

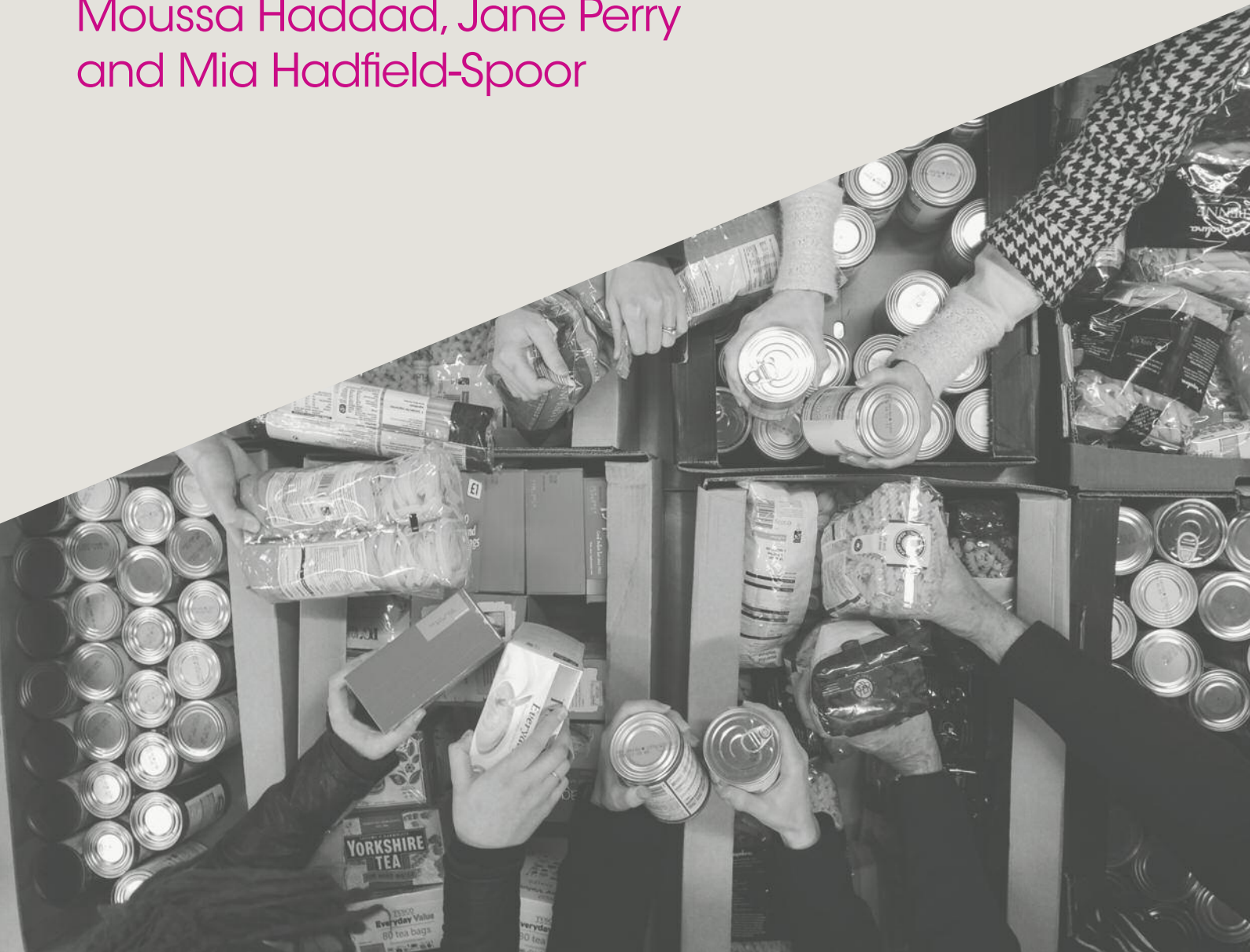
**CHILD
POVERTY
ACTION
GROUP**



EMERGENCY USE ONLY: UPDATE 2017

CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

Moussa Haddad, Jane Perry
and Mia Hadfield-Spoor



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Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high-profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights. If you are not already supporting us, please consider making a donation, or ask for details of our membership schemes, training courses and publications.

The Trussell Trust develops, runs and enables community projects that combat poverty and exclusion. We do this by bringing communities together to end hunger and poverty in the UK by providing compassionate, practical help with dignity, whilst challenging injustice. The Trussell Trust co-ordinates a network of over 420 food banks across the UK that work to provide help in a crisis and address the underlying causes of hunger. Find out more at <http://www.trusselltrust.org/>.

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OVERVIEW

In November 2014, the *Emergency Use Only* report broke new ground as the first systematic research into food bank use across the United Kingdom.¹

It shed light on the factors driving food bank use, particularly the nature of the 'acute income crises' and longer term vulnerabilities which were leaving too many people with little option other than to access emergency food. Our driving concern was that, in the twenty-first century, with a social security system designed to prevent poverty, no one should be going hungry.

The *Emergency Use Only* research – hearing directly from people helped by food banks, supported by information from administrative data and learning from welfare rights caseloads – identified a number of specific problems that contribute to food bank use, along with some relatively simple changes which might dramatically reduce the number of people who are referred.

Over two years on, and based on research in late 2016, this report takes the recommendations from *Emergency Use Only* and, for each, assesses the progress made – in policy and practice – towards meeting the challenges they present. Across the country, food banks and other community groups, local councils, charities, parliamentary inquiries and national governments have been taking action. This report showcases exciting examples of interventions that help tackle the problems that lead people to use food banks. In doing so, it demonstrates one of the key arguments of *Emergency Use Only* – that change is possible.

Recap: what did we learn?

Emergency Use Only demonstrated that people visited food banks as a last resort, when other coping strategies had failed or were overstretched. Deciding to accept help from a food bank was difficult, described as ‘unnatural’, ‘embarrassing’ and ‘shameful’.

Most people who were referred to a food bank faced an immediate, acute financial crisis – either complete loss of income, or a very significant reduction in their income – which left them with little or no money to put food on the table. The acute crisis was set against a backdrop of complex, challenging life shocks – ill health, bereavement, relationship breakdown, debt, substantial caring responsibilities or job loss – with people with mental health problems appearing to be particularly at risk. Many lived on constantly low incomes. Hard choices between heating, eating, paying bills and servicing debts were very real.

Acute crises could be prompted by a sudden loss of earnings or a change in family circumstances, such as bereavement or homelessness, but, for between half and two-thirds of food bank users, the immediate crisis was linked to the operation of the benefits system – eg, waiting for benefit payments, sanctions, reductions in disability benefits or problems with tax credits. Emergency support provided to people in a time of crisis, including local welfare assistance scheme payments, was not sufficient to prevent their having to be referred to a food bank. Many were unaware of the potential help available; few were accessing it.

Emergency Use Only set out the many and varied causes of shocks in people’s lives, and how these can threaten families’ ability to provide for themselves. It argued that the social security system is a vital safety net for all of us at such moments, but demonstrated that urgent action was needed to ensure it continues to operate as intended. The research identified practical, measured changes in policy and practice to ensure vital support for people in crisis.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN NEXT?

Statistics from The Trussell Trust indicate that, although the number of three-day emergency food supplies provided to people in crisis by Trussell Trust food banks has continued to rise, increases have been less dramatic since 2014.² The need for its work clearly continues, as does the need for reform. In early 2016, the UK government indicated a laudable intention to improve life chances for some of the poorest in society. For such an aspiration to be achieved, protection for the

most vulnerable during times of financial crisis needs to be assured. The Department for Work and Pensions has made some welcome moves in this regard with the work, health and disability green paper, which includes scrapping work capability assessments for the chronically ill.³ We would recommend a wider review as part of this strategy to take into consideration more of the recommendations in this document.

When fully operational, the new universal credit system should represent a significant step forward in reforming benefit provision, especially in ensuring continuity between in-work and out-of-work support. However, concerns remain about the impact of the initial wait for the first universal credit payment, especially on the low paid, who do not have financial reserves on which to fall back. We welcome the provision of a 'budgeting advance' for those who indicate they may have financial difficulties, but call for this system to be subject to close and transparent monitoring.

