



# National Association of Care Catering Meals on Wheels Report 2023



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## **The National Association of Care Catering (NACC) Meals on Wheels Report**

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### **About NACC**

The National Association of Care Catering (NACC) is a not-for-profit organisation representing everyone working in or associated with catering in the Care sector to help them improve their services.

### **About APSE**

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) is a not-for-profit local government body working with over 300 councils throughout the UK.

## Foreword

The National Association of Care Catering (NACC) are the lead organisation representing caterers working within the care sector whether in care homes or in the community through Meals on Wheels and Lunch Club provisions. The NACC unites, supports, and represents everyone working in and associated with catering in the UK care sector and has done so for 35 years. It is recognised as a respected source of information and opinion for the dynamic and growing area of care catering.

The NACC has been committed to raising standards of care catering and championing the positive impact nutrition, hydration and mealtimes have on the physical and emotional health and wellbeing of the elderly and vulnerable in care settings. Catering for the vulnerable and elderly is challenging and demands specialist skills and knowledge. As people age their dietary and dining needs change and become more complex. Food intolerances, reduced appetites, dysphagia, and dementia, for example, must be recognised and safely catered to remove the risk of malnutrition and dehydration-related illnesses and provide a positive mealtime experience.

The NACC have commissioned the Association of Public Sector Excellence (APSE) to conduct research into the provision of Local Authority Community Meals on Wheels services, still in service across the UK in 2023. The research is to understand the scope of the provision, the cost of providing the service, menu, foods, and wider provisions. This report is the third of its kind since 2016, that reports the rapid decline of Meals on Wheels in the UK.

Meals on Wheels supports older and disabled people to live independently in the community by reducing the risk of malnutrition, loneliness, or social isolation. Alongside at least one nutritious meal every day, the regular caring contact helps reduce avoidable health and care costs, as well as providing support for carers. The service is more than just a meal and offers wellbeing checks and a regular point of contact supporting to reduce loneliness and social isolation.

Currently there is no statutory responsibility for the provision of Community Meals on Wheels for older people in need within the community, and thus no public funding ringfenced for the provision of this key preventative service.

## 1 Introduction

APSE conducted desk-based research to establish which of the 210 UK local councils surveyed in 2016 and 2018 continue to provide a Meals on Wheels service. The councils who reported they provided a Meals on Wheels service were then surveyed from May to August 2023. A series of questions sought to establish their Meals on Wheels offering. The survey questions repeated those of earlier surveys conducted in 2016 and 2018 allowing trend information to be determined and allowing the research team to explore emerging changes.

In a continuing trend from 2016, the number of authorities providing a service has further decreased with just **29%** of the UK's local authorities now offering a 'Meals on Wheels' type service. Of these, many purport to offer a service but contracts amount to little more than an agreement with preferred suppliers such as supermarket home delivery services and are at zero cost to the council budget.

Private sector providers have largely filled the gap where a council has withdrawn from the service, although the meals are usually at a comparatively higher price.

For 2023, there has been an average UK increase of circa **34%** in the cost of a meal. This indicates that there has been a significant impact in the cost of providing the service and contracted providers are increasing the price to the council. This clearly reflects food price inflation issues as well as the increased costs in fuel for deliveries and labour market cost pressures.

The local authority (LA) models identified might be summarised as following:

- LA prepare and distribute
- LA buy and distribute
- LA tender and subsidise
- LA tender and service is standalone
- LA signpost only

## 2 Background

The first recorded provision of Meals on Wheels can be traced back to the Second World War, where the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) provided food for people who had lost their homes during the Blitz and were therefore unable to cook meals for themselves. Most of the recipients of the meals were the elderly.

*National Assistance Act 1948, s 3*, states that a local authority may make contributions to the funds of any voluntary organisation whose activities consist in or include the provision of recreation or meals for old people. The majority of Meals on Wheels schemes that operated

under this Act were for the benefit of people of pensionable age who, for some reason or other, are unable to provide adequate meals for themselves.

In 1961, it was reported by Baroness Swanborough<sup>1</sup>, that the majority of Meals on Wheels schemes are operated under this Act and still operated for the benefit of people of pensionable age. Swanborough commented that under the Act, that, *"So far as voluntary organisations can discover from their negotiations with local authorities, there was no clear ruling as to whether Section 31 enables local authorities to incur capital expenditure to provide kitchens, vans, etc. for voluntary bodies operating "Meals on Wheels" schemes, and in any event, under this Act, they are authorised to provide "Meals on Wheels" only to old people."*

Baroness Swanborough went on to highlight that under *National Health Service Act 1946, s 28*, a local health authority may make arrangements for the prevention of illness, the care of persons suffering from illness, mental defectives, or the after-care of such persons. Under subsection (3) of the section, local authorities may contribute to voluntary organisations formed for any purpose as aforesaid. The powers given under Section 28 vary from those in the *National Assistance Act*, in that "local authority" means in this case only a county or county borough council fell within the scope of the Act, and meals can be supplied to people of any age if they are sick or likely to become sick for want of proper provision. Some of the older people who receive meals under the *National Assistance Act* would, in consequence, be disqualified from receiving meals under this Act.

The National Assistance (Amendment) Act 1962 empowered local authorities to make arrangements for meals to be provided to the elderly. For example, meals could be provided in community halls or be delivered to people at home. These are often referred to as 'Meals on Wheels'.

Local authorities could use their own staff to provide the meals or purchase them from outside contractors. It was also possible to use the services of voluntary organisations, to act as their agent in preparation and delivery.

