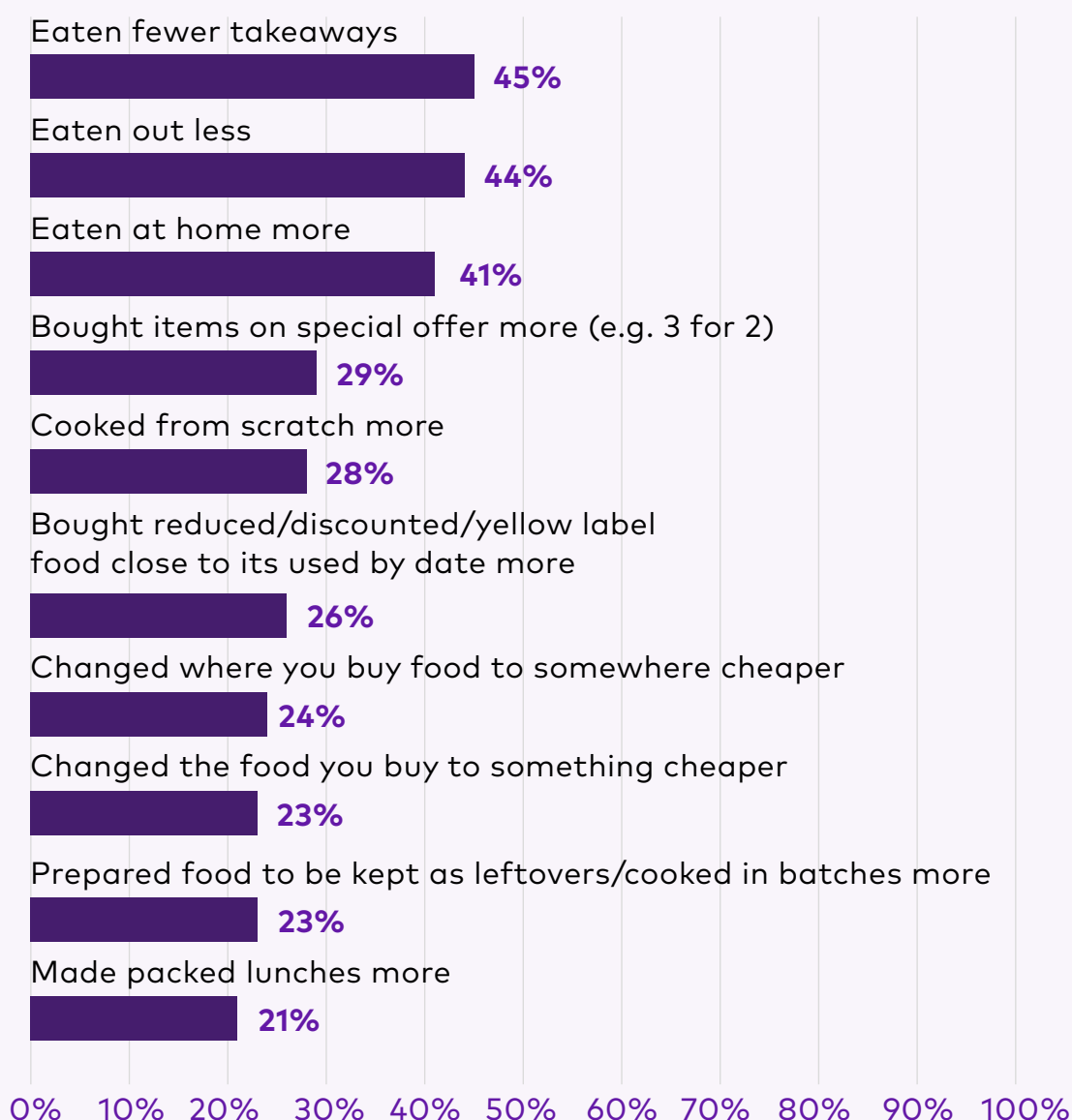
Respondents also cited the time required to prepare the food as a notable factor (16%) as well as the energy required in order to make the meal (12%).

A smaller but significant proportion (6%) of young adults reported that they took this action because they wanted to allow other people in the house to eat more instead.

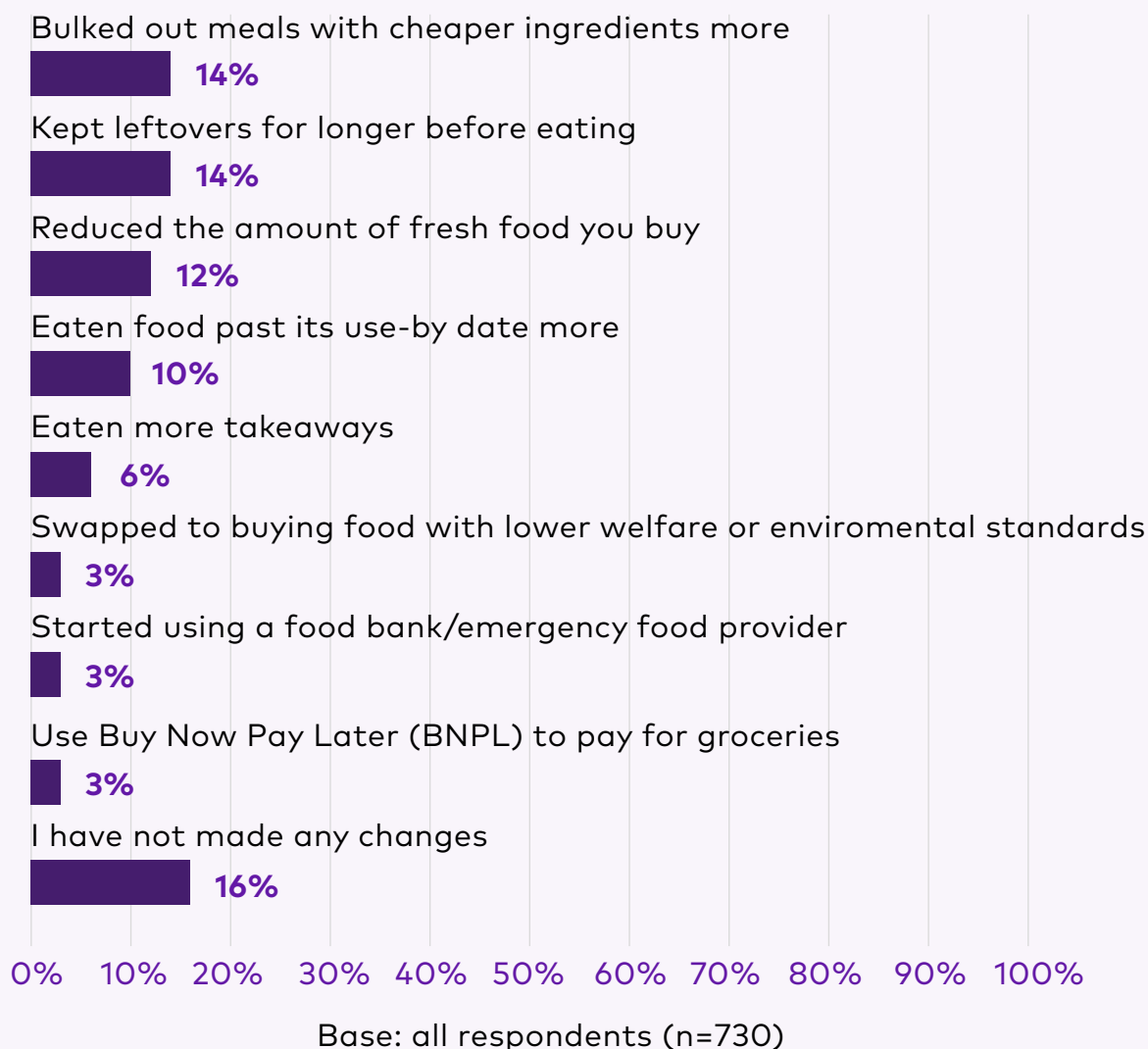
## 4.9 Food actions taken over the last 12 months

The majority (84%) respondents had taken some course of action over the past 12 months in response to concerns about food affordability (Figure 9). The most frequently cited actions included eating fewer takeaways (45%), eating out less (44%) and eating at home more (41%).

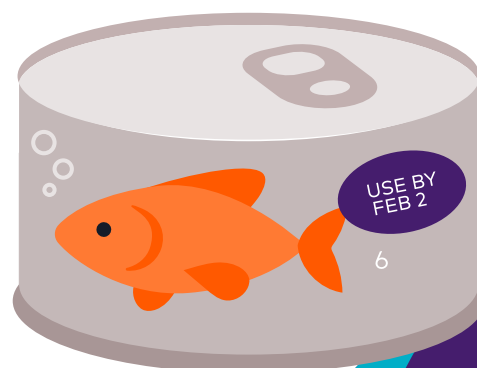
Figure 9: Have you taken any of the following actions over the last 12 months?







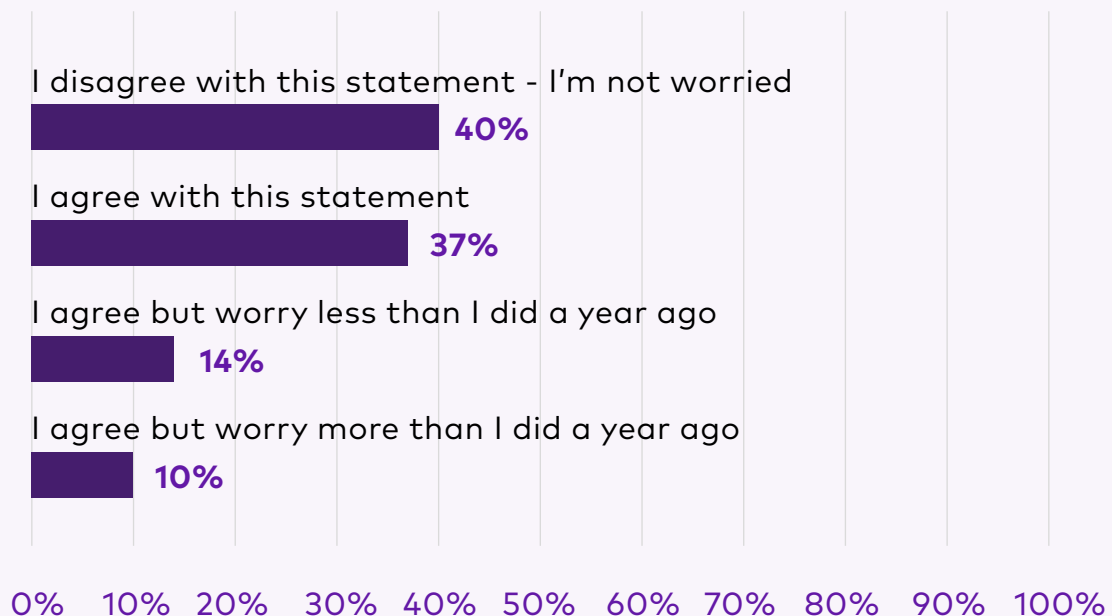
Other actions taken by consumers included buying more items that were on special offer (29%), cooking more meals from scratch (28%), buying reduced or discounted food closer to its use-by date (26%), changing where they buy their food (24%) or the type of food they buy (23%) in order to find a cheaper alternative. **(10%) have eaten food past its use-by date.**



## 4.10 Concern at being able to buy quality food at an affordable price

Over three in five (61%) respondents agreed that they were 'worried about being able to buy good quality food at an affordable price'. Amongst this proportion, 14% stated that whilst they were worried, they now worried less than they did a year ago. In contrast, one in ten (10%) claimed they were actually more worried compared to last year (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Please select the option that best describes how you feel about the statement: I am worried about being able to buy quality food at an affordable price for me



Base: all respondents (n=730)



Concern about being able to buy high quality food at affordable prices was more likely amongst:

- Those regarded as food insecure (91%) relative to those not food insecure (39%).
- Females (65%) when compared to males (56%).
- Those from a C2DE background (64%) when compared to those from the ABC1 socio-economic group (56%).
- Those with a disability (77%) when compared to those not disabled (57%).
- Those residing in urban areas (63%) when compared to those in rural locations (54%).
- Those renting from a private or social landlord (73%) compared to those living at home with parents, guardians or other family members (53%).

# 5. Case study 1

Wendy, a 25-year-old from Belfast who lives in social housing, is a single parent with two children under the age of eight. Several years ago, Wendy took redundancy in order to care for her children on a full-time basis as she could no longer rely upon her partner or family for childcare. Occasionally, she would do some evening shifts at a local petrol station, however, this would very much depend on getting help with the children from neighbours. Running out of money to buy food is a common occurrence for Wendy, as she manages her budget on a week-by-week basis. She ensures that her children have adequate meal portions and regular meals each day, however, as a consequence she herself often has to skip meals to finance this.



"I'm embarrassed to say this happens to me all the time, especially as we get towards the end of the week. Money for me is really tight. Both the kids get free school meals so I know they are well looked after during the day, but it can be difficult at the weekends and during holidays when I have to feed them. I make sure they are well fed, but when things are tough, I would go without a meal here or a breakfast there to make sure I have enough to buy the basics".

Once all her necessary bills are paid, she has less than £20 left over each week to spend or save and regularly would find herself going into her overdraft. Wendy does have the security of a family member who from time to time has lent her money when she has been faced with an unexpected bill. These loans have been interest free, and on each occasion, she has paid these back in full by either cutting back on food expenditure or doing some extra part-time shifts.

"My brother is very good to me and the kids, but unfortunately he doesn't live local. I have borrowed money from him in the past and he's been great, but I don't like to take advantage of him as he has his own struggles, so have always made sure I pay him back."

In the recent past, Wendy did have an unpleasant experience with an illegal money lender from her estate, so is very reluctant to use this source of finance again.

"A couple of years ago I borrowed a very small amount from a local money lender just to see me through a birthday party...let's just say I won't go down that route again. I know plenty of people who have got into too much debt with these guys, and it doesn't end well. I can survive ok, but others may be more desperate than me and rely on them."

Wendy manages her budget by doing small shops on a regular basis, and batch cooks then freezes in order to prolong the shelf-life of the food ensuring she has surplus meals towards the end of the week. She also has stopped buying groceries at local convenience stores and now takes public transport to her nearest 'discounter' chain to save money.