Universal credit sits alongside another relevant major government initiative introduced since the publication of *Emergency Use Only*: the introduction of the national living wage of £7.20 per hour in April 2016, with it reaching a target of 60 per cent of current median earnings by 2020. This will make a welcome contribution towards tackling Britain's low-pay economy. However, figures from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation indicate that, even with two parents working full time and receiving universal credit, many families with children will not reach the level of income required to achieve a minimum standard of living. Lone parents, those not working full time and those in receipt of income-replacement benefits will fare much worse.

Evidence presented in *Emergency Use Only*, as well as by other research, means we now have a clear picture of why many people are left with little option other than to use a food bank.

Firstly, levels of the main income-replacement benefits in the UK, as well as incomes provided by many low-paid jobs, are well below what most people would define as an acceptable standard of living.⁴

For those living with this low level of income, it is not realistic to save in order to guard against financial shocks, be that unanticipated large household expenditure or unexpected loss of income, such as missing wages or benefit payments. When these events happen, a significant proportion of our population is left in a very vulnerable position. When such events happen repeatedly, to the same individuals or within the same community, the wider resources provided by social networks, family support, or a friend who might be relied on to 'lend a tenner', become overstretched.

Acknowledgement that there are certain expenses or events that cannot not be foreseen and for which, in the circumstances, families cannot reasonably be expected to prepare themselves, lies behind the emergency/crisis payments

system, previously provided through the social fund, and more recently by various short-term advances and crisis payments made available through local welfare assistance schemes.

These systems – short-term benefit advances, discretionary housing payments and crisis grants – form what is known as ‘the safety net below the safety net’. This normally inconspicuous part of our social security system is a vital last line of defence against families falling into destitution and unsustainable, often high-cost debt.

Secondly, research with food bank users, in the *Emergency Use Only* report and in other smaller studies carried out since, reveals a number of situations in which the social security system is not currently offering the level of protection that it was designed to deliver.

- Problems with benefits are still the predominant reason given for food bank referrals. The government’s figures indicate considerable progress in improving benefit delivery and that the vast majority of benefit claimants receive their payments on time. However, as *Emergency Use Only* showed powerfully, even a 10-day wait for benefit money can be too long. The government’s own figures indicate that roughly 10 out of 100 benefit claimants were waiting for more than this target time.⁵ In any system, some element of administrative delay may be inevitable; the question then turns to what emergency provision is available for those who are left waiting. Evidence suggests that too few people are aware of, or receive, the emergency payments intended for them. **We reiterate our call for the government to improve communication about, and access to, short-term benefit advances, and to make available regular statistics so that trends in take-up are clear and can be monitored. We also outline a number of recommendations that would ensure continuity of income for claimants of employment and support allowance.**
- The drop in overall numbers and the proportion of benefit claimants being sanctioned is also welcome. However, evidence from research conducted by West Cheshire Foodbank with Oxford University and the University of Chester indicates that those who are using a food bank as a result of a sanction are among the hardest hit.⁶ This results in a noticeably longer duration of food bank use than with other crises. Benefit conditionality in the form of sanctions represents deliberate withdrawal of state support for individuals and families. Recent research at the University of Oxford identified a ‘strong dynamic’ relationship between jobseeker’s allowance sanctioning rates and referral to food banks between 2012 and 2015. For every 10 additional sanctions applied in each quarter of the year, on average five more adults would be referred to food banks in the area. As sanctions decreased, foodbank referral also decreased.⁷ **We advocate that sanctions should only be used as a last resort,**



and with a genuine, clearly communicated ‘yellow card’ system, giving claimants an opportunity to change their behaviour before financial sanctions are imposed. If claimants do incur a financial sanction, they should be automatically considered for a hardship payment at the same time, to reduce the need for sanctioned individuals and families to have to rely on emergency food provision.

- For those facing an immediate financial crisis not immediately related to the benefits system, emergency crisis payments are vital. Localisation of the crisis support now offered by local welfare assistance schemes has endangered this provision, and led to examples of detrimental local variation. **There is a need to guarantee the future of local welfare provision, while not undermining the benefits of localisation. This could be achieved by introducing a clearer framework for delivery, as is currently in place in Scotland,⁸ and introducing similar ringfencing and reporting duties for local councils as currently apply to discretionary housing payments.**

As well as tackling the structural problems with the benefits system that currently leave people without money for food, *Emergency Use Only* also identified food bank clients’ poor experiences of engaging with the system. Evidence suggests that recommendations made in *Emergency Use Only* – improving communication, introducing clear procedures for complaints, and strengthening the advice and support role of Jobcentre Plus staff – still stand. However, this report is also able to point to excellent examples of co-operation between food banks and local job centres. **The Department for Work and Pensions should work with local authorities and charities to facilitate this kind of engagement at local and national levels to help build an efficient and supportive service for all job centre clients.**

Significantly, the experience of food bank users indicates that mental health is a particular challenge for many. We support the recommendation from Wandsworth Foodbank that **the Department for Work and Pensions should provide high-quality mental health training for its Jobcentre Plus advisers, so that they are well placed to understand and support clients with mental health difficulties, and that benefit policy be sensitive to the additional needs of people with learning disabilities and/or mental health needs.**⁹

Finally, the good news stories presented in this report illustrate the considerable benefits which occur when food banks are able to support clients to receive the advice they need to access the support to which they are entitled. We hope that valuable lessons can be learned from these examples of best practice.

Notes

1. J Perry, M Williams, T Sefton and M Haddad, *Emergency Use Only: understanding and reducing the use of food banks in the UK*, Oxfam GB, 2014
2. The Trussell Trust, 2016
3. Department for Work and Pensions and Department of Health, *Improving Lives*, green paper, October 2016
4. A Davies, K Hill, D Hirsch and M Padley, *A Minimum Income Standard for the UK in 2016*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2016
5. Social Security Benefits: written question 32486
6. E Garratt, A Spencer and C Ogden, *#stillhungry: who is hungry, for how long, and why?*, 2016
7. R Loopstra, J Fledderjohann, A Reeves and D Stuckler, 'The impact of benefit sanctioning on food insecurity: a dynamic cross-area study of food bank usage in the UK', *Sociology Working Papers*, 2016-03, 2016
8. The Welfare Funds (Scotland) Act 2015 placed the Scottish Welfare Fund into law from 1 April 2016: <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/People/fairerscotland/scottishwelfarefund/welfarefundsbill>
9. S Chapman, Wandsworth *Food Poverty Report*, 2016

ONE ACCESS TO SHORT-TERM BENEFIT ADVANCES

Summary of 2014 recommendations

1. Increase awareness.
 - Prominently display details of short-term benefit advances in job centres. *Accepted.*
 - Make short-term benefit advances available in the standard script read over the telephone when benefit is claimed. *Supported by Work and Pensions Committee (March 2015).*
2. Simplify the claims process.
 - Allow both online and telephone applications.
 - Ensure an automatic short-term benefit advance application if a claim for a means-tested benefit has not been decided after 10 days (supported by *Feeding Britain*).
3. Improve data collection.
Supported by the UK Statistics Authority, National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee.

Improve access to short-term benefit advances by increasing awareness, simplifying the claims process, and improving data collection to identify support needs.

Emergency Use Only revealed how, for many food bank users, a sudden loss of income was related to a problem with their benefit claim – between claim and decision, between award and payment, and when an award had ended but that decision was being challenged. Short-term benefit advances are designed to support those who appear likely to be entitled to benefit, but who are experiencing financial need because the benefit is not yet in payment. However, few eligible food bank users were aware of these, and fewer still were receiving them. We recommended that local job centres should enable continuity of payment by increasing and easing access to short-term benefit advances, before referring people to local welfare assistance schemes or food banks.