The Care Act 2014 placed personal budgets into law for the first time, making them the norm for adults with care and support needs. This enabled adults, and their advocate if they have one, to exercise more choice and control over how their care and support needs are met. It gave a greater choice and more control over the way the personal budget is used to purchase care and support and from whom it is purchased.

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<sup>1</sup> Hansard 18 April 1961 – Meals on Wheels Schemes. <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1961/apr/18/meals-on-wheels-schemes>

When the research was conducted in 2016, there was no statutory requirement for local authorities to provide a Meals on Wheels service and, as such, the research revealed that fewer than **50%** of councils provided the service. The research undertaken in 2018 showed that there had been a further decline with **42%** of councils having a contracting arrangement in place or were providing the service in-house. The latest figures placing Meals on Wheels provision at **29%** is a further significant and worrying decline in provision.

This current research sought to establish the percentage of councils who were still providing the service. It also wanted to consider a broader view of the type of services that are being provided, the costs associated with the provision, the linkages with social care, alongside the challenges and benefits associated with the Meals on Wheels service.

A series of questions were asked relating to the service. This report provides an overview of the key findings from the survey.

### 3 Results

The councils that continue to provide the service were asked a series of questions. To support the survey responses, a desk-based review of publicly available documents was also undertaken, and councils contacted directly to gain a comprehensive perspective.

As the research was undertaken in 2016 and 2018, it enables a comparison to be made with the current data to highlight the key trends in the areas where the same data was gathered.

#### 3.1 Local authorities who are providing the service

The table below provides an overview of the percentage of local authorities that provide a Meals on Wheels service. There is also a comparison of the data from 2014, 2018 and 2023 as well as a regional and country comparison provided.

| Country | Region          | MOW Service 2016 | MOW Service 2018 | MOW Service 2023 |
|---------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| England | East of England | 64%              | 45%              | 18%              |
|         | East Midlands   | 50%              | 50%              | 25%              |
|         | London          | 59%              | 41%              | 13%              |
|         | North East      | 25%              | 17%              | 8%               |
|         | North West      | 17%              | 13%              | 9%               |

|                         |                                   |            |            |            |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
|                         | <b>South East</b>                 | 33%        | 39%        | 17%        |
|                         | <b>South West</b>                 | 53%        | 41%        | 31%        |
|                         | <b>West Midlands</b>              | 53%        | 47%        | 33%        |
|                         | <b>Yorkshire &amp; The Humber</b> | 44%        | 20%        | 20%        |
| <b>England Average</b>  |                                   | <b>43%</b> | <b>36%</b> | <b>18%</b> |
| <b>Northern Ireland</b> |                                   | 100%       | 80%        | 80%        |
| <b>Scotland</b>         |                                   | 75%        | 61%        | 61%        |
| <b>Wales</b>            |                                   | 50%        | 45%        | 36%        |
| <b>UK</b>               |                                   | <b>48%</b> | <b>42%</b> | <b>29%</b> |

The data clearly shows that there has been a decrease in the percentage of local authorities providing the provision in the UK, from the high of 66% in 2014 to 29% in 2023. The largest declines from 2018 are in London (-29%), the East of England (-27%) and the East Midlands (-25%). The Yorkshire and Humber region has not seen any decline and remains at 20%.

Northern Ireland and Scotland have also not seen any decline since 2018, whereas there has been a 9% decline in Wales in the percentage of councils providing a Meals on Wheels service. It should be noted that Meals on Wheels in Northern Ireland is not provided through local authorities but is provided through the local Health and Social Care Trust.

In a bid to understand the reason for the decline, research was undertaken to identify the main drivers for stopping providing the service. The research found a correlation between a contractor not continuing with the contract and the local authority making the decision to withdraw the service. Those surveyed also reported that the local authority tenders are not attracting providers during the bid process. In addition, providers are increasing the cost of providing the service, reflecting perhaps their own cost pressures.

As for the main reasons why they have ceased providing a service, respondents cited budget pressures, the cost of providing the service, a range of alternative options for customers and declining numbers of people using the service.

### **3.2 Cost of service provision**

The table below provides an overview of the cost to the customer of a two-course meal. It



also provides a comparison between the averages reported in 2016 and 2018.

| Country                 | Region                 | MOW Service 2016 | MOW Service 2018 | MOW Service 2023 |
|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| <b>England</b>          | East of England        | £4.97            | £4.74            | £5.25            |
|                         | East Midlands          | £5.59            | £4.40            | £6.79            |
|                         | London                 | £4.50            | £3.87            | £4.34            |
|                         | North East             | £4.56            | £3.20            | £6.70            |
|                         | North West             | £4.25            | £4.17            | £5.45            |
|                         | South East             | £4.22            | £5.35            | £6.62            |
|                         | South West             | £4.43            | £5.02            | £6.64            |
|                         | West Midlands          | £4.61            | £4.33            | £4.35            |
|                         | Yorkshire & The Humber | £4.82            | £4.58            | £7.33            |
|                         |                        |                  |                  |                  |
| <b>England average</b>  |                        | <b>£4.85</b>     | <b>£4.40</b>     | <b>£5.57</b>     |
| <b>Northern Ireland</b> |                        | £1.90            | £1.90            | £1.90            |
| <b>Scotland</b>         |                        | £3.24            | £3.25            | £4.14            |
| <b>Wales</b>            |                        | £4.48            | £4.85            | £5.23            |
| <b>UK</b>               |                        | <b>£4.30</b>     | <b>£3.60</b>     | <b>£4.82</b>     |

The data in 2018 revealed that, across the majority of regions, there had been a decrease in the cost charged to the customer, and marginal increases in Scotland and Wales. This was largely attributed to the efficiencies put in place in the way that services were delivered. However, in 2023 the data clearly shows that there has been a significant increase in the cost of the meal with the England average increasing by £1.17, the Scotland average increasing by £0.89, and the Wales average increasing by £0.38.

