



Early Warnings

Universal Credit and Foodbanks

20 years supporting people in crisis

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About us:

The Trussell Trust is a national anti-poverty charity which runs a network of over 425 foodbanks, who provide three days' nutritionally balanced food and support to people in crisis in the UK. Foodbanks in our network provided 1,182,954 three day food supplies between 1st April 2016 and 31st March 2017, a 6% increase from the previous year, and issues with benefits continue to be the most common cause of referral to a Trussell Trust foodbank.

Over 90% of the food we give out is donated by generous members of the public. Everyone who comes to a Trussell Trust foodbank is referred by a professional such as a social worker, health visitor or schools liaison officer.

Over 30,000 frontline professionals refer people to Trussell Trust foodbanks. Trussell Trust foodbanks work hard to signpost people to other local agencies and services able to help resolve the underlying cause of the crisis. As part of the charity's More Than Food approach, many foodbanks also host free additional services like debt and money advice, cooking and budgeting courses, and holiday clubs, to further our aim of stopping UK hunger.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KEY FINDINGS:

1. Foodbanks in areas of full Universal Credit rollout to single people, couples and families, have seen a 16.85% average increase in referrals for emergency food, more than double the national average of 6.64%.
2. The effect of a six-plus week waiting period for a first Universal Credit payment can be serious, leading to foodbank referrals, debt, mental health issues, rent arrears and eviction. These effects can last even after people receive their Universal Credit payments, as bills and debts pile up.
3. People in insecure or seasonal work are particularly affected, suggesting the work incentives in Universal Credit are not yet helping everyone.
4. Navigating the online system can be difficult for people struggling with computers or unable to afford telephone helplines. In some cases, the system does not register people's claims correctly, invalidating it.
5. Foodbanks are working hard to stop people going hungry in areas of rollout, by providing food and support for more than two visits to the foodbank and working closely with other charities to provide holistic support. However, foodbanks have concerns about the extra pressure this puts on food donation stocks and volunteers' time and emotional welfare.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Recent positive engagement between The Department for Work and Pensions and The Trussell Trust at a national level is welcome. However, more information about the shape and form of Universal Support locally, particularly ahead of full UC rollout in an area, would bring clarity to foodbanks.
2. A reduction of the six week waiting period for Universal Credit would make a significant difference to people's ability to cope with no income. The 'waiting period', the time before the assessment period begins, could be reduced first.
3. More flexibility in the administration of Universal Credit is needed to support people moving onto the new system. For example, more support for people applying online who are unfamiliar with digital technology, and support to improve people's ability to move into work and stay in work.
4. Continued monitoring the impact of conditionality, in particular in-work conditionality, which has been linked to increased foodbank use.



FOREWORD



David McAuley
Chief Executive
The Trussell Trust

This year, The Trussell Trust turns 20. In our time as a charity there have been many high points. It has been an honour to work with passionate people in communities across the UK to develop practical solutions to poverty. Talking to a mum who now saves a third of her shopping bill after taking part in one of our free Eat Well Spend Less budget cookery courses is a real testament to the difference that we can make.

The 40,000 volunteers up and down the country who generously give their time at foodbanks make this possible. Volunteers come from all walks of life and some of the most inspiring stories I hear are when people previously helped by foodbanks decide they want to help others by volunteering themselves.

But nothing can mask the sad reality that we're only here because people are going hungry.

Ever since we began to partner with communities to tackle poverty and hunger from the frontline, the insights of our Foodbank Network have been seen by some as 'early warning signs' of the effects policy level changes can have on the ground.

Foodbanks in our network tell us that the majority of the people referred to them come because of issues to do with benefit payments. This could be anything from a missed payment for a mum whose heart condition means working would put her life in danger, or a builder who has been laid off and is waiting for his first benefit payment to come through as he looks for a new job.

Foodbank volunteers talk with people in similar situations every day. When people are referred to us for a food parcel, they've most likely tried everything they can to get back on their feet, but it just hasn't worked. That's why we're here to give them a cup of tea, a listening ear, and some food. We work hard to give people hope and extra support so that they recover from their crisis and will not need emergency food in the future.

But in this role we have consistently refused to be just an emergency response. We have been gathering data and undertaking research. Ever since we started noticing foodbank use was increasing, we've been vocal about what we have found and keen to work with politicians, businesses and other charities to tackle hunger in communities up and down the country.