Research, such as that completed in Wandsworth, demonstrates that proactive, accurate information from Jobcentre Plus advisers is needed to ensure that claimants are not left destitute. In response to *Emergency Use Only* and similar recommendations from the *Feeding Britain* report,¹ the government did commit to taking steps to ensure claimants who are at risk are aware of short-term benefit advances by providing more information to claimants online and in job centres, and updating staff guidance about the short-term benefit advances process. It is also important that staff are able to identify and put in place appropriate repayment plans.

In 2015, the Work and Pensions Select Committee Inquiry into Benefit Delivery recommended that: ‘Job centre staff should ask every claimant whether they have an urgent financial need rather than wait for the claimant to volunteer that information.’² However, in response, the government rejected calls for reference to short-term benefit advances to be added to the standard telephone script.³

In the meantime, the number of applications for short-term benefit advances continued to decline – between September 2014 and September 2015, there

were 228,000 applications, compared with 313,000 in 2013/14. The number of people receiving short-term benefit advances is much lower than the number of people who received the equivalent payment (an 'alignment payment') under the old social fund. In 2013/14, only 169,000 short-term benefit advances applications had a positive outcome, compared with 834,500 alignment payments in 2012/13 – an 80 per cent fall.⁴ Regional data shows wide variation in the proportion of jobseeker's allowance claimants applying for and receiving short-term benefit advances. This appears to support anecdotal evidence that Jobcentre Plus advisers are not following standard procedures.⁵

Additionally, over 65,000 short-term benefit advance claims were unaccounted for in 2014/15.⁶ These are claims declined without a formal decision, because of doubt about entitlement to benefit. Welfare rights advisers believe such cases should still have a formal decision-making process.

Full verification and understanding of these, and other, features of short-term benefit advance administration would require the Department for Work and Pensions to publish regular, detailed statistics. Such data is not currently available and, again, the government's response to recommendations has suggested that this was unlikely to be forthcoming.⁷

Wandsworth Foodbank

Wandsworth Foodbank in South London published its third annual *Food Poverty Report*.⁸ Produced in partnership with Citizens Advice, it explores the triggers and causes of crises leading to 4,078 people receiving emergency food and support from Wandsworth Foodbank in the last year.

The Wandsworth research found that information about and access to short-term benefit advances continues to be poor and subject to the discretion of individual Jobcentre Plus employees. None of the 13 food bank guests interviewed who were experiencing benefit delay had been informed about, or helped to access, this emergency provision, leaving them in unnecessary hardship.

One-third (34 per cent) of 50 referral partners who responded to the food bank survey said that they had helped clients apply for a short-term benefit advance. Of those who knew the outcome of the application (12 partners), just over half said applications had been 'fairly' or 'very' successful, while just under half said applications had been 'not very' or 'not at all' successful. The food bank reflects that this may suggest that clients are more likely to be granted an advance if supported by a professional than if they attempt to access this provision themselves.



In response to *Feeding Britain*, the government rejected the recommendations to consider automatic short-term benefit advance payments after a certain period of time and to allow advice workers to submit claims on their clients' behalf.⁹ Evidence of consistently low rates of short-term benefit advance claims, despite publicity measures put in place by the Department for Work and Pensions, suggests these recommendations should be considered further.

NEXT STEPS

The number of people helped by food banks as a consequence of benefit delays indicates that benefit claimants in urgent financial need do not always know what help is available to them, and do not always indicate their distress during their benefit claim. We call again on the government to:

- Include explicit mention of short-term benefit advances as part of the mandatory job centre scripts.
- Consider introducing automatic short-term benefit advances if the benefit claim has not been settled after the target period.
- Permit welfare rights workers to submit short-term benefit advance claims on their clients' behalf.
- Ensure that repayment plans are appropriate and affordable.

With the Work and Pensions Select Committee, we call again on the government to publish regular statistics on short-term benefit advances to allow take-up and trends to be clear and monitored.

Government responses to written parliamentary questions have promised that, following introduction of new short-term benefit advance publicity and guidance, the Department for Work and Pensions would 'monitor their effectiveness and impact, including on the number of requests'.⁷ We ask that the Department for Work and Pensions confirm whether the evaluation has taken place, and share the results.

Notes

1. *Feeding Britain: a strategy for zero hunger in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland*, All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom, 2014
2. *Benefit Delivery: government response to the Committee's fourth report of session 2015/16*, House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, July 2016
3. See note 2
4. CPAG, *Evidence to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger*, p5, <http://www.cpag.org.uk/content/evidence-all-party-parliamentary-group-hunger>, accessed 18 May 2016
5. See note 4, p7
6. See note 4, p7
7. See note 2
8. S Chapman, *Wandsworth Food Poverty Report*, May 2016
9. *Feeding Britain: six months on*, A progress report on the work of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom, June 2015

TWO SANCTIONS POLICY AND PRACTICE

Summary of 2014 recommendations

1. Increase access to hardship payments.
 - Make hardship payments available to all in the first 14 days.
 - Make a decision about hardship payments at the same time as the sanction decision.
2. Clarify communications about sanctions.
 - Ensure that a sanction decision is only lawful if the letters are sent, are proven to have been received, and clearly communicate the reason for the sanction, the period of the sanction and the process for applying for hardship payments.
3. Mitigate the impact while a sanction is being reconsidered.
 - Do not suspend benefits while a sanction is being reconsidered.
 - Ensure a sanction does not start until 14 days after the claimant has been notified.

Department for Work and Pensions is trialling a 14-day grace period.

Increase access to hardship payments of jobseeker's allowance, employment and support allowance and universal credit, clarify communications about sanctions, mitigate the impact while a sanction is being reconsidered and address issues for housing benefit.

The experience of *Emergency Use Only* participants added to the increasing body of evidence that the operation of the current sanctions policy was causing hardship and hunger. People who received sanctions were not able to easily replace their income from benefits, and instead turned to food banks. Furthermore, stories revealed how the sudden removal (or sharp reduction) in benefit income can have long-term consequences on household coping strategies and wellbeing, including mental health, thereby exacerbating, rather than ameliorating, the difficulties people may already face.



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West Cheshire Foodbank

In July 2016, a group of charities, working with the University of Oxford and the University of Chester, published the findings of a two-year study into the drivers of over 5,800 client referrals. This found that benefit sanctions were the primary reason for referral in 8 per cent of cases. Sanctions were twice as prevalent among people claiming jobseeker's allowance than among those claiming employment and support allowance. The number of people affected by sanctioning halved between May 2014 and April 2016.

A key finding was that the duration of sanctions is noticeably longer than other crises, leaving people unable to eat for a longer period. The report shows that nearly one in five people who received help from West Cheshire Foodbank as a result of sanctions were estimated to experience a crisis that would last 13 weeks or longer. Benefit sanctions affected a greater proportion of adults than children, although over one in five people affected by benefit sanctions was a child. Sanctions were more common among young adults and working-age adults (9 and 7 per cent, respectively) than among older adults (3 per cent).

As a result, *Emergency Use Only* called for increased hardship payments, clarification of sanction communications and mitigation while a sanction is being reconsidered. It also proposed a technical fix to prevent jobseeker's allowance sanctions leading to local authorities erroneously closing housing benefit claims. These recommendations were reinforced and expanded on by *Feeding Britain* in December 2014.

Since late 2014, the response from the government on conditionality and sanctions has been slowed by the electoral and parliamentary cycle. The number of sanctions has fallen dramatically, from an average of 74,000 jobseeker's allowance sanctions per month between April 2013 and March 2014, to around 18,000 per month in the 12 months to March 2016.¹

In response to the Work and Pensions Committee report on sanctions in October 2015, the Department for Work and Pensions did commit to trialing a new system giving claimants 14 days' notice of its intention to sanction and the option to appeal.² The Department for Work and Pensions also committed to introducing an easier/earlier application process for hardship payments. CPAG experience from its advice work is that more clients are being assisted to apply for hardship payments, though there is, so far, no evidence of this in published statistics.

