

#stillhungry

Who is hungry, for how long, and why?



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Research Report by West Cheshire Foodbank, The University of Oxford,
The University of Chester, The Trussell Trust, Cheshire West Citizens Advice Bureau,
DIAL West Cheshire (DIAL House), Chester Aid to The Homeless and The Debt Advice Network

‘Charity is no substitute for justice withheld.’

Saint Augustine



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Thousands of people in West Cheshire have experienced a crisis that has meant they needed emergency food. We dedicate this report to each of you in the hope that fewer people will face such hardship as a result.

Sincerely,



Alec Spencer
West Cheshire Foodbank



Dr Elisabeth Garratt
University of Oxford



Dr Cassie Ogden
University of Chester

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ABBREVIATIONS

CWaC	Cheshire West and Chester	JCP	Jobcentre Plus
DWP	Department of Work and Pensions	JSA	Jobseeker’s Allowance
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance	UC	Universal Credit
HMRC	Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs	WCFB	West Cheshire Foodbank

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1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



- This report presents one of the most **systematic and detailed explorations** yet conducted of people receiving **emergency food** in the UK
- Evidence was gathered from **two years of collaborative research** exploring emergency food provision from the Trussell Trust in West Cheshire. The work builds on and updates the 2015 #cheshirehunger report. It combines **detailed statistical evidence** on the personal characteristics of people using foodbanks, their reasons for referral and expected duration of income crises alongside **narratives of people** receiving emergency food in West Cheshire
- Our analyses are split into two sections. First, we explore general trends in the provision of emergency food in West Cheshire between 2013 and 2016, and consider changes over time. Second, we draw on more detailed data concerning the reasons for referral and estimated duration of crises prompting people to seek emergency food from West Cheshire Foodbank between May 2014 and April 2016

Findings from 2013 to 2016:

- Over this period, the **growth of emergency food provision** in West Cheshire echoed the expansion of the overall Trussell Trust network
- **Problems with benefits** – whether delays, changes or sanctions – accounted for **two-thirds of referrals**
- Reasons for referral to West Cheshire Foodbank were comparable to those across the Trussell Trust network. There were however some differences: benefit changes and debt were slightly more common among people referred to West Cheshire Foodbank than nationally, while low incomes were slightly less common
- **One-third** of those receiving help from West Cheshire Foodbank **were children**
- **Two per cent** of food parcels were distributed to people **aged 65 and older**
- **Four per cent** of food parcels were distributed to **homeless people**
- Food parcels were distributed to people living in all **46 wards in Cheshire West and Chester**. A large proportion of food parcels were nonetheless concentrated in several highly disadvantaged wards

Detailed findings from May 2014 to April 2016:

- **One in five** referrals reflected **benefit delays**, mainly to ESA and JSA
- **Benefit changes** accounted for **14 per cent of referrals**. Similar numbers of delays were reported in relation to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and Employment Support Allowance (ESA)
- **Benefit sanctions** were responsible for **over 7 per cent of referrals**. Sanctions were twice as prevalent among people claiming JSA than ESA. The number of people seeking help due to benefit sanctions halved between May 2014 and April 2016
- **Nearly one in five referrals** were due to **low income**, and low incomes became increasingly prevalent as a reason for referral. High household expenses were a major driver of low incomes

- **Debt accounted for 16 per cent of referrals**, commonly because debt repayments left people without enough money to live on
- The number of people referred to West Cheshire Foodbank for problems relating to Universal Credit (whether delays, changes or sanctions) was small. Delays in rolling out this change means that the number of people in Cheshire West and Chester claiming Universal Credit is small, so it is too soon to judge the consequences of the introduction of Universal Credit
- The **spare room subsidy** accounted for **less than one per cent of referrals**, although it may have contributed to other reasons for referral
- It is important to be cautious when considering the underlying reasons for foodbank use because reasons for referral are often complex and overlapping so cannot always be categorised into a single cause
- **Nearly half of referrals** reflected income crises **lasting between one and two weeks**. **Six per cent** of referrals were for **crises lasting 13 weeks or longer**, raising questions over the suitability of emergency food provision to address longer-term food poverty
- The duration of crises varied according to the main reason for referral: benefit delays and changes, and low incomes typically lasted between one and four weeks, while sanctions generally lasted longer. Problems with debt presented either very brief or much longer crises
- Different groups were referred to West Cheshire Foodbank for different reasons. Benefit sanctions affected a greater proportion of adults than children, although **over one in five people affected by benefit sanctions was a child**. Benefit sanctions and delays were common among one-person households, debt was prevalent in couples, and low incomes were frequent among 'other' household types
- We also found clear age differences in people's experiences, where younger adults and working-age adults were typically referred due to problems with benefits, while older people were more likely to seek emergency food for reasons of debt and low incomes

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. Detailed recommendations are discussed in full in Section 8.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

1. **Improve Jobcentre Plus administration and service**
2. **Reform benefit sanctions policy and practice**
3. **Reform the mandatory reconsideration process**
4. **Ensure social security payment levels are adequate**
5. **Sustain and improve access to the local welfare assistance scheme**
6. **Ensure wages are sufficient and work is secure**

Please see page 38 for full details of these recommendations.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

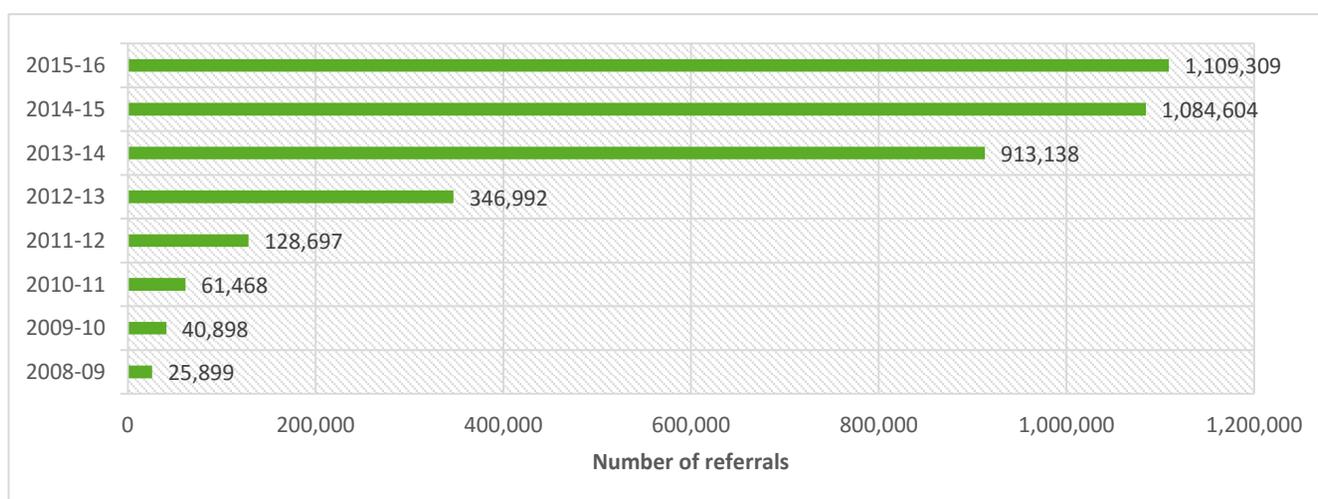
Building on the ‘#cheshirehunger’ report published in March 2015 (Spencer, Ogden and Battarbee, 2015), the current report presents the findings from two years of collaborative research looking at who is accessing emergency food provision in West Cheshire and what the primary reasons for this might be. As with the former work, it combines detailed statistical evidence with the narratives of people experiencing food poverty to offer insight into emergency food provision in West Cheshire. The report finishes by making practical recommendations to help reduce the number of income crises faced and their severity. By contributing to our collective understanding in this way, this report aims to enable policy makers and practitioners at both a local and national level to make more informed decisions to address food poverty.

2.1 How has emergency food provision grown over time?

The well-publicised growth in the provision and uptake of emergency food provision over the past five years has firmly established food poverty as a pressing issue facing the UK. There are now 428 Trussell Trust-run foodbanks in the UK, and in 2015/16 the Trussell Trust distributed emergency food to over one million people¹, three times as many as in 2012/13 (Figure 1). Foodbank use among children has also increased over this period (Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2015). A member of the Trussell Trust network, West Cheshire Foodbank has expanded since launching in November 2012. Emergency food is now distributed from six centres, and the foodbank has seen considerable growth in demand over this period.

Figures on the number of people receiving emergency food from the Trussell Trust do not capture the true scale of food poverty. Some people experiencing food poverty will access help from other sources, including independent foodbanks and soup kitchens, while many receive no help at all, instead trying to manage by buying cheaper food and less food. Indeed, other researchers have estimated that 8.4 million adults in the UK experienced food poverty in 2014 and 1.25 million people in the UK were destitute in 2015 (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016; Taylor and Loopstra, 2016). Although these figures vary widely, it is clear that food poverty is a significant problem. Evidence that people are not accessing suitable and sufficient food – or experience uncertainty doing so – demonstrates the persistence of severe poverty in contemporary Britain.

Figure 1: Number of three-day emergency food supplies distributed by Trussell Trust foodbanks by financial year



¹ We do not know the unique number of people receiving emergency food as some people may have received emergency food on more than one occasion.

This growing dependence on emergency food provision is not confined to that supplied by Trussell Trust foodbanks: reports of children coming to school hungry or with no money for lunch, and increased demand for emergency food by charities that repurpose surplus food collectively demonstrates that food poverty is a major issue in the UK, and may be becoming worse over time (Greater London Authority, 2012; FareShare, 2015; NASUWT, 2016). Such evidence challenges suggestions that rising use of foodbanks could in part reflect increased availability, not increased need, an opinion that has persisted despite clear evidence to the contrary (Lambie-Mumford *et al.*, 2014).

A growing interest in food poverty as a research topic has improved our understanding of the scale of UK food poverty and its major causes and consequences. To this end, a considerable body of research has explored the challenge of food poverty and its possible solutions (Cooper, Purcell and Jackson, 2014; Perry *et al.*, 2014). Nonetheless, gaps remain in our understanding of both the scale and causes of food poverty in the UK, which risks undermining our ability to develop effective and meaningful solutions to the problem, and eliminate hunger both in West Cheshire and the United Kingdom. This report aims to fill some of these knowledge gaps and contribute to addressing UK food poverty.

2.2 What are the causes of food poverty?

The problem of poverty in the UK is by no means a new one, but the growth of emergency food provision in recent years has increased the visibility of severe need and renewed interest in the underlying causes of poverty. Food collection points are now an established feature of many supermarkets, suggesting that emergency food is becoming part of mainstream culture. In particular, the observation that rising uptake of emergency food provision has occurred in parallel with broader social and economic changes raises the question of whether the documented rise in food poverty reflects changes in need prompted by the current economic climate.