As Universal Credit, the new system of administering benefits, rolls out to more areas across the UK, foodbanks in our network are seeing first-hand the impact it is having in their communities.

We know the system of benefits right now is too complicated – foodbanks often speak to people that are experiencing the system for the first time and are struggling to understand how it works and what they need to do. The move to simplify it is a welcome one. However, we also understand that any large reform can have unforeseen consequences. We are sharing the frontline insights of our foodbank network with the Department for Work and Pensions, and the wider public, to ensure any adverse side effects are addressed in policy and practice.

We have been heartened by Secretary of State Damian Green's willingness to engage, his department's work to pilot improvements, and the recent changes to the Universal Credit taper rate which mean people moving into work will keep more of their earnings. We hope our insights can inform efforts to make sure the values on which Universal Credit is built are delivered in practice.

We cannot stop UK hunger alone. We need a welfare system that really does work for everyone.



INTRODUCTION

Universal Credit was introduced in the Welfare Reform Act (2012), with the aim of:

1. Encouraging people on benefits to start paid work or increase their hours by making sure work pays.
2. Making it easier for people to manage the move into work.
3. Simplifying the system, making it easier for people to understand, and easier and cheaper for the government to administer.
4. Reducing the number of people who are in work but still living in poverty.
5. Reducing fraud and error.

The system will eventually replace 'legacy' benefits, such as income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Child Tax Credits, Working Tax Credits, and Housing Benefit.

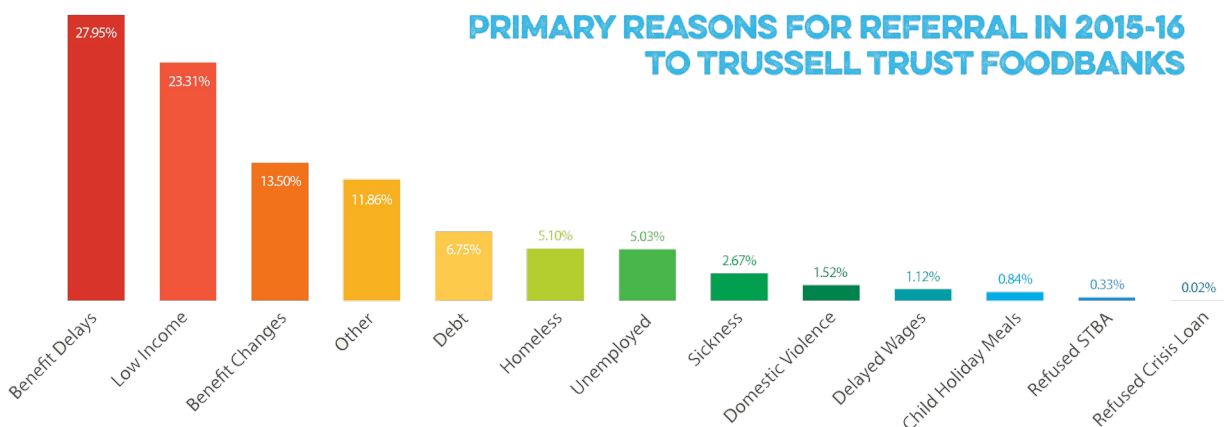
The timetable for the rollout of the scheme has been delayed. At the time of writing, Universal Credit for single jobseekers is live in England, Scotland and Wales. 47 Jobcentre Plus areas are now live with the full Universal Credit system for all new claimants, while 133 Jobcentre Plus areas are now live for couples and families. One million claims have already been made through the new system.

Currently the phase-in of Universal Credit is a 'natural' migration, where claimants move on to Universal Credit when a claimant experiences a change in circumstances and is no longer able to re-apply to their 'legacy' benefit. In 2019 claimants will be subject to a 'managed' migration, where they will be moved onto Universal Credit from their 'legacy' benefits.

FOODBANKS AND UNIVERSAL CREDIT

Recent research on foodbank use has repeatedly found that issues with a benefit payment are the main reason for referral to a Trussell Trust foodbank. Emergency Use Only (2014), a report on foodbank use jointly undertaken by The Trussell Trust, Oxfam, Child Poverty Action Group, and the Church of England, found that foodbank use was generally due to an 'immediate, acute financial crisis – either a complete loss of income or a very significant reduction in their income'. The report found that a majority of the people spoken to were in crisis due to an issue with the benefits system, such as a delay in the receipt of a payment.