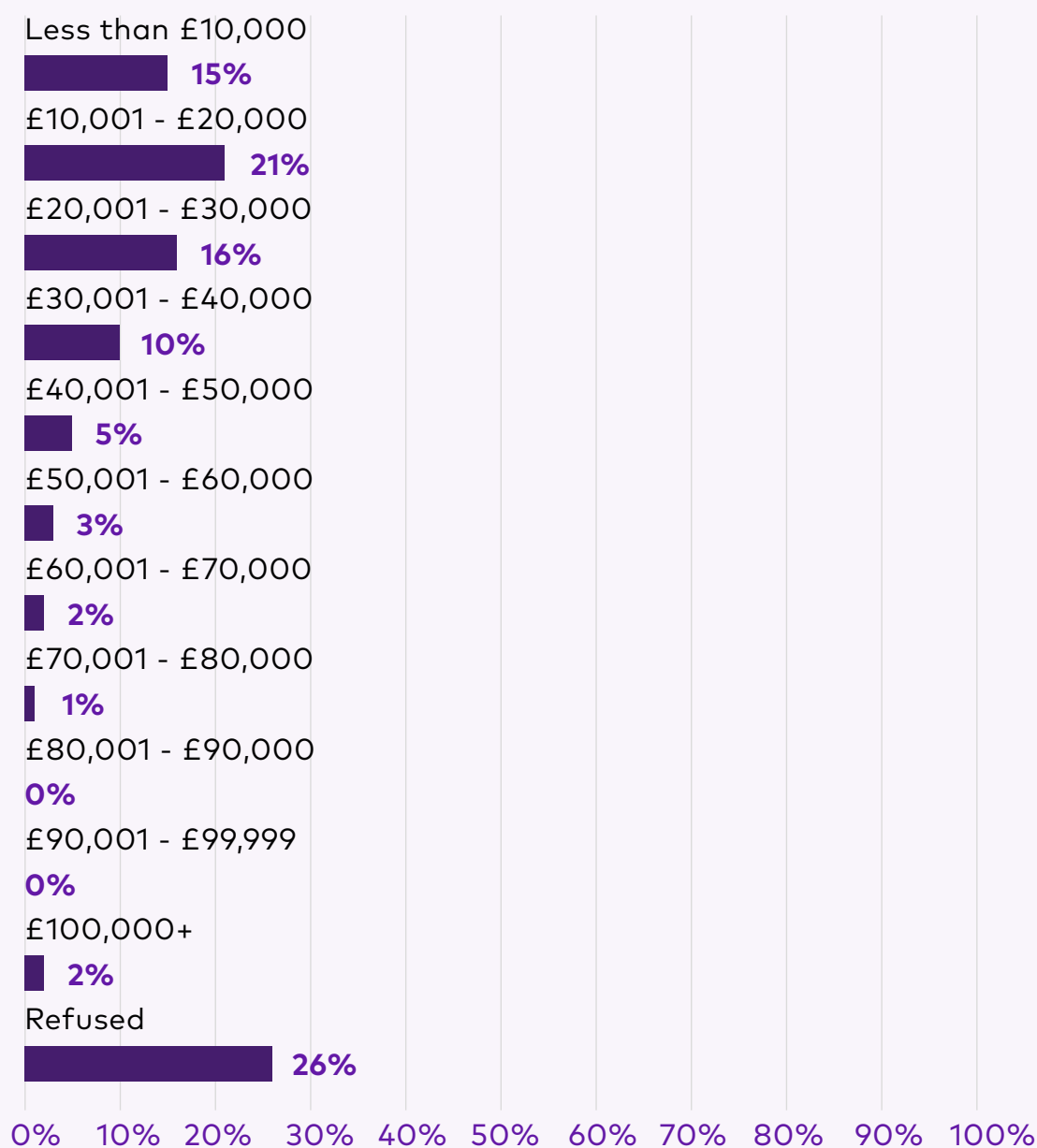
"I used to use a mix of both [discounter chain] and [local convenience store] when buying food, but I've realised I can save a lot more by jumping on the bus and going to the [discounter chain]. As the kids are at school, I have time, but I can only buy small quantities on each trip as I have to carry it all home again."

# 6. Financial situation

## 6.1 Total personal income

Over one in ten (15%) consumers aged 18 to 30 had a total personal income of less than £10,000 per year. Around a third (36%) had an income up to £20,000 per year (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Can you please indicate the number that best describes your total personal income per year before the deduction of tax?



Base: all respondents (n=730)



Respondents with an income less than £20,000 per year were more likely to be:

Those regarded as food insecure (43%) relative to those not food insecure (30%).

Females (41%) when compared to males (29%).

Those from a C2DE background (45%) when compared to those from the ABC1 socio-economic group (25%).

Those with a disability (51%) when compared to those not disabled (32%).

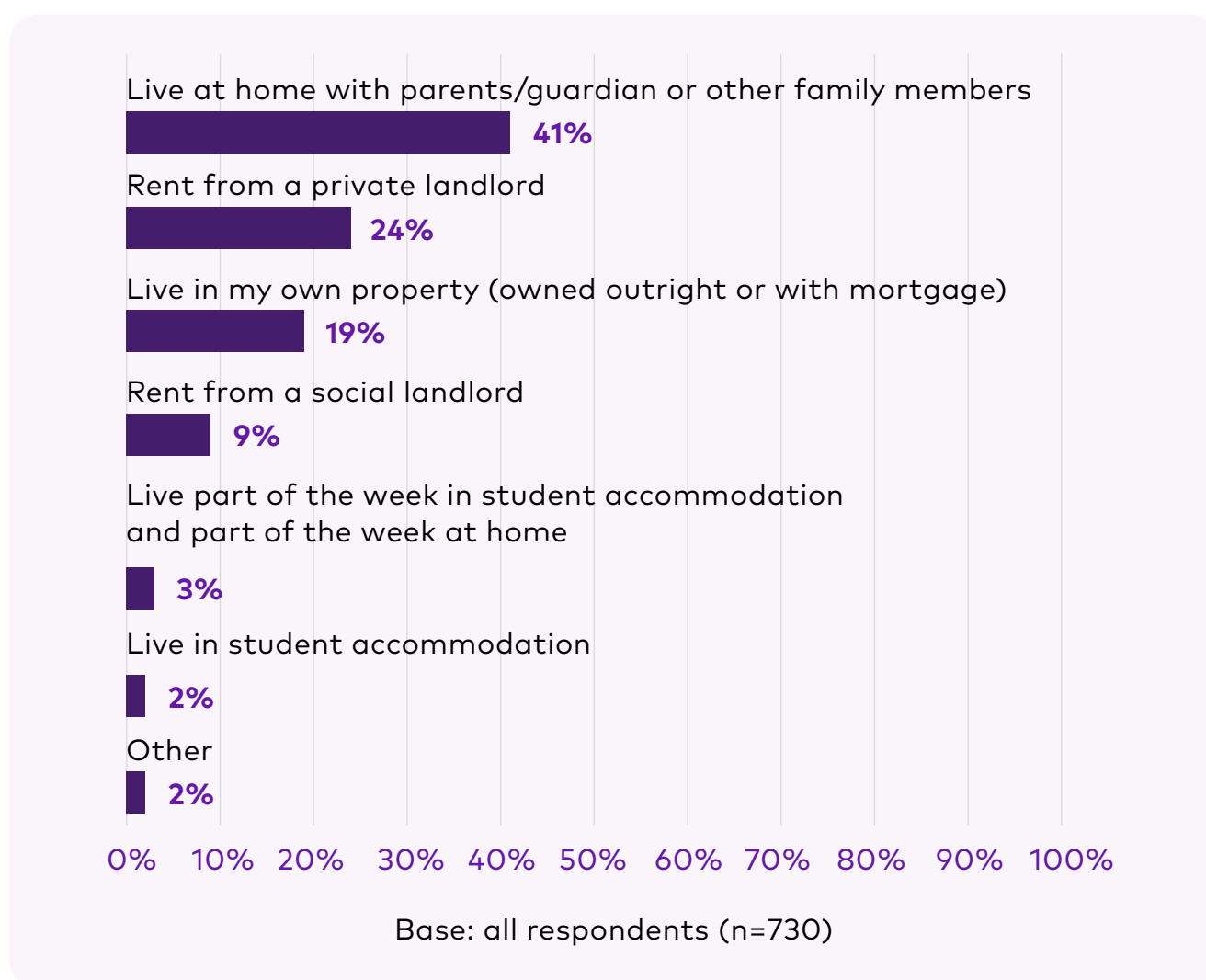
Those in full or part-time education (45%) or not in employment or education (53%).

## 6.2 Living arrangements

**Two in five (41%) respondents were living at home, with a further quarter (24%) renting from a private landlord (Figure 12).**

Around one in five (19%) respondents were residing in their own property, with one in ten (9%) renting from a social landlord.

Figure 12: Which of the following best describes your living arrangements?



Consumers renting from a social landlord were more likely to be:

- Those regarded as food insecure (16%) relative to those not food insecure (4%).
- Those from a C2DE background (14%) when compared to those from the ABC1 socio-economic group (4%).
- Those with a disability (18%) when compared to those not disabled (7%).
- Those not in employment or education (25%) when compared to those with full or part-time employment (8%).

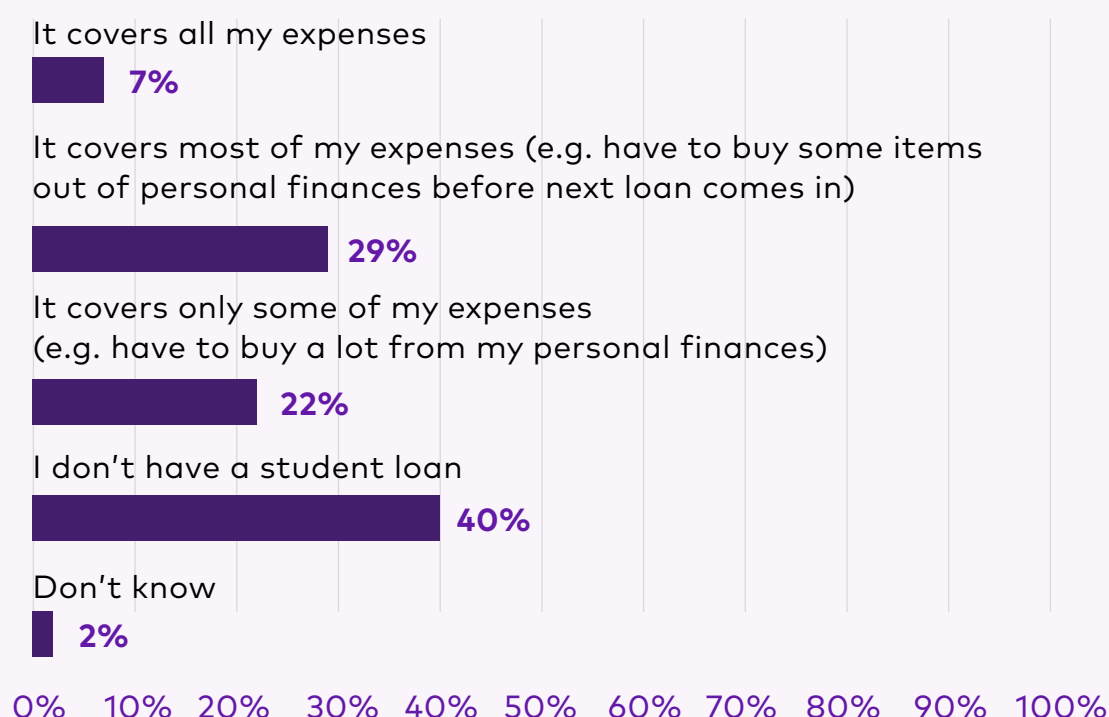


## 6.3 Extent to which student maintenance loans covered living expenses

Three in five (58%) respondents who were in full or part-time education had a student maintenance loan<sup>2</sup> (Figure 13). Having a student loan was a more common occurrence amongst those renting from a private or social landlord (68%) compared to those living at home with parents, guardians or other family members (51%).

For over a third (36%) of students, their student loan covered all or most of their expenses. Almost a quarter (22%) of students claimed their loan only covered some of their expenses.

Figure 13: To what extent does your student maintenance loan cover your living expenses?



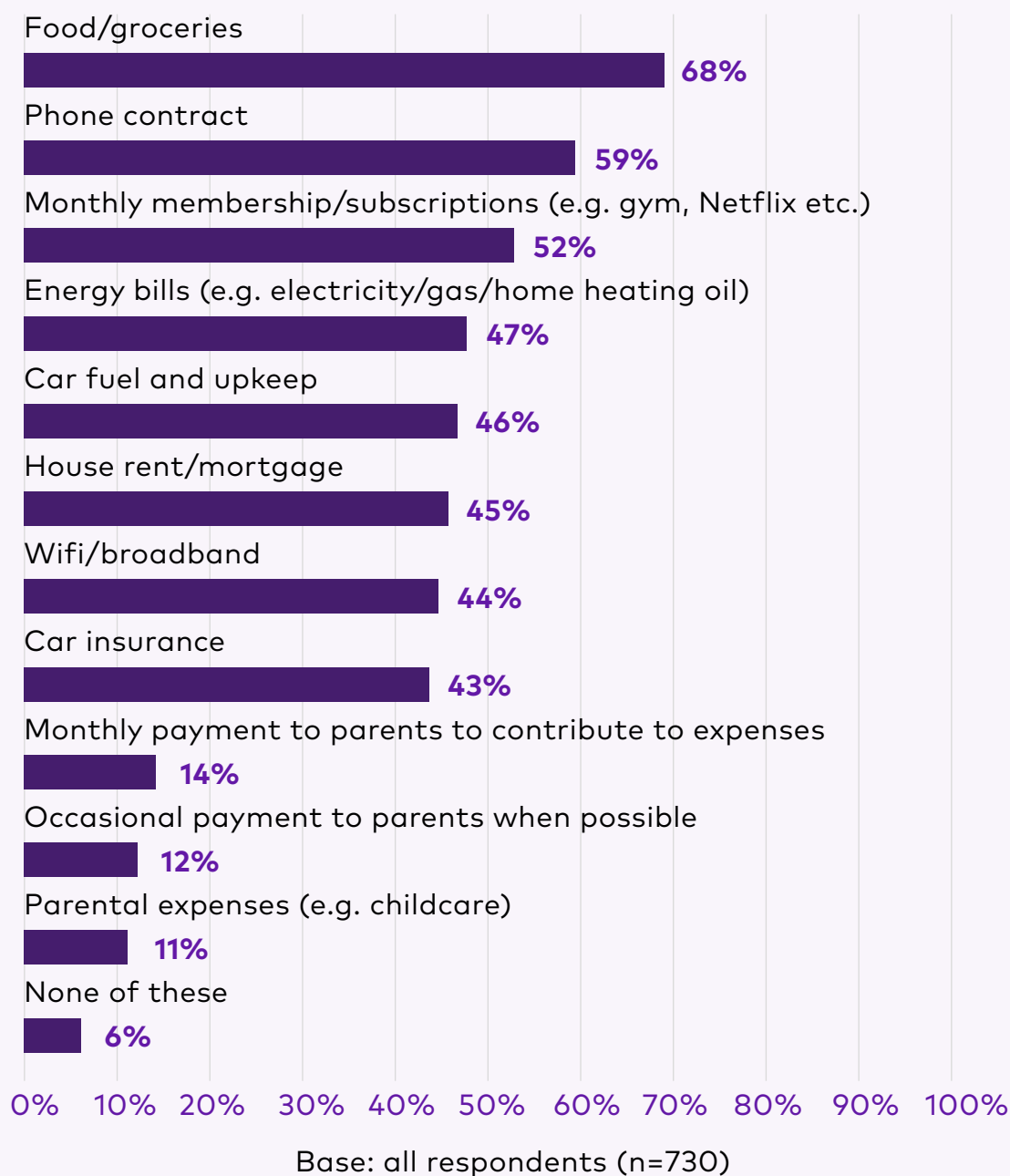
Base: all respondents currently in full or part-time education (n=192)

<sup>2</sup> To note that on 31 January 2025 it was announced that from September 2025 there will be a 20% increase to the maximum maintenance loan allowance. <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/news/murphy-announces-20-increase-student-maintenance-loans-202526>

## 6.4 Items responsible for paying for

Regarding items that respondents had responsibility to pay for, the majority had to cover the cost of their own food and groceries (68%) and phone contracts (59%) (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Which, if any, of the following items is it your responsibility to pay for?



Smaller proportions had responsibility to pay for their monthly memberships (52%), energy bills (47%), car fuel and upkeep (46%), house rent or mortgage (45%), broadband (44%) and car insurance (43%).

Respondents most likely not to have responsibility for paying for any of these items were those in part or full-time education (12%) when compared to those who were not studying but had employment (1%), as well as those living at home with parents, guardians or other family members (12%) compared to those renting from a private or social landlord (2%).