For those in work, falling wages, rising underemployment and the growth of zero-hours contracts have eroded the financial protection of work (Cribb and Joyce, 2015; ONS, 2015). For the first time, in 2011/12 over half of households living in poverty contained someone in work, demonstrating that working does not guarantee an adequate income (MacInnes *et al.*, 2013). For people who depend on benefits, welfare restructuring and spending cuts resulting from the 2012 Welfare Reform Act, including the abolition of council tax relief and the introduction of the spare room subsidy (the so-called ‘bedroom tax’) have reduced the value of benefit payments (Oxfam, 2014). These changes have severely weakened the safety net provided by benefits. In parallel, the widening pursuit of sanctions has left increasing numbers of claimants with no income, often in error (Miscampbell, 2014; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2015). Although it is not possible to estimate the exact impact of these changes on uptake of emergency food, unemployment and austerity measures have been linked to increased foodbank use (Loopstra *et al.*, 2015).

Alongside these reductions in incomes and benefit payments, accelerating living costs have intensified pressure on already depleted household budgets. Food prices rose by 12 per cent between 2007 and 2012, increasing food bills for all groups, but this rise was greater for lower-income households (DEFRA, 2013). People’s eating habits have changed in the challenge to make ends meet, through switching to cheaper food and buying fewer calories (Griffith, O’Connell and Smith, 2013). Rising bills are not confined to food and have instead been accompanied by increases in the costs of fuel, water, and transport (MacInnes *et al.*, 2013). Despite using a range of innovative methods to manage their budgets, the documented rise in emergency food provision suggests that such strategies do not always provide sufficient protection against food poverty (Purdam, Garratt and Esmail, 2015). These multiple pressures on household finances were recognised by the All-Party Parliamentary inquiry into hunger in the United Kingdom, which made a series of wide-ranging recommendations aimed at reducing UK food poverty in its 2014 report (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty, 2014).

2.3 What are the consequences of food poverty?

The consequences of food poverty are severe. Most significant is the cost to people's health: food poverty is associated with worse overall health in children (McIntyre, Connor and Warren, 2000), and many vulnerable people referred to foodbanks have health conditions that are exacerbated by the nutritional compromises of cheap food (Garthwaite, Collins and Bamba, 2015). Hospital admissions for malnutrition have also increased over the past five years (Taylor-Robinson *et al.*, 2013). Food poverty also has devastating consequences for mental health and is linked with increased risks of depression and suicide (McIntyre *et al.*, 2013).

The social consequences of food poverty are no less important. People referred to foodbanks have reported feelings of shame and embarrassment alongside a deep reluctance to access emergency food for fear of being considered a failure (Purdam, Garratt and Esmail, 2015). The media have contributed to the negative and hostile portrayals of people accessing emergency food, and the wider tendency to demonise vulnerable groups. Such attitudes tend to overlook the structural determinants of food poverty, instead taking a victim-blaming approach in which people needing support are portrayed as spending irresponsibly (The Sentinel, 2014) and being unable to cook (Butler, Wintour and Gentleman, 2014). This has served – in part, at least – to lay the blame at the door of people struggling with poverty and to shift the discussion away from the wider economic and social influences of food poverty.

2.4 Exploring emergency food provision in West Cheshire

Despite widespread debate and an increasing research interest in food poverty as a social problem, rigorous and detailed data on UK food poverty are still scarce. In 2015, #cheshirehunger gave vital insight into the prevalence of food poverty, the characteristics of people accessing emergency food, and their reasons for doing so. The question of food poverty is set against a backdrop of highly politicised debate, making it especially important to undertake a rigorous examination of trends in food poverty, as well as taking the time to listen to the experiences of people who have received emergency food. If food poverty has declined over the past year, this might suggest that existing provision of emergency food does offer an adequate solution to the problem. Alternatively, the persistence of food poverty would strengthen the view that reliance on charity is insufficient and new strategies are needed to tackle food poverty in 21st century Britain.

The present report provides an update on the results reported in #cheshirehunger to offer insight into how food poverty has – and has not – changed in the past year, as well as providing key recommendations for policy responses. Over this period, following the 2015 General Election the coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats was replaced with a majority Conservative government. All newly unemployed people now claim for Universal Credit, while the transfer of claims to Universal Credit has faced considerable teething problems relating to its design and administration, and its introduction has consequently progressed more slowly than planned. Cuts to children's services – including the closure of five children's centres in Cheshire West and Chester – have eroded support for children and their families. By highlighting the experiences of people using foodbanks in West Cheshire, this report also contributes to a small but growing body of research seeking to capture the experiences of a group that are often discussed but seldom heard (Garthwaite, 2016). By giving a voice to these people, we hope to better understand the causes and experiences of food poverty, and help identify ways of eliminating food poverty in the UK.

3.0 CONTEXT

West Cheshire Foodbank is one of 428 projects belonging to the Trussell Trust's network of not-for-profit foodbank projects. Foodbanks provide parcels of emergency food designed to last up to three days, each containing a prescribed combination of long-life food. Foodbanks in the Trussell Trust's network all adhere to the same operating model, mission and vision (Trussell Trust, 2016b). Food is collected from within the local community and the vast majority is privately donated and sourced from individuals, faith groups, schools, local businesses and at supermarket drives. To obtain a food parcel, recipients are required to obtain a voucher from a frontline professional working within the local community, such as an advice centre, social worker or healthcare worker. For more information see Lambie-Mumford (2013) and Trussell Trust (2016b).

The Trussell Trust provides training and ongoing development support to foodbanks and contributes to the discourse on food poverty at a national level. Trussell Trust foodbanks all use the same online data collection system, which is used by foodbanks individually and the Trussell Trust nationally to collect statistics about food donations and, most crucially, foodbank usage. This enables patterns and trends to be identified and offers a basis for challenging food poverty.

Trussell Trust foodbanks fed 1,109,309 people in the last financial year (2015-16), with individual foodbanks distributing an average of 2,616 three-day emergency food supplies each over the same period. Foodbanks in the North West of England consistently provide food to more people than in any other region, with 160,048 emergency food supplies distributed in this same period. Based in the North West of England, West Cheshire Foodbank is a medium-sized project which provided 5,409 emergency food supplies last year, making it above average in terms of numbers being fed both nationally and regionally.

West Cheshire Foodbank serves a population of approximately 200,000 people living in Chester and Ellesmere Port, as well as several smaller towns, villages and suburbs which make up the Cheshire West and Chester unitary authority². Chester is a historic, walled city which attracts considerable tourism revenue. A university is also attached which increases the population during term-time. Although there is significant affluence in the area, there are also pockets of deprivation, particularly in Ellesmere Port. House prices have been rising steadily over past two years and in April 2016 the average house price in Cheshire West and Chester was £186,282, up from £168,948 in April 2014 (Land Registry, 2016). Rental costs have also risen, and in July 2013 private rents were considered unaffordable (costing at least 25 per cent of household incomes) for more than half of households in Cheshire West and Chester (Arc4, 2013). West Cheshire Foodbank has six distribution centres at which people struggling with poverty can redeem a voucher issued to them by a frontline care professional such as an advice, health or social worker. These centres have been chosen for their accessibility and to reduce barriers that may prevent people using the service, such as the cost of public transport.

The Trussell Trust has access to anonymised headline statistics from across the UK and from these data can build a national picture of patterns and trends. The 'reason for crisis' remains the focus of this second report. The standard reasons listed and the details given have been limited in the past, which affects their usefulness and accuracy. For example, the system cannot be interrogated to establish whether problems with social security benefits were due to administrative or payment systems errors with pre-existing benefits, or the result of more recent changes to the administration of sanctions (Lambie-Mumford *et al.*, 2014). In this project we draw on additional data collected to provide more detailed reasons on referrals to foodbanks. This grants us greater insight into the lives and experiences of people who have received emergency food from West Cheshire Foodbank.

² The towns of Northwich and Winsford are covered by a different foodbank

4.0 METHODS

In this research we asked the following questions:

- **Who** accesses emergency food provision in West Cheshire?
- **Why** do people access emergency food provision in West Cheshire?
- What are the **narratives** of people accessing emergency food provision in West Cheshire?

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to offer an understanding of who accesses emergency food provision in West Cheshire, the primary reasons for this, and the narratives of respondents. Methodological triangulation was adopted to enable the collection of both quantitative data (collected through surveys integral to the agency assessment process) and qualitative data (collected from respondents' personal written accounts and corroborated using referring agency case notes) to help further validate our findings. A combination of methods is integral to this study to allow for both a description of foodbank use – including who is using the service and the core reasons for needing this provision – alongside a more explorative approach which can help uncover a person's thoughts, reasoning and feelings, which can better communicate the depth and complexity of the individual lived experience.

4.1 Quantitative data collection and analysis

4.1.1 The process of quantitative data collection and analysis

This study used the Trussell Trust data collection system to avoid unnecessary duplication of information and also to enable comparisons with national-level data. West Cheshire Foodbank referral agencies use a standardised procedure to collect basic details of all clients at the point of assessing individuals for emergency food provision. An assessment can only be conducted by a person who is appropriately trained and is a registered signatory with West Cheshire Foodbank. Referral agencies in West Cheshire include the Citizens Advice Bureau, registered social landlords, schools, children's centres, and a range of charities and voluntary groups. Details collected include the name, postal address, ethnicity and age group of the person applying, the number of adults and children in their household, and the nature of the crisis that led them to seek help. Within major voucher holding agencies, random spot-checks were conducted by internal workers to ensure that the assessment process was undertaken consistently. The data were then centrally collated by West Cheshire Foodbank using an established data collection system developed by the Trussell Trust. The West Cheshire Foodbank administrative team checked the data to ensure that information collected was complete and reliable, and provided further guidance where this process was not completed to the required standard.

In this project we explored the characteristics of people using the West Cheshire Foodbank between January 2013 and April 2016. Some of our analyses explore a particular time period to allow comparisons to be made with national-level data. The unitary authority of Cheshire West and Cheshire comprises 46 council wards. People living in these wards are served by West Cheshire Foodbank, which has a catchment of 34 wards³ comprising the towns of Chester, Ellesmere Port, and Neston, and Mid Cheshire Foodbank, comprising 12 wards, including the towns of Northwich and Winsford. We include in our analyses those living within the 46 council wards and referred to West Cheshire Foodbank, even if their local foodbank is Mid Cheshire Foodbank. All those who did not have a fixed address were assumed to live within the unitary authority of Cheshire West and Cheshire.

³ Blacon Ward, Boughton Ward, Chester City Ward, Chester Villages Ward, Dodeleston and Huntington Ward, Ellesmere Port Town Ward, Elton Ward, Farndon Ward, Frodsham Ward, Garden Quarter Ward, Goway Ward, Grange Ward, Great Boughton Ward, Handbridge Park Ward, Helsby Ward, Hoole Ward, Lache Ward, Ledsham and Manor Ward, Little Neston and Burton Ward, Malpas Ward, Neston Ward, Netherpool Ward, Newton Ward, Rossmore Ward, Saughall and Mollington Ward, St. Paul's Ward, Strawberry Ward, Sutton Ward, Tarporley Ward, Tarvin and Kelsall Ward, Tattenhall Ward, Upton Ward, Willaston and Thornton and Whitby Ward.