This is mirrored in the statistics from our own network, which we release at the same time every financial year. 42% of foodbank referrals for the financial year 2015/16 needed a foodbank due to an issue with their benefits.



INTRODUCTION

Adverse side effects of changes to the welfare system have also been linked to increased foodbank referrals. Research from the University of Oxford looking at five years of foodbank data and comparing it to sanctioning rates locally found a strong correlation between increased sanctioning and increased foodbank use, with 10 more instances of sanctioning correlating to around 5 more foodbank referrals.

Since 2013, foodbanks in our network have been seeing the side-effects of Universal Credit rollout in their areas. All Trussell Trust foodbanks in England, Scotland and Wales operate in areas where a partial rollout has occurred, and at time of writing, 71 foodbanks operate in areas where Universal Credit is live for couples and families, while 28 foodbanks in our network operate in areas where Universal Credit has experienced a full rollout.

Universal Credit marks a departure from previous forms of benefit payments by including:

1. A six-week delay before people receive first payment.
2. Payments in arrears, with housing benefits paid directly to claimants.
3. New forms of conditionality for claimants, both in and out of work.
4. A work allowance which determines the point at which the Universal Credit award starts to taper off.
5. Digitising how payments are managed by claimants and the DWP.
6. Some reductions in the amount of payments claimants receive.
7. Universal Support, a new system of support to help claimants transition to Universal Credit.

Findings from our survey of foodbanks for the year 2015/16 found that Universal Credit was already affecting the circumstances of the people they serve, as well as the operation of the foodbank. Over a quarter of the respondents to our survey told us that they were seeing an increase in referrals due to Universal Credit being rolled out in their area. Foodbanks noted in particular that the six-week delay was leaving people without money.

However, other foodbanks told us they 'didn't know', or that it was too early to tell. The staggered rollout of Universal Credit, with full rollout expected in 2022, means data on its impact on people and local support services is piecemeal, though much-needed, in this crucial development phase of the program.

As the full Universal Credit system goes live in more areas it is important that the third sector works with decision makers to continue to examine the impact to make sure the service is working to fulfil its aims, whilst still protecting the most vulnerable. Our study hopes to shed light on some of the impacts of the transition to Universal Credit, and suggests practical ways in which adverse side effects can be mitigated.

METHODOLOGY

Our study comprised of three levels of enquiry: first, a quantitative comparison of foodbank use in areas of the Universal Credit rollout; second, a survey of our network which received 74 responses; and third, in-depth interviews with foodbank managers in our network. We have first scoped areas which have experienced a Universal Credit rollout and identified foodbanks which correspond to those areas, building a database. Foodbank figures were compared between the 2016/17 financial year and the 2015/16 financial year to see if any observable changes had occurred in numbers fed. Our Foodbank Network was also asked to complete a survey about a range of topics, one of which was the impact of Universal Credit, the initial findings (50 responses) of which were sent as a submission to the Work and Pensions Committee's enquiry into Universal Credit. An additional 24 foodbanks responded to the survey, and the aggregated data was analysed and forms the basis of this report. Additional to this, we conducted semi-structured interviews with foodbank managers in key areas of Universal Credit rollout. These comprise deep-dive case-study profiles of foodbanks to examine in more detail the effect of the changes.



ISSUES WITH UNIVERSAL CREDIT

Foodbanks mentioned a number of administrative issues with Universal Credit in their area, highlighting areas where administration could be improved or more support offered.

1

SIX WEEK DELAY OR MORE FOR THE FIRST PAYMENT

Trussell Trust foodbanks reported most commonly that people were referred to their foodbank during the wait for a Universal Credit claim to be processed, and that people were typically waiting 6 weeks for a claim to be processed. This included a seven-day 'waiting period', as well as an assessment period, after which awards were paid in arrears.

65%

of foodbanks said the 6-week+ wait for the first universal Credit payment has led to more people needing help from the foodbank, with 27% of foodbanks saying this increase was significant.

1/4

of foodbanks reported instances of waiting more than six weeks for the initial payment. There are instances of people referred to foodbanks having to wait for longer periods, including up to thirteen weeks.