The lowest price charged for a two-course meal in 2023 by a local authority is £1.90, but it is worth noting that this is in Northern Ireland, under a different administrative arrangement. The highest price charged for a meal is £8.00 by a local authority in the Southwest of England. The price that the council charges is generally set by elected members or set at a

price that covers the cost of providing the service.

It should be noted that the Yorkshire and Humber region has seen a significant increase in the average cost for a two-course meal, this can be largely attributed to an increase in the rates charged by the contractor to provide the service on behalf of councils in the region.

It was reported by **42.86%** of respondents that the cost to the council for providing the meal in the last 12 months had increased by **10-20%**. **28.57%** reported an increase of up to **10%** whilst **21.43%** reported an increase in costs by **20-30%** in the last 12 months.

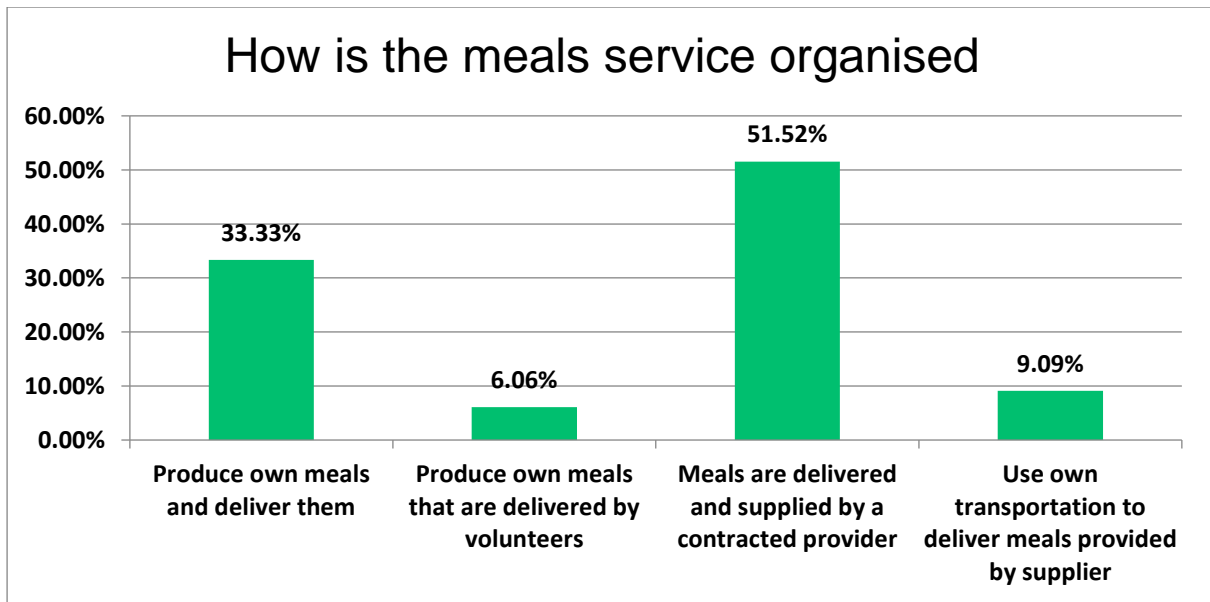
The increase in the price charged to a customer can be explained by wider factors that have impacted the service since 2018. These include the increase in wage costs, with increases to the minimum wage and the majority of councils paying the Higher Living Wage, as well as the significant increase in the cost of food, fuel and utilities in the post COVID-19 period.

It is clear from the research that local authorities are implementing, or planning to implement, a range of measures to mitigate the impact of inflationary rises in food costs. These include revising menus to reduce the cost of ingredients or working with suppliers to reduce the number of meat, poultry, and fish dishes on the menus.

Of the councils that submitted information regarding providing a subsidy for the provision, **30%** reported that they part subsidised the provision. The research in 2018 stated that **58%** of local authorities part subsidised the service. The decrease could be attributable in part to the fact that the only **29%** of councils are providing a Meals on Wheels service compared with **42%** in 2018, and that councils are needing to withdraw a subsidy due to budget pressures and the need for the service to be financially viable.