Atherton and Leigh Foodbank, Greater Manchester

Since 2014, Atherton and Leigh Foodbank has been working with local solicitors who provide *pro bono* work. The solicitors undertake a range of casework, but mainly deal with social security issues, including sanctions. In the last two years, 143 people have been helped. All the social security cases taken on last year were successful in the clients' favour, underlining the dubious legal grounds on which many sanctions appear to be based. More recently, solicitors have not had as many people referred to them with sanction problems, because the introduction of the mandatory reconsideration process means that people who have been sanctioned must first apply for the sanction decision to be looked at again before they can appeal. The solicitors only step in if this is refused, by which time someone's sanction period may have been served. Even if someone's appeal is successful, s/he will have had no – or significantly reduced – income for four weeks.

There have also been improvements in communication, but there is still evidence that the content and means of communication are not clear or appropriate for clients.³

There have been no changes to the reconsideration process for sanctions. Responses from members of the National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers indicated considerable variability in the time taken to reconsider, with the majority reporting between two and four weeks.⁴

NEXT STEPS

The trial of the 14-day notice period for sanctions currently taking place in Scotland is an improvement on existing practice, but does not tackle the fundamental failings in the current sanctions system.

- Sanctions should be used as a last resort and, if imposed, claimants should be clearly notified, with clear reasons given.
- Claimants should have the opportunity to change their behaviour before financial sanctions are imposed: a genuine 'yellow card' system.
- Sanctions should not be of a fixed period, so claimants have an opportunity to have their sanction lifted if it spurs them on to engage with employment support – the stated goal of the policy.

- If claimants do have a financial sanction, they should be automatically considered for a hardship payment at the same time, to reduce the need for sanctioned individuals and families having to rely on emergency food provision.

Notes

1. Department for Work and Pensions, *Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance Sanctions: decisions made to March 2016*, August 2016
2. House of Commons, *Hansard*, 22 October 2015, col 58WS
3. Child Poverty Action Group, *Evidence to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger*, December 2015, pp15-17
4. See note 3

THREE THE EMPLOYMENT AND SUPPORT ALLOWANCE REGIME

Summary of 2014 recommendations

1. Continue to pay employment and support allowance during a mandatory reconsideration.
2. Improve the system for handling medical certificates.
3. Mitigate the impact of missed appointments, especially where the claimant may not be at fault, or may need additional support.

Ensure claimants are not left without income while challenging a decision made because of missing medical certificates or missed appointments.

Emergency Use Only identified significant numbers of food bank users who were experiencing problems with sickness and disability benefits, particularly employment and support allowance – including payments suddenly stopping because of a failure to fulfil the benefit conditions, missing medical certificates and missed appointments.

MANDATORY RECONSIDERATION

Problems with employment and support allowance when a claimant fails a medical assessment are particularly likely to lead to food bank use because payments stop during the period when a decision is being challenged (known as ‘mandatory reconsideration’). *Emergency Use Only*, supported by *Feeding Britain*, proposed that the problem could be addressed by continuing to pay employment and support allowance during the mandatory reconsideration process, in same way as is sometimes done for appeals.

CPAG advice work at Tower Hamlets Foodbank suggests that mandatory reconsiderations may happen more quickly than was the case, but at a cost: advisers report that written considerations are less extensive, and actual reconsiderations more rare. The result could be that the mandatory reconsideration process does not reduce the number of appeals and, in effect, creates an added delay and hardship for claimants.



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Evidence of faster mandatory reconsiderations is welcome, as is the government's commitment to publish official statistics relating to clearance times. However, there are concerns that mandatory reconsideration often acts as a rubber stamp and an in-built delay to appeals, and it is therefore important to continue to protect the incomes of claimants while they await mandatory reconsideration.

MEDICAL CERTIFICATES

Emergency Use Only recommended specific improvements to the system for handling medical certificates: providing an email address to which certificates could be sent and accepting scanned email copies; advising [jobcentres](#) to scan and email medical certificates to the Department for Work and Pensions when a claimant's existing certificate is about to expire or has expired; and allowing employment and support allowance payments to continue for a grace period of 14 days if a claimant informs the Department for Work and Pensions that a medical certificate has been, or will be, provided in that time. None of these recommendations have yet been adopted.

Evidence from CPAG welfare rights work indicates that the system for handling medical certificates remains inadequate. The Department for Work and Pensions benefits advice line makes it clear that claimants should allow nine working days before following up on their submission of a medical certificate. This represents a significant level of delay in the system, which can have a substantial financial impact.

County Durham Foodbank

Durham Foodbank, one of the largest in The Trussell Trust network, identified a growing number of food bank clients who were experiencing problems with their employment and support allowance claims. A common scenario encountered by the food bank is of clients who have been rejected at a work capability assessment and so have to reapply for jobseeker's allowance while also re-securing a medical certificate indicating that they are not 'fit for work'. This can be a challenging and demoralising process, made worse by the removal of income caused by the cessation of employment and support allowance.

Working with Durham Money Advice Centre, which is also part of its family of charities, the food bank has developed a programme of additional support for these clients, available through drop-in sessions during food bank opening hours. At this drop-in, an experienced money advice worker is available to support clients throughout the employment and support allowance process, including submitting applications or further information requested by the Department for Work and Pensions, and negotiating the mandatory reconsideration process. Ongoing support also includes home visits, if required – something which is particularly important as clients often find it difficult to leave the house due to their illness or disability. Where appropriate, the adviser is available to accompany food bank clients to employment and support allowance assessments, providing transport, emotional support and an independent witness. Where a request for mandatory reconsideration fails, clients are passed to a separate welfare rights advice team, who have specialist knowledge to handle the appeal, but not the capacity to handle clients at earlier stages in the process. The service is appreciated by clients, and forms part of the wider wrap-around support provided by the food bank, to help to reduce future re-referrals.

MISSED APPOINTMENTS

Emergency Use Only recommended that the Department for Work and Pensions should mitigate the impact of missed appointments, particularly where there is the possibility that a claimant may not be entirely at fault or may need additional support. Suggestions included reducing the amount of employment and support allowance, rather than imposing the loss of all income, and/or allowing a claimant who contacts the Department for Work and Pensions within one month to rearrange her/his appointment or submit the ESA50 form, and so remain on employment and support allowance, rather than having to start the application process over again.

NEXT STEPS

In order to ensure continuity of income for claimants, the recommendations from the original *Emergency Use Only* report remain pertinent, namely:

- Treat claimants awaiting a mandatory consideration in the same way as claimants appealing an employment and support allowance decision.
- Issue guidance to job centres, advising them to scan and email medical certificates to the Department for Work and Pensions when a claimant's existing certificate has expired or is about to expire.
- Mitigate the impact of missed appointments by avoiding the loss of all income, and allow those who have missed appointments to rearrange them and remain on employment and support allowance.

FOUR ACCESS TO EMERGENCY FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Summary of 2014 recommendations

1. Introduce a statutory duty on local authorities to meet the needs covered by local welfare assistance schemes, including meeting short-term needs in an emergency.
2. Maintain funding for local welfare assistance schemes and, if possible, ringfence this.
3. Ensure that devolved equivalents are adequately funded, and that those who might benefit are aware of their existence and how to access them.
4. Improve communication between Jobcentre Plus, local authorities, food banks and other statutory and charitable service providers to ensure that those in need are aware of the support available.

Sustain and improve access to emergency financial support through local welfare assistance schemes and the devolved equivalents.

Since local welfare assistance schemes were introduced in 2013, localising the discretionary parts of the former social fund (crisis loans and community care grants), they have become a major part of the landscape of provision for those who encounter immediate financial crisis.¹ Since their introduction, the Department for Work and Pensions and councils have reported reduced spending on the discretionary support they provide to people in crisis.² *Emergency Use Only* provided a clear indication that the schemes do not appear to be meeting this purpose in many cases, with low awareness and even lower numbers receiving support.