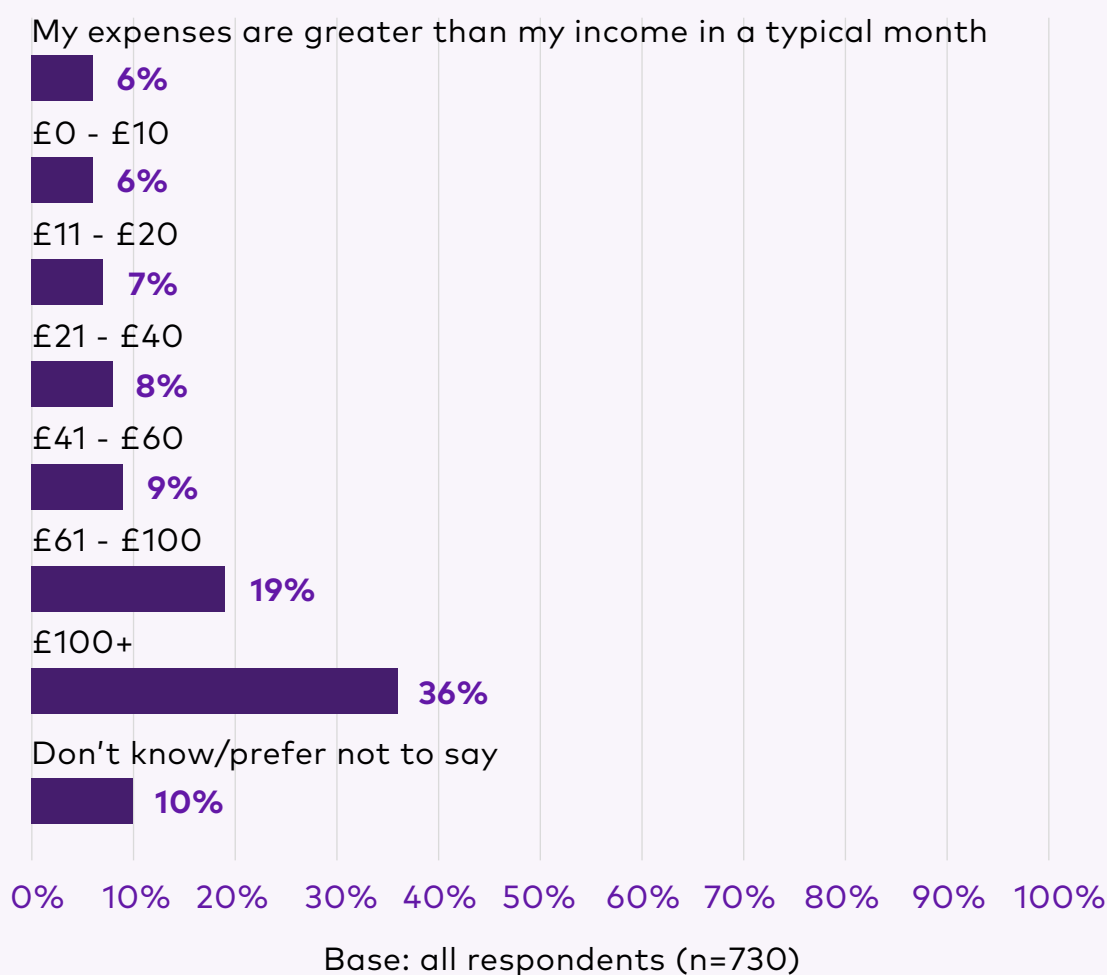


## 6.5 Money left each month after necessary payments made

Once all necessary payments have been made each month, around one in five (19%) consumers aged 18 to 30 had £20 or less left to spend or save, and just over a third (36%) had £60 or less (Figure 15).

For 6% of respondents, their expenses were greater than their income in a typical month.

Figure 15: After all your necessary payments are made each month, approximately how much do you have left to spend/save?



Consumers that had £20 or less left over each month after having paid necessary expenses were more likely to be amongst:

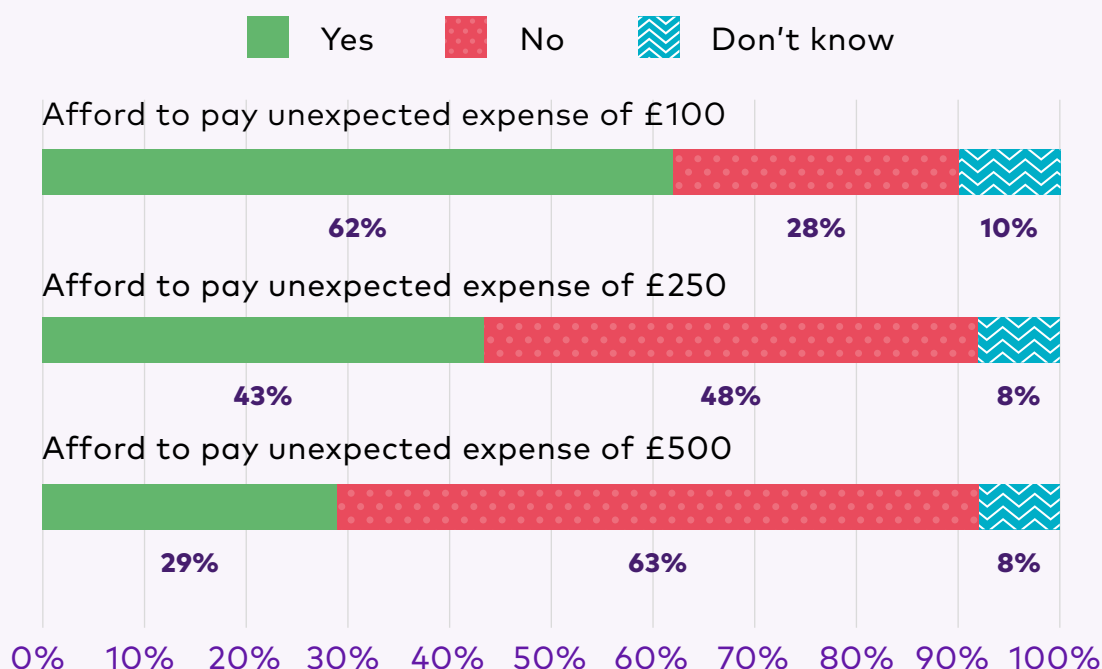
- Those regarded as food insecure (30%) relative to those not food insecure (11%).
- Those with a disability (29%) when compared to those not disabled (17%).
- Those suffering from food allergies or intolerances (33%) relative to those who were not (17%).
- Those not in employment or education (36%) when compared to those with full or part-time employment (13%) or those in full or part-time education (21%).

## 6.6 Able to afford an unexpected bill

**Almost three in ten (28%) respondents stated they would be unable to afford an unexpected, but necessary, expense of £100 (Figure 16).**

Nearly half (48%) would be unable to pay if the expense increased to £250, and almost two thirds (63%) if the expense was £500.

Figure 16: Could you afford to pay an unexpected, but necessary, expense of £100 / £250 / £500?

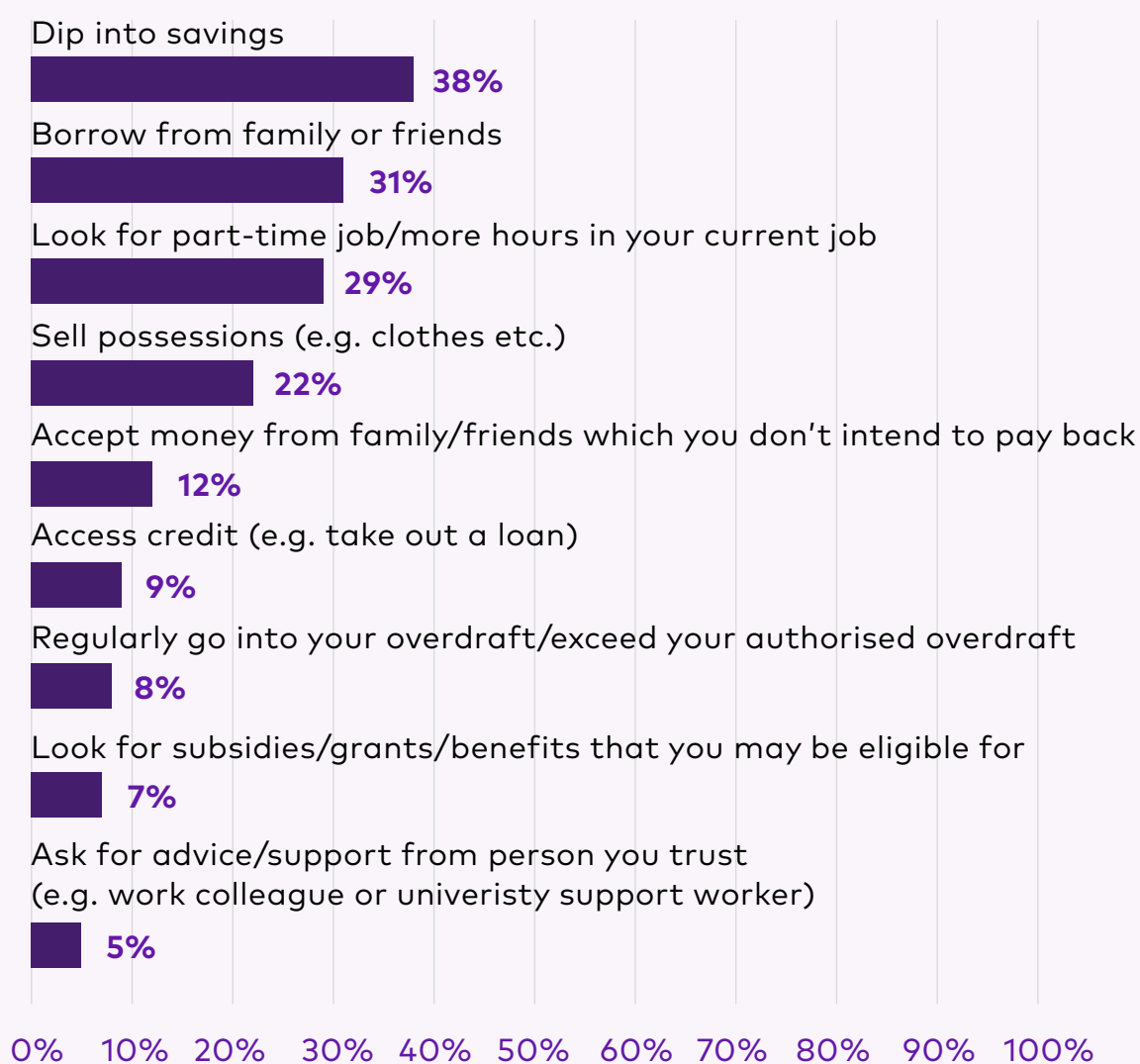


Base: all respondents (n=730)

## 6.7 Actions taken when money is running out

When respondents see that their money is running out, almost two in five (38%) dip into their savings in order to cover expenses. Around three in ten borrow from friends or family (31%) or look for part-time work or more hours in their current job (29%). Under a quarter (22%) will seek to sell possessions (Figure 17).

Figure 17: If you see that your money is running out, what actions do you take?



Base: all respondents (n=730)

When confronted with this dilemma, food insecure consumers are more likely to borrow from their friends and family (48%), look for part-time work or extra hours (35%), sell possessions (32%) or accept money from family/friends that they don't intend paying back (20%).

Amongst those that borrow from friends and family, the vast majority (89%) don't pay any interest on this loan.





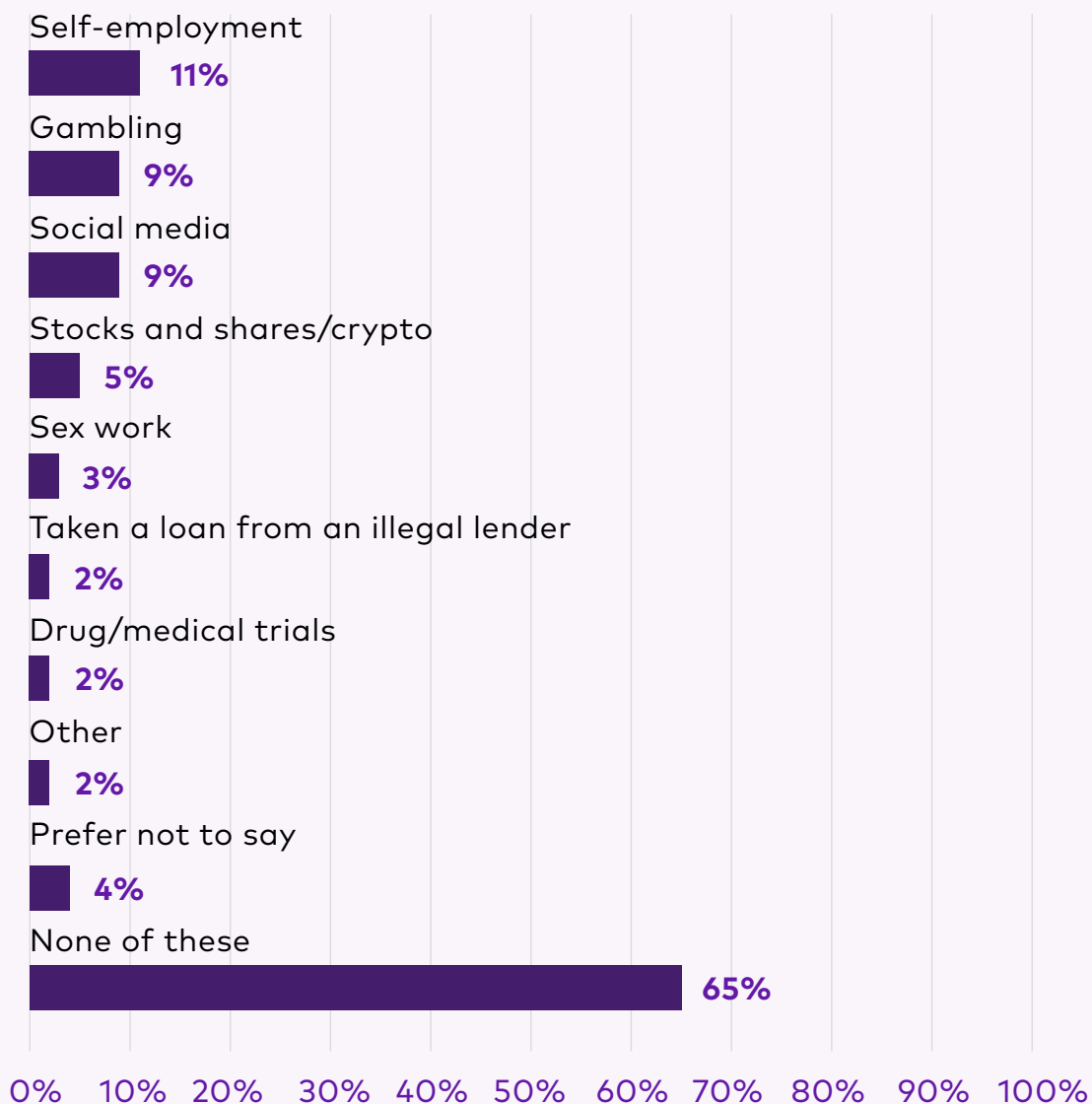


## 6.8 Things done for extra money due to financial hardship

In order to earn extra money due to financial hardship, around one in ten respondents had taken up self-employment (11%), took part in gambling (9%) or social media activity (9%) (Figure 18).

Smaller proportions turned to stocks and shares or crypto (5%), sex work (3%), took a loan from an illegal lender (2%), or took part in drug or medical trials (2%).

Figure 18: Have you done any of the following for extra money due to financial hardship?



Base: all respondents (n=730)

## 7. Case study 2

Oisin, a 26-year-old full-time student at university, lives with three housemates in privately rented accommodation in Belfast. He works part-time in a bar in the evenings and also has a student loan but still finds it difficult to make his budget stretch to cover all his expenses. In an average month, after having paid his portion of all necessary bills such as broadband, mobile phone, electricity, gas and food, he would have in the region of £100 left over to spend on socialising and takeaway food. Prior to becoming a student, Oisin had a full-time job so he does have some savings that he can fall back on.



"I know I'm very fortunate as my parents help me out a lot with expenses. They cover the cost of running my car and my dad also transfers me a small allowance over and above my student loan. I do five shifts a week in a pub nearby, but my parents would not be happy if they knew I was working so much rather than studying, but I need the money so I can enjoy myself."

Once a month, Oisín goes home to his parents in Omagh for the weekend to get washing done and returns back to his apartment with stocks of non-perishable food and freshly prepared dinners for freezing gifted to him by his parents. For the first few weeks after returning to Belfast, he has little expenditure on groceries. However, towards the end of the month when his stocks are running low, eating healthy regular meals becomes more of a challenge and he tends to skip occasional meals and resort to takeaway food for convenience.

"I get home about once a month, but when I do, I come back with packets of dried foods such as pasta 'n' sauce, super noodles and microwaveable rice. My mum also prepares me single portion meals such as lasagna which I would freeze."