### **3.3 Type of service provided**

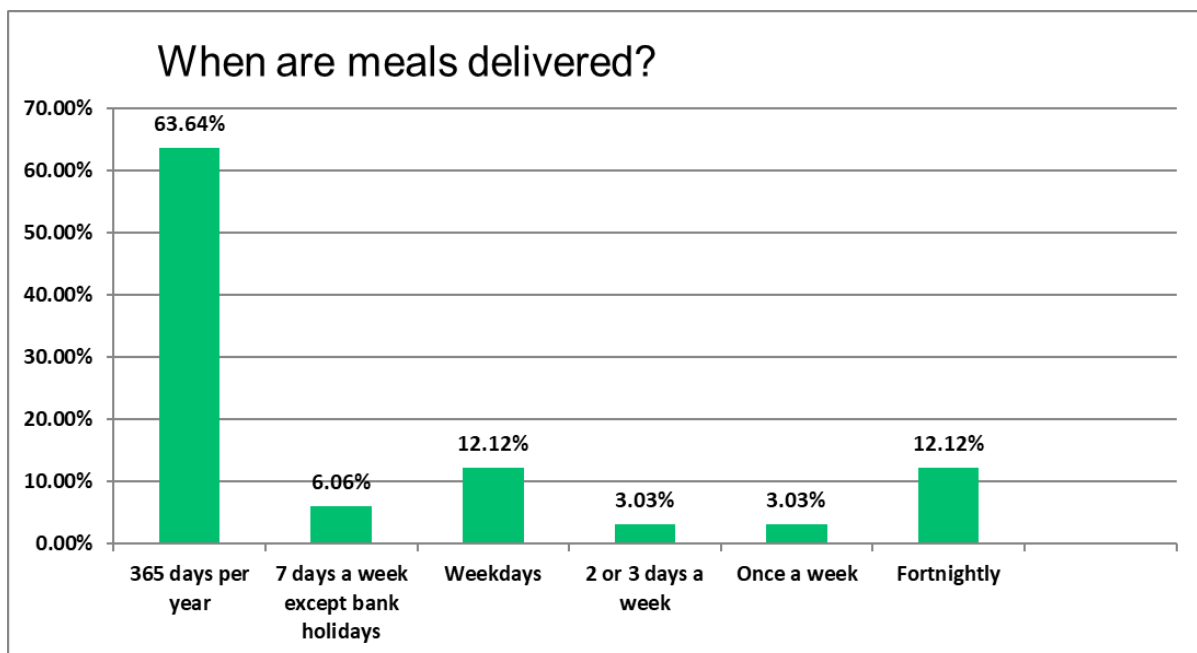
The graph below provides an overview of how the service is organised.



From the responses received from local authorities, over half (51.52%) report that meals are delivered and supplied by a contracted provider, and 33.3% advise that they produce their own meals and deliver them.

The responses highlight that there are different models as to how the service is delivered to meet the needs of the service users and the requirements of the council.

Local authorities were asked when they made deliveries to the service users and the graph below provides an overview of the responses.



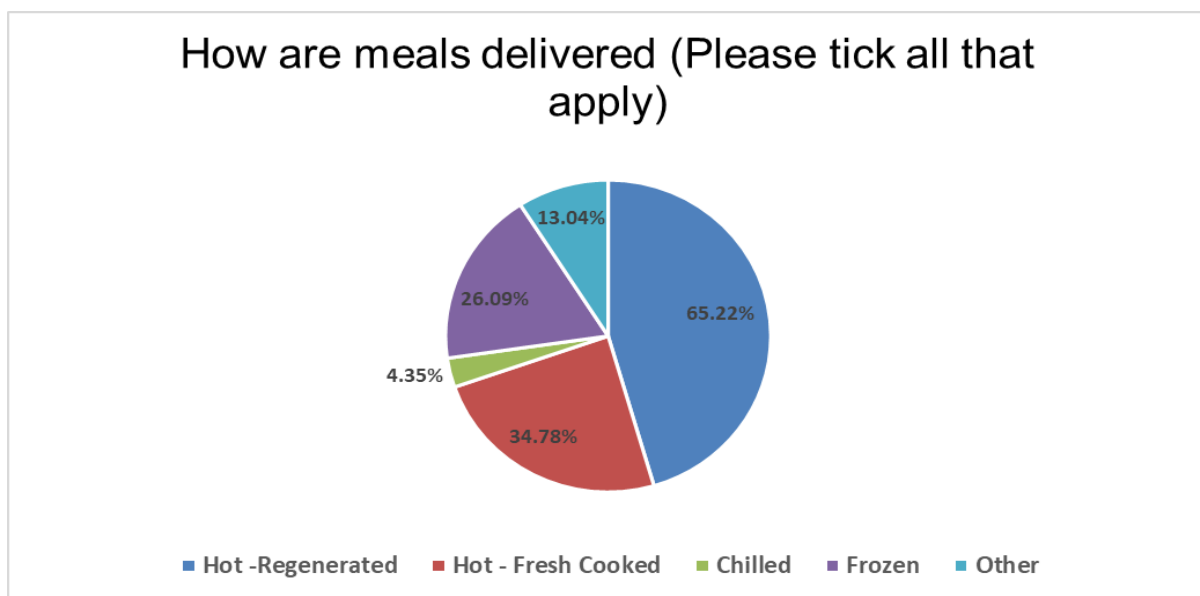
The vast majority of councils (63.64%) report that the meals are delivered 365 days of the

year and 12.12% state that the meals are delivered fortnightly. The meals that are delivered on a two-weekly basis are delivered as frozen 'ready meals' and are, in the main, where councils have contracted the provision to a supplier.

To gain more comprehensive information regarding the meals that are provided, it is clear from the research that councils are offering the service provider various options to meet their contractual obligations and service needs which is explored further in the scope of the service.

### 3.4 Scope of the provision

The chart below details how the meals are delivered.



Over **65%** of those surveyed reported that the food is delivered Hot – Regenerated, just under **35%** provide hot meals that are freshly cooked and **26.09%** deliver frozen meals.

The meals are, in the main, delivered at lunchtime, but meals for other times of the day are delivered at the same time, with local authorities reporting that they provide breakfast, tea-time meals and snacks.

When looking at changes in demand for the service it is difficult to draw any concrete conclusions as there is no clear response. The responses range from demand decreasing by **15%** to an increase in demand of up to **10%**. There are many factors that impact on the demand for the service which include how the service is publicised, how clients access provision, the criteria for accessing the service and the availability of alternative provision in the area.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on NHS services and on social care provision. Councils report that COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of the Meals on Wheels service to the political leadership, especially as councils mobilised to deliver food parcels to the vulnerable and people self-isolating, even in areas where no Meals on Wheels service had been in place.