4.1.2 Detailed information on the ‘Nature of Crisis’ and ‘Anticipated Duration’

It was integral to this research that additional detailed information was collected regarding the reason for and anticipated duration of the income crisis that prompted them to seek emergency food. A research team containing members of West Cheshire Foodbank, the Citizens Advice Bureau, and a disability rights adviser developed a process in which additional information was incorporated into the existing voucher system. The system needed to accurately capture the variety of reasons for people accessing the foodbank through a fast and straightforward administrative procedure, and to record information in a manner that respected the sensitivity of respondents’ data. A simple coding system was therefore designed specifically for the purpose of this research to complement the existing voucher scheme.

To ensure that the coding list was exhaustive, experts from Cheshire West Citizens Advice Bureau and DIAL West Cheshire⁴ reviewed internal case notes to create a detailed draft ‘coding list’ which categorised the possible natures of crises that led to households requiring emergency food. This list was reviewed initially by nine voucher-holding agencies, after which extra categories were added and code titles were revised, thus ensuring face validity. The coding system was further reviewed at the West Cheshire Foodbank Agency Forum and seven additional codes were implemented on 1st January 2016. The end result was a list that further disaggregated the categories of Trussell Trust ‘reason for’ data. The detailed reasons can be grouped into six main reasons: benefit delays, benefit changes, benefit sanctions, low incomes, debt and ‘other’ reasons. The ‘other’ category demonstrates the complexity of some crises and the difficulty faced by referral agencies in categorising their reasons for referral. It should be noted that like the crisis type data, only one reason for referral could be identified in this detailed information. The analyses reported here therefore present a simplified picture of reasons for referral, which are often complex and overlapping. In addition to collecting further detail regarding the nature of crisis, the coding system also collected information on the anticipated duration of the crisis.

The researchers have been made aware of two other foodbanks capturing deeper data on a systematic basis at the local level. The viability of replicating this methodology at the national level is currently being explored. Organisations that are systematically collecting similar data or that wish to replicate this process are encouraged to contact the authors.

4.1.3 Recording and analysis of quantitative data

Similar to the techniques of data collection outlined above, existing systems were accessed to avoid duplication of information where possible. A new database recorded the additional information collected giving the ‘nature of crisis detail’ and ‘anticipated duration of crisis detail’. Following the introduction of an ‘extended voucher scheme’⁵ in 2015, there may be a minor inflationary impact upon the number of crises that are anticipated to endure for between two and four weeks. Once the research period ended, data from both systems was extracted and merged to create a new composite database. The West Cheshire Foodbank voucher number was used as the unique identifier for this process. At this point the respondents’ name and address details were omitted from the database to ensure true anonymity. For cross-reference purposes, data at the household level can be identified by a combination of surname and postcode. Name and address details were not shared beyond West Cheshire Foodbank.

Once the data collection process ended the data were reviewed and checked by a select panel. Statistical information using percentages and averages was produced which described the nature of the data collected. The information collected was not complete in all cases: reason for referral information was missing in 15 per cent of referrals, while detail on estimated duration of crises was missing in 17 per cent of referrals. The amount of

⁴ DIAL West Cheshire is an independent information and advice service, covering welfare benefits and disability rights. Their headquarters are at DIAL House in Chester.

⁵ The West Cheshire Foodbank extended voucher scheme offers up to four consecutive foodbank vouchers to a household, with a single voucher from the issuing agency. The Foodbank undertakes the administrative function, replicating the initial voucher information up to three times. The scheme is designed for people that agencies are actively working with, but who require food over a longer period of time while action is taken to address difficulties

missing data varied considerably by referral agency, suggesting that some referral agencies experienced difficulties in collecting these data, or that certain referral agencies may have served a large number of clients with complex difficulties that could not easily be categorised. Information on reason for referral and estimated duration of crises therefore could not be assumed to be missing at random so we include missing data in the analyses presented in this report.

4.2 Qualitative data collection and analysis

4.2.1 The Narrative Inquiry technique

The power of people's stories has long been appreciated within the social sciences. In this report the placing of stories alongside quantitative data is important to help contextualise and bring to life the experiences of those using the foodbank. The narrative inquiry technique is a qualitative research methodology which focuses on presenting data in story form which can be as long or short as necessary. As people's stories are diverse and differ radically, this type of approach can use information taken from observations, interviews or autobiographical materials (such as letters or diaries) in order to construct the story (Plummer, 2001). The method has gained credence: advocates of the approach reason that sharing and telling stories can help others to better understand a person's experiences (Goodley *et al.*, 2004). The narrative inquiry technique is used in this report to specifically capture how various circumstances have led to people in West Cheshire using foodbanks for emergency food provision. The stories are short but capture the various social contexts that lead to a better understanding of food poverty.

4.2.2 Respondents

This component of the study collected qualitative data from clients who used West Cheshire Foodbank between 1st May 2014 and 30th April 2016 and who consented to the use of their personal narrative (referred to throughout as a 'story'). Clients who had been assessed for a food voucher (and had therefore provided the information detailed above) were invited to complete a 'West Cheshire Foodbank Story Sharing Form' with the assistance of a foodbank volunteer where appropriate. This was a simple form that aimed to capture a brief summary of the respondent's narrative. It provided respondents with an opportunity to give consent for researchers to use their information for this study, and inform the researcher if the respondent wished to be contacted to take part in this qualitative stage of the research. The form was completed by respondents at West Cheshire Foodbank distribution centres, the venues at which vouchers can be exchanged for emergency food. Respondents were clearly informed that completing the form was in no way a condition of receiving emergency food.

The session volunteers at West Cheshire Foodbank were trained to ensure that, where possible, respondents completed this form themselves. There were respondents who required a volunteer to support them, for example where respondents were physically unable to write or found writing difficult. In such cases it was necessary for a foodbank volunteer to act as a scribe for the respondent who dictated their narrative.

4.2.3 How our stories were found

Some respondents provided a personal account of their experience through the 'West Cheshire Foodbank Story Sharing Form'. The 'layered' design of this form allowed respondents to engage to a level depending on the extent to which they wished to be involved. In total, 162 narrative forms were completed between May 2014 and April 2016.

The first page of the form gave respondents the option to share their story with the public without providing identifying details. The reverse of the form allowed respondents to provide their name and contact details. This allowed West Cheshire Foodbank and the Trussell Trust to contact the respondent for the purpose of sharing their narrative with the public. Respondents could also give permission for West Cheshire Foodbank to corroborate their narrative with the agency that assessed and referred them to the foodbank and indicate if respondents were willing and able to provide evidence that supported their narrative.

Respondents played a crucial role in relation to how their story was produced for this study. We fully acknowledge the diversity and different needs of the people accessing emergency food provision in this study and therefore required a flexible way of working with respondents. Consequently, participants who indicated that they wished to engage further with the qualitative phase of the research had the option to meet individually with a researcher from West Cheshire Foodbank as a way to share their stories.

The ways in which respondents articulated their reasons for accessing emergency food provision were taken into account in the construction of their stories. Stories from Alice, Kate, Sandra, Will, Ben and Maria are narrated in the third person which captures the ways in which people's circumstances were shared as a series of relevant details contributing to their current situation. Stories from Gemma, Rob, Lesley, Sarah, Allison and Justin are written in the first person as many respondents more readily contextualised their experiences in terms of their everyday life. Together the stories capture the de-personalised nature of welfare policy alongside the personal effects of food poverty on these individuals and should aid the understanding of the people behind the statistics.

4.2.4 Rapport and validation

Although various methods were used to obtain stories, their consistency lies with the development of rapport between the participant and researcher, which is closely related to ethical considerations (see Section 4.3). The fundamental principles of conducting research for respondents' benefit were upheld and their wellbeing and comfort was prioritised over any concerns of the researchers. It was important to ensure trust was gained between the client and the person collecting data and this was done by ensuring all questions asked were non-biased and open. We decided that audio recording of interviews was not appropriate given the sensitive nature of the topic. Respondent validation of stories was therefore the main way to ensure the stories reflected the narrative that respondents wished to share. Where stated, narratives were also corroborated with the referral agency. To enable the process of respondent validation, participants were given the opportunity to review various drafts of their stories before they were included in this report.

4.3 Ethical considerations

This research was undertaken in the setting of the various private, charitable and statutory organisations who offer their staff and volunteers training in relation to respecting clients' privacy and the importance of confidentiality. In addition, in this study we ensured that clients who provided information offered their full informed consent to take part in the study. Any client who was deemed unable to make this decision was excluded from the study, although in practice we did not exclude anybody on these grounds. For inclusion in the study respondents needed to have accessed emergency food provision from West Cheshire Foodbank.

Respondents have been excluded from the qualitative research where either personal disclosure or advice from care professionals suggest that individual circumstances deem the respondent's involvement unethical or where it is understood that disclosing information might have a bearing on involvement in any legal proceedings. Respondents who did not speak English fluently and who did not have access to an interpreter were also not included in this part of the research. In practice we did not exclude anybody on either of these grounds.

The 'West Cheshire Foodbank Story Sharing Form' clearly informed respondents that participation was not a condition of receiving assistance. Respondents were also made aware that West Cheshire Foodbank would not share the client's name or contact details with the public and that identifying details would be removed from the 'story' text. The names of respondents have been changed in this report and other potentially identifying details, such as specific locations, have been removed.

4.3.1 Institutional approval of ethics procedure

The research method and ethics for this research was approved by a group of representatives from the frontline charities involved in the data collection process.

5.0 OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS FROM 2013 TO 2016

5.1 How many referrals were there to West Cheshire Foodbank between 2013 and 2016?

In this section we explore general trends in the number of people receiving emergency food provision from West Cheshire Foodbank between 2013 and 2016, and their personal characteristics and reasons for referral. This period was characterised by considerable growth both in the size of the Trussell Trust foodbank network and the number of food parcels distributed.

Figure 2 shows the growth in emergency food provision supplied by both West Cheshire Foodbank and by the entire Trussell Trust network. The number of food parcels distributed by both organisations increased over this period, particularly between 2013-14 and 2014-2015. The number of adults and children who received help from West Cheshire Foodbank over this period is displayed in Figure 3. Approximately two-thirds of people receiving help from the West Cheshire Foodbank were adults and one-third were children, and these proportions did not change over this period. The proportion of children who received help over this period was lower at West Cheshire Foodbank (32 per cent) than Trussell Trust foodbanks located in the North West (38 per cent) and the total Trussell Trust network (37 per cent).

Comparing these charts shows that while the number of referrals to foodbanks was fairly stable over the past two financial years, the number of people who received help increased slightly over this period. This reflects a shift towards referrals of larger households, and a decrease in the number of referrals to one-person households. The rising number of people helped by foodbanks is evident in West Cheshire and also across the wider Trussell Trust network, and suggests a broader shift in the characteristics of people accessing emergency food provision.