"Any spare money I have I spend on socialising; I like to go out on the town as often as I can afford it. Towards the end of the month, when the food is running out, I tend to resort to takeaway food from the local Centra. It's not cheap, but it tastes great and is super convenient. I would have a breakfast bar before class, skip lunch, then call in to the shop after my last class to get something more substantial. I know it's not good for me, but I'm young and play sport so for the time being I can get away with it."

Oisín lacks confidence in preparing food from fresh, and because his flat mates are studying different courses, they rarely spend time together in the apartment and cook in bulk.

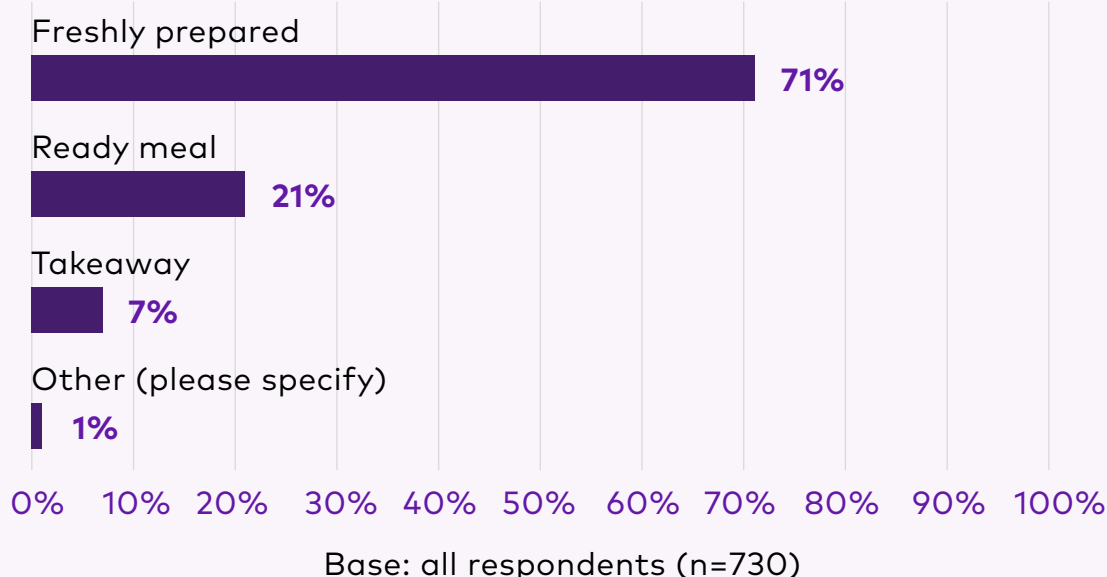
"I don't really know how to cook freshly prepared food, I never tried. We have a decent cooker and facilities, but they aren't used that often and with study, work and going out, I just don't have the time...We are rarely all together in the flat at the same time, so the idea of all four of us sitting down to a freshly prepared meal has never been a thing. Our biggest problem is that we have a small freezer section, so there's generally a fight to get foods stored."

## 8. Meal types

### 8.1 Types of food eaten most often for main meal

Over seven in ten (71%) respondents typically had a freshly prepared meal for their main meal of the day. Around one in five (21%) most often had a ready meal, with less than one in ten (7%) eating takeaway (Figure 19).

Figure 19: What type of food do you most often eat for your main meal of the day?



Consumers least likely to regularly eat freshly prepared meals were more common amongst:

- Those regarded as food insecure (56%) relative to those not food insecure (82%).
- Those aged 18 to 24 (67%) when compared to those in the 25 to 30 (75%) age category.
- Those with a disability (51%) when compared to those not disabled (75%).
- Those suffering from food allergies or intolerances (60%) relative to those who were not (73%).
- Those not in employment or education (59%) when compared to those with full or part-time employment (78%).

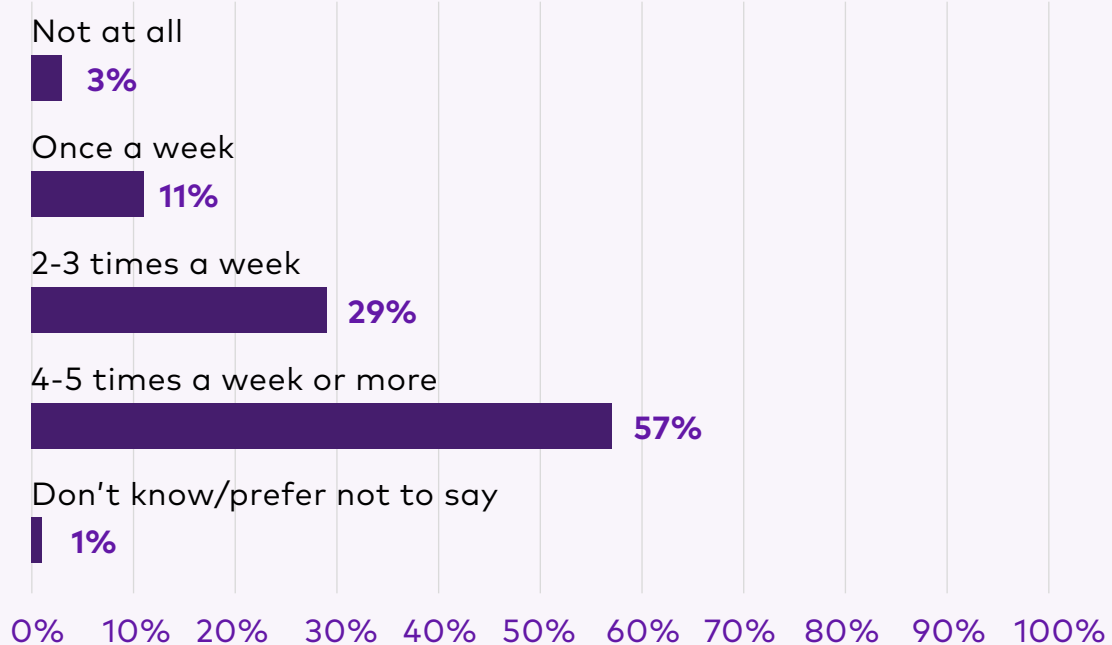
## 8.2 Regularity of eating freshly prepared food

**Almost three in five (57%) respondents ate freshly prepared food on at least four or five occasions during the week, and under a third (29%) did so on at least two or three occasions (Figure 20).**

Around one in ten (11%) consumers ate only one freshly prepared meal a week.

These respondents were more likely to fall into the food insecure category (18%) relative to those who were not food insecure (7%).

Figure 20: On an average week, how many times do you eat the following types of food: Freshly prepared



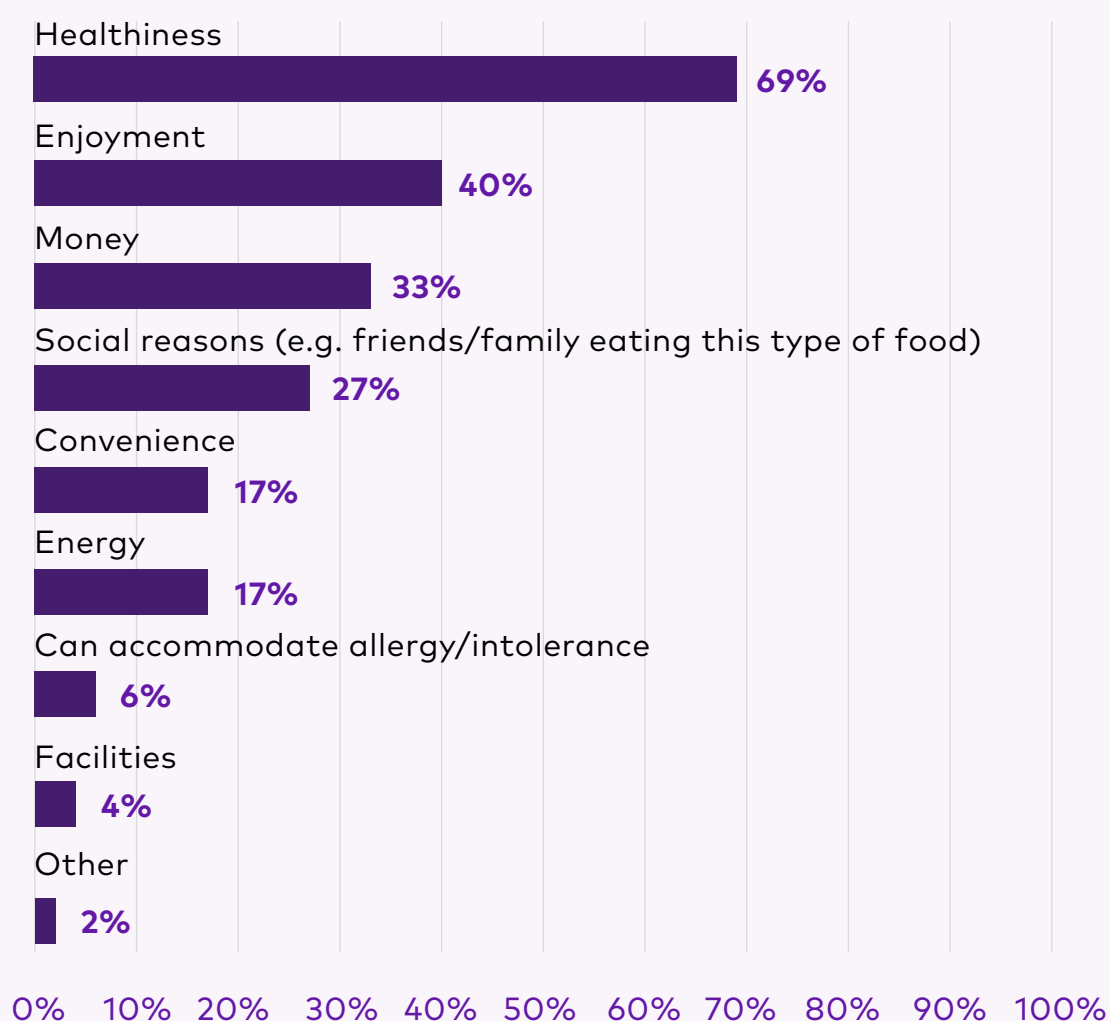
Base: all respondents (n=730)

### 8.3 Reasons for eating a freshly prepared meal

The most common reason for preparing a meal from fresh was due to its healthiness (69%). Respondents also cited the enjoyment of preparing a fresh meal (40%) as well as the potential cost efficiencies involved (33%) (Figure 21).

Consumers stated that preparing a fresh meal had social benefits with friends and family also eating this type of food (27%). For many, it was regarded as convenient (17%), with the consumption of fresh prepared food also helping to give them energy (17%).

Figure 21: What are the most common reasons for preparing a meal from fresh when you do so?

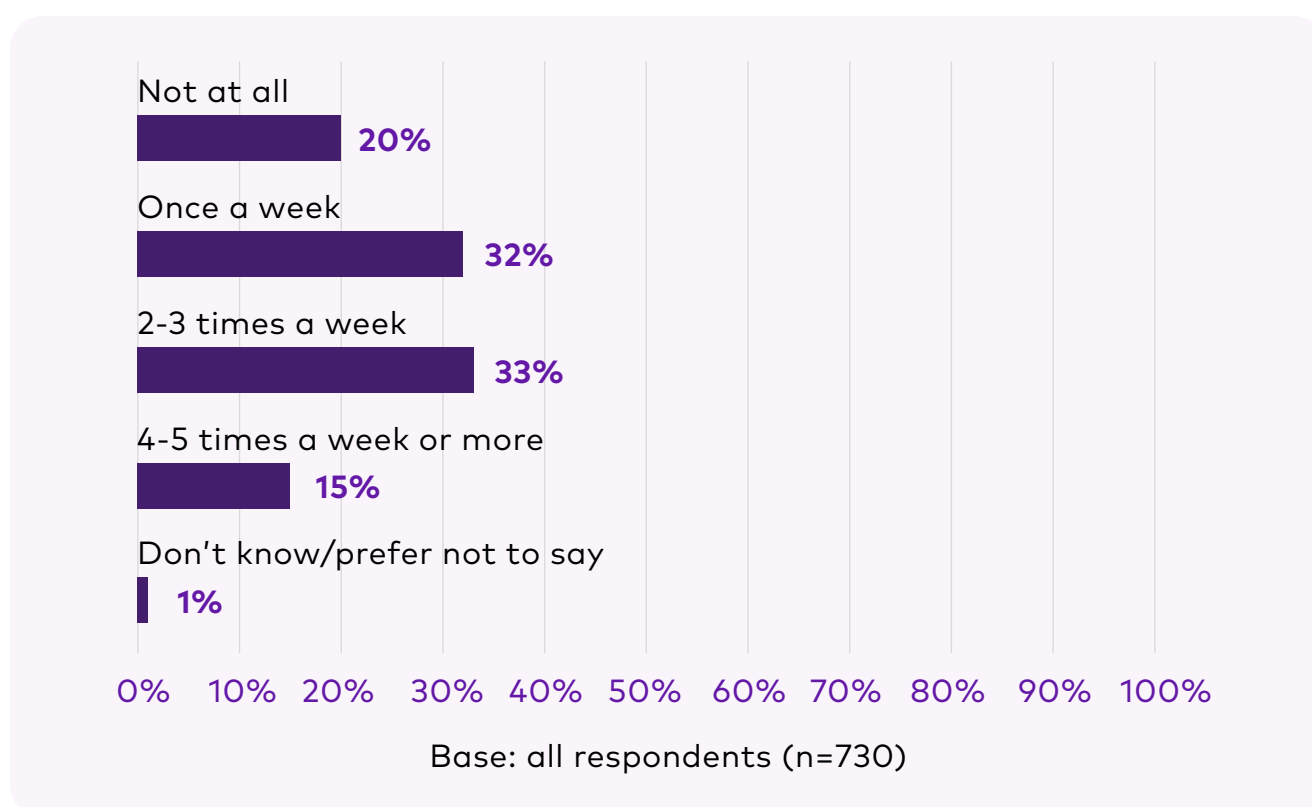


Base: all respondents that eat freshly prepared food (n=709)

## 8.4 Regularity of eating ready meals

Four in five (80%) respondents ate ready meals on at least a weekly basis. Around a third (32%) consumed a ready meal once a week, with similar proportions (33%) doing so on two or three occasions during the week (Figure 22).