Although there are local authorities that report an increase in demand for the service, there are also councils that report demand has decreased. During the pandemic, supermarkets and other companies invested heavily in their online grocery and takeaway offerings and this may be a contributing factor as to the decrease in demand.

### **3.5 Challenges**

The 2023 research sought to ascertain what local authorities perceive to be the challenges of providing a meals service and the benefits of doing so. It is clear from the responses that one of the biggest challenges is the increase in costs for running the service.

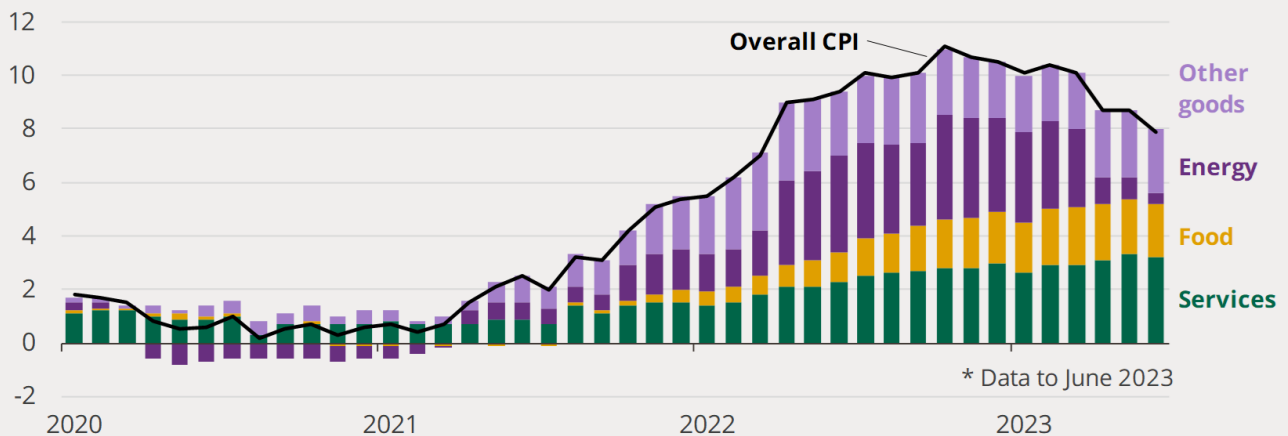
Inflationary costs of energy and goods remained relatively stable at the time of the research undertaken in 2014, 2016 and 2018. However, food prices have been rising sharply over the past year and were **14.8%** higher in July 2023 compared with a year before, with a 45-year high of **19.1%** being set in March 2023. Over the two years from July 2021 to July 2023, food prices rose by **29.3%**. It previously took over 13 years, from February 2008 to July 2021, for average food prices to rise by the same amount<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Library – Rising cost of living in the UK.  
<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9428/>

## Energy and other goods drove inflation higher in 2022

Percentage point contributions to annual CPI inflation rate



Note: Food includes non-alcoholic drinks

Source: Reproduced from Bank of England, Monetary Policy Report – August 2023, Chart 2.2

This is against the backdrop of severe budget pressures being experienced by local authorities across the UK. In August 2021, UNISON reported that Councils across England, Wales, and Scotland face a £3 billion funding black hole for 2022<sup>3</sup>. The Local Government Association in September 2023 have similarly raised a £3 billion funding gap.

The impact of the massive deficits in budgets is that local authorities are in a position where they are required to make difficult decisions regarding what services they provide. There is no statutory requirement for councils to provide a meal on wheels service, and when councils who provide the service conduct a review of the provision, it is clear that they are opting not to continue providing the service and signposting service users to the private sector and voluntary providers. With individuals in receipt of a care plan, having a direct payment to procure their own care, signposting is seen as the one of the viable options for local authorities.

### 3.6 Benefits

Although there has been a sharp decline on the number of local authorities providing a Meals on Wheels service from **66%** of councils providing the service in 2014 to **29%** in 2023 evidence of the benefits of providing a Meals on Wheels service continues to mount.

The key points highlighted as benefits to the service through the research do not necessarily have an obvious financial benefit, and where there is a financial benefit, it is realised in other

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unison.org.uk/news/2021/08/councils-across-england-wales-and-scotland-face-a-3bn-funding-black-hole-next-year/>

services, such as the NHS and the cost of care or nursing home placements. It is noted in the research that the main benefits include providing the client with a nutritious meal; providing support with the cost of living; supporting independence and choice for the individual; allowing other support to be provided such as wellness checks and reduces loneliness. For individuals who are admitted to hospital, a community meals service can be an integral part of the care plan to enable timely discharge.

Research into the impact of the service on nutritional intake has concluded that a nutritious meal not only benefits the individual but wider health and social care services. One such determinant of health outcomes is that the total energy intake is a positive influence on malnutrition risk in frail older adults, and the increased protein intake supports good health, promotes recovery from illness and assists in maintaining functionality in older adults.<sup>4</sup>

The cost-of-living crisis, and accompanying food insecurity it causes, can have a significant adverse impact on older people, as they have restricted income potential and are on a fixed budget. The Meals on Wheels service enables people to access a hot cooked meal that may not otherwise be available to them. Research by the University of Hertfordshire looked at the Meals on Wheels service and the food security of older people. The report concluded that the service was a community asset, having a positive impact in supporting food practices and food security.<sup>5</sup>