Figure 2: Number of referrals to West Cheshire Foodbank and to all Trussell Trust foodbanks by financial year

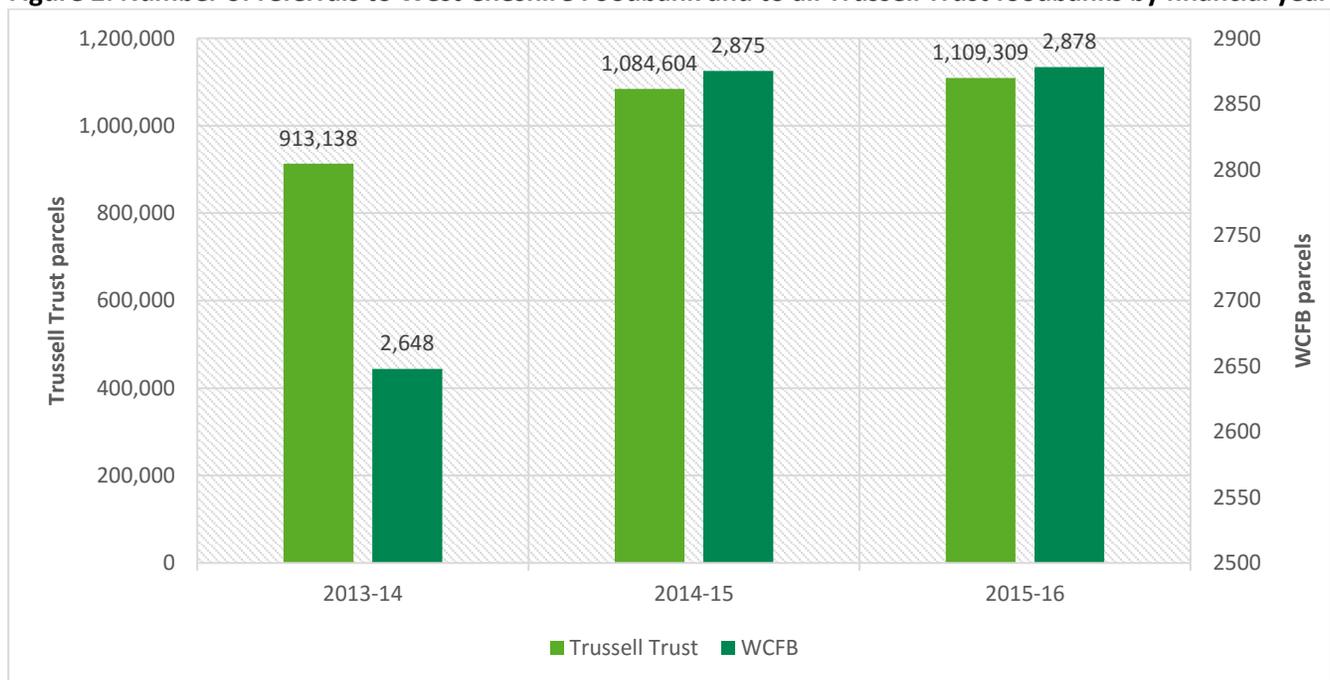
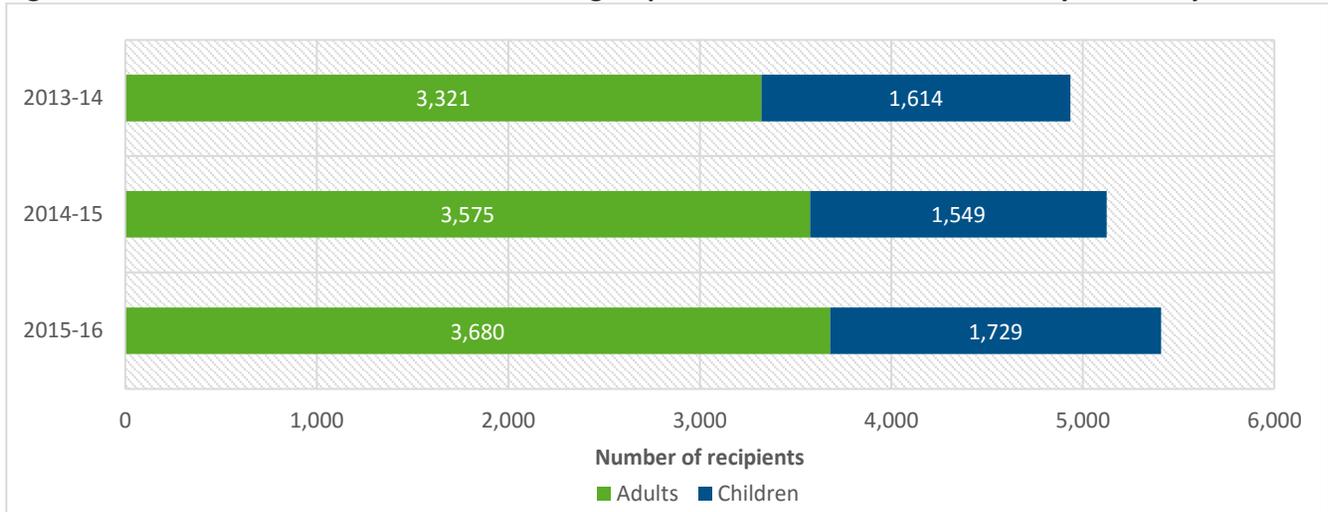
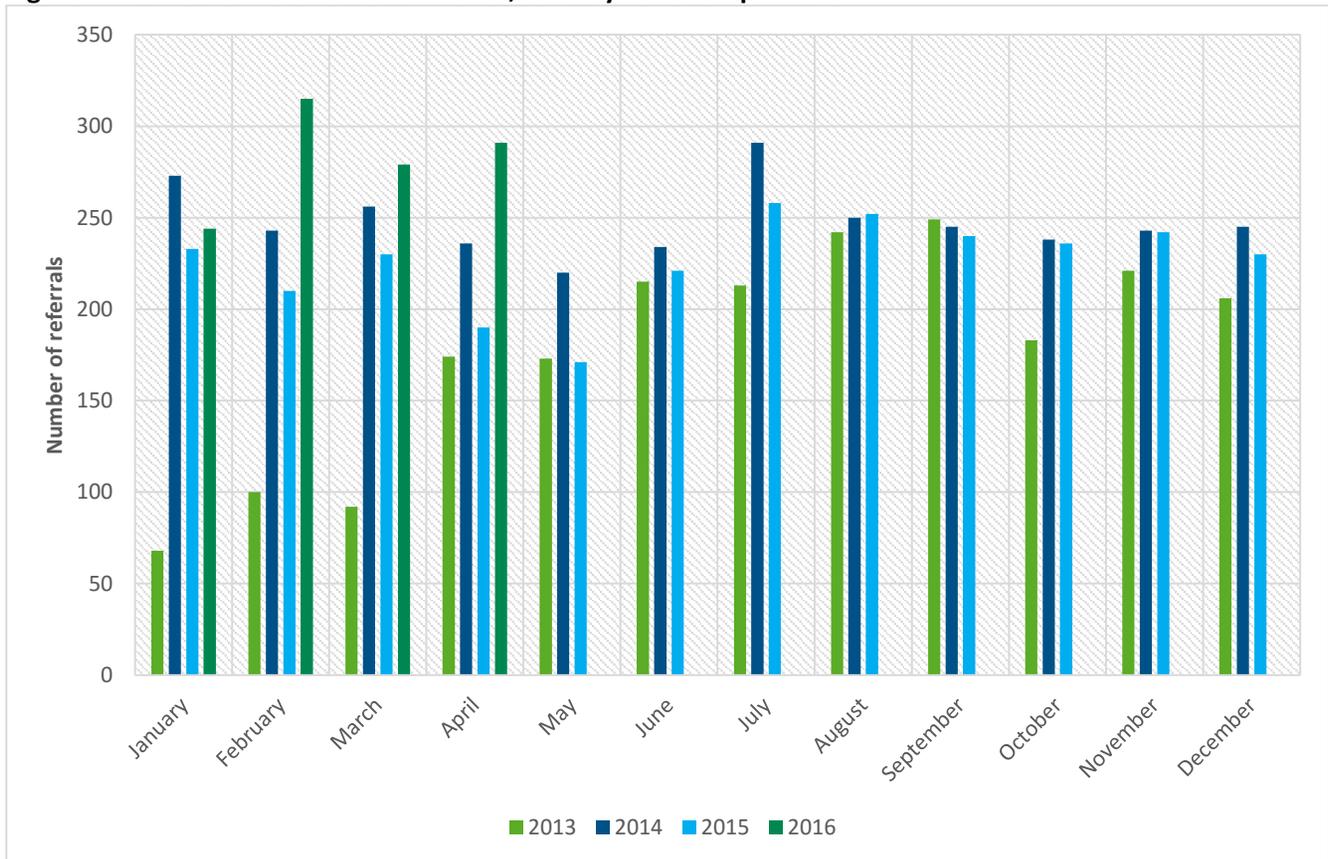


Figure 3: Number of adults and children receiving help from West Cheshire Foodbank by financial year



A detailed breakdown of the number of referrals by month is presented in Figure 4. The number of referrals grew steadily throughout 2013 as the foodbank became better known. The comparatively high number of referrals in the first part of 2016 suggests that West Cheshire Foodbank is becoming an established source of help to people in the local area and demonstrates that the problem of hunger has not yet been solved. There is no clear evidence of greater foodbank use during the winter months when fuel bills are higher and people may have to choose between 'heating and eating'. Referrals are slightly higher during July and August, which may reflect so-called 'holiday hunger' where households find it difficult to feed their children during the school holidays when school meals are not available.