Figure 22: In an average week, how many times do you eat the following types of food: Ready meals



Consumers that ate ready meals on at least four or five occasions throughout the week (15%) were more likely to be amongst:

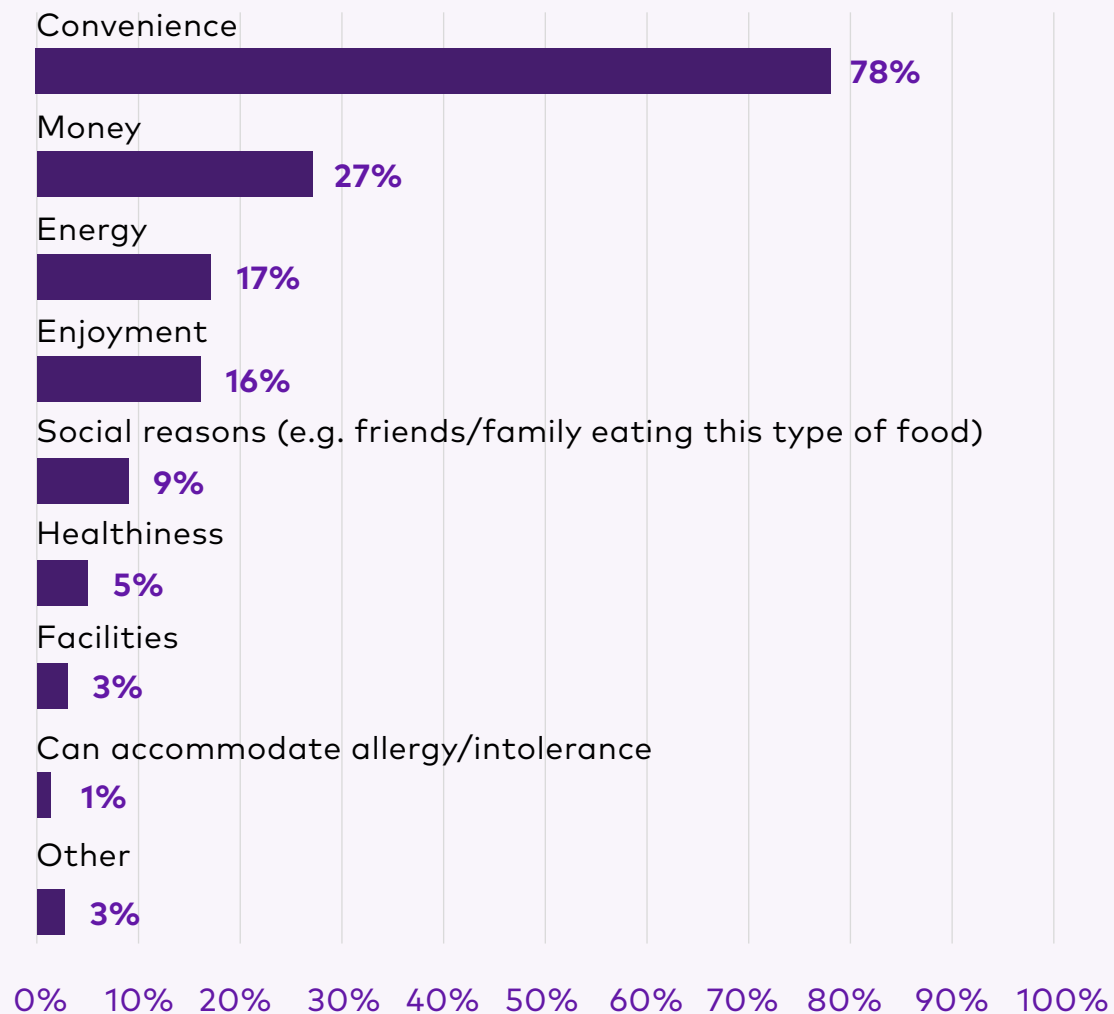
- Those from a C2DE background (19%) when compared to those from the ABC1 socio-economic group (10%).
- Those aged 18 to 24 (19%) when compared to those in the 25 to 30 (10%) age category.
- Those with a disability (23%) when compared to those not disabled (13%).

## 8.5 Reasons for eating ready meals

**Convenience was the most commonly cited reason for eating ready meals, referenced by almost four in five (78%) respondents (Figure 23).**

Over a quarter (27%) attributed money as a key reason, with smaller proportions suggesting ready meals provided them with energy (17%) and enjoyment (16%).

Figure 23: What are the most common reasons for buying a ready meal when you do so?



Base: all respondents that eat ready meals (n=571)

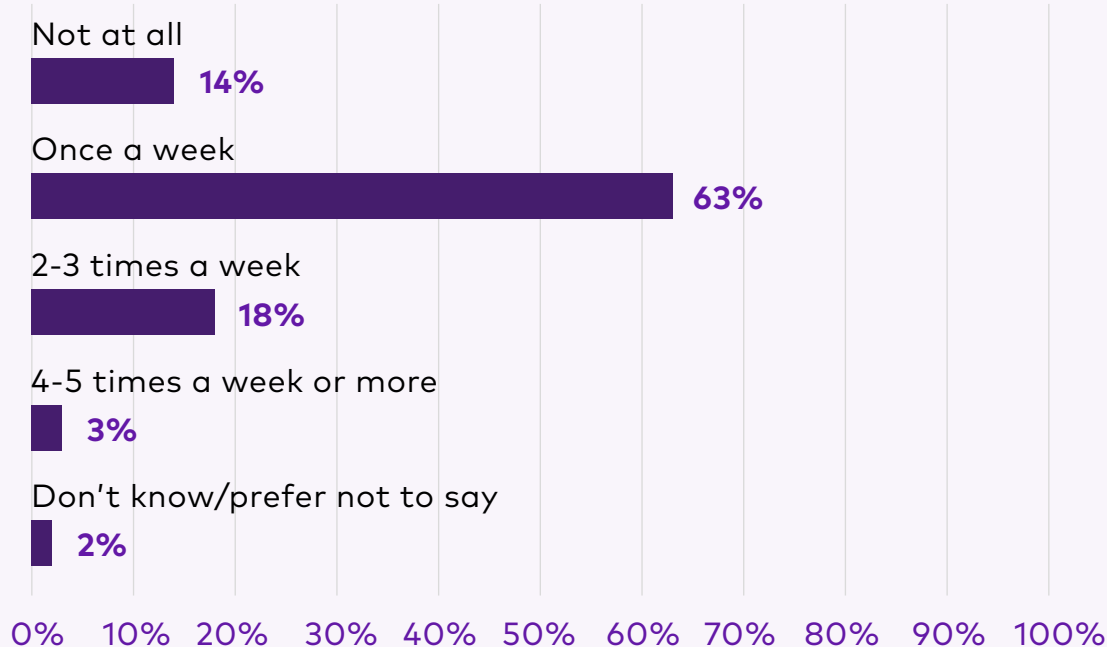


## 8.6 Regularity of eating takeaways

Almost two thirds (63%) of respondents ate takeaway food once a week, whilst around one in five (18%) did so two or three times each week. Consumers eating takeaway food two or three times each week were more likely to be males (22%) compared to females (13%) (Figure 24).

Over one in ten (14%) stated they did not eat takeaway food at all.

Figure 24: On an average week, how many times do you eat the following types of food: Takeaway



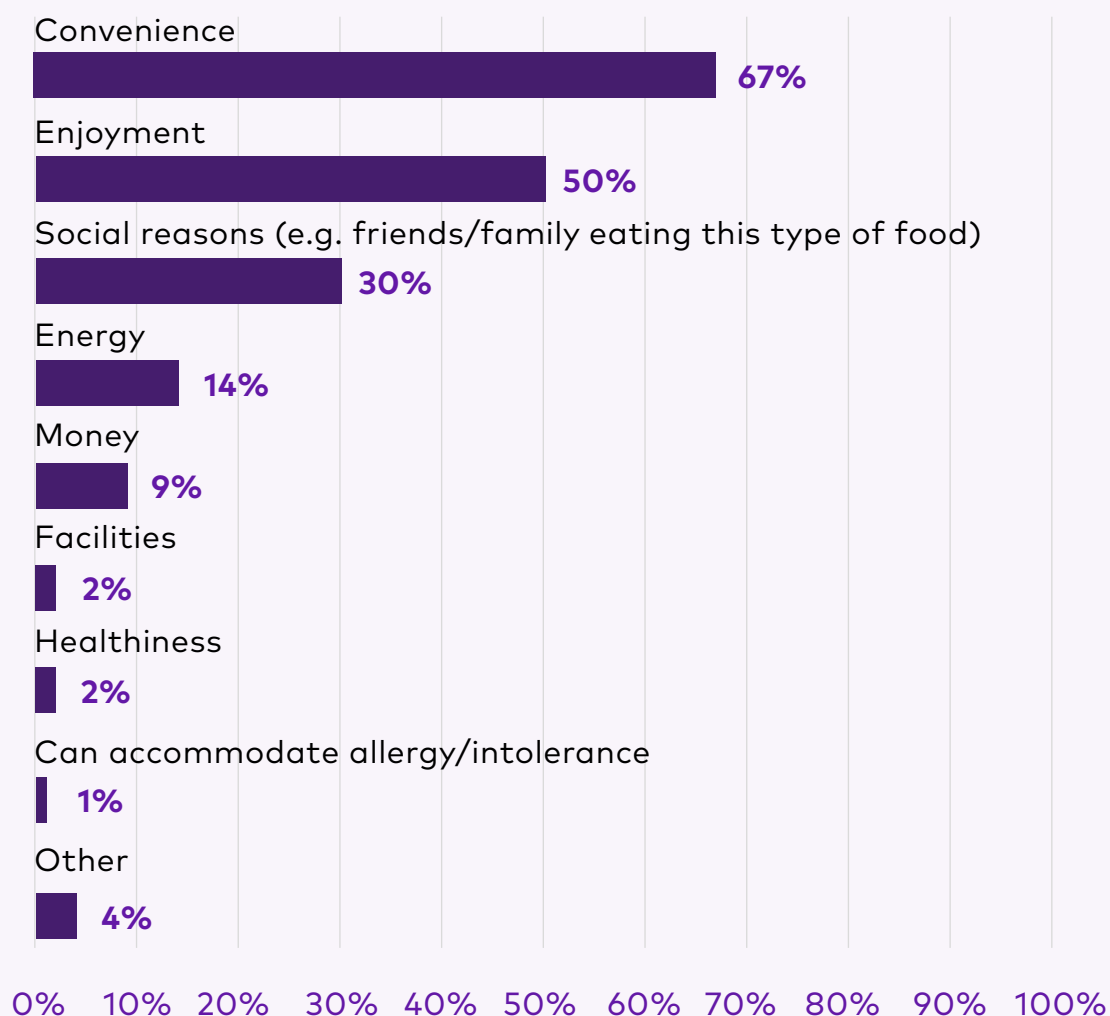
Base: all respondents (n=730)

## 8.7 Reasons for eating takeaways

As experienced with ready meals, convenience proved to be a significant factor behind the decision to purchase takeaway food (67%) (Figure 25).

Half (50%) of respondents made reference to the enjoyment involved in eating takeaways, with three in ten (30%) also citing the social element of eating takeaway food with family or friends.

Figure 25: What are the most common reasons for buying a takeaway when you do so?

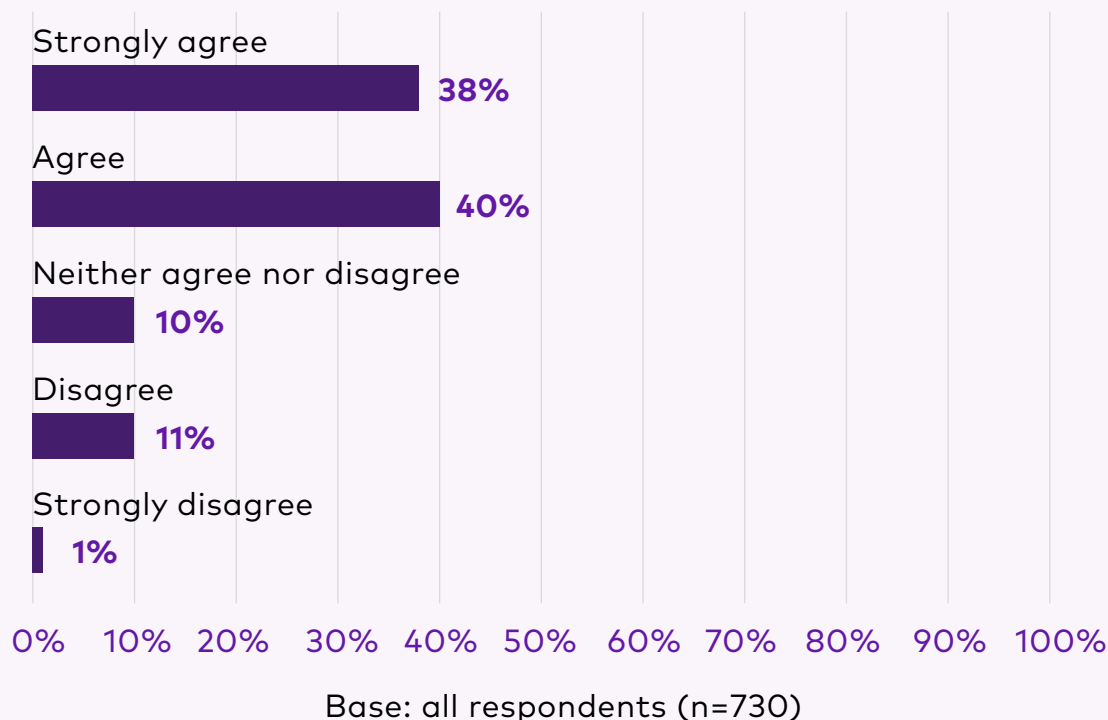


Base: all respondents that eat takeaway (n=607)

## 8.8 Confidence in ability to prepare healthy foods

Almost four in five (78%) young adults expressed confidence in their ability to prepare healthy foods from scratch. In contrast, over one in ten (12%) lacked confidence in their abilities (Figure 26).

Figure 26: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I am confident in my ability to prepare healthy foods from scratch.



Respondents lacking confidence in their ability to prepare healthy foods from scratch were more likely to be amongst:

- Those regarded as food insecure (17%) relative to those not food insecure (9%).
- Those aged 18 to 24 (15%) when compared to those in the 25 to 30 (9%) age category.
- Those living at home with parents, guardians or other family members (18%) compared to those renting from a private or social landlord (9%).
- Those with a disability (16%) when compared to those not disabled (10%).

## 8.9 Difficulties experienced when making or consuming food you eat

Over two in five (41%) respondents experienced a lack of motivation when making or consuming the food that they eat. Other difficulties included the cost of buying healthier food (29%), having limited time to plan, cook or prepare healthier food (22%), being the only person in the household wanting to eat this type of food (17%) and the lack of availability of healthier options when shopping (13%) (Figure 27).

Figure 27: Did you experience any of the following difficulties when making/ consuming the food that you eat?



Base: all respondents (n=730)

Overall, around three quarters (76%) experienced difficulties when making or consuming the food they eat. These respondents were more likely to be amongst:

- Those regarded as food insecure (95%) relative to those not food insecure (63%).
- Those with a disability (93%) when compared to those not disabled (73%).
- Those residing in urban areas (79%) when compared to those in rural locations (71%).
- Those suffering from food allergies or intolerances (89%) relative to those who were not (75%).

Food insecure respondents were significantly more likely to express a lack of motivation (52%) when preparing food compared to those who are not food insecure (33%). They were also more likely to have concerns about the cost of buying healthier food (45%) than those who are not food insecure (19%).

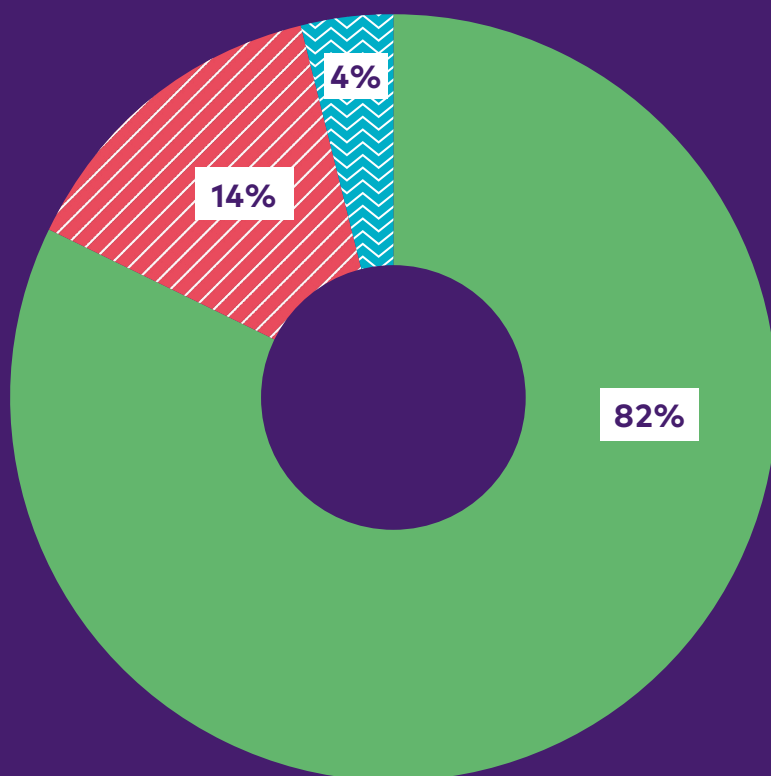


GLUTEN  
FREE

## 8.10 Consumers who grew up seeing food cooked from scratch

Over four in five (82%) respondents 'grew up seeing food cooked from fresh on a regular basis'. In contrast, more than one in ten (14%) did not experience this when growing up (Figure 28).