The pandemic has accelerated the rates of loneliness in today's society, especially amongst older people. In the past, an elderly person may have paid a visit to the supermarket and had a chat with the checkout assistant, but now that interaction has been reduced by the introduction of self-service checkouts and that is just one small example. To reduce loneliness there is an example of a council who has implemented a Meals and Chat service where a meal is delivered and there is time for the driver to stay and chat with the individual. Research conducted at the University of Bristol, about the interactions between service providers and clients, suggests that the Meal on Wheels service provides significant benefits beyond nutrition.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The impact of home-delivered meal services on the nutritional intake of community living older adults: a systematic literature review  
[https://uhra.herts.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/2299/25851/Health\\_Social\\_Care\\_Comm\\_2022\\_Dickinson\\_Meals\\_on\\_wheels\\_services\\_and\\_the\\_food\\_security\\_of\\_older\\_people.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://uhra.herts.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/2299/25851/Health_Social_Care_Comm_2022_Dickinson_Meals_on_wheels_services_and_the_food_security_of_older_people.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

<sup>5</sup> Meals on Wheels services and the food security of older people  
[https://uhra.herts.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/2299/25851/Health\\_Social\\_Care\\_Comm\\_2022\\_Dickinson\\_Meals\\_on\\_wheels\\_services\\_and\\_the\\_food\\_security\\_of\\_older\\_people.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://uhra.herts.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/2299/25851/Health_Social_Care_Comm_2022_Dickinson_Meals_on_wheels_services_and_the_food_security_of_older_people.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

<sup>6</sup> <https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/publications/its-not-just-about-the-dinner-its-about-everything-else-that-we-d>

## 4 Conclusions

The report and case studies highlight how Meals on Wheels and Community Meals services afford older and vulnerable people nutritious food, friendly human interaction and wellbeing checks – all vital ingredients which allow people to live independently in their own homes.

Meals on Wheels keep people nourished and hydrated with a nutritious daily meal (in many cases the only one they will eat each day) and provides an essential preventative service that reduces costly malnutrition-related admissions to hospital which are adding to the terrible strain on the NHS.

For the majority of service users, Meals on Wheels is so much more than just a meal. It's a lifeline that eases the devastating effects of isolation and loneliness. The delivery of a meal brings regular social interaction which for many may be the only human contact they enjoy. It also provides a much-needed well-being and safety check, again, crucial for those who may not see anyone else each day.

The research highlights the challenging times that providers are operating in with the cost of living crisis, rising food costs, volunteer and staff recruitment challenges and the shortfall in social care funding. The cost of a meal to the client has increased from a UK-wide average of £4.03 in 2018 to £4.81 in 2023, and this is against the backdrop of many councils part subsidising the cost.

Due to Meals on Wheels not being a statutory requirement and the absence of funding for the provision, many local authorities are taking the decision to no longer provide financial support for these services and closing them permanently. The research only serves to emphasise the decline in service with a reduction from **66%** of councils providing the service in 2014 to **29%** of councils having some form of provision in 2023 with indications that this could reduce further in the short term.

The provision of Meals on Wheels will not solve the issues in the NHS and social care, as a singular solution. However, the local authorities that continue to provide the service do so because they recognise that the service provides part of the jigsaw of a solution and helps achieve priorities set out in their corporate strategies, such as a food strategy, reducing the impact of the cost-of-living crisis or reducing social isolation.

Over the years that the research has been conducted it is clear that there is a greater integration between the Meals on Wheels service and social care. However, none of the respondents to the survey reported that funding was received from the NHS to support the service.

With further public sector budgetary pressures on the horizon, and councils therefore reviewing the services they provide, there needs to be a greater recognition from



government and council leaders of the positive impact that this vital service affords through access to nutritious meals and well-being checks delivered to the door of those living independently in our communities.

With successive governments across all UK administrations extolling the virtues of 'independence, well-being and choice' for older people it is obtuse to believe that this can be truly achieved in the absence of an effective Meals on Wheels service. For many older people, an affordable and effective Meals on Wheels service will be part of the opportunity to enable them to live independently.

## 5 Case studies

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### 5.1 Fife Council

#### **How is the service organised?**

The Meals on Wheels Service at Fife Council is provided In-house. The service is operated and managed by Fife Council's Facilities Management Services on behalf of the Fife Health and Social Care Partnership on a full cost recovery basis.

#### **An overview of the service**

The service delivers approximately 600 meals per day and 150 afternoon teas, 363 days per year, typically between 11am and 1pm each day.

#### **The biggest challenges to providing the service?**

The biggest challenges in delivering the service are the ongoing and future budget pressures in the Council's budget. These budget pressures are a concern for the service as it operates at around a 30% subsidy. Therefore, as a "non-statutory" service, its financial sustainability is being reviewed.

#### **The biggest benefits of the service**

Fife Council highlights many benefits of the Meals on Wheels service including: -

- Ensuring some of the most vulnerable and elderly within the community receive healthy, tasty, nutritious meals every day.
- Delivering the meals presents an opportunity to undertake regular welfare checks by trained, caring, committed staff.
- The service supports people to remain independent in the comfort and security of their own homes.

In addition, the service is seen as reducing the pressure on social care budgets, which has a wider benefit to the Council, with the average cost of residential care in Fife being approximately £1,200-£1,400 per week.

#### **Financial support for the service**

Fife Council currently provides a subsidy of around 30% to support the service. The Council states that, otherwise, the service may be unaffordable to many service users, and may result in a decline, which would ultimately increase operating costs and the level of subsidy.

## **Supporting social care / NHS – hospital discharges**

The service supports patients discharged from hospital who may require a period of recovery and, in-turn, may not be able to shop/prepare/cook meals. The service enables patients to move back into their own homes and receive healthy, tasty, nutritious meals along with a welfare check.