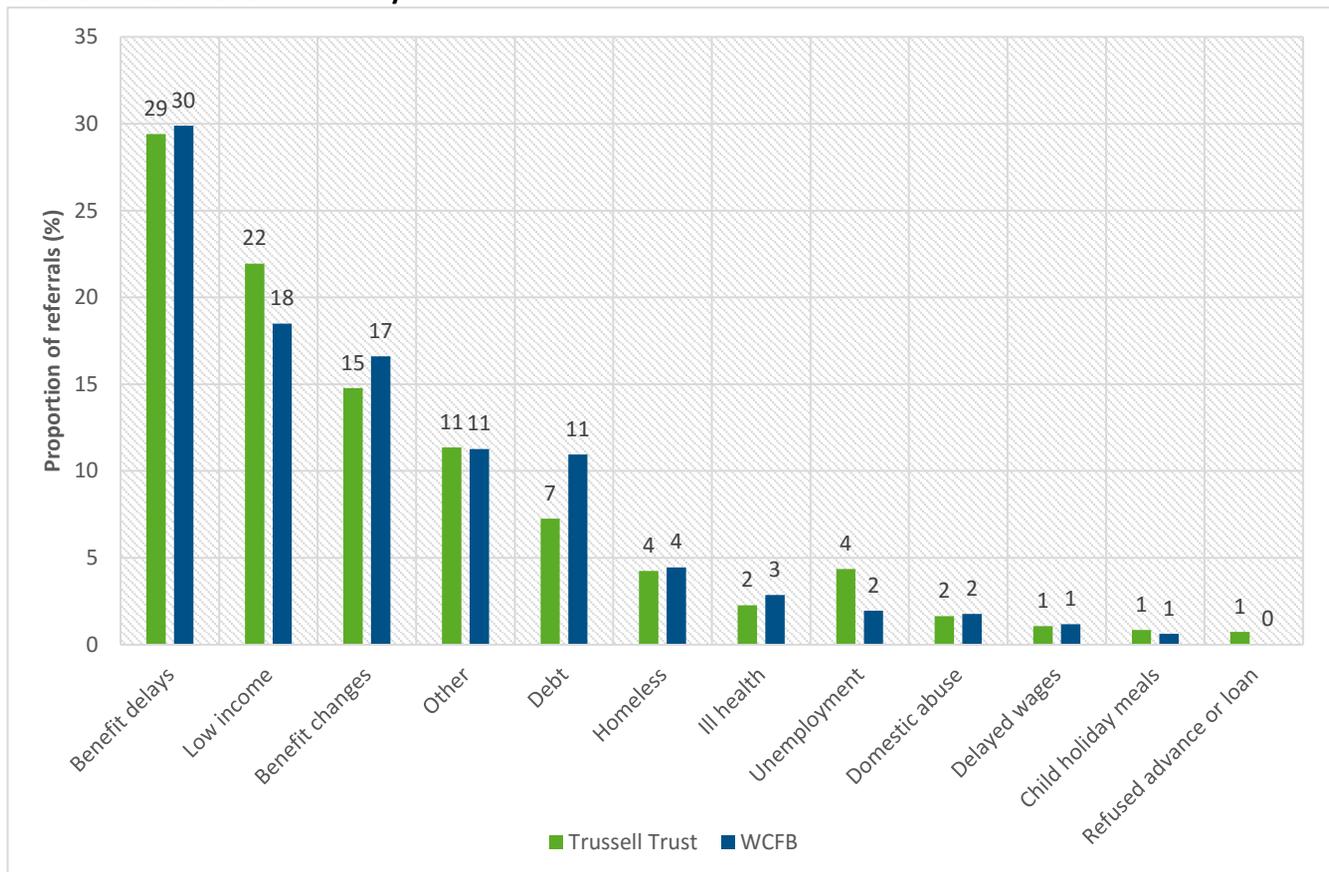
Figure 4: Number of referrals each month, January 2013 to April 2016



5.2 Why were people referred to West Cheshire Foodbank between 2013 and 2016?

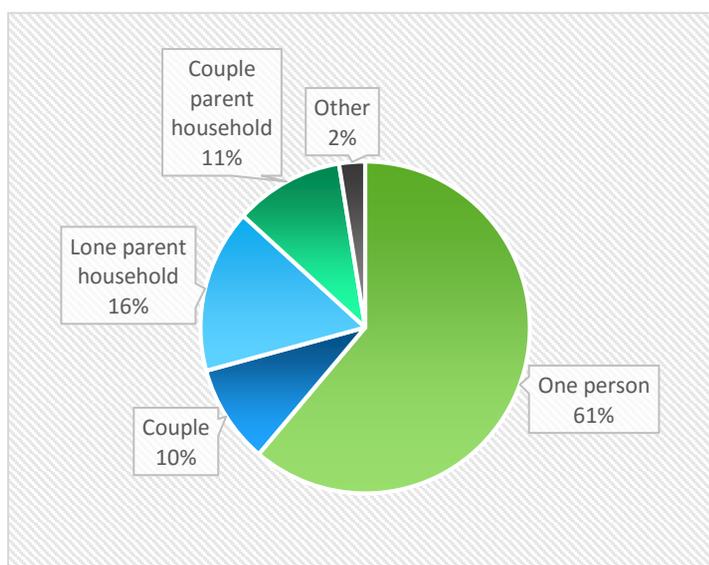
The underlying reasons for people accessing help from West Cheshire Foodbank and all Trussell Trust foodbanks between 2013-14 and 2015-2016 are shown in Figure 5. The reasons for referral are very similar, with the main reasons of benefit delays, low income and benefit changes accounting for nearly two-thirds of referrals. There are some small differences: low income and unemployment were less prevalent at West Cheshire Foodbank than the Trussell Trust overall, while benefit changes and debt were more prevalent. Nonetheless, the reasons for referral to West Cheshire Foodbank are broadly typical of referrals by all people using Trussell Trust foodbanks.

Figure 5: Proportion of referrals to West Cheshire Foodbank and to all Trussell Trust foodbanks by crisis type, 2013-14 to 2015-2016 financial years



5.3 Who was helped by West Cheshire Foodbank between 2013 and 2016?

Figure 6: Referrals by household type, 2013-14 to 2015-16 financial years

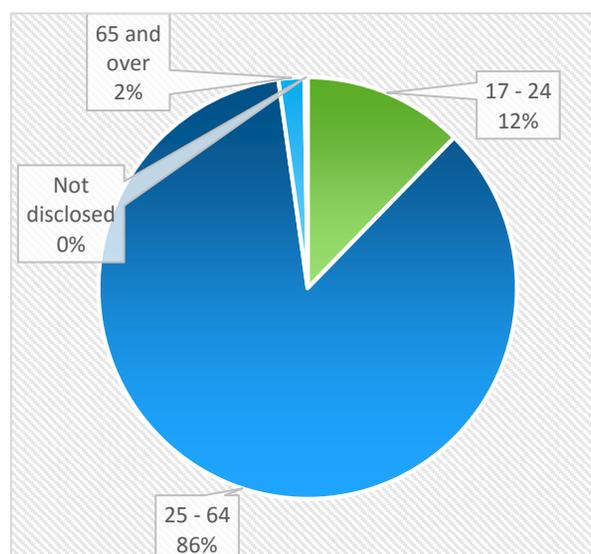


In Figure 6 we see that over half of referrals were to one-person households, despite accounting for only 30 per cent of households in Cheshire West and Chester. One-person households therefore are over-represented among people using foodbanks. Couple- and lone parent households with children together accounted for over one quarter of referrals, which matches their prevalence in the local area. One in ten referrals were to couples without children, despite accounting for 26 per cent of households. A small number of referrals were to 'other' household types, defined as households with three or more adults, with or without children. These proportions remained comparable throughout this three-year period.

Figure 7: Referrals by age group, 2013-14 to 2015-16 financial years

Figure 7 shows that the majority of referrals were to adults aged 25 to 64. Over one in ten referrals were to younger adults aged 17 to 24, and only 2 per cent of referrals were to people aged 65 and over. In 2014, 62 per cent of people living in Cheshire West and Cheshire were aged 16 to 64, demonstrating that West Cheshire Foodbank provides help to a disproportionate number of people in this age group.

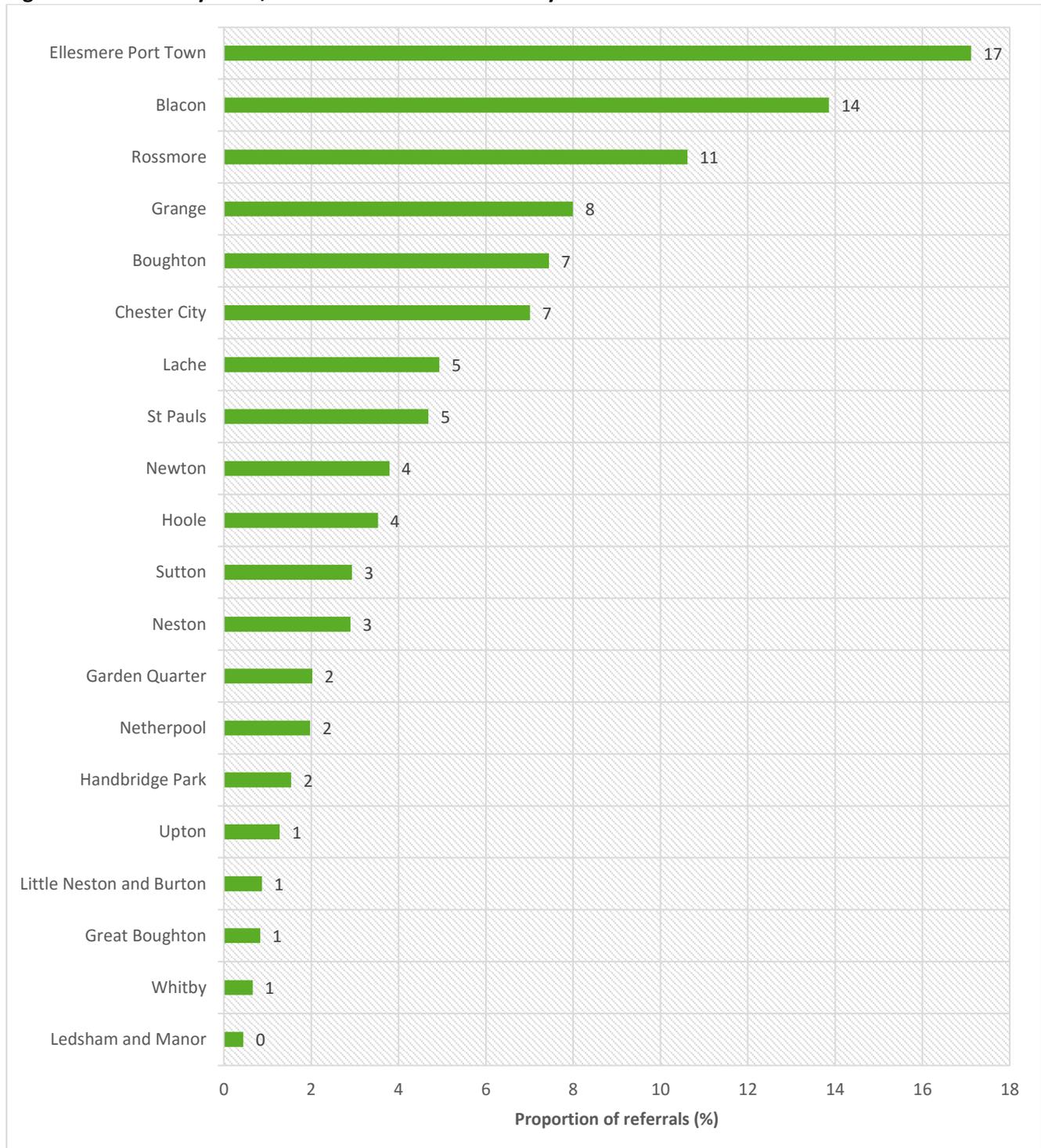
The age composition of people using foodbanks remained fairly comparable throughout this three-year period, although the proportion of referrals to 17-24 year olds decreased a little, and referrals to people aged 65 and over increased slightly. This change must be interpreted cautiously due to the small number of older people using foodbanks, which is consistent with previous research (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger, 2015). The small number of older people receiving emergency food might explain the absence of seasonal trends in the distribution of food parcels in Figure 4 as older people are the most likely to face pressures on their household budgets in the winter months due to the high costs of keeping their homes sufficiently warm. It should also be noted that age information relates only to the person receiving the food parcel, not all members of their household. This means that the number of over-65s receiving emergency food might be higher if younger members of their household are claiming a food parcel on behalf of the household.



