

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Across the UK, more and more people have resorted to using emergency food provision to make ends meet. A well-documented growth in food poverty has occurred within a context of economic austerity. Severe reductions in social security entitlement and levels, a rise in insecure and self-employment, and stagnant wages have combined with marked increases in essential costs of living to leave more and more people struggling to sustain access to enough good food.

People have adopted a wide range of strategies to try and manage shortfalls in household income, and **seeking food aid is usually a strategy of last resort** (Lambie-Mumford, Crossley, Jensen, Verbeke, & Dowler, 2014; Perry, Williams, Sefton, & Haddad, 2014) but, nonetheless, **increasing numbers of people in West Cheshire, as in the UK, have required charitable emergency food provision.** There is no evidence that increased provision of food aid is causing more to want it (Cooper, Purcell, & Jackson, 2014); **all available evidence in the UK shows that the growing need is driving provision.** Neither is there any evidence that all people who go to foodbanks do so because they cannot budget or cook. Indeed, many on long-term low incomes are very skilled at both; **many want to buy and eat healthy food but simply have insufficient money to do so.**

In West Cheshire, demand for charitable emergency food provision has grown rapidly over the last two years. Of those receiving emergency food, approximately two thirds were adults and one third were children. People who were single, two parent families, single parent families and households with multiple adults all accessed emergency food provision. There was a strong positive correlation between the deprivation of a ward and the number of foodbank referrals. Typically, people accessing emergency food provision on behalf of their household were white (98%) and of working age (98% were aged between 16 and 64).

Problems with social security benefits directly accounted for almost half (47%) of the referrals to West Cheshire Foodbank. Administrative delays, punitive sanctions, benefit changes and ESA stoppages accounted for the majority of these delays.

- **Administrative and other delays (23%):** Administrative delays in paying social security benefits were considerable and grew as a proportion of referrals over the research period¹. Crises catalysed by administrative delays typically lasted between 1 and 4 weeks.
- **Sanctions (11%):** The main reasons given for sanctioning were missed appointments (5%), insufficient search activity (3%), non-attendance at a medical assessment (2%) and non-compliance with work-related activity (1%). Sanctions usually placed households in a crisis situation for between 1 and 13 weeks.

¹ This research collected information about the people using West Cheshire Foodbank between the 1st May and the 30th of November 2014.

- **Benefit Changes (9%):** Difficulties most frequently occurred where participants changed from claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) to employment and support allowance (ESA). Crises catalysed by benefit changes typically lasted between 1 and 4 weeks.
- **ESA stoppages (4%):** In the majority of cases where a member of the household had their payment of Employment and Support Allowance stopped, the participant was awaiting the outcome of a Mandatory Reconsideration or appeal. The immediate crisis resulting from ESA stoppages typically lasted between 2 and 13 weeks.

Issues relating to low, insecure income and debt were also hugely significant reasons why people accessed emergency food provision (31%).

- **Low, insecure incomes (20%):** People were referred for a variety of reasons. For some participants, income was insufficient to meet household expenses. Some participants suffered from a reduction in income because of factors such as the spare-room subsidy (also called the bedroom tax). Other participants had no or low income because they had recently been released from prison or had started work but were awaiting their first pay packet. The immediate crisis resulting from low income typically lasted between 1 and 4 weeks. A significant number (12%) of crises endured for considerable periods of time however, with low income households left without sufficient food for 13 to 26 weeks.
- **Debt (11%):** The most common reasons presented related to housing costs, utilities and/or loans. The immediate crisis was estimated to last for between 1 and 4 weeks although our experience of working in this area suggests resolving the issues related to debt is considerably more protracted.

People were also referred where the primary reasons given were **homelessness (6%), domestic violence (2%), sickness (2%) or delayed wages (1%)**.

The following recommendations suggest key ways in which the need for a foodbank in West Cheshire can be reduced, by mitigating some of the primary causes of acute income loss for local people and ensuring adequate and appropriate support is available where this is not achieved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

How can we reduce the numbers of people needing to access emergency food?

1. IMPROVE JOBCENTRE PLUS ADMINISTRATION AND SERVICE
2. REFORM SANCTIONS POLICY AND PRACTICE
3. REFORM THE MANDATORY RECONSIDERATION PROCESS
4. ENSURE SOCIAL SECURITY PAYMENT LEVELS ARE ADEQUATE
5. ENSURE WAGES ARE SUFFICIENT AND WORK IS SECURE
6. SUSTAIN AND IMPROVE ACCESS TO THE HELP SCHEME (CWAC LOCAL WELFARE ASSISTANCE)
7. ENSURE ADEQUATE SUPPORT AND ACCOMMODATION IS AVAILABLE FOR PEOPLE AFFECTED BY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND/OR HOMELESSNESS

See page 32 of the full report for the details of these recommendations.