

Foodbanks, Job Centre Plus and the DWP

The Trussell Trust charity runs a network of community-led foodbanks across the UK that provide emergency food to people in crisis. Foodbanks work in partnership with frontline care professionals such as doctors and social workers who identify to the foodbank people who are going hungry. The care professionals issue a food voucher entitling people to a minimum of three days of emergency food and signposting to other organisations able to resolve the underlying cause of the crisis. Clients are referred to foodbanks for a variety of reasons including redundancy, benefit delay, ill health, low income, homelessness and debt. Food is donated by schools, churches, businesses and individuals in the local area and sorted by volunteers. Each foodbank is led by a local church and encourages help to the community by the community. Currently over 65 foodbanks have been launched nationwide and this number is growing rapidly. Our vision is that every town should have a foodbank.

In the last 12 months over 41,000 people across the UK received emergency food from Trussell Trust charity foodbanks, a 70 percent increase on the previous year. Of these, 35 percent (14,350 people) were referred to the foodbank due to benefit delay. Clients are referred to the foodbank by frontline care professionals who are in an informed position to assess whether a person is in real need. When the first foodbanks were set up employees of Job Centre+ were initially one of the main distributors of foodbank vouchers. However, despite this highly effective means of providing help to people struggling to feed their families as a result of benefit delay, the previous government issued a directive stopping Job Centre+ from referring clients in crisis to a foodbank.

In December 2008, just one week before Christmas and at the start of recession, a DWP directive was issued enforcing a policy that Job Centre+ could not refer direct to charities such as foodbanks. As a result, thousands of people entitled to and waiting for benefits across the UK have not been able to be referred direct to a foodbank by Job Centre+ staff, despite the fact that many clients were struggling to feed themselves and their families.

Many staff at Job Centre+ have expressed their desire to issue foodbank vouchers to clients facing crisis and some Job Centres have found informal, unofficial ways to circumvent the system and enable their clients to receive the emergency food that they need.

When challenged about its decision not to allow Job Centre+ to work with foodbanks, the Labour government initially responded that all those entitled to benefits received them on the day if they were in crisis and that delay was not an issue. A further reason cited was that not every UK town has a foodbank and thus it would be unfair for some people to receive emergency food from foodbanks and not others.

It is simply not true that all those entitled to benefits receive them on the day. On behalf of The Trussell Trust, MP Andrew Selous asked a series of Parliamentary Questions in 2009 and 2010 about benefit delay and elicited (after various attempts to avoid the question) the following response:

In January 2010 37,046 people waited 17 days or more for their Job Seeker's Allowance and 20,068 waited 22 days or more. *These figures are from DWP PQ 316962.*

These statistics do not include the vast number of people who experience benefit delay whilst their benefits are being re-assessed. Foodbanks across the UK have seen hundreds of clients not able to eat simply because they notified the benefits office of a change in their circumstances, such as getting married and changing their name, at which point all benefits are stopped whilst they are re-assessed. This process can take six or seven weeks or more leaving the client in a state of total crisis.

Gloucester foodbank recently reported the following case:

'A parental support worker from a local primary school agency recently collected a food parcel for a mother and two children. She went to their home because the son was not attending school. The mother was not expecting any visitors so we know that nothing was staged. The child was not attending school because she did not have enough money for school lunches and the boy was too embarrassed to go to school and say he did not have the money to pay for his lunch. The mother showed the support worker that her food cupboards, freezer and fridge had no food, apart from oats and a little milk, and her purse was empty.

The reason for the crisis is that the father had left and the benefits were in his name. He has not been contributing towards child care since leaving. The mother informed the Benefits Agency and due to her 'change in circumstances' all benefits have stopped including child benefit. As far as the support worker knew it would take 2-4 months before the benefits would be sorted. It seems there is a 14 week wait for child benefit to be re-instated and 12-14 weeks for child tax credits to re-start. Officially, other benefits like free school meals are not available to children unless the parents can prove they are in receipt of other benefits.'

Benefit delay is a problem that causes great distress to thousands of people across the UK and yet it is an issue that seems to be persistently swept under the carpet. The Trussell Trust believes that the following measures are necessary:

1. For the government to make an active effort to prioritise timely payment of benefits to which people are entitled.
2. To allow Job Centre+ to refer clients facing crisis to a foodbank for emergency food aid.
3. To consider active support of foodbanks to enable more foodbanks to open so that people facing crisis can receive help from their local community. Governments should also be aware that foodbanks are plugging the gap where government services are failing and consequently should prioritise funding relief to foodbanks that provide this service.

The Trussell Trust is hopeful that under the new government, the Department for Work and Pensions will work with foodbanks to alleviate suffering in the UK and recognise the valuable contribution made by foodbanks in providing relief to the UK's hidden hungry.