We also find that almost all people accessing food parcels at West Cheshire Foodbank are white (96.4 per cent). Nearly two per cent are non-white, which is comparable to the 2011 Census estimate of 2.6 per cent non-white people living in Cheshire West and Chester. These small numbers mean it is not possible to provide a more detailed breakdown by ethnicity. Ethnicity information was missing for a small number of cases. Four per cent of referrals were to homeless people.

From Figure 8 we can see that over half of all referrals were made for households living in five wards: Ellesmere Port Town, Blacon, Rossmore, Grange and Boughton. These five wards are characterised by high levels of economic disadvantage, with a large proportion of residents having low or no educational qualifications, higher than average unemployment, a high prevalence of social renting, and low levels of home ownership. These wards also contain above average levels of one-person households below the age of 65 and lone-parent households, consistent with the figures reported in Figure 6 and suggesting that these household types are especially vulnerable to food poverty.

Figure 8: Referrals by ward, 2013-14 to 2015-16 financial years

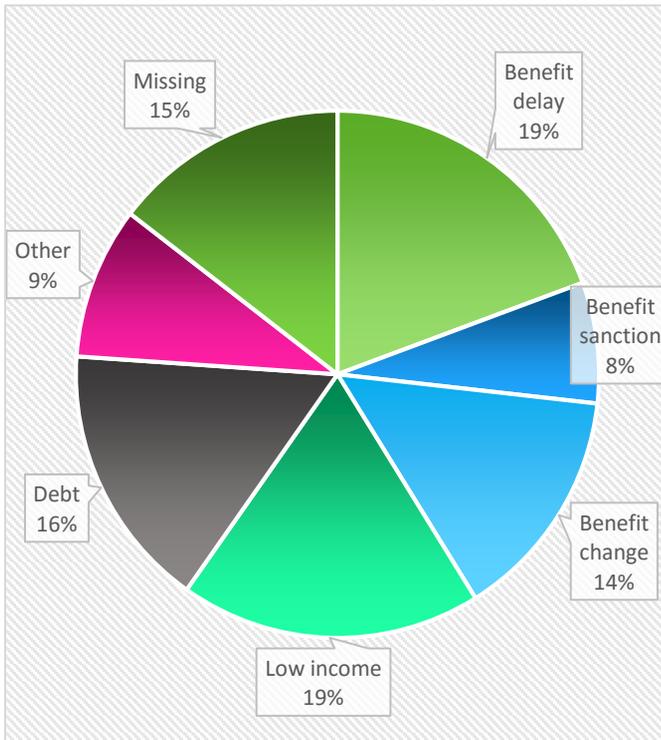


6.0 DETAILED FINDINGS FROM MAY 2014 TO APRIL 2016

In this section we explore in greater detail the reasons for foodbank use and the expected duration of crisis for the 5,808 referrals to West Cheshire Foodbank in the 24 months between May 2014 and April 2016.

6.1 Why were people referred to West Cheshire Foodbank between May 2014 and April 2016?

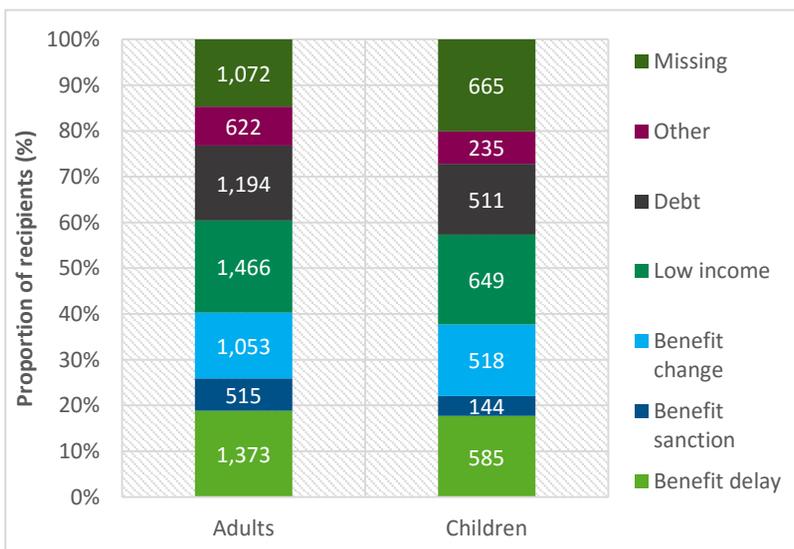
Figure 9: Proportion of referrals by broad reason, May 2014 to April 2016



The broad reasons for referral to West Cheshire Foodbank between May 2014 and April 2016 are illustrated in Figure 9. The largest single cause was benefit delay, accounting for 1,124 or one in five referrals over this period. Issues of low income (1,082 referrals) and debt (947 referrals) were also prevalent, alongside benefit changes (835 referrals) and sanctions (431 referrals). Overall, 41 per cent of referrals reflected problems with benefits.

The proportion of referrals for these main reasons corresponds fairly closely to the breakdown of referrals by crisis type for the 2015-2016 financial year shown in Figure 5. Any discrepancies between these charts are likely to reflect the different reasons available, for example the separate reason of benefit sanctions that is available between 2014-2016 but not in the crisis type data. Furthermore, foodbank use is often triggered by a number of different overlapping reasons so the two measures are not expected to match perfectly.

Figure 10: Proportion of adults and children receiving help from West Cheshire Foodbank by broad reason, May 2014 to April 2016



In total, 7,295 adults and 3,307 children received assistance from West Cheshire Foodbank over this period. The proportion of adults and children is broken down by reason for referral in Figure 10. Comparable proportions of adults and children were referred for reasons of benefit delay, benefit change, low income, and debt. Benefit sanctions affected a greater proportion of adults (7 per cent) than children (4 per cent), providing a welcome indication that the consequences of sanctions are not being shouldered disproportionately by children.

Figure 11 shows how the broad reasons for referral changed over the period between May 2014 and April 2016. Reasons of benefit delay and benefit change both fluctuated but remained fairly stable over time, while debt became more prevalent over this period. Encouragingly, the proportion of people seeking help due to sanctions reduced by half over this period. Less positive, however, is the rise in low income over time, particularly towards the end of this period.

Figure 11: Number of referrals by broad reason over time, May 2014 to April 2016

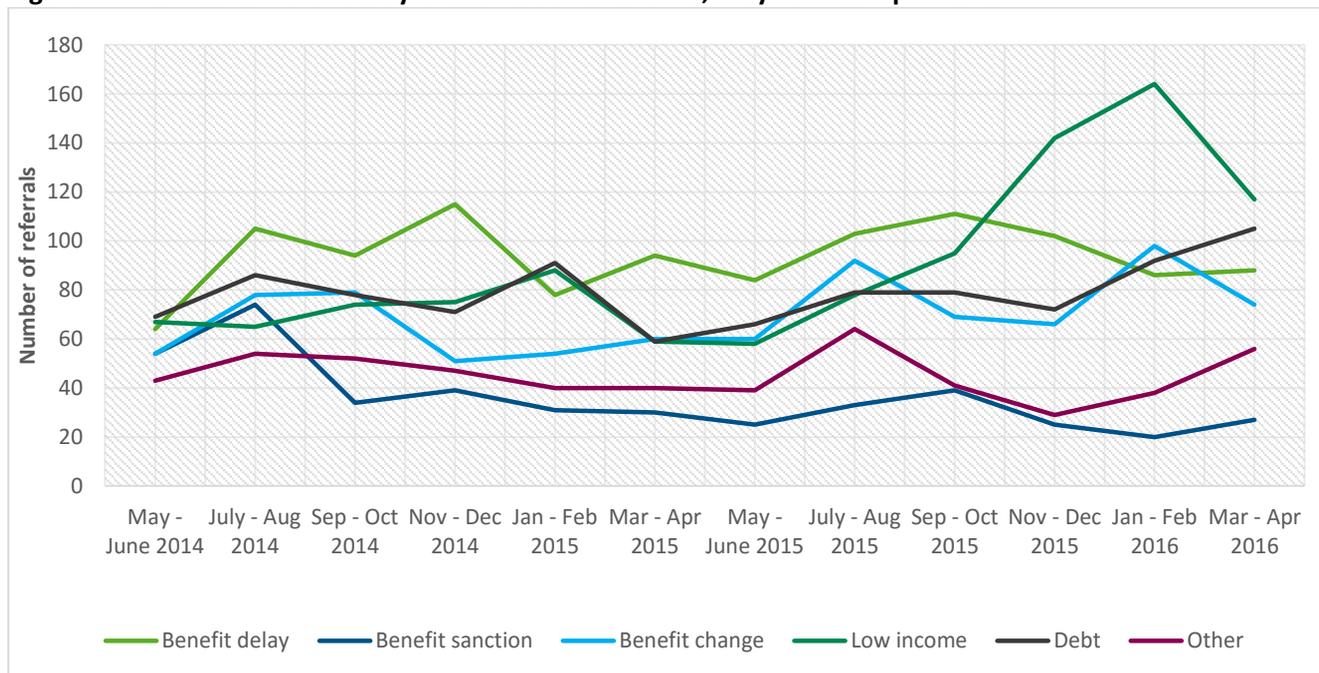
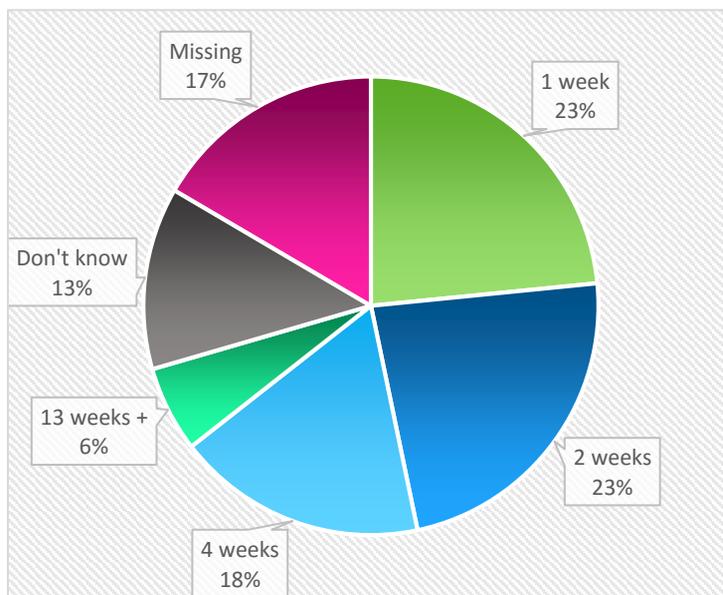