Figure 28: Please respond whether the following statement is true or false in your experience: I grew up seeing food cooked from fresh on a regular basis



■ True ■ False ■ Don't know

Base: all respondents (n=730)



Respondents that did not see food cooked from fresh when they were growing up were more likely to be amongst:

- Those regarded as food insecure (24%) relative to those not food insecure (7%).
- Those from a C2DE background (17%) when compared to those from the ABC1 socio-economic group (10%).
- Those residing in urban areas (17%) relative to those in rural locations (9%).

Consumers that did grow up seeing food cooked from scratch were significantly more confident in their ability to prepare healthy foods from scratch (86%) when compared to those who didn't (47%).



## 9. Case study 3

Arden, a 28-year-old from Bangor, lives in privately rented accommodation with her partner. They both work full-time in a call centre and work as much overtime as is offered. In an average month, after they have paid off their necessary expenses, they have around £300 left over. Arden and her partner are trying to save for a deposit to buy their own home and are always on the lookout for ways to cut back and save money.





As part of their saving plan, Arden and her partner have stopped buying treat foods and takeaways, and now have a rigid food plan in place, whereby each weekend, once they have done their main shop, meals are prepared for the entire week and are frozen. To facilitate this, they purchased an additional second-hand freezer for storage.

Arden also prepares packed lunches, so they don't have to purchase food on the go, and both have also stopped regularly going out at the weekends. Instead, they would invite friends around to the house and socialise there.

"By changing our food plan around, I reckon we save at least £100 a month by not buying lunches and takeaway dinners. At times you can get a bit sick of eating the same things, but we get decent meals every day containing meat and vegetables. We both do shift work, so it's so handy if you're home late in the evening and don't have to think about what to make"

"A couple of years ago, we would have stopped at the chippie or KFC on the way home, as they are right beside where we work. Now that we don't do that, we can notice the extra money at the end of the month".

"On the odd occasion we would get a Chinese takeaway at the weekend, but it's very rare compared to the old days. On a Saturday night we might invite friends to the house and have a couple of drinks and save a fortune".

Due to the fact they spend more time eating meals together at home, Arden feels this has had a beneficial impact on their relationship as well as on their general health as both have lost considerable weight since cutting out ready meals and takeaways.

Arden has also changed her shopping patterns in order to seek out better deals and cheaper options. She now does her main weekly shop in a different major supermarket, which she believes has made significant savings. Arden also now often conducts her shop online, so that she can't be tempted into unnecessary purchases when in-store.

"The biggest saving I have made came about by changing where I shop. I'm pretty sure I save between £20 to £30 per week... and by shopping online you can simply pick what you got the week before and not be tempted".

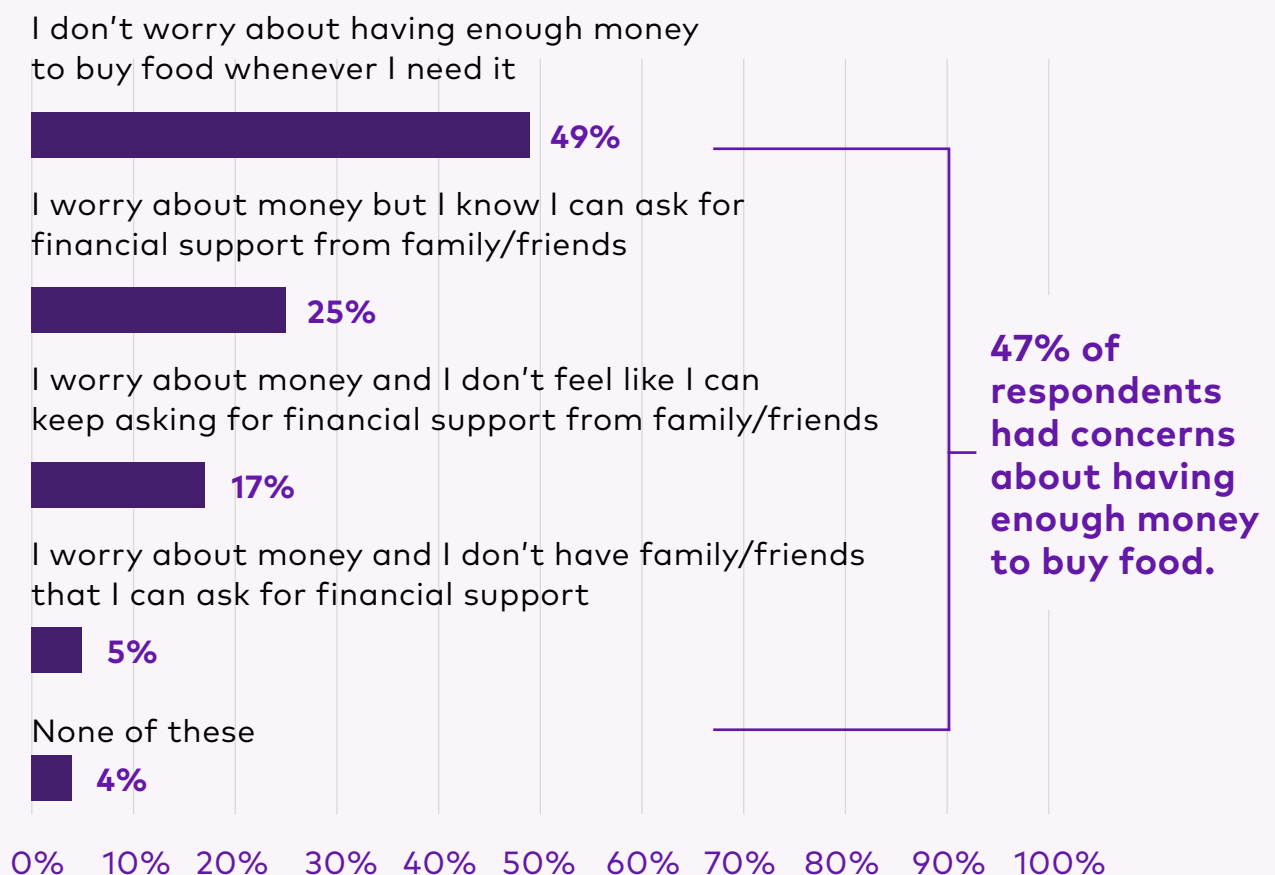
# 10. Support and resources available

## 10.1 Financial support available from family or friends

Almost half (47%) of respondents had concerns about having enough money to buy food. However, a quarter (25%) stated they could ask for financial support from friends or family. More than one in five (22%) felt that they couldn't keep asking for assistance (17%) or that financial support from friends and family was not available to them (5%) (Figure 29).

In contrast, 49% of consumers aged 18 to 30 don't worry about having enough money to buy food whenever they need it.

Figure 29: Please choose the statement which is the most appropriate for your situation



Base: all respondents (n=730)

Concerned consumers who felt they couldn't keep asking for financial support, or who had no family or friends support available to them were more likely to be amongst:

- Those regarded as food insecure (45%) relative to those not food insecure (6%).
- Those from a C2DE background (27%) when compared to those from the ABC1 socio-economic group (17%).
- Those with a disability (34%) when compared to those not disabled (19%).
- Those residing in urban areas (26%) relative to those in rural locations (13%).
- Those renting from a private or social landlord (31%) compared to those living at home with parents, guardians or other family members (20%).



## 10.2 Organisations consumers could turn to for support

Almost three in five (58%) young adults were not confident about which organisations they could turn to for support if they were experiencing money difficulties (Figure 30).

Figure 30: If you are currently, or were ever to experience money difficulties, would you feel confident about which organisation(s) you could turn to for support? Base: all respondents (n=730)

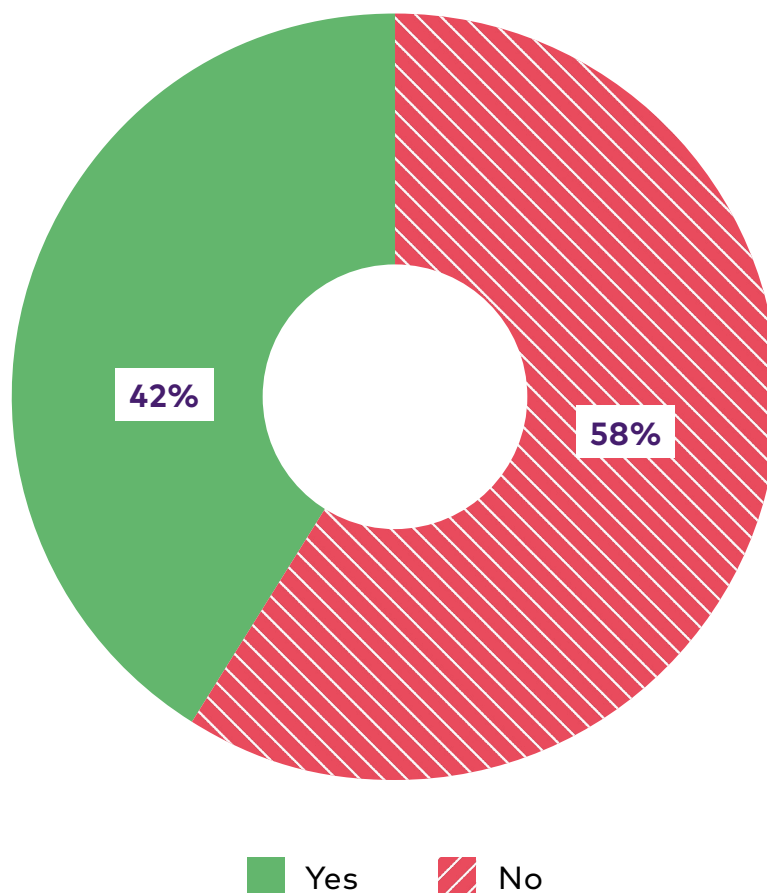
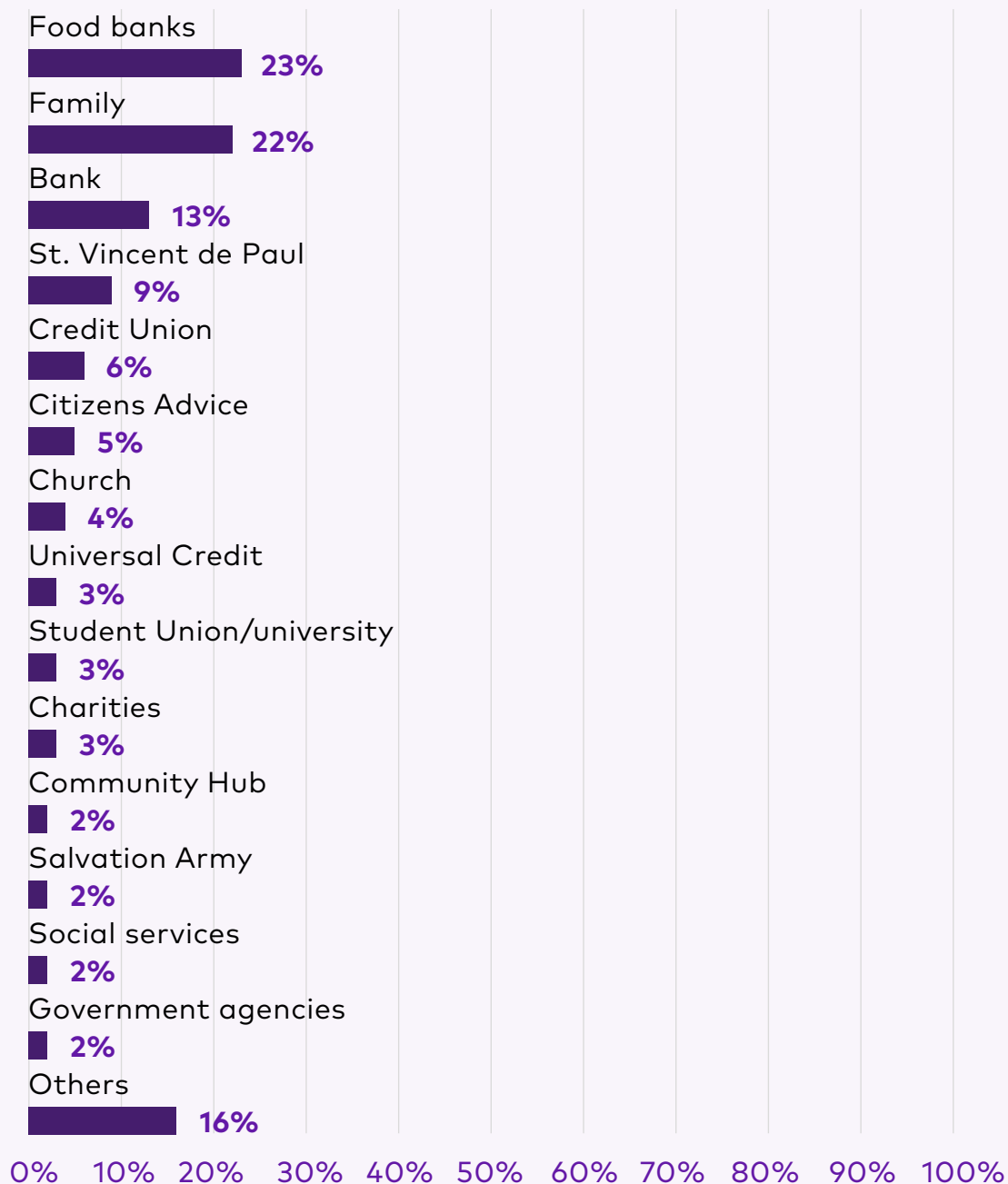


Figure 31: What organisations would you turn to for support? Base: all respondents who would look for support (n=312)



Base: all respondents (n=312)

Lower confidence levels were more likely amongst those residing in rural areas (66%) when compared to those located in urban locations (54%).

Amongst those who felt confident they would know where to go to for support, food banks (23%), family (22%), banks (13%) and St Vincent de Paul (9%) were the most frequently cited sources for assistance.

# 11. Case study 4

Kiara, a 27-year-old from Lisburn, lives in rented accommodation with her seven-year-old son, Jake. Due to a limited budget, Kiara and her son's food choices are often out of her control which gives her a sense of anxiety. She works in the hospitality sector which means many of her shifts are in the evenings and at weekends, so she relies heavily on family members to take care of Jake after school. Kiara has a concern that Jake doesn't have a balanced diet because his grandparents give in to his fussy eating habits, and he therefore eats unhealthy food options too frequently.



"I depend upon my sister and my parents a lot to look after Jake when I'm at work, and I'm usually at work over dinner time. I know it's tough for them, but they end up giving him 'fakeaway' food in order to please him and get him onto his homework. I do warn them about this, but I also need to be grateful as I have to work, I've no choice".

As a consequence, when not at work, Kiara tries especially hard to prepare freshly made meals, however, this is often met with resistance. This results in considerable food waste with fresh produce being binned as it goes past its use-by date.

"When I'm at home I try and make up for the fact he's eaten badly during the week, but when I make something fresh and healthy, it's always a battle to get him to eat it and then I give in for an easy life... because of this I waste so much food".

Without the ongoing support of her parents preparing meals for Jake most evenings, Kiara would be unable to cover her expenditure. Once all her necessary bills are paid each month, which include rent, electricity, gas, broadband, insurances and upkeep of a car, she has little, or no money left to spend or save. At certain times of the year when expenses increase, such as Christmas and birthdays, she relies on financial help from her parents and sister, who don't ask for any loans to be paid back.

"Without the help of my family, I simply couldn't cover it. They are so generous and look for nothing in return so it's difficult for me to complain about what they're feeding Jake. But it's not a long-term solution".

Working in a restaurant means Kiara gets access to dinner at work at very favourable rates so she doesn't have to cut portion sizes or skip meals. The downside to this is that she is regularly eating rich food which she couldn't otherwise afford, therefore her own diet is far from healthy or balanced.

"Where I work offers staff rates for dinner, so on my break for a couple of quid I can have a proper meal which really helps the budget and fills me right up. The only downside is that you have to eat what is offered by the chef, which usually involves chips".