## **Linkages with wider council strategies**

In addition to reducing the pressure on social care, the Meals on Wheels service supports Fife Council's anti-poverty and crisis prevention agenda.

## **The future of the service**

In three years' time, the Council hope to continue delivering the provision but would like to service to be seen as more of an essential/statutory service, on a more financially sustainable footing, delivering to more customers and maximising the use of its resources and fleet.

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## **5.2 Hertfordshire County Council (HCC)**

### **How is the service organised?**

The Community Meals service is contracted from Health and Independent Living Support (HILS) – a charitable social enterprise set up in 2007 with the support of HCC.

### **An overview of the service**

The service is designed to be preventative, so eligibility includes support for temporary issues (illness, bereavement) as well as long term need.

It is completely flexible, and clients can use the service for occasional days or long term. The meals are sourced from Apetito frozen so that a large range of options can be provided including texture modified, religious and cultural options, and allergen free. Meals are delivered hot and ready to eat.

In 2022-2023 there were 532,000 meals delivered across the whole of Hertfordshire, and the meals are delivered 365 days a year. In addition, there were 116,000 tea and breakfast packs delivered in 2022-23 alongside the lunch time meal.

### **The biggest challenges to providing the service?**

HCC reports several challenges to providing the service and highlight that the following: -

- The cost-of-living crisis has had a large impact on food costs that are reported to have increased by up to 30% over the past 18 months, the utilities costs have also risen which has increased the overall running cost of HILS' four Hertfordshire meals on wheels sites.
- The fuel for Councils' fleet of 70 cars has risen by 40%. As the clients are often on limited budgets, passing on price rises is difficult, and the County Council also has budgetary pressure.
- Recruitment and retention are difficult whilst employment rates are so high, and the service is in direct competition with the NHS and social care partners which can pay more and provide better benefits.
- The demands for the service are also growing, with increased hospital discharge support required (two weeks free meals funded by HCC to prevent readmission).

### **The biggest benefits to the service**

HCC report that there are many benefits to providing the service and these include: -

- The Community Meals service ensures good nutrition for older and vulnerable people: The meals (Apetito) and HILS menus are carefully designed by trained nutritionists to be suited for older people's dietary needs.
- The welfare checks undertaken as part of the service ensure the wellbeing of users; a faster response to illness, falls, heatwaves/cold or crises; prevention of falls.
- Community interaction and point of contact for vulnerable groups as the drivers not only form strong, trusted relationships with clients, but the service acts as a linchpin for linking clients to other support organisations. The service works within a 'no wrong door' policy, meaning that they will always try to redirect clients to the right support even if the Council does not offer a service directly.
- Medication prompts which ensure clients are reminded to take essential medication.

Alongside the overall benefits outlined above, for individuals, the meals service provides:

- Reassurance and peace of mind as clients know that they can depend on the service; not only that they will receive a hot, tasty meal, but also that a friendly face will be checking in on them each day. This applies also to next of kin who know that the service will always alert them to any concerns about their loved ones.
- Relationships are formed and the client feels part of a local community due to the meal's drivers getting to know clients well and building trusting relationships through these daily interactions. For many clients who are home-bound or do not have many/any other visitors, this can be a highly impactful relationship, and an important link to their local community.
- The meals service provides flexibility and personal choice as each client can tailor their service to their individual needs, from meal choices to length/ frequency of service which offers a level of personal choice that alternative meal solutions cannot offer.

- HILS also refers to many statutory and third sector organisations for additional support, as well as offering its own wider health and wellbeing services when needed.

### **Financial support for the service**

HCC subsidises the service by approximately 20% through a contract payment that helps HILS cover its costs (sites, wages, vehicles, utilities, fuel, food etc). The service is seen as a key way to prevent greater care costs and unnecessary escalation of care and support needs, such as residential care.

The Council sees that there are significant benefits to subsidising meals on wheels services with strong evidence that the home meals service reduces the risk of health conditions linked to malnutrition such as frailty, heart disease, and some cancers. For older people, malnutrition is also linked to increased falls risk. Preventing avoidable health deterioration through meals services is not only a social responsibility of the local authority to their residents, but it also reduces avoidable spend on health and social care services.

Not commissioning or subsidising the service, the local meals services would result in clients receiving an alternative service which is often more expensive, requiring care workers to prepare a meal. Meals services are therefore a pragmatic, cost-effective solution to supporting older residents.

A subsidy was essential in facilitating independent organisations to establish financially sustainable meal services, as the real cost of delivery often exceeds the price clients can pay. The HILS' London meals service (LILS) is an example of a service which was forced to close in 2020 due to financial instability as a result of lack of council subsidy and high London input costs.

### **Supporting social care / NHS – hospital discharges**

HILS offers a specific pathway for clients leaving hospital in which meals are provided free of charge for two weeks (funded by HCC with Household Support Fund monies). This allows for patients to be discharged quickly, as our operating model allows for meals to be delivered the same day if a referral is received before 8.30am. After this two-week period, clients can continue with paid meals if they choose. However, for over half of people receiving this service, this short-term support is all they need to get back on their feet after a hospital stay.

### **Linkages with wider council strategies**

The service underpins all the wider council (and Integrated Care System) strategies including:

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- Ensuring the health and wellbeing of residents. Facilitating access to food (not to mention hot, nutritious food) is essential as malnutrition is so strongly linked to other

health conditions. The welfare check that accompanies the meal delivery also supports health prevention strategies: drivers will often spot changes in demeanour or condition which could be indicators of health concerns (e.g., UTI's which are particularly common amongst the elderly and can be a major cause of hospitalisation, falls, and a threat to life if not treated early).