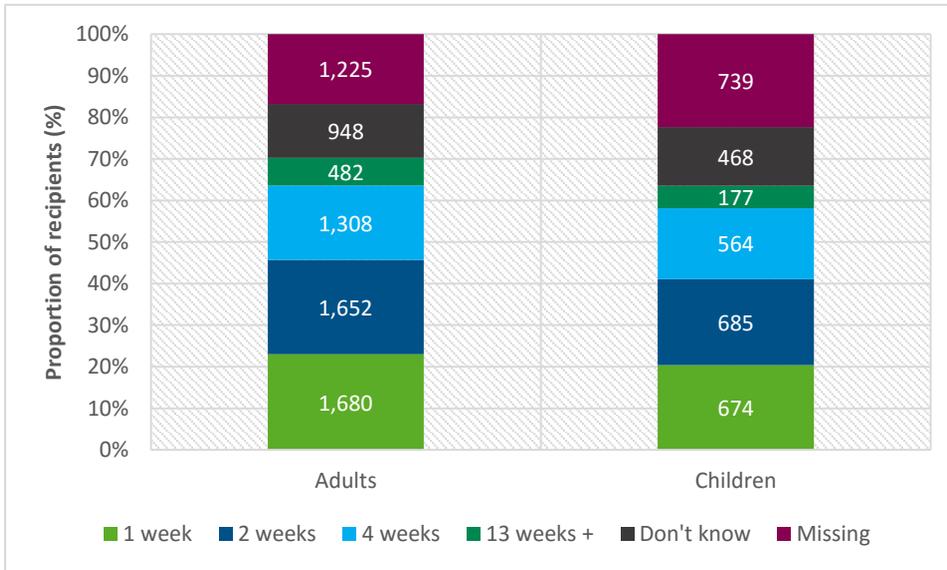
Figure 12: Proportion of referrals by estimated duration of crisis, May 2014 to April 2016

Figure 12 shows the estimated duration of crises reported by people who used West Cheshire Foodbank over this period. Two-thirds of people reported a crisis lasting one to four weeks, while longer crises of 13 weeks or longer were reported by six per cent of people, prompting questions over the suitability of emergency food provision to address longer-term food poverty.



The proportion of short crises lasting one to two weeks is highest among one-person households (49 per cent) and couples without children (48 per cent), and lowest among 'other' households (29 per cent). Long crises lasting 13 weeks or longer were conversely most common in 'other' households (13 per cent) and least common in lone parent households (4 per cent). Short crises of 1-2 weeks were most common among people aged 25 to 64 (47 per cent) and least common among older people (37 per cent). Long crises lasting 13 weeks or longer were conversely most prevalent among older people (14 per cent). These variations relate to the different composition of reasons for referral and their corresponding durations between different household types and age groups. We explore these patterns in greater detail in the following sections.

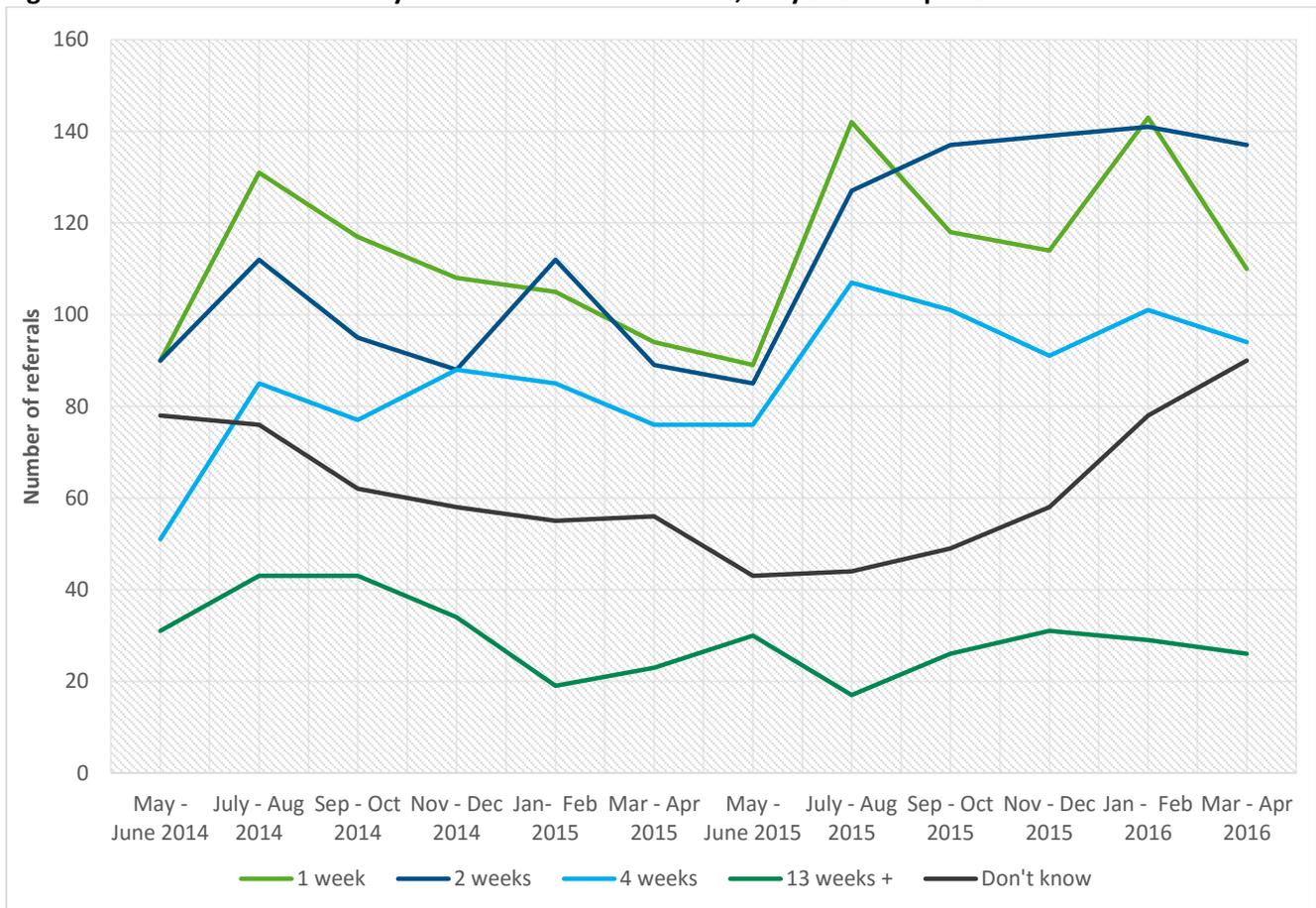
Figure 13: Proportion of adults and children receiving help from West Cheshire Foodbank by estimated duration of crisis, May 2014 to April 2016



The proportion of adults and children who received assistance from West Cheshire Foodbank is broken down by the estimated duration of crises in Figure 13. The duration of crises were comparable for adults and children, and might be slightly shorter for children, again indicating that children are not bearing the worst experiences of foodbank use.

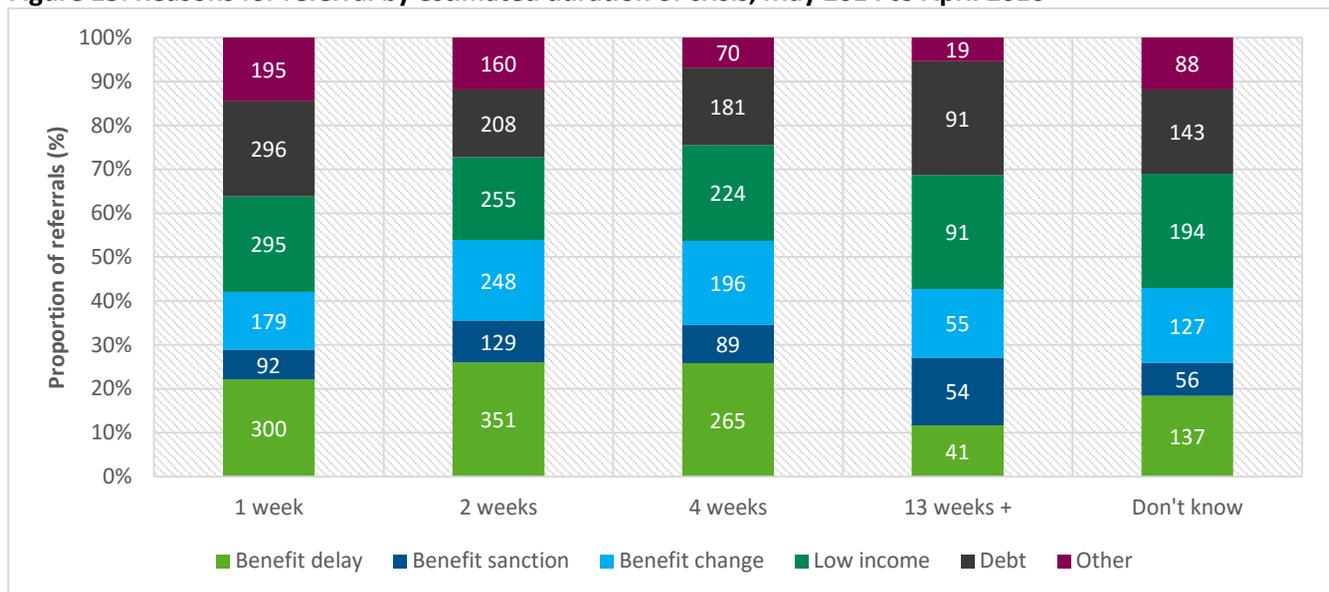
Changes over time in the duration of crises are illustrated in Figure 14. There was an overall decline in referrals of all durations except those lasting four weeks between May 2014 and April 2015. Between June 2015 and April 2016 referrals of one, two, and four weeks all increased considerably, although it is not clear why.

Figure 14: Number of referrals by duration of crisis over time, May 2014 to April 2016



Information on people's reasons for referral and estimated duration of crises are combined in Figure 15. Here we see that benefit delays typically resulted in crises lasting one to four weeks, while benefit delays that prompted crises of 13 weeks or longer were less common. In contrast, the largest proportion of crises resulting from sanctions lasted 13 weeks or longer, while fewer crises resulting from sanctions lasted one week. Benefit changes resulted in crises of all durations, but were most commonly estimated to last two to four weeks. The duration of crises due to income related problems varied. Debt was commonly both a long-term problem and was also responsible for crises lasting one week. This may reflect different causes of debt, where people may face long-term problems paying household bills, or alternatively experience acute problems due to debt repayments or short-term payday loans.

