

## STUDY DEEPENS INSIGHT INTO WHY PEOPLE TURN TO FOODBANKS



A group of frontline charities<sup>1</sup> and the University of Chester have published pioneering new research that reveals in greater detail than ever before the reasons why people are referred to West Cheshire Foodbank. Based on these findings, the report calls on policy makers to tackle the rise in local emergency food provision and recommends key ways in which foodbank use can be reduced.

The study collected information across the 1711 referrals for emergency food provision that were made between May and November 2014<sup>2</sup>.

The researchers worked collaboratively with local advice services to put together a detailed coding system, drilling into the reasons for crisis used on Trussell Trust's foodbank vouchers. The system was utilised by West Cheshire Foodbank's referral agencies during the research period. The findings mirrored Trussell Trust's statistics at a headline level<sup>3</sup> but were able to provide much more information about why people required food. In particular the report demonstrates significant numbers of foodbank visitors faced problems with social security payments (including protracted administrative delays, sanctions and ESA stoppages); and lengthy crises due to low income and debt, usually as a result of prohibitive housing costs and utility bills.

The Reverend Christine Jones, Chair of Trustees at West Cheshire Foodbank said:

*"Behind these statistics are real people who are struggling – people such as Scott<sup>4</sup>, who was unable to work due to a knee operation but didn't score enough points to receive Employment and Support Allowance. Whatever the reason for emergency food use, any hunger is unacceptable and we are concerned that there is a level of need which is being systematically ignored. We are calling on the government to publicly accept that food poverty is a growing problem and to take responsibility for protecting the poorest people in society."*

The research pioneered a new data collection method for Trussell Trust foodbanks which combined detailed statistical analysis with personal narrative. The study strengthened and upheld previous research, providing an enhanced level of scrutiny. West Cheshire Foodbank developed a format for studying food poverty which could be replicated by other foodbanks around the country, to provide more robust information on the need experienced by those in food poverty.

Alec Spencer, who co-authored the report commented: *"We felt it was important to gain more insight into why people require emergency food provision. The findings have contributed to the wider discourse of food poverty but we recognise that it is important, both locally and nationally, to examine the drivers of emergency food provision. This will ensure that interventions can be shaped intelligently and responsibly by governments, local authorities and the third sector in order to reduce hunger in the future."*

## KEY FINDINGS

- Demand for charitable emergency food provision in West Cheshire has grown rapidly over the last two years. Of those receiving emergency food, approximately two thirds were adults and one third were children.
- All household types access emergency food provision. There was a strong positive correlation between the deprivation of a ward and the number of foodbank referrals.
- Problems with benefits directly accounted for almost half (47%) of the referrals to West Cheshire Foodbank.
  - **Administrative and other delays** accounted for 23% of referrals and typically lasted between 1 and 4 weeks.
  - **Sanctions** accounted for 11% of referrals and usually placed households in a crisis situation for between 1 and 13 weeks.
  - **Benefit Changes** accounted for 9% of referrals and typically lasted between 1 and 4 weeks.
  - **ESA stoppages** accounted for 4% of referrals and 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** accounted for 20% of referrals and typically lasted between 1 and 4 weeks. A significant number (12%) of crises endured for considerable periods of time however, with low income households unable to afford sufficient food for 13 to 26 weeks.
  - **Debt** accounted for 11% of referrals and the immediate crisis was estimated to last for between 1 and 4 weeks.

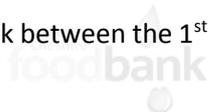
## RECOMMENDATIONS

The report recommends the following actions to reduce the need for emergency food provision. Full recommendations can be found on page 32 of the report.

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 that work is secure***
6. *Sustain and **improve access to the HELP Scheme (CWAC local welfare assistance)***
7. *Ensure adequate support is available for people affected by **domestic violence and homelessness***

## NOTES TO THE EDITOR

- <sup>1</sup>The charities include West Cheshire Foodbank, The Trussell Trust, Cheshire West Citizens Advice Bureau, DIAL West Cheshire (DIAL House), Chester Aid to the Homeless, the Debt Advice Network and the Salvation Army.
- <sup>2</sup>This research collected information about the people using the West Cheshire Foodbank between the 1<sup>st</sup> May and the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 2014.



- <sup>3</sup> Please see <http://www.trusselltrust.org/stats>.
- <sup>4</sup> Scott shared his story when he visited the Foodbank during the research period. See Narrative 5 on page 25 of the Cheshire Hunger Report. Since he shared his story with us, Scott<sup>4</sup> went through the mandatory reconsideration and appeals process and had the original decision overturned in court. Scott was awarded 17 points and has had his social security payments reinstated. He said:

***“They stopped my benefits and the way they treated me made me feel so small. I was suicidal. If it wasn’t for my missus I wouldn’t be here. We all are humans. We’re not just a number. I’ve got my money now but I would like an apology from the Department for Work and Pensions for all the heartache and stress their decision caused me.”***

- Seeking food aid is usually a strategy of last resort.
- UK evidence shows that growing need is driving provision.
- There is no evidence that all people who go to food banks do so because they cannot budget or cook.
- Severe reductions in UK public expenditure, particularly in social security entitlement and levels, as well as a rise in insecure and self-employment, and stagnant wages have combined with significant loss of local authority networks of support, and marked increases in essential costs of living including food prices to leave more and more people struggling to sustain access to enough good food for a healthy life.

## **FURTHER COMMENTARY**

**Richard Atkinson, Director at DIAL West Cheshire said:**

*“At DIAL West Cheshire we see many hundreds of people who have been subject to unfair and unreasonable medical assessments by ATOS and other government contractors. In almost every case these assessments trigger an immediate financial crisis and the threat of food poverty. It is simply wrong that people who are ill or disabled are placed at risk of hunger in this way.”*

**Major Gill Stacey at The Salvation Army said:**

*“The stories I hear from people who have lost their job – especially those in their 50s - remind me of how easy it can be to lose everything you have. In these difficult circumstances, benefit sanctions are the last thing people need: the fear that these create can be all consuming, damaging people’s mental health and driving people further from employment. The jobcentre treats people looking for work as third rate citizens. Current policies are dehumanising and strip people of their self-belief, worth and esteem. We need to rethink the way that we treat people in crisis, and strive for a social security system that emphasises compassion and dignity.”*

**Meriel D’Artrey, Head of Social and Political Science at the University of Chester said:**

*“As a Social Science Department which puts a strong emphasis on social change and social justice, we have been delighted to collaborate in the production of this report. Led on our part by Dr Cassie Ogden, it evidences the relevance of our knowledge transfer activities to the community and of the University’s impact on policy initiatives.”*

**Robert Bissett, Chief Executive at Chester Aid to the Homeless said:**

*“Chester Aid to The Homeless has worked with the West Cheshire Foodbank to help alleviate the issue of food poverty in our local community. Our hope is that this report will provide a focus to reduce the need for charitable and faith based organisations to provide emergency food provision.”*