DIGITISATION OF INTERFACE

2

A cornerstone of the new Universal Credit system is the creation of a new Digital Service through which the Department for Work and Pensions and claimants manage payments.

Foodbanks identified several issues with digitisation, particularly with administrative issues processing claims. New claims were lost and not registered on the system, whilst another found that documents scanned in and sent from the Job Centre to the Universal Credit centre were regularly misplaced. Furthermore, one foodbank highlighted that the online sign-up system for Universal Credit would often not register claims and instead directed people to sign up for Jobseekers Allowance at their Jobcentre Plus, despite the Jobcentre Plus directing people to apply for Universal Credit.

The practical difficulties encountered by some claimants in addressing problems with their claim were also a barrier. People on 'pay as you go' phones could not afford to hold for an average of forty minutes to speak to someone at the Universal Credit centre, and there were times when people did finally get through and then were told the Universal Credit system was down.

3

PAYMENT IN ARREARS

At the time of writing Universal Credit is administered in arrears in England, Scotland and Wales, with housing benefit paid directly to the claimant rather to the housing provider. Foodbanks reported that payments in arrears were seen to be contributing to delays, debt, and problems budgeting.

ISSUES WITH UNIVERSAL CREDIT

4

POOR ADMINISTRATION

Foodbanks noted that in areas of rollout that not only were initial payments delayed, but further payments could also be delayed, or may not be made until the claimant called the Universal Credit centre. Furthermore, foodbank managers reported that local agencies did not always have the correct information about the rollout and paperwork for claims could be lost, sometimes between the Job Centre and Universal Credit centre. Foodbanks told us:



Statutory agencies locally were misinformed about the rollout and who it would impact.

Claims [have] been lost and forms filled in wrong causing delays.



SANCTIONING

5

10%

of foodbanks told us that sanctioning on Universal Credit was an issue. Universal Credit is notable in that claimants can be sanctioned whilst in work, whereas previously conditionality applied only to people not in work, who were able to work.

In-work conditionality in the Universal Credit system aims to incentivise working full-time by placing conditions on those who do not work full-time but are able to. One foodbank noted that mental health issues were exacerbated by the stringent conditions placed upon claimants by Universal Credit, and were causing unnecessary sanctions:



We have had issues with people referred to the foodbank who are struggling to cope with the job search requirements of Universal Credit, which seem in some cases to be even more stringent than under Jobseekers Allowance. This is particularly challenging for people with mental health conditions, who are struggling to navigate the system and receiving sanctions.

ADVERSE SIDE-EFFECTS

The insights of our foodbank network have been seen as early warning signs of the effects policy level changes can have on the ground. Foodbanks work on the frontline of poverty, meeting people every day who are struggling to afford basic necessities, making them uniquely placed to offer comment on adverse side-effects policy change can have on the most vulnerable. Foodbanks told us the most common side-effects they were seeing amongst people on Universal Credit.

“ I lost my job in October and have been relying on money from friends and family to survive, but that is no longer possible. I haven't eaten for five days and will not get Universal Credit for six weeks, so went to the council in desperation – they gave me a foodbank voucher. Thank you to the foodbank.

MENTAL HEALTH

OVER 1 IN 4 **FOODBANKS**
SAY **UNIVERSAL CREDIT**
AFFECTS **MENTAL HEALTH**

The most common adverse side effect of the new system mentioned by foodbanks was the impact on the mental health of people needing help. People felt anxiety about falling short on paying bills, and then anxiety about falling into debt, or solving the debt they were already in. One foodbank noted:

“ Universal Credit delays are contributing to the exacerbation of mental health issues due to anxiety about how to cover basic living costs and uncertainties about the future.”

The widespread mentions of the stress and anxiety of delays in payment are worrying. Threats of eviction or legal action for failing to pay bills were noted by a number of foodbanks as a worry for people, with many actually being evicted or convicted for not being able to keep up with bill payments.

Foodbanks noted the way underlying mental health conditions created a negative cycle as people struggled to navigate the system, fulfil the conditions of their payments, or were unaware of how to access support. One foodbank noted that people with mental health issues would not seek help as it was too overwhelming and so withdrew and became more socially isolated, further worsening their mental health.

“ People are lost. They have no support at the Jobcentre Plus, and don't know where to turn for help. Particularly worrying is the number of larger families, with young children, who are also struggling with low income and mental ill-health.