- Maintaining cost of living standards for individuals, subsidised meals services provides an affordable option for prepared hot meals instead of alternatives such as takeaways or private carers. The model in which councils subsidise independent organisations to deliver meals which are paid for by the client (on the whole) is also cost-effective for the council itself and prevents the cost of other chargeable local authority services being elevated.
- Supports in maintaining independence. Individuals can be forced to go into care simply because they cannot prepare food themselves (often the case after a bereavement); services such as meals on wheels prevent this and allow people to stay in the comfort of their own home for longer.

### **The future of the service**

With an ageing population, the Council anticipate demand for meals to continually increase over the next three years. Health and social care have an ever greater need to help people to stay well and independent, and meals on wheels in Hertfordshire is a key element of the local preventative framework that supports the Integrated Care System and local residents.

The service is concerned about the demise of meals services elsewhere in the country, so HILS will continue to support other charitable organisations and local authorities to retain and reestablish these vital services wherever is can sustainably do so.

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## **5.3 Torfaen County Borough Council**

### **How is the service organised?**

The service is provided and delivered in-house.

### **An overview of the service**

The Council contract with Apetito to provide frozen meals which are regenerated on a daily basis. A tea tray can be provided to accompany the meal (sandwich, cake, frozen dessert) which is delivered at the same time of the meal. The Council aims to deliver between 11:30 and 14:00, seven days a week and caters for between 190-215 people per day. Some deliveries are simply drop off in the kitchen, others are plating up, making hot drinks, and serving.

### **The biggest challenges to providing the service?**

The biggest challenges currently being experienced by the service centre around the increase in the cost of food and utilities.

### **The biggest benefits of the service**

The service enables people to stay in their own home, expediate hospital discharges and provide daily welfare checks under the Social Care umbrella.

In addition, as the service provides food to those that have been identified as not being able to cook for themselves and undernourished, when delivering the drivers have had to call ambulances on numerous occasions for emergency treatment which in some cases has saved the individuals life.

### **Financial support for the service.**

The Council subsidises the service by approximately 20% and believe that without the subsidy the cost of a meal to an individual would be too great for the client, putting them at risk of malnutrition plus social isolation.

### **Supporting social care / NHS – hospital discharges**

Community Meals comes under the Social Care umbrella within the Local Authority. Therefore, social workers from the local authority and NHS are able to make direct referrals.

### **Linkages with wider council strategies**

Part of the Council strategy is helping people to stay safe in their homes which is what Community Meals support. Drivers carry out welfare checks on all customers and report all issues back which is subsequently fed on to the relevant Adult Service Team. Previously, the Council provided a discount to people receiving meals to assist with the cost of living but this has now been discontinued.

### **The future of the service**

The authority is looking to maintain the same position as now. Providing hot nutritious meals along with a welfare check on the individual.

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## 5.4 West Sussex County Council

### **How is the service organised?**

The Council commissions a provider to deliver the service.

### **An overview of the service**

A two-course meal is provided daily, 365 days, 11am-2pm delivery window. There are around eight hundred active clients. Some on 1 day, others on seven. Additional teatime packs (chilled) are also offered and are delivered at the same time as the hot lunch, for eating as tea later in the day.

### **The biggest challenges to providing the service?**

The Council report that keeping the service sustainable is one of the biggest challenges. With the costs such as food and wages increasing but there is a need to keep the client cost affordable.

The service is facing recruitment difficulties as the labour market is much smaller than previous and there is greater competition.

In addition, it is difficult getting a regular supply of new customers, as clients can be isolated and do not always know services are available. There is a small pool of suitable specialist food suppliers which means sourcing value for money meals from suppliers is challenging.

### **The biggest benefits of the service**

West Sussex Council see that the Meals on Wheels service supports in combating social isolation, keeping people well-fed in their homes, keeping people healthy at home for longer. Therefore, the service is a preventive measure and supports keeping people out of care homes and hospitals as the daily welfare checks allow any changes in the health of the client to be noticed and flags issues so the clients can receive the required support.

The regular visit, 365 days a year, provides an 'eyes on' welfare check with the Council having a procedure in place for delivery drivers to report health or environmental issues- i.e., over loaded plugs/ no heating. The client can then be provided the support required thereby helping people who otherwise could not stay at home, to remain at home.

### **Financial support for the service.**

The Council does not subsidise the service. It is commissioned, managed, and supported with resource as part of the Councils prevention strategy and wellbeing for our older residents.



## **Supporting social care / NHS – hospital discharges**

The Council has funded D2A (Discharge to Assess) people leaving hospital with 3 days-worth of meal deliveries, to allow them to return home earlier and to relieve pressure on hospital beds during the winter when the NHS are under strain.

The service helps people coming out of hospital recover through good nutrition and wellbeing, aiding recovery. It also keeps people from becoming malnourished that, in turn, can prevent hospital, care admissions, and help people to fight off illness and viruses better.

## **Linkages with wider council strategies**

The service plays into West Sussex Council's agenda and strategies around keeping older people at home and safe for longer as they age. It is about making best use of the Council, and those older people's budgets, to continue leading the best life that they can in West Sussex.

## **The future of the service**

The Council hope to continue developing the current contractual arrangements and support older people in West Sussex. The authority wants to grow the meal and client numbers and make the service fully sustainable and as affordable as possible for residents.

In addition, West Sussex County Council would like Central Government to offer support to councils, to provide, retain and rejuvenate services across England.



## **The National Association of Care Catering (NACC)**

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