Since publication of *Emergency Use Only*, funding for local welfare assistance schemes has been precarious. For 2015/16, dedicated funding was initially removed from the provisional local government finance settlement but, following an extensive campaign, an annual £130 million was identified from local authorities' general grant as being intended for local welfare assistance, and a one-off additional £74 million was made available to assist with pressures on local welfare, health and social care. Despite funding being included in the revenue support grant, the National Audit Office reported that many councils to which it spoke said that funding from government for local welfare provision had effectively ceased, as there was no longer a specific grant for it.³ In addition, a significant proportion of councils did not spend all the funding they were originally given.⁴

In addition to financial vulnerability, there continues to be a lack of clear statutory duties on local and national bodies. This has allowed provision to be cut back. A survey by the National Audit Office found 10 councils who had stopped, or significantly reduced, local welfare provision, and few who had committed to continuing provision after 2015/16. CPAG's local welfare assistance portal has identified eight local authorities that have closed their schemes entirely, and others that have significantly scaled back. Many local authorities also include food bank referral as part of their scheme.

Exeter Foodbank

The local welfare assistance scheme in Exeter has been very limited for some time. Payments have only been issued in non-monetary form since 2013, predominantly in the form of referrals to Turntable (a local charity that provides furniture and white goods) and some Co-op food vouchers. This limited support has been tapered out and the scheme ceased to exist entirely in March 2016. To the food bank's knowledge, there are no plans to replace it with any alternative. Referrals to Turntable are no longer available; people in hardship are issued with food bank vouchers and/or signposted to other voluntary organisations and charities for support.

Exeter City Council's benefit support team (which was previously predominantly responsible for the administration of the local welfare assistance scheme) has been the food bank's largest single voucher distributor (out of around 110 referral agencies) for some time, and comprises roughly 18 per cent of total referrals made. In 2015/16, Exeter Foodbank provided three days' worth of food to 677 people referred by the council's benefits team, of whom 122 were children.

Uptake of local welfare assistance continues to be low, compared with equivalent parts of the social fund. Councils have been cautious in promotion and setting eligibility criteria. However, since no data is collected centrally, it is hard to ascertain the level of applications and success rates, or how these relate to reported underspends.⁵

Safeguarding local welfare assistance scheme central funding and improving access and client awareness remains a high priority for many food banks. Of the 100 food bank managers responding to a Trussell Trust survey in October 2015, 94 agreed that it was important both that the Department for Work and Pensions ensures central funding continues and that work is done to improve awareness.

Advice agencies and local authorities have also told CPAG about continuing issues with people being inappropriately referred to a local scheme by Department for Work and Pensions staff, when they should be accessing short-term benefit advances or hardship payments.



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NEXT STEPS

Localisation has led to examples of detrimental variation in the provision of local welfare assistance. Introducing a clearer framework for delivery, including capacity/requirement benchmarking, as there is in Scotland, would reduce the current variation while not undermining the benefits of localisation.

Discretionary housing payments, in contrast to local welfare assistance schemes, are subject to both a ring fence and reporting duties, with the result that most councils have spent the majority of funding they have been awarded. Information gathering has also made it clear how recipients have been affected by reforms, which allows for decisions on future funding to be better informed.

The Department for Communities and Local Government has a crucial role to play in ensuring that local welfare assistance schemes are adequately funded and monitored. It would be greatly beneficial if ringfencing and reporting duties similar to those for discretionary housing payments were introduced for local welfare assistance schemes.

Barrow Foodbank and North Lakes Foodbank

Food banks in Barrow and North Lakes have both worked to develop good relationships with Cumbria County Council. Barrow Foodbank faced early difficulties because the council was planning to refer people applying for local welfare assistance to the food bank without any consultation with the food bank or other local services, such as housing associations. However, this changed quickly and the food bank now has an excellent relationship with the local authority.

Barrow Foodbank refers some people for local welfare assistance, including people who are referred by Jobcentre Plus, or people who it does not know and who have not been referred by voucher holders. In the other direction, the council's telephone advisers hold vouchers to refer applicants who do not qualify for local welfare assistance to the food bank and also second 'floating' support workers to attend the food bank in person. The council's adviser is able to signpost and provide 'all pay cards', which provide £15 for people to use on gas or electricity (the food bank sees lots of young people moving into temporary accommodation with only a kettle when they are no longer allowed to stay with foster parents).

North Lakes Foodbank has developed a very different approach to the usual referral model, but one that works very well given the rural location of its centres. Cumbria County Council has seconded advice workers from local floating support services to three of six food bank centres in the most rural areas, where voucher holders are less available. The advice workers sit in the food banks and offer low-key, drop-in advice on issues such as debt, low income, benefits and housing. They can signpost people to more thorough sources of help and, as food bank voucher holders, they can also, if they feel it is appropriate, issue the person with a food bank voucher. This secondment offers clients an enhanced level of service and immediate help in dealing with their crisis.

Notes

1. National Audit Office, *Local Welfare Provision*, 2016
2. See note 1
3. See note 1, p29
4. See note 1, p7
5. See note 1, p8

FIVE AN EFFICIENT AND SUPPORTIVE SERVICE FOR ALL CLIENTS

Summary of 2014 recommendations

1. Reinstating access to telephone lines in job centres for claimants to contact benefit call centres.
2. Making available email addresses for claimants and/or their advisers to correspond with the relevant office within Jobcentre Plus.
3. Revising Jobcentre Plus guidance and circulars to reduce the complexity of the application process, and providing clearer support and guidance.
4. Introducing clear procedures for complaints and resolution in the event of service failure.
5. Improving management and training of personal advisers, to ensure they act as support workers for claimants as well as gatekeepers.

Make job centres efficient and supportive by reinstating access to phone lines, making email address available to claimants and their advisers, reducing the complexity of the application process, training personal advisers to act as support workers as well as gatekeepers, and having clear procedures for complaints and resolution when things go wrong.

Emergency Use Only documented the problems with benefits administration encountered by many food bank users. We concluded that reform was needed to create a social security system that is more efficient and with minimum standards to ensure all claimants are treated with dignity.



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Thetford Foodbank, Norfolk

Thetford Foodbank reports that regular personal contact has allowed good relationships with the local Jobcentre Plus in Thetford to develop. For food bank distribution centres covered by the Thetford job centre, this has allowed constructive collaboration, including being able to raise concerns about challenges faced by particular groups of claimants. However, for the other two distribution centres, which are based in other Jobcentre Plus districts, this is not the case, resulting in a less joined-up service for clients, concerns about the future of provision (linked to reduced funding for a local CAB office), and clients having to make longer journeys to receive support.

Thetford Foodbank raised a concern with its local job centre recently about a few clients who it considered vulnerable (eg, some people who cannot read or write) and who were having financial problems. The food bank asked what it could do for these people, for whom there does not seem to be a solution. It is also concerned that it sees people who struggle to even get out of the house, but who are not getting help for their mental health issues. Work with the job centre on these issues is ongoing.

Emergency Use Only findings and recommendations were supported by *Feeding Britain*, which proposed a number of recommendations regarding communication between claimants and the Department for Work and Pensions, including the reintroduction of telephones in job centres, the removal of premium rate phone lines and the introduction of email addresses for submitting documents.

The government has not yet responded to most of these recommendations, though we welcome its October 2017 announcement of freephone support lines. In 2015, it rejected the recommendation for email addresses to be made available to claimants, but said it was considering alternative means of enabling claimants to submit personal information.

Unfortunately, a survey of members of the National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers conducted by CPAG in autumn 2015 suggested that benefit delivery had not improved over 2014/15.¹ The 166 responses were split evenly between feeling that the number of mistakes by the Department for Work and Pensions had stayed the same overall and that they had become more common. Only 2 per cent felt that mistakes had become less common.

More worryingly, in this context, 13 advisers who responded to the survey mentioned a changing, harsher attitude from Department staff, with others specifically mentioning that their clients had experienced rudeness.

Kingston Foodbank, south-west London

Kingston Foodbank has a positive and productive relationship with its local Jobcentre Plus office, which is the main referral agency for the area. Food bank staff are in ongoing conversation with job centre staff regarding referrals, constantly monitoring what sort of clients are being referred, and why. For example, the food bank was able to raise particular concerns about short-term benefit advances and then work with job centre staff to explore when they could be used, encouraging the job centre to give an advance before a food bank voucher.