DEBT

Issues with debt were another common adverse side-effect mentioned by foodbanks. Delays in payments and inconsistent monthly payments meant that debts could often pile up. Foodbanks noted that people were borrowing money, from friends, family, or possibly door-step or payday lenders, until their claim was granted. Foodbanks also highlighted that the initial waiting period did not only affect people during that period, but had an ongoing impact as people struggled to deal with the lasting effects of no income for a number of weeks.

2 IN 5 **FOODBANKS** SAY
UNIVERSAL CREDIT LINKED TO
INCREASING **DEBTS**

“ The lack of income during the initial six week waiting period is having a significant ongoing impact on some clients, particularly those with no savings and no family or friends to fall back on. We've seen clients who have fallen into significant rent arrears during the initial period, and been reliant on the foodbank to help for some time afterwards while paying this off to prevent eviction.



ADVERSE SIDE-EFFECTS

DIFFICULTIES WITH WORK

“ Before Christmas I was on Jobseekers Allowance. I then took a small job at Christmas and after that contract ended I was switched to Universal Credit without warning. I had to wait six weeks, which led to rent arrears. It was not backdated. I wish I never took the job at Christmas. I now get paid every four weeks. In that first 10 weeks I had £200 for rent, so of course I was behind with my rent.

1 IN 5 **FOODBANKS**
SAY UNIVERSAL CREDIT
CAUSES ISSUES WITH WORK

A key aim of the Universal Credit system is that benefits taper off slowly when individuals go back into work, and that the amount a claimant works before payments are reduced is generous enough to incentivise even part-time or low-paid work. However our findings suggest that poor administration and a long wait for payment meant that people who were currently in work, or recently in work, were still left with little or no money. This was a particular problem in insecure or short-term work, where the system could not accommodate unsteady incomes. One foodbank manager told us:

“ Some people experience difficulty going back onto Universal Credit after a short period of work and people working zero hour contracts, but have not had any work for a week or two.

One foodbank mentioned that this could be due to the inaction of employers as well as poor administration of Universal Credit.

“ People who take on short term work contracts can find it difficult to ease back onto Universal Credit if companies do not issue a P45 quickly, therefore as far as the DWP are concerned they are still in paid employment.

HOUSING

Foodbanks consistently noted that people feared eviction or were in rent arrears due to the new Universal Credit method of payment. One foodbank reported to us that people were:

1 IN 5 **FOODBANKS** SAY
UNIVERSAL CREDIT CAUSES
ISSUES WITH HOUSING

“ Unable to pay rent resulting in potential eviction by private landlords, debt and use of loan sharks, having to self-disconnect gas and or electricity.

Universal credit pays housing benefit payments in arrears directly to tenants, which has also caused problems as these changes were poorly communicated in some areas. One foodbank told us that private tenants were not given this information and so found themselves in rent arrears. Another foodbank told us:

“ People do not realise that rent needs to be paid, and are increasingly struggling with debt.

ADVERSE SIDE-EFFECTS

DIFFICULTIES MANAGING BUDGETS

Foodbanks reported that people referred to them for emergency food often found budgeting during the move to a monthly payment difficult. There was often little support available with budgeting and as payments were calculated according to the previous month's income, monthly payments were unsteady, and people were finding it hard to know how much money they would have.



People are having problems budgeting until the next payment, and there is a lack of support with problems relating to Universal Credit. Money management is a big problem, a month's money in one go and it gets spent, without allowing for the rest of the month.

MARRIAGE BREAKDOWN

Foodbanks reported four recent instances of people dealing with the breakdown of marriages due to the extra financial pressure put on the relationship whilst struggling with the wait for Universal Credit payments.



THE IMPACT ON FOODBANKS

HIGHER DEMAND AND REPEAT VISITS

Problems with Universal Credit claims and payments have had a variety of effects on foodbanks' services. The most common was providing food and support for longer than two visits to the foodbank (currently the average times a person would be referred to one of our foodbanks over a 12-month period).

Our research shows that nationally, foodbanks in areas of full Universal Credit rollout to single people, couples and families, have seen a 16.85% average increase in referrals for emergency food, more than double the national average of 6.64%. One foodbank told us:

“ We give food for the duration of Universal Credit wait, and possible a few more parcels if they've developed debt whilst waiting for Universal Credit.

