



# PRESS RELEASE

## Families go hungry as benefit delays increase

Families waiting up to two months for benefit payments are sending children to bed hungry because of failings in the benefits system. Thousands of people across the UK experience benefit delay every year, but in the last twelve months the time taken for benefit problems to be resolved has increased significantly forcing people into a crisis where they cannot afford basics such as food. Foodbanks run by UK charity The Trussell Trust have given emergency food to over 40,000 people nationwide in the last twelve months, 37% of whom were referred to foodbanks due to benefit delay.

A school's liaison officer in Gloucester recently took a foodbox to a pupil's home and discovered that there was no food in the house except oats and a little milk. The mother of two had no money left and her son had stopped attending school due to embarrassment at having no money for lunch. The mother explained that her husband had left her, was not contributing to child care and that all the benefits were in his name. When she informed the Benefits Agency all benefits were stopped because of her 'change in circumstances'. The support worker estimated that it would take two to four months for the benefits to be re-assessed: a 14 week wait for child benefit to be re-instated and 12-14 weeks for child tax credits to re-start. Furthermore, additional benefits like free school meals are only available to children if parents can prove that they are in receipt of benefits.

The new government has inherited a benefits delay headache which urgently needs to be resolved. The previous government refused to acknowledge that benefit delay was a serious problem, claiming that anyone in a crisis and entitled to benefits would receive money that day. Consequently, The Department of Work and Pensions banned Job Centre Plus staff from referring clients going without food to a foodbank due to the mistaken belief that delay was not an issue.

In 2009-10 MP Andrew Selous asked a series of parliamentary questions about numbers facing benefit delay which revealed that in January 2010 alone 37,046 people waited 17 days or more for their Job Seeker's Allowance and 20,068 waited 22 days or more. These figures do not include the huge numbers of people like the family above who experience weeks of delay whilst their benefits are re-assessed, sometimes for a reason as simple as a changed surname due to marriage.

"Through foodbanks, local communities across the UK are helping people thrown into crisis by benefit delay," says Chris Mould, Director at the Trussell Trust, "we hope the new government will give priority to reforming a system that is failing some of our most vulnerable neighbours". Ends.

## Notes to the editor:

- Trussell Trust Director Chris Mould writes: *'That people entitled to benefits can wait weeks to receive them is shocking, it can literally mean people have no food - something that should not happen to anyone in this country, and certainly not something that should happen as a result of our welfare system failing them. Most people would find it hard to cope if their pay cheque was delayed for weeks, yet it is seen as ok to let people at the bottom of the economic ladder go without their due payments for this long. It's high time someone blew the whistle on benefit delay.'*
- Figures quoted above on JSA benefit delay are from Parliamentary Question 316962 that was asked by MP Andrew Selous on behalf of The Trussell Trust.
- In 2008-09, 25% of foodbank clients received emergency food due to benefit delay, in 2009-10 this figure jumped to 37% of clients.
- 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.
- 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 previous 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
- 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 64 foodbanks have been launched nationwide and this number is growing rapidly. Our vision is that every town should have a foodbank.
- Foodboxes contain three days of non-perishable foods such as tinned fruit, vegetables, meat and fish as well as pasta, cereal, UHT milk, sauces, tea, long-life juice.
- The foodbank network run by The Trussell Trust helps churches to launch foodbanks in their local communities. Foodbanks are operating from Cornwall to Inverness. Recession saw a huge increase in the number of foodbanks opening nationally and in the number of people fed due to recession related problems. Despite the 'end' of recession, many people are still being affected by the economic downturn and are turning to foodbanks for help.
- In 2009-10 UK foodbanks fed 41,000 people in crisis compared to 26,000 people in 2008-09, a 70% increase.
- The Trussell Trust is a Christian charity working to bring hope and practical help to people in crisis in the UK and Bulgaria.

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