The food bank manager has presented about the work of the food bank to job centre staff, explaining how the food bank and Jobcentre Plus have shared aims, in that both are trying to help people and avert crises. A workshop has been developed to look into case studies in depth, to raise awareness about the real people who are in crisis, and then to work together to develop advice on preventing those particular reasons for food bank use.

Finally, the food bank and Jobcentre Plus have been working together to think more widely about what else they, or other agencies, could do to develop joined-up approaches to tackling hunger and poverty in Kingston. Paul, the manager at Kingston Foodbank, reflects that: 'Exploring the question of what would be needed to take us to the point of if/when there is no need for a food bank is thinking outside the box and beyond normal practices of the food bank and Jobcentre Plus, but it is essential.'

The survey also provided feedback from advisers' own experiences of attempting to contact the Department for Work and Pensions. They reported that it was frustrating to get through, with multiple stages usually required because of a lack of authority and expertise on the part of Department staff, which, in many cases, led to inaccurate information being received.

The experience of food banks has been mixed. In some areas, such as Kingston, proactive food bank projects have been able to work well with local job centres in trying to help people they jointly support. However, these are presently scattered local examples rather than the norm.

NEXT STEPS

Evidence suggests that the problems identified in *Emergency Use Only* concerning food bank clients' poor experiences of the benefits system remain. Indeed, there are suggestions that they may have got worse. The recommendations made in *Emergency Use Only* for national changes to the operation of the benefits system, therefore, still stand.

At a local level, however, there are examples of where personal engagement between food banks and job centres has helped to forge greater understanding of the issues faced by clients. It would be beneficial if the Department for Work and Pensions could work to facilitate this kind of contact at local and national levels, and to ensure that guidance reflects the needs of claimants, in order to help build an efficient and supportive service for all Jobcentre Plus clients.

Notes

1. CPAG conducted an online survey of the members of the National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers (NAWRA) from late October to early November 2015. The survey received 225 responses, answering a total of 18 questions about their experience of DWP benefits administration and changes that had taken place over the previous year.

SIX SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Summary of 2014 recommendations

1. Improve the quality and availability of training for Jobcentre Plus advisers and decision makers to better understand the role of mental health in circumstances that led to any breach of expectations.
2. Create better links between Jobcentre Plus and local health and financial support services, to enable better signposting.
3. Ensure sufficient mental health services are available to meet need.

Ensure that job centres better support their clients with mental health problems by improving the quality and availability of training for advisers and decision makers, creating better links with local health and financial support services, and ensuring that sufficient mental health services are available to meet need.

The interviews carried out with food bank users for *Emergency Use Only* highlighted several distinct ways in which poor mental health was associated with the crisis that led to food bank use. For some people, there was a direct link between poor mental health and their immediate financial crisis – eg, where severe depression or anxiety was given as the main reason for failure to attend employment and support allowance work capability assessments. For others, poor mental health of individuals or in the wider family was an indirect vulnerability – one factor among many in the cumulative burdens that eventually precipitated financial crisis. There were also examples of cases where, although not featuring as an immediate cause of food bank use, mental health problems had been exacerbated by the immediate financial crisis and/or had prevented the family from recovering financial stability. Our research revealed that, despite the over-representation of people with mental health issues among benefit claimants, Jobcentre Plus frontline staff and decision makers often demonstrated considerable lack of understanding of mental illness.

Formal and informal consultation with food bank managers over the two years since *Emergency Use Only* was published indicates little sign of improvement. Many food banks in the Trussell Trust network see many clients with varying degrees of mental health issues, which can lead to homelessness. Last year, The Trussell Trust organised training with Mind for London project managers on recognising and dealing with mental health issues. In London, The Trussell Trust is planning to use its foodbank development fund to offer another round of mental health training.

Norwood Foodbank, London

Norwood Foodbank sees a significant number of people affected by mental health issues. Some of the people who visit have such serious mental health issues that the food bank arranged safety training with the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, so that the volunteers are better prepared to deal with incidents that may arise.

The food bank was contacted by a local mental health charity, which runs a club house, with job support, IT support and friendship clubs, and has worked with the food bank to reach more people who had need of, but who were not already accessing, its services. The charity was able to locate someone with an understanding of mental health issues at Norwood Foodbank, and could provide tailored signposting, guidance and suggestions. The adviser was able to sign people up to the mental health network to get further support.

In a survey of Trussell Trust food bank managers in 2016, 40 per cent reported that mental health issues were a major issue among the people who used the food bank. Growing numbers of managers are raising concerns about the impact of wider cuts in mental health services on vulnerable people in their community, in some cases directly raising demand for food parcels and/or an identified need for food banks to provide informal social support. For example, when Peterborough Foodbank visited the adult mental health team, it expressed concerns that, with the cuts in money for its work, more clients would not receive the support they need and would become more vulnerable. There was particular concern about people having their money taken by friends and family, which may result in their needing to use a food bank more often.

In research carried out by Wandsworth Foodbank, three in five of the 50 voucher partners who responded said that the current benefits system catered 'badly' or 'very badly' for their clients with mental health difficulties.¹ These clients find it particularly difficult to negotiate the bureaucracy of the benefits system, particularly to meet Department for Work and Pensions requirements in terms of benefits conditionality, and to understand or complete complicated paperwork unsupported. Voucher partners expressed concerns specifically about Jobcentre Plus, and the quality of service, information, communication and support their clients with mental health needs receive from local advisers.



Exeter Foodbank

Exeter Foodbank continues to see a large number of clients with long-term health conditions (both physical and mental), who struggle to access the appropriate benefits.

The food bank sees many clients who have previously received disability living allowance, but who are now having to reapply for personal independence payment as it is rolled out. Many are still facing significant delays while waiting for medical assessments, which sometimes seem to be cancelled by the assessment centres at very short notice, resulting in further waits of five to six weeks. The food bank also sees a lot of people who have failed their medical and lost a source of income on which they were dependent. (Many are in the process of appealing the decision.)

NEXT STEPS

We support the recommendation from Wandsworth Foodbank that the Department for Work and Pensions should provide high-quality mental health training for its Jobcentre Plus advisers, so that they are well placed to understand and support clients with mental health difficulties, and that benefit policy be made sensitive to the additional needs of people with learning disabilities and/or mental health needs. This may be possible through the progress of the work, health and disability green paper.

Two food banks, in London and Yorkshire, are developing pilots with the UK Council of Psychotherapists and Deloitte to place psychotherapists in food banks to expedite diagnosis, signposting and treatment of food bank users with mental health issues.

Notes

1. S Chapman, *Wandsworth Food Poverty Report*, May 2016

SEVEN ACCESS TO APPROPRIATE ADVICE AND SUPPORT

Summary of 2014 recommendations

1. Improve resourcing of independent advice services and legal aid, and restore funding restored to increase their availability.
2. Improve the links between advice services and food banks and, if appropriate, co-locate some voluntary sector services with emergency food aid provision.
3. Support the Trussell Trust and other agencies with volunteer, funding and partnership resources to help increase efforts to better signpost and provide support for food bank users and others in the community.

Improve the resourcing of advice and support services to ensure that we have an advice-first, not food bank-first approach, and conduct research into where advice provision is most effective, including when independent advisers co-located in foodbanks would make the most difference in reducing foodbank referral numbers.

The *Emergency Use Only* research included the use of a welfare rights adviser at Tower Hamlets Foodbank, who helped clients to identify and overcome problems with benefits. As well as contributing to the insights into the problems with benefit administration identified in the report, this work revealed the need for more advice and support to help people access the support to which they are entitled from the social security system.

Since *Emergency Use Only* was published, pressures on advice services have continued to grow, with services closing as a result of a lack of funding. Meanwhile, pressures on individuals' and families' budgets have increased too. Headline benefit rates have fallen in real terms due to CPI-linking and later outright freezes, while localisation of certain benefits has been accompanied by reductions in levels of support. As well as cuts, such as to local welfare assistance schemes, we have seen cuts in council tax support: there was a 51 per cent increase in the use of bailiffs in London alone last year due to the 10 per cent cut in funding and imposition of minimum payments.¹ Thus, support for advice services needs to be addressed at both local and national level.