Kiara has full confidence in her ability to prepare fresh healthy food and has the facilities to do so. However, her current employment situation does not allow the time or opportunity for this to happen.

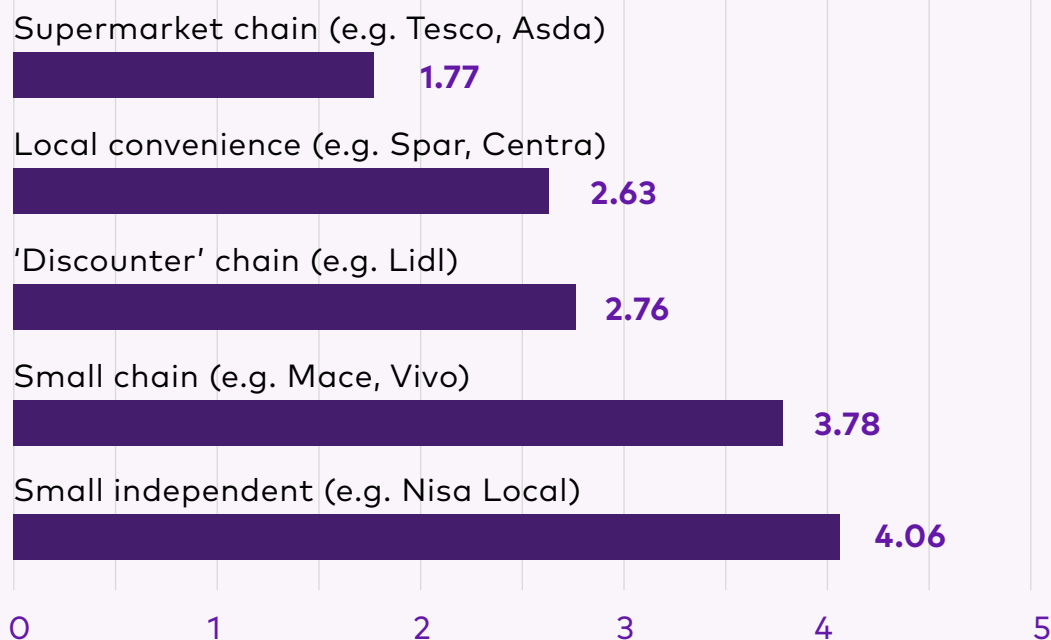
# 12. Shopping and food storage

## 12.1 Most common places to buy food

On a one to five scale, where one represented the 'most common place to buy food' and five the 'least common place', supermarket chains were, on average, most likely to be used by consumers when buying food, followed by local convenience stores and 'discounter' chains (Figure 31).

Figure 31: What are your most common places to buy food? Rate from the most common (1) to the least common (5)

Average ranking comparison (the closer to 1 the more common a place to buy food)



Base: all respondents (n=730)

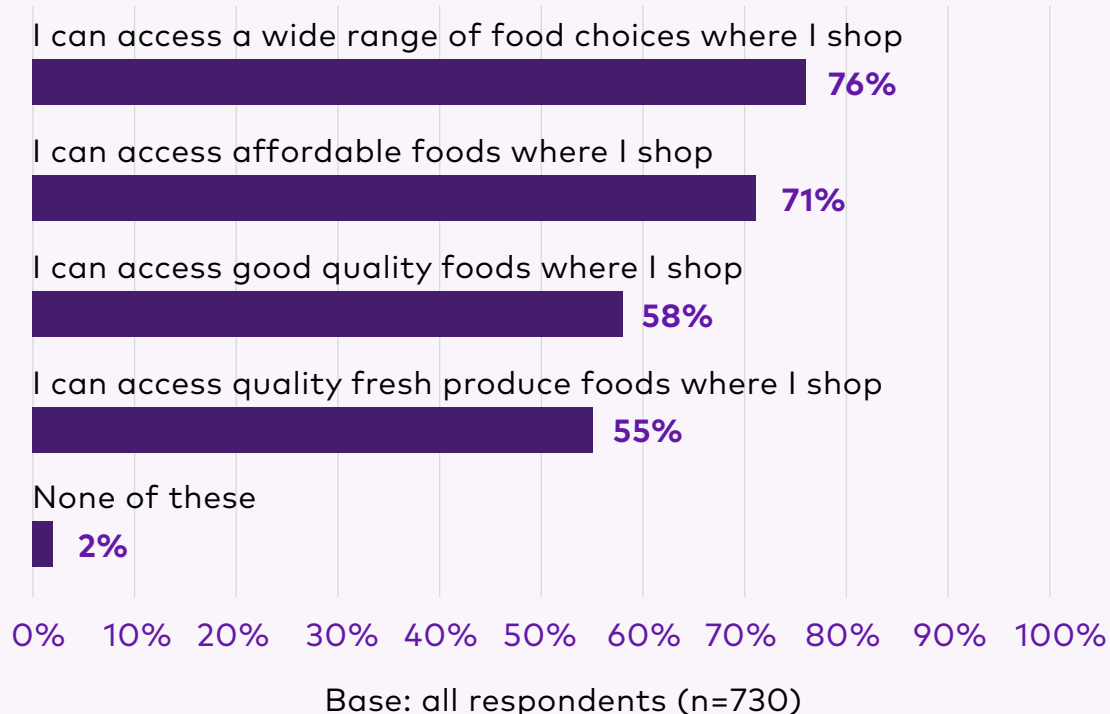


## 12.2 Experiences of food shopping

Over three quarters (76%) could access a wide range of food choices where they shop, with slightly smaller proportions (71%) also being able to access affordable foods (Figure 32).

Nearly three in five (58%) had access to good quality foods where they shop, and over half (55%) could access quality fresh produce foods.

Figure 32: Please select all statements that reflect your experience of food shopping.

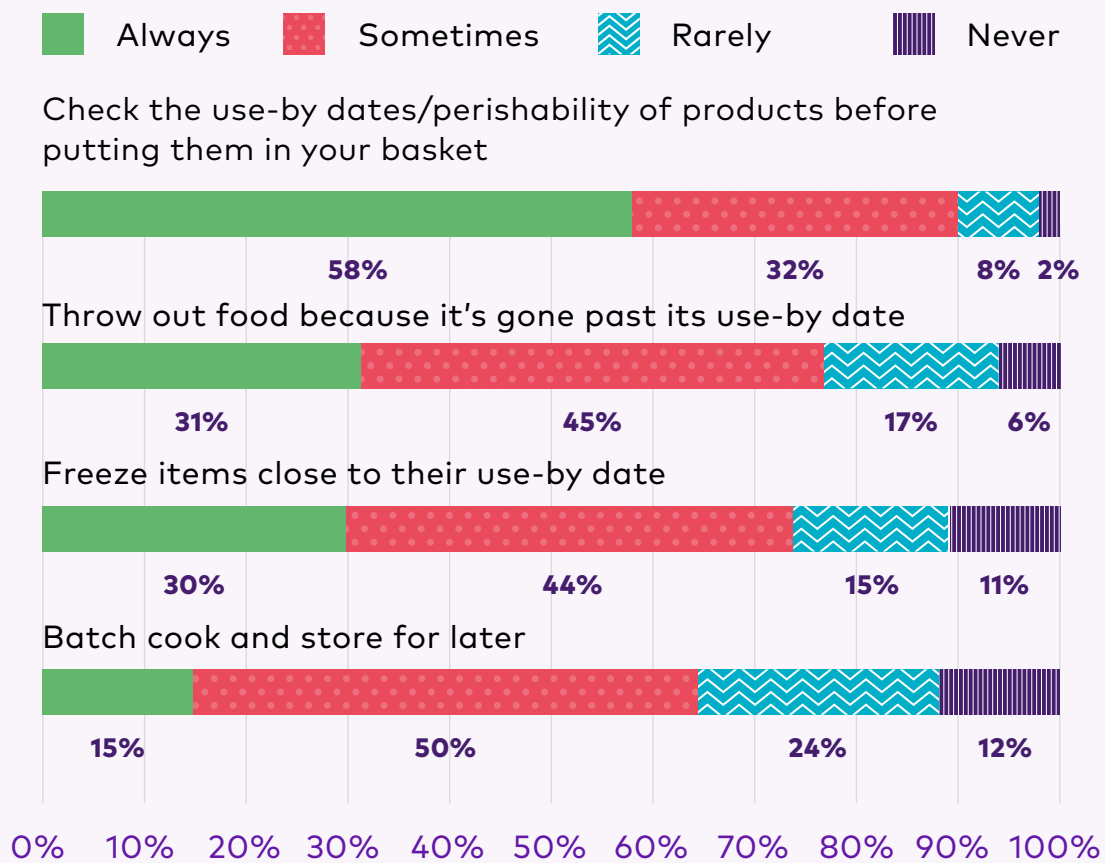


## 12.3 Actions to reduce perishability of food

Nine in ten (90%) respondents 'always' or 'sometimes' check the use-by date or perishability of products before putting them into their basket. Around one in ten (10%) 'rarely' or 'never' check the product (Figure 33).

Over three quarters (76%) 'always' or 'sometimes' throw out food because it has gone past its use-by date. Similar proportions (74%) freeze items close to their sell-by date, and almost two thirds (65%) are more likely to batch cook and store for later.

Figure 33: How often do you do the following



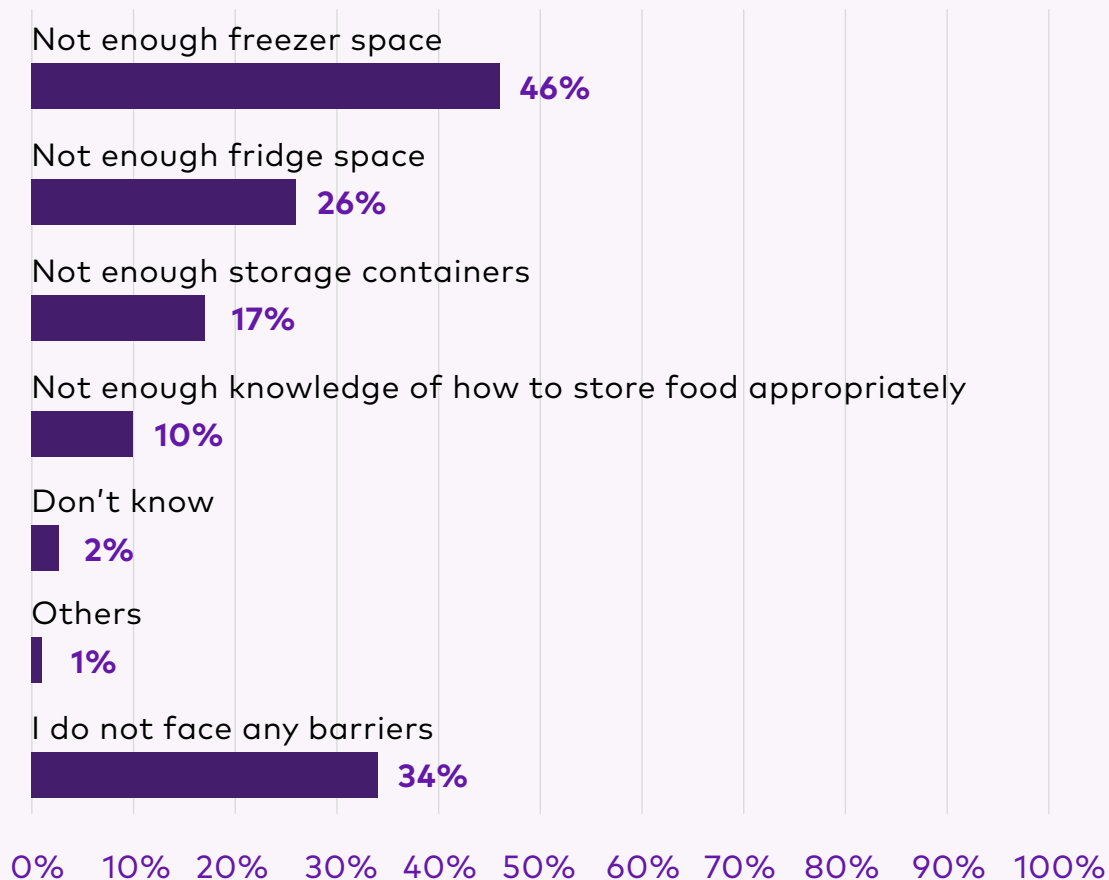
Base: all respondents (n=730)

## 12.4 Barriers experienced when trying to store food

**One third (34%) did not experience any barriers when trying to store food appropriately in order to extend its perishability. (Figure 34).**

Barriers that were experienced included not having enough freezer space (46%), not enough fridge space (26%), not enough storage containers (17%) and a lack of knowledge of how to store food appropriately (10%).

Figure 34: What barriers, if any, do you face when trying to store food appropriately to extend its shelf life/reduce perishability?



Base: all respondents (n=730)

Food insecure consumers were significantly more likely to encounter these barriers when compared to those not food insecure as well as those renting from a private or social landlord compared to those living at home with parents, guardians or other family members.

## 13. Case study 5

Georgie, a 22-year-old from Belfast, lives at home with her parents and is currently studying full-time at a university in Northern Ireland. She has a part-time job working Saturdays in a café close to her home. Georgie has no financial pressures and largely relies on her parents to purchase and prepare the food that she consumes. Her part-time job covers any expenses she has for socialising.



Living at home and being close to the university has made a huge difference to both her diet and finances. Every day, she would have a substantial breakfast before leaving the house, bring with her a packed lunch, then return home each evening to a freshly prepared meal. Although Georgie likes to cook from fresh herself, she realises that if she is under pressure with work, her parents will always prepare a meal for her and that she doesn't have to cover any of the grocery costs. She is very conscious of what she eats and the need to consume a healthy balanced diet. However, she is also fully aware that this would be much more difficult if she didn't live at home with her parents.

"Since I came home from my placement year, I only eat at home now. The reason for this is the control I have over my meals and the quantities I eat. My parents always want me to eat good portions but for me it's healthy ingredients and small amounts".

"To be honest, whatever money I earn is my own. Living at home is huge, and my parents cover pretty much all of my costs. They are very health conscious too, so we all tend to eat the same type of foods, like fish, chicken and vegetables. I know at home there's always going to be something nice and healthy that fills me up. It also means the money I earn at the café is my own to spend on whatever I want. If I lived away, I could never do this. I love cooking from fresh but if I was away, I wouldn't have the time or the money probably and would fall into bad habits".

At university, Georgie is aware of many students that survive on fast food and work unsociable hours to fund their expenses and education. She is also aware of students that compromise their diets and regularly skip meals in order to fund their social life.

"It's frightening to see what some do to pay their way at university. Working every night in pubs and clubs, grabbing fast food when they can, I don't know how they do it. Then there's the party side to it which must soak up a lot of the money they have earned".

# 14. Conclusions

The findings from the Young Adults' Food Experiences survey indicates that food insecurity is a significant problem amongst consumers aged 18 to 30 in Northern Ireland, with over two in five (41%) falling into this category. It is also evident that those experiencing food insecurity are more likely to be:

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From a less affluent (C2DE) socio economic group.

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Disabled than not disabled.

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Suffering from food allergies or intolerances compared to those who are not.

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Not in employment or studying compared to those in education or with full or part-time employment.

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Living in urban areas rather than rural locations.

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Renting from a private or social landlord.

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There are clear concerns amongst young adults that food will run out before they have money to buy more (49%), and that they, or others within the household, can't afford to eat balanced meals (46%). There are also notable proportions that are reducing meal sizes, skipping meals, or worse still, going without food for an entire day simply because they don't have enough money for food. Most young adult consumers having to make these sacrifices are clearly aware of the impacts, citing issues such as less energy, low confidence and feeling hungry more often as consequences.

The research also identifies high levels of concern (61%) amongst consumers regarding their ability to buy quality food at an affordable price. Given that around a third (36%) of this age group earn less than £20,000 per year, many are experiencing financial pressures as they take on the responsibility of paying for their food and groceries, phone contracts, memberships, energy bills, car upkeep, rent or mortgage and insurance.

Once all necessary bills have been paid each month, around one in five young adults (19%) have only £20 or less, and a third (36%) have £60 or less to spend or save. A small but significant proportion (6%) of young adults find themselves in a constant downward spiral as their expenses are greater than their income in a typical month.