Foodbanks in areas of full Universal Credit rollout have seen a **16.85%** average increase in demand, more than double the national average of **6.64%**.

STRETCH ON RESOURCES

Foodbanks reported seeing their resources stretched, particularly in areas of full Universal Credit service rollout. Food stock donations have been put under pressure and at least one foodbank in the network has recently needed to request donations from other foodbanks to respond to the increased need in their area.

Foodbank managers also raised concerns that the influx of referrals can also put extra time and emotional pressure on volunteers, who have volunteered more hours to help with increasingly busy sessions and yet may not be able to offer the full signposting service they would like:

“ At the foodbank we have seen a 67% increase in clients since Universal Credit started here in October 2016. The volume of work, hours in time volunteers are having to commit, and the emotional toll of seeing and listening to clients in real distress is hard to express. For foodbanks who struggle to find volunteers, have little warehouse space or unreliable donations of food – we do not know how they are going to cope.

Submissions to the Work and Pensions Committee Inquiry on Universal Credit from other agencies mentioned that they had needed to refer people who used their services to foodbanks due to the impact of Universal Credit. The London Borough of Sutton mentioned in their submission that Sutton Foodbank had seen an increase of 13% in referrals, primarily due to issues with Universal Credit delays. The borough was relying on the foodbank to provide temporary relief and so had begun to fund the work of the foodbank:

“ Due to the demand since the austerity measures came in and more recently with Universal Credit, our local foodbank has had to take on more storage units to support our residents, which the London Borough of Sutton are funding as the council cannot afford this voluntary provision to end, as this would have a severe effect on our local welfare provision.

This is deeply concerning for The Trussell Trust and raises important questions for both politicians and the charity sector about the extent to which frontline volunteer-run groups should have to step in to help in the absence of other practical help.



THE FOODBANK RESPONSE

Foodbanks are working hard locally to offer as much support as they can to local people affected by issues with Universal Credit.

1

SIGNPOSTING

Many foodbanks are working closely with other charities in their community to provide cross-community support, by either referring to local welfare advice organisations, or hosting advisors in their foodbank sessions to help at the immediate point of crisis.

64%

of foodbanks signpost to local support services which can offer additional support.

Foodbanks highlighted Citizens Advice workers as particularly supportive in this respect. Local housing associations and debt advice services were also mentioned as key to supporting people affected. However, concerns were raised about the waiting times people faced to meet with some of these advice charities:



We work closely with a local welfare advice charity, but they often have a waiting list of several weeks for full assessment.

Local services were stretched and in one instance, a foodbank in a very rural area could do little other than signpost people to a Citizens Advice five miles away. The Citizens Advice carried out some outreach services but these were limited. Most concerning, 15% of foodbanks told us they either had no suitable local help they could signpost people to, or were not aware of such help available locally. In some areas, as more local support services face closure, the options for foodbanks helping people affected by Universal Credit issues are increasingly limited.

OFFERING SUPPORT ONSITE

2

A number of foodbanks were taking their support one step further and were advocating on behalf of people, either directly contacting the Jobcentre on behalf of someone referred to them, or by facilitating people to contact the Universal Credit call centre. Foodbanks were also helping people in the foodbank centre to fill in forms and assisted with telephone calls.



Our area has been a "Pathfinder" for Universal Credit... [we have found] claimants can only use the phone lines to speak with the Universal Credit call centre. It often takes about 30-45 minutes to get through to a person and if the query is anything out of the ordinary a further long hold often occurs. We have installed a VOIP phone line as foodbank clients can't afford the calls from mobiles and using our landline phone was blocking the line for calls."

Over

1/4

foodbanks provide advice or advocacy on-site

However, advocating for people has become more difficult due to the lack of knowledge in the local Jobcentre Plus about the details of Universal Credit claims. One foodbank mentioned that their local Jobcentre doesn't contain detailed information about the cause of a sanction, or how long the sanction will last. Foodbank managers, who in the past could build positive working relationships with their local Jobcentre Plus to flag issues, are unable to replicate this for Universal Credit. Furthermore, local sources of help are limited and being reduced. Short term benefit advances, or crisis loans, vary according to location, and are often not well-publicised to people needing help.