CPAG's work with Tower Hamlets Foodbank

CPAG has been providing welfare rights advice in Tower Hamlets Foodbank since August 2013, helping to develop a deep understanding of the benefit issues driving people to food banks. This, in turn, has informed both this analysis and the original *Emergency Use Only* report. In order to best support clients, CPAG has attempted to develop good working relationships with local services, often with great success:

- Tower Hamlets Council. CPAG has a very good relationship with some of the staff in the housing benefit department. This allows advisers to phone and/or email named individuals in the department directly, asking them to action issues relating to clients' housing benefit issues, usually resulting in a very quick and effective response from them. This is particularly useful as, often, clients' housing benefit has been suspended when employment and support allowance or jobseeker's allowance has stopped. Advisers are able to get the housing benefit and/or council tax reduction de-suspended, which helps put clients' minds at rest and stops rent arrears building up.
- Hackney Benefits Centre. Advisers have a very strong relationship with the complaints resolution managers who deal with employment and support allowance and jobseeker's allowance claims. This means that they are able to ring and/or email them directly when they have particularly vulnerable clients and/or situations which are urgent. The managers at Hackney Benefits Centre are very proactive and helpful, and get things actioned as quickly as they can. Again, this helps advisers to do their jobs more effectively, and helps clients to get their benefits back or into payment as quickly as possible.
- Job centres. This is one area where advisers feel they would benefit from having a stronger relationship locally. They do not have a list of contacts for local Jobcentre Plus staff, and have to rely on ringing Hackney Benefits Centre and asking it to find out the number for the job centre they need to contact. This works only because Hackney Benefits Centre is very helpful and willing to look up this information; otherwise, advisers would regularly have to ring the normal Jobcentre Plus numbers, which can be very time consuming and not always effective.

Between 1 April and 30 September 2016, CPAG's advice work in Tower Hamlets has been worth significant amounts in financial outcomes for clients. Across 200 cases, this has totalled £158,538.36 in one-off payments and £10,107.44 per week in ongoing payments.

Coventry Foodbank

Coventry Foodbank was the second busiest Trussell Trust food bank in the UK in 2014/15; this year, it is the third busiest, behind Newcastle and Durham. It saw a drop in referrals of nearly 3,000 in the 2015/16 figures compared with 2014/15, and attributes part of this to the introduction of independent welfare advisers.

In 2014, Gavin Kibble (founder of Coventry Foodbank) and Charley Gibbons (then chief executive of Coventry CAB) began the first steps to create what is now known as the Restart Project, a Big Lottery-funded partnership which ensures that holistic advice is offered in food banks through the 'More than Food' initiative.

Eighteen months on, the advice services at the food bank have been incredibly successful. The project uses volunteers to deliver low-level triage advice to clients at the food bank. Then, if the client needs to talk to a senior caseworker from the CAB, s/he can access her/him immediately, using Skype to talk directly to her/him at the CAB's offices at Kirby House. Among the clients receiving further assistance from the CAB, 79 per cent do not have to return to the food bank for assistance. This was calculated to have generated £343,140.99 in financial gains for food bank clients over the year, in the form of debts restructured, people claiming benefits they did not know they were entitled to, overturning sanctions, and other support.²

Research conducted through the project showed that 90 per cent of food bank clients were unaware of all the benefits to which they were entitled. For example, a Restart client with debt problems visited the food bank. Before speaking to a CAB adviser in the food bank, she had been unaware that she was entitled to working tax credit, which an adviser helped her apply for. She also had debt repayments renegotiated to sustainable amounts, increasing her income by £155 a week. This meant she could now afford food for herself and children, and no longer needed the foodbank.

The service has been provided from seven of Coventry Foodbank's centres, and is credited with some of the fall in numbers seen by the food bank from April 2015, with 2,700 fewer emergency food supplies given to people in need. This was the second biggest fall in the country, and was in contrast to a rise of 2 per cent in the number of people helped across the UK.



3 or More project, West Lothian Foodbank, Scotland

The 3 or More project is a partnership between West Lothian Foodbank, West Lothian Council's Advice Shop, and the food bank's referring agencies, to help people experiencing persistent food poverty. Often, people with complex and enduring financial difficulties need more than three food parcels while their crisis remains unresolved. After someone has visited a food bank three times and then requires further support, a worker from the Advice Shop will deliver the food to her/his home. This not only addresses the immediate crisis, but, during the visit, the worker is able to provide advice and advocacy to maximise the client's income and alleviate poverty in the longer term. If required, ongoing one-to-one support is available from a dedicated caseworker, alongside onward referrals to additional support services, such as money or energy advice, Adult Basic Education, Access2Employment, Business Gateway and the Money Advice Service.

By 2016, 81 per cent of 68 customers referred had engaged with the service and had been assisted in various ways. In West Lothian, there has been a 17.6 per cent decrease in the number of food bank referrals, attributed, in part, to the implementation of this successful wraparound support.

In addition to the 3 or More project, West Lothian Foodbank is trialling a number of other initiatives that aim to improve the range of support it offers clients. These include:

- A referral pathway which makes signposting a lot easier for referral partners when individuals feel they have run out of options for alternative support – eg, promoting and encouraging the uptake of free school meals, breakfast clubs, school clothing grants and the school clothing bank.
- A close working partnership with the Scottish Welfare Fund, which makes direct referrals to the project. The referrals are often from individuals who have exhausted the use of the Fund (eg, three or more grants in a 12-month period). This ensures that people who are no longer eligible to be supported by the Fund, but who are still in need of crisis support, are not left to go hungry.

NEXT STEPS

We need to move more to a situation not of food bank first, but of advice and benefits first. The default approach should be for upstream support: ideally, people should be seeing advisers before they go to the food bank. Funding for, and capacity building of, advice services is crucial to preventing crises in the first place.

That said, at present, advisers in food banks do reach people who have not previously been able to access advice, and provide a valuable service to those clients who have already reached a crisis. Particularly in situations where food banks are rural or isolated, or where there are few advice services, co-location of food banks and advice services may be the most appropriate solution. Research is needed to assess where and when advice provision is most effective.

- The Trussell Trust, Citizens Advice and other national support charities should attempt a co-ordinated approach to identify where independent advisers co-located in foodbanks would make the most difference in reducing foodbank referral numbers.
- The government must improve accessibility of Department for Work and Pensions staff to food banks and independent advisers, and ensure a dedicated hotline to these agencies is available to frontline charities to address urgent crises which have led to, or risk leading to, further food bank referrals.

Notes

1. S Ashton, M Francis, and A Woudhuysen, *Still Too Poor to Pay: three years of localised council tax support in London*, Child Poverty Action Group and Z2K, September 2016
2. Restart Volunteering Programme, Coventry Foodbank, 2016

EIGHT STRENGTHENING OTHER SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

No one should have to resort to a food bank because of failings in our social security system.

Inevitably, in any large system, there will be delays and errors, but it is the role of the layer of emergency provision in the social security system – crisis support previously provided by the social fund and since localised – to ensure that these errors do not lead to destitution or hunger. Preventing hunger ought always to be a basic function of any social safety net.



At the same time, we must recognise the vital role food banks play in their communities, increasingly acting as community hubs by providing additional services and support, reaching people who might not seek help from other sources and tackling social isolation. For some people, where a solution cannot be put in place quickly, or if they fall into a short-term crisis, foodbanks provide a dignified and friendly space to come for support. It is crucial, however, that they are not forced to provide a long-term replacement for functions that are properly those of the social security system.

Emergency Use Only findings strongly complemented wider research evidence that turning to emergency food is a 'strategy of last resort', only used when other strategies were exhausted. Our analysis also highlighted that many of those alternative strategies were insufficient, while others, such as building up housing arrears, were very high risk. The research used the 'sustainable livelihoods approach' as a framework for making a final set of wide-ranging recommendations which might help to support positive coping strategies across five domains of locational, financial, physical, human and social assets.