Consumers' concerns are also heightened by a noticeable inability to pay for unexpected expenses if they were to arise, with almost half (48%) not being in a position to cover a surprise bill of £250, and almost two thirds (63%) unable to cover an additional expense of £500. It is also clear from the research that more needs to be done in order to increase awareness of support organisations that can assist consumers during a financial crisis. Only two in five (42%) are confident about which organisations they can turn to.

Despite the fact the vast majority do eat freshly prepared meals at least two or three times a week, the research did reveal a significant proportion of consumers within this age category also eating ready meals and takeaway foods on a regular basis, with convenience proving to be the main motivating factor.

There is an encouraging level of confidence (78%) amongst young adults in their perceived ability to prepare healthy foods from fresh. However, motivation, the cost of healthier foods, limited time to plan and others in the house not wanting to eat the same food act as barriers for many.

The Consumer Council is committed to working with stakeholders and policymakers to share the findings from this research so that the lived experiences and needs of young adults, particularly those experiencing food insecurity are better understood.

To ensure this improved understanding has impact, the Consumer Council has also developed recommendations and suggested who is best placed to take these forward. These are set out in the following section.

# 15. Recommendations

## 15.1 Government

We believe the following interventions would help address some of the barriers highlighted by young adults in this research:

- **We support the introduction of an Essentials Guarantee<sup>3</sup> – the Trussell (formerly Trussell Trust) and Joseph Rountree Foundation recommendation that at a minimum, the social security system should ensure that people don't go without essentials. This would involve a legal minimum allowance from Universal Credit so that the costs of essentials (like food, utilities and household items) are covered.**
- **People with disabilities should receive adequate social security payments which take into account the additional essential costs which they face as a result of their disability.**
- **We believe more should be done to incentivise healthier fast-food options given the prominence of unhealthy takeaway food. This might involve, for example, offering preferential rates for food outlets that show they are prioritising the healthiness of their products and menu.**
- **We welcome the mapping exercise commissioned by FSA which will map grocery retailers, fast-food outlets, takeaways and restaurants and will inform interventions aimed at creating a healthier food environment.**
- **Subsidies or vouchers are needed to help with the cost of free-from food for those with diagnosed food allergies/intolerances. Young adults in this group are more likely to be food insecure and less likely to eat freshly prepared food.**
- **Existing prescriptions services should be improved for those with food intolerances. A pharmacy-led scheme where patients have a unit allowance per month (like Scotland), or a chip and pin scheme where patients are given a credit allowance to use in supermarkets (like England and Wales) would be beneficial. This was a recommendation we first made in relation to our research which examined food affordability and availability issues for those with food hypersensitivities<sup>4</sup>.**
- **In the same way that calls are being made to ensure private and social landlords provide window and floor coverings for their tenants<sup>5</sup>, there also needs to be consideration given to the provision of adequate facilities for the preparation and storage of fresh/frozen food. This would involve introducing a minimum fridge and freezer size, particularly in houses of multiple occupancy (HMOs).**

<sup>3</sup> Guarantee our Essentials: reforming Universal Credit to ensure we can all afford the essentials in hard times

<sup>4</sup> Impact of cost and availability of free-from products on consumers, Consumer Council, July 2023

<sup>5</sup> 760,000 social housing tenants are living without flooring in all rooms, BBC News, 26 January 2025



- Universities and regional colleges which have kitchens for catering and hospitality courses could be funded to use their facilities to conduct cooking demonstrations. This scheme could help young adults develop practical skills, try new foods and be made aware of the cost savings of cooking from scratch and meal planning.
- Students need to be supported through continual commitment to raise student maintenance loans in line with inflation. To this end, we support the Economy Minister's recent announcement that there will be a 20% increase in the maximum student maintenance loans from September 2025.

## 15.2 Retailers

Retailers are well placed to make changes that would help young adults overcome some of the challenges we have highlighted through this research. These could include:

- Retailers could consider introducing schemes which help young adults with meal inspiration ideas which are linked to offers. This will incentivise healthy eating.
- Retailers should ensure there is a balance between healthy and less healthy foods on promotion given the cost of buying healthy food is noted as the second biggest barrier people face when preparing their food.
- More competitive pricing is also needed for free-from food for those with food hypersensitivities, with special offers available throughout the year as opposed to the New Year when foods perceived as healthy tend to be more heavily promoted'. There also needs to be more price matching between 'standard' products and similar free-from products.

## 15.3 Further research

- More research is needed to gain an in depth look at what consumers mean when they say skipping meals/reducing portion sizes reduces their confidence.
- For 6% of respondents, their expenses were greater than their income in a typical month. Further research could look into how much their expenses exceed income.
- Those renting from both private and social landlords are shown to be more financially vulnerable than those living at home with parents, guardians or other family members. Additional research would be useful into why renters are considerably more likely to be food insecure and how they can be supported better.
- A lack of motivation was the largest barrier for young adults when preparing their food. Further research and resources are needed to look how can this be addressed, and what are the underlying factors that influence this.
- This research highlighted the prominence of young adults eating ready meals. Separate research could delve into the relative healthiness of popular ready meals (especially when they are often viewed by young adults as being a healthy option).
- Rural consumers were more likely to report they could not access a wide range of food choices, good quality foods or quality fresh produce. The Consumer Council is currently conducting research across all age demographics which will provide further insight.

## 15.4 Consumer education

Whilst this research shows that young adults have a good understanding of what constitutes healthy meals, it is clear that limited budgets and time constraints act as barriers to eating a healthy balanced diet. To address this, we will work with our key partners in the following ways:

- We will need to develop messaging aimed specifically at young adults that provides support and guidance on how to shop, cook and prepare quick healthy meals on a budget. This messaging should include tips on batch cooking and correct storage.
- We will share resources such as Jack Monroe's *Cooking on a Bootstrap Microwave Meals*<sup>6</sup> which use minimal facilities (e.g. microwave, single pan), minimal time (often 15 mins), and caters to limited budgets.
- We will work with colleagues in our Financial Services team to help raise awareness about problematic ways some young adults seek to earn money when they are financially vulnerable.
- We will also work to provide better signposting so that young adults know where to go for help and advice when struggling to afford the basics.

<sup>6</sup> Cooking on a Bootstrap, Jack Monroe, Microwave Cooking



# Appendix - Young Adults' questionnaire

## Establishing food insecurity levels

**Q1a.** Thinking about the last 12 months, please state how often the following statements are relevant to you/people in your household: I was worried whether my/our food would run out before we got money to buy more.

**Q1b.** Thinking about the last 12 months, please state how often the following statements are relevant to you/people in your household: The food that I bought just didn't last, and I didn't have money to get more.

**Q1c.** Thinking about the last 12 months, please state how often the following statements are relevant to you/people in your household: I couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.

[The response options for Q1a, Q1b and Q1c were as follows: often true, sometimes true, never true, don't know/prefer not to say.]

**Q2.** In the last 12 months how often, if ever, did you or any other person in your household cut the size of your meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food?

- No, I/we have not skipped or cut the size of meals because of money
  - Yes, every month
  - Yes, almost every month
  - Yes, some months but not every month
  - Yes, only 1 or 2 months
  - Prefer not to say
- 

**Q3.** If you have made changes like reducing food portion sizes or skipping meals because of the price of food, how if at all, has this impacted you?

- It has had no impact (didn't impact me negatively)
- I have less energy
- I have low confidence
- I have feelings of social isolation
- I feel hungry more
- I have less concentration for work/studying
- Other (please specify)

**Q4. If you have cut the size of your meals or skipped meals in the last 12 months, were there any other reasons not related to the price of food that contributed to you doing this?**

- Irregular mealtimes e.g. had a late breakfast instead of lunch
  - Time required to prepare food put me off
  - Lack of facilities to prepare food put me off
  - Cost of electricity/gas/HHO required to cook the meal
  - Not having sufficient ingredients
  - Energy required to make the meal
  - Wanted to allow other people in the house to eat more instead
  - Seeking to lose weight
  - Because of a low mood
  - Feeling lonely
  - No other factors – money was the only reason
  - Prefer not to say
  - Other (please specify)
- 

**Q5. In the last 12 months how often, if ever, did you or any other person in your household ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food?**

- No, I/we have not taken this action because of money in the last 12 months
- Yes, every month
- Yes, almost every month
- Yes, some months but not every month
- Yes, only 1 or 2 months
- Prefer not to say

**Q6. Have you taken any of the following actions over the last 12 months.**

- Eaten out less
  - Eaten at home more
  - Eaten fewer takeaways
  - Eaten more takeaways
  - Cooked from scratch more
  - Bought items on special offer more (e.g. 3 for 2)
  - Prepared food to be kept as leftovers/cooked in batches more
  - Changed where you buy food to somewhere cheaper
  - Changed the food you buy to something cheaper
  - Made packed lunches more
  - Kept leftovers for longer before eating
  - Bought reduced/discounted/yellow label food close to its use by date more
  - Eaten food past its use by date more
  - Started using a food bank/emergency food provider
  - Reduced the amount of fresh food you buy
  - Swapped to buying food with lower welfare or environmental standards
  - Bulked out meals with cheaper ingredients more
  - Used Buy Now Pay Later (BNPL) to pay for groceries
  - I have made another food-related change (please specify)
  - I have not made any changes
- 

**Q7. Please select the option that best describes how you feel about the statement below: I am worried about being able to buy good quality food at an affordable price for me.**

- I disagree with this statement (I'm not worried)
- I agree with this statement
- I agree but worry less than I did a year ago
- I agree and worry more than I did a year ago

## Employment and education

**Q8. Do you know roughly how much you receive per week from earnings from employment, before taxes and other deductions? Please include any tips, bonuses, overtime pay or commissions.**

- Less than £100
  - Between £100-£300
  - Between £300-£500
  - Between £500-£700
  - More than £700
  - Don't know
- 

**Q9. If studying, what course are you currently completing?**

- Degree apprenticeships
  - Higher Technical qualifications (HTQs)
  - National vocational Qualification (NVQ)
  - Higher National Diploma (HND)
  - Postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE)
  - Post graduate diploma
  - Bachelor's degree
  - Master's degree
  - Doctorate
- 

**Q10. To what extent does your student maintenance loan cover your living expenses?**

- It covers all my expenses
- It covers most of my expenses (E.g. have to buy some items out of personal finances before next loan comes in)
- Its covers only some of my expenses (E.g. have to buy a lot from my personal finances)
- I don't have a student loan
- Don't know

## Financial situation

**Q11. Which, if any, of the following items is it your responsibility to pay for?**

- Food/groceries
  - House Rent/Mortgage
  - Energy bills e.g. electricity/gas/HHO
  - Car fuel and upkeep
  - Car insurance
  - WiFi/broadband
  - Phone contract
  - Monthly memberships/subscriptions e.g. gym, Netflix etc.
  - Monthly payment to parents to contribute to expenses
  - Occasional payment to parents when possible (less formal arrangement than option 9)
  - Parental expenses (e.g. childcare)
  - Other (please specify)
  - None of these
- 

**Q12. After all your necessary payments are made each month, approximately how much do you have left to spend/save?**

- My expenses are greater than my income in a typical month
- £0-£10
- £11-£20
- £21-£40
- £41-£60
- £61-£100
- £100+
- Prefer not to say
- Don't know



**Q13. Could you afford to pay an unexpected, but necessary, expense of the following amounts: £100, £250, £500 (For example, if your car broke down and you had to pay to get it repaired)**

[The response options were as follow: yes, no, don't know.]

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**Q14. If you see that your money is running out, what actions do you take?**

- Look for a part-time job/more hours in your current job
  - Borrow from family or friends
  - Accept money from family/friends which you don't intend to pay back
  - Dip into savings
  - Sell possessions e.g. clothes etc.
  - Look for subsidies/grants/benefits that you may be eligible for
  - Ask for advice/support from person you trust (e.g. work colleague or University support worker)
  - Access credit e.g. take out a loan
  - Regularly go into your overdraft/exceed your authorised overdraft
  - I haven't had to take any of these actions due to money running out
  - Other (specify)
  - None of the above
- 

**Q15. Ask if Yes to borrowed from friends/family: Do you pay interest on this loan?**

[The response options were as follows: yes, no, don't know.]

---

**Q16. Have you done any of the following for extra money, due to financial hardship?**

- Self-employment
- Drug/medical trials
- Sex work
- Take a loan from an illegal lender
- Social media
- Stocks and shares/crypto
- Gambling
- Other (specify)
- Prefer not to say
- None of the above

## Types of meals eaten

**Q17. What type of food do you most often eat for your main meal of the day?**

- Fresh prepared
  - Ready meal
  - Takeaway
  - Other (Please specify)
- 

**Q18. On an average week, how many times do you eat the following types of food: Fresh prepared, ready meal, takeaway**

[The response options were as follows: not at all, once a week, 2-3 times per week, 4-5 times per week, don't know/prefer not to say.]

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**Q19. What are the most common reasons for buying a takeaway when you do so?**

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**Q20. What are the most common reasons for buying a ready meal when you do so?**

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**Q21. What are the most common reasons for preparing a meal from fresh when you do so?**

- Money
- Energy
- Convenience
- Social reasons (e.g. friends are doing it)
- Enjoyment
- Facilities
- Healthiness
- Can accommodate allergy/intolerance
- Other (Please specify)

**Q22. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I am confident in my ability to prepare healthy foods from scratch**

[The response options were as follows: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree.]

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**Q23. Did you experience any of the following difficulties when making/consuming the food that you eat?**

- Lack of motivation
  - Lack of availability of healthier food when shopping
  - Being the only person in the household wanting to eat this type of food
  - Others in my household do the shopping (I don't choose)
  - Cost of buying healthier foods
  - Limited time to plan, cook or prepare healthier food
  - Do not know how to cook or prepare healthier food
  - Lack of healthier options when eating out or buying food to take away
  - Not enough nutritional information available on labels
  - Don't know enough about which foods are healthier or suitable for me
  - Don't like the taste of the healthier food I've tried
  - Getting used to new/different flavours
  - Lack of good facilities/equipment to cook food
  - None of these/I had no difficulties
  - Other (please specify)
- 

**Q24. Please respond whether the following statement is true or false in your experience: I grew up seeing food cooked from fresh on a regular basis**

[The response options were as follows: true, false, don't know.]

## Support and resources available

**Q25. Please choose the statement below which is the most appropriate of your situation:**

- I don't worry about having enough money to buy food whenever I need it
  - I worry about money, but I know I can ask for financial support from family/friends
  - I worry about money, and I don't feel like I can keep asking for financial support from family/friends
  - I worry about money, and I don't have family/friends that I can ask for financial support
  - None of these
- 

**Q26. If you are currently, or were ever to experience money difficulties, would you feel confident about which organisation(s) you could turn to for support?**

[The response options were as follows: yes, no.]

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**Q27. If yes, what three organisations would you turn to for support?**

## Shopping and storing food behaviours

**Q28. What are your most common places to buy food? Rate from the most common to least common. (1=most, 5=least) (Ranked order)**

- Local convenience e.g. Spar, Centra
- Small chain e.g. Mace, Vivo
- Small independent e.g. Nisa Local
- Supermarket chain e.g. Tesco, Asda
- 'Discounter' chain e.g. Lidl

**Q29. Please select all statements below that reflect your experience of food shopping:**

- I can access a wide range of food choices where I shop
- I can access affordable foods where I shop
- I can access good quality foods where I shop
- I can access quality fresh produce foods where I shop
- None of these

**Q30. How often do you do the following:**

- Check the use-by dates/'perishability of products before putting them in your basket?
- Batch cook and store for later?
- Freeze items close to their use by date?
- Throw out food because it's gone past its use-by date?

[The response options were as follows: always, sometimes, rarely, never.]

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**Q31. What barriers, if any, do you face when trying to store food appropriately to extend its shelf life/reduce perishability?**

- Not enough fridge space
- Not enough freezer space
- Not enough storage containers
- Not enough knowledge of how to store food appropriately
- Others, specify....
- I do not face any barriers
- I don't know



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