THE FOODBANK RESPONSE

3

MORE THAN FOOD

Increasingly, The Trussell Trust is working with its foodbank network to help foodbanks run free additional projects that help tackle the underlying cause of crisis. These programmes help build resilience to help prevent people needing referral to a foodbank in the future.

1. EAT WELL SPEND LESS

The Trussell Trust has developed a budgeting and cookery course called Eat Well Spend Less, a free six week course where people learn basic household budgeting, make nutritionally balanced food and meet new people. Currently, over 116 courses have been run by foodbank across the UK, helping hundreds of people learn new skills and build social networks in their community.

2. HOLIDAY CLUBS

Hunger in the holidays, when the costs of childcare, entertainment, and food for children rise, has been identified by our foodbanks as an important issue. Holiday Clubs have been developed by The Trussell Trust to offer activities and a meal to children and their families for an afternoon during the holidays. Over 1,200 people have participated in a Trussell Trust holiday club and a recent survey of parents involved found that 85% of participants said that coming to the Holiday Club has made a difference to what they and their children do during the school holidays.

3. MONEY LIFE

Problems with debt and money management are key adverse side-effects of the delays in Universal Credit payments. With the help of substantial funding from Money Saving Expert Martin Lewis, we have been able to develop a service offering targeted help and signposting to high-quality local debt advice.

CASE STUDY: OLDHAM

Oldham was one of the 'pathfinder' areas for the rollout of Universal Credit, and Oldham Foodbank's experience of the rollout reflects the national network. The foodbank has seen:

1. Problems with delays
2. Problems with digitisation
3. A lack of flexibility and support
4. Problems with people moving in and out of work

The foodbank is offering whatever support it is able to give, including signposting the local Citizens Advice, working with the local welfare advice charity to host advice sessions within the foodbank itself, and signposting to their local Jobcentre Plus, who have been helpful during the rollout. However, the foodbank has had to limit how much food is given out as the demand is so high, and issues with administration mean that the foodbank can't give people the advice they need to move out of crisis. The foodbank manager told us:

“ A volunteer's son had been on Universal Credit but had come off when he got a job. He came out of work and tried to sign back on but they said they had lost all record of him so he had to start his claim again. When he was re-registered they then said they couldn't give him any payments because he had been sanctioned three times. No one could tell him why he had been sanctioned, when, or for how long.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings suggest that there are clear issues with the rollout of Universal Credit which need to be addressed before full rollout is completed across the UK. Many of the unintended outcomes of the change have been difficult for both claimants and foodbanks, many of whom are struggling to meet the local need. Neither claimants nor foodbanks have been given clarity to deal with the adverse side-effects of Universal Credit rollout and give proper support and advice to the people to they serve.

Third sector, volunteer-led organisations stand alongside, not instead of, the welfare system. Foodbanks play an important role in offering local support and informing policy but local and national Government must do more to make sure people are not thrown into crisis by these changes.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. More information about the shape and form of Universal Support locally, particularly ahead of full Universal Credit rollout in an area, would bring clarity to foodbanks.

We welcome the recent positive engagement from Secretary of State Damian Green, and his interest in hearing and learning from the concerns of our network. These new findings suggest changes and the availability of Universal Support have not been communicated clearly enough to prepare local statutory or charitable organisations for the impact of rollout. A targeted approach for local charities like foodbanks would bring clarity to frontline organisations.

2. Reducing six-week waiting period.

A reduction of the six week waiting period, would make a significant difference to people's ability to cope with no income and would mitigate some of the more serious effects of this, such as debt, mental health issues, and homelessness. The 'waiting period', the time before the assessment period begins, could be reduced first.

3. Offer flexibility and support to mitigate adverse side effects on claimants.

More flexibility in the administration of Universal Credit is needed to support people moving onto the new system. Additional support for people struggling with the online system could make a difference for less IT-literate claimants. Additional support with money management could benefit some people referred to foodbanks with aiding the transition to monthly payments. Finally, support to improve people's ability to move into work and stay in work would benefit people in insecure or seasonal work. Recent suggestions from the Scottish Government and the Northern Irish Assembly to administer payments fortnightly are a good example of a practical way more flexibility could be offered to claimants.

4. Monitor the impact of in-work conditionality.

Given the evidence that sanctions have been linked to foodbank use, we would be keen for the Government to monitor the effectiveness and impact of in-work conditionality as an incentive to work.





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