Blackburn Foodbank

Blackburn Foodbank undertook research into food poverty and its impact on people locally. It found that there was a high level of illiteracy, and that a significant percentage of people were unskilled as a result of Blackburn's history of being an area with a lot of non-skilled work available. The research found that, where people were not engaging, or were struggling to engage, with the job market or benefits system, it was because they did not know how to.

Following the research, the food bank developed several programmes to help address the underlying causes of poverty in its area by improving people's opportunities and aspirations, supporting social inclusion, and promoting mental health and wellbeing. Projects include drop-in support sessions with the local credit union, a choir, a clothing bank, and an IT course provided in conjunction with the local housing association.

The food bank also runs cookery demonstrations in its café area and, in 2015, it ran a 'food champions' course, as part of a local initiative in response to school holiday hunger. At the end of a demonstration, attendees were given the ingredients to practice at home the recipes they had just seen made. It will run a similar project during the summer holidays this year. One man who joined the choir and had previously used the food bank and experienced mental ill health remarked that it was really helping him feel like himself again, as it 'put him in touch with a time before [he] was ill'.

Food banks in The Trussell Trust network are working to further understand how they can address the underlying causes of poverty and hunger in their local communities and move beyond crisis provision and signposting. In order to provide the services that would be most useful to people who are referred to food banks, and to provide tailored advice and support, food banks analyse their own data and the experiences of the people they serve to help signpost people to external advice/support services, or locate local advice services on site. This reduces the need for a future referral to the food bank.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

A number of food banks in The Trussell Trust network, including York, Blackburn, Coventry, and Hammersmith and Fulham, have been involved in, and have initiated, research projects to analyse more thoroughly why people are being referred to their food bank, and to understand how they would be able to improve the service they provide. Some, like West Cheshire and Wandsworth, have published their own research.

Over 90 per cent of food banks in The Trussell Trust network provide at least one additional service beyond giving out three days' worth of food, ranging from simple signposting to sophisticated programmes of benefits, debt and money advice. Research has shown that co-locating additional/local support services on site increases take-up, enabling people to get out of their crisis more quickly.



Vale Foodbank

Vale Foodbank opened in 2011. It grew out of the work of the Big Wrap project in the Vale of Glamorgan, which had been working since 2008 to support disadvantaged young people in the area, particularly around Christmas. The Big Wrap gives out presents and Christmas hampers to disadvantaged children and young people who are at risk of receiving nothing, or very little, for Christmas. The project leader realised that if people could be in this situation at Christmas, they were likely to be in similar situations at other times of the year, and so it set up Vale Foodbank. The food bank is able to provide baby clothes, books and DVDs, in addition to the emergency food parcel. In autumn 2016, it launched a Baby Basics service to provide a Moses basket of clothes and other essential products to the large number of new mothers who it anticipates will be referred to it.

Since January 2016, the food bank, working in partnership with Gwalia (a not-for-profit housing care and support agency), has opened a furniture project (ReStore), which has a warehouse in the centre of town where people donate furniture to be distributed, free or at low cost, to local people who are referred. ReStore delivers items to people's homes and also sells items in its shop. Some of Gwalia's tenants have been trained to carry out portable appliance testing on the electrical goods that the project processes, and to volunteer as part of the team. ReStore has helped 200 households to access affordable furniture, and will be moving into upcycling furniture in the near future.

CO-LOCATION OF ADDITIONAL SERVICES

Food banks in the Trussell Trust network provide a range of additional services to address the underlying causes of poverty, hunger and food bank referrals. Where a local agency already provides the service, a food bank will not try to replicate this, but will partner with the specialist relevant agency, such as Christians Against Poverty, Magic Breakfast, Mind or Citizens Advice, to co-locate the service at the food bank.

This approach is supported nationally by the More Than Food projects, which work to provide solutions to problems that frequently lie behind a financial crisis, including action on food poverty, fuel poverty, benefit delivery issues and developing mental health and wellbeing projects. For example, Stoke-on-Trent Foodbank and Warwick and Leamington Foodbank run services that address food poverty, such as cookery courses, cookery demonstrations, hot meals, and breakfast and lunch clubs. One in 10 food banks in the Trussell Trust network are

helping to provide meals in the school holidays. Holiday hunger is an area that should be dealt with by the government through extended schools and holiday provision. The announcement in the 2016 Budget that funding for breakfast clubs would be extended was a welcome nod in the direction of government support for providing food in a school context.

Over a quarter of food banks in the Trussell Trust network are now running a fuel poverty project, such as top-up vouchers or helping with access to hardship grants.

Many food banks, including Warwick and Leamington, Blackburn, Hartlepool and Stoke-on-Trent, provide money advice services by co-locating projects such as Community Money Advice and Citizens Advice workers at the food bank venue. The Trussell Trust is also rolling out a national programme of financial triage and money advice support, funded by the founder of MoneySavingExpert.com, Martin Lewis. This particular project supports the food bank to use the Turn2Us benefit checker, which is already being used by some food banks, such as Cannock and District Foodbank.

Redcar Area Foodbank

Footprints in the Community, the umbrella charity which manages the Redcar Area Foodbank, aims to help relieve poverty in Redcar and surrounding areas. One of the ways it does this is through its food bank project. However, it became apparent that the food bank was not meeting all the clients' needs, and so the charity introduced several other projects.

First Steps provides baby clothes and equipment to families who are struggling to get baby essentials together. It has the added bonus of reducing landfill and ensuring recycling of almost new equipment and clothing. It also provides second-hand maternity clothing to expectant mums.

Its Next Step Shop is the next step for many food bank clients and others who are struggling to feed themselves and their families. It is a members' shop – members pay £2 each visit and are able to choose 10 items of food from the shelves. This helps build self-esteem, as members are no longer using the food bank and they have a choice of which foods they select.

The charity became aware of the lack of positive activities available for men during the day, so opened two Men's Sheds – one in Redcar and the other in Skelton. This provides a safe space for men to meet, to take part in hobbies or just to share a coffee.

Gateshead Foodbank and Billingham Foodbank work closely with Citizens Advice to provide benefits advice to people who are referred to the food bank. Billingham has an advice worker in every session. It also runs smaller projects, such as having someone who cuts hair on site free of charge once a week. Like Barrow Foodbank, Billingham Foodbank has won joint funding to support the collaborative service provision. In Billingham Foodbank's case, the Big Lottery is funding 'Help Through Crisis' in conjunction with Citizens Advice.

Alongside the interventions and support mentioned above, a number of food banks run social enterprises and social inclusion projects that help fund the food bank's work, and provide volunteering opportunities for local people.

CONCLUSION

Two years ago, *Emergency Use Only* helped shed light on the factors driving food bank use in the UK. Since then, further evidence has corroborated what we found: that some relatively simple changes – to the operation of the social security system in particular – could make a huge difference, and help to drive down food bank use.

Today, the numbers of people using food banks remain high, and large numbers of people are still facing unmanageable financial insecurity. Yet we see from local initiatives across the country – many of which are showcased in this report – that the challenges food bank users face can be overcome. Much of this good work could be scaled up nationally.

We are pleased to note in this report areas in which government has been receptive to making changes that can help. The report also highlights areas where there is more that can be done. Even in a highly effective and efficient system, when administering social security payments to millions of people, there are bound to be delays and errors. We urge the government, therefore, to ensure that there are robust systems in place – the safety net beneath the safety net – to protect vulnerable claimants when things do go wrong. This report highlights a number of actions that could help secure the change needed. In particular, we would like to see existing provisions – such as short-term benefit advances and hardship payments – better advertised, given ongoing evidence of low awareness among food bank users of their existence.

Overall, the message of the report is twofold. Food banks are doing a lot to understand and address hunger and poverty in the UK. However, it is heart-breaking that, in twenty-first century Britain, huge numbers of people need to be referred for emergency food provided by charities in order to feed themselves. The good news is that, as the examples throughout this report show, the income crises that drive people to food banks can be prevented – and change is possible.

APPENDIX FEATURED PROJECTS