Figure 15: Reasons for referral by estimated duration of crisis, May 2014 to April 2016



6.2 Referrals due to benefit delays

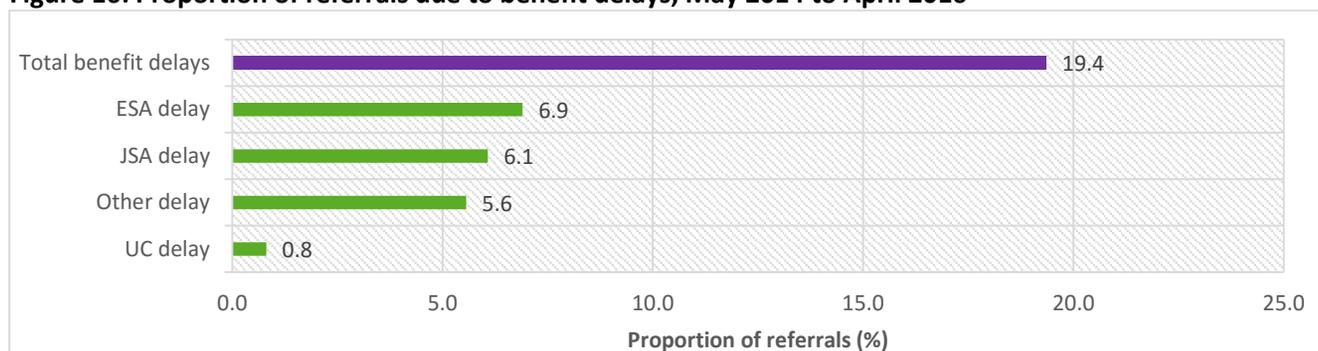
Changes to the benefits system have required considerable administrative work and lengthy delays for some people receiving benefits. There are no legal time limits within which benefit claims must be processed, potentially leaving people with long waits while their claims are assessed and payments are administered (National Audit Office, 2014). Concerns have also been raised over waiting times following the replacement of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), Employment Support Allowance (ESA), income support, child- and working-tax credits and housing benefit with Universal Credit (UC). This has an inbuilt six-week wait to receive payments and early evidence suggests that considerable hardship can be experienced during this time (Gowans, 2016). Benefit delays contributed to foodbank use for Alice and Gemma, as described below.

NARRATIVE 1: ALICE'S STORY

"Alice's husband (51 years old) was on ESA as he previously had a stroke and an epileptic fit. A few weeks ago he was told he was fit for work and he should sign on for JSA. As a result of this he was sent on a work programme to college in Ellesmere Port, had another stroke and epileptic fit at college and was taken to hospital where the doctors said he wasn't fit for work. Jobcentre Plus agreed he should be on ESA. He had no money for over a month. It will be another two weeks before Alice gets any money. Alice is legally responsible for her grand-daughter."

Source: Participant narrative, West Cheshire Foodbank and CWaC. Name has been changed.

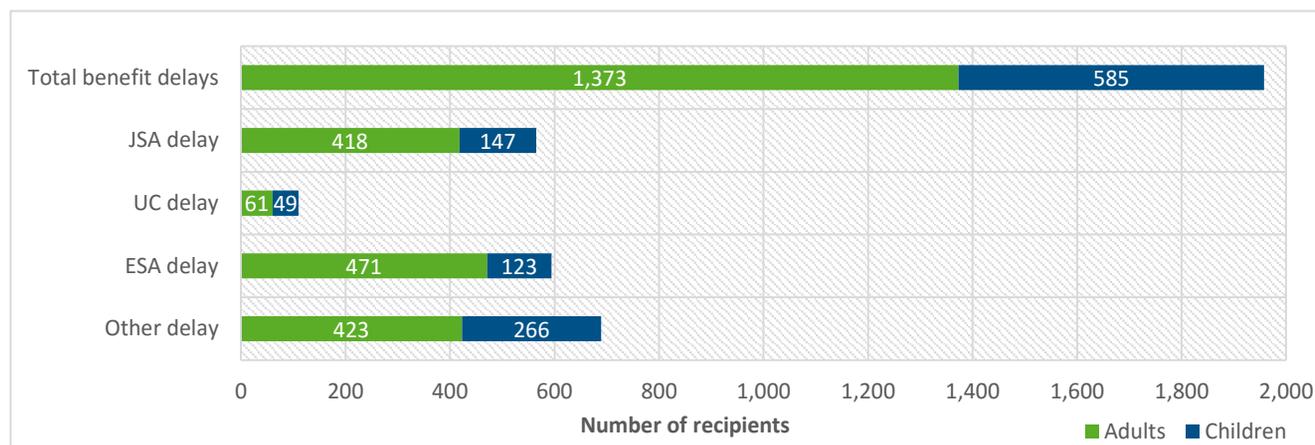
Figure 16: Proportion of referrals due to benefit delays, May 2014 to April 2016



Benefit delays accounted for one in five referrals to West Cheshire Foodbank between May 2014 and April 2016, and Figure 16 shows that delays were more common among people claiming ESA and JSA than UC. Benefit delays therefore disproportionately affected JSA claimants: in November 2015 (the latest data available) 5.7 per cent of people in Cheshire West and Chester claimed ESA, while only 0.7 per cent claimed JSA.

In total, 1,958 adults and children received help due to benefit delays (Figure 17). Similar numbers of adults were affected by delays to JSA, ESA and 'other' benefits. A larger proportion of children were affected by 'other' delays than delays due to JSA or ESA. The number of adults and children affected by delays to Universal Credit was small. Benefit delays were most common in one-person households (21 per cent) and least common for couples without children and 'other' household types (15 per cent). Delays were around twice as prevalent in young adults (23 per cent) and working age adults (19 per cent) than those aged 65 and over (10 per cent).

Figure 17: Total number of adults and children receiving help from West Cheshire Foodbank due to benefit delays



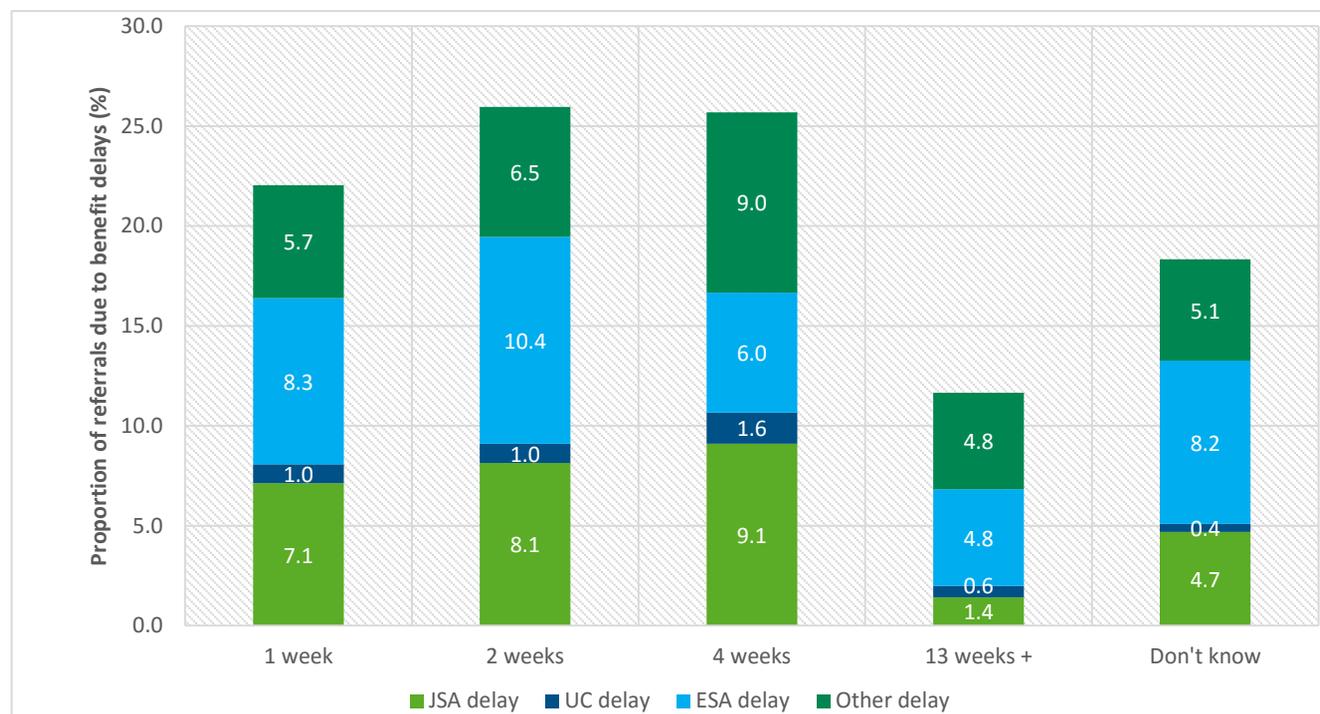
NARRATIVE 2: GEMMA'S STORY

"On 5th October 2015 I was notified that my Child Tax Credits would stop. I would usually get £52 per week on a Monday which I would use to buy groceries and pay bills. I am an unemployed single parent of a four and a half year old child so I rely on this money and live week to week. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) claim I did not renew my tax credit claim on time, which I dispute and therefore making a 'late renewal' means I now have to wait at least two weeks for any payments. I have all correspondence from HMRC which confirms that I did everything I should within the time limits."

Source: Participant narrative, West Cheshire Foodbank and Cheshire West Citizens Advice. Name has been changed.

The duration of crises due to benefit delays are displayed in Figure 18. Delays to JSA and 'other' benefits tended to last four weeks, while delays to ESA were most likely to last two weeks. Delays to Universal Credit generally lasted for four weeks, but small numbers means we should be cautious about drawing conclusions.

Figure 18: Reasons for referral due to benefit delays by estimated duration of crisis, May 2014 to April 2016



6.3 Referrals due to benefit changes

NARRATIVE 3: KATE'S STORY

"Kate has four children aged between 9-16 years. Kate was previously on ESA but became fitter and was put on Universal Credit. When she transferred to Universal Credit she didn't realise her tax credits, housing benefit and council tax benefit would stop. She received her last payment on New Year's Eve (2015)⁶ apart from £70 advanced payment. Kate is not due to get her full payment until February (2016) and can't have further advance payment. Her children's free school meals have been stopped along with other benefits."

Source: Participant narrative, West Cheshire Foodbank. Name has been changed.

The Welfare Reform Act 2012 introduced considerable changes to benefits available in the UK through measures that removed some components, tightened benefit eligibility and reduced the value of some benefit payments. The increased stringency of work capability assessments for people who are unable to work due to poor health or disability left many people ineligible for assistance (DWP, 2014), and the cash value of benefits fell for working-age adults, children, and older people (Oxfam, 2014). Existing research using Trussell Trust data has linked government spending cuts with increased uptake of emergency food provision, demonstrating that benefit changes have profoundly negative consequences for people claiming benefits (Loopstra *et al.*, 2015). Reasons of benefit change also capture people's movement between different types of benefits, for example from Employment Support Allowance to the lower value Jobseeker's Allowance. Changes to benefits are captured in the experiences of Kate, Rob, and Sandra.

⁶ Kate visited the foodbank in early January 2016.

NARRATIVE 4: ROB'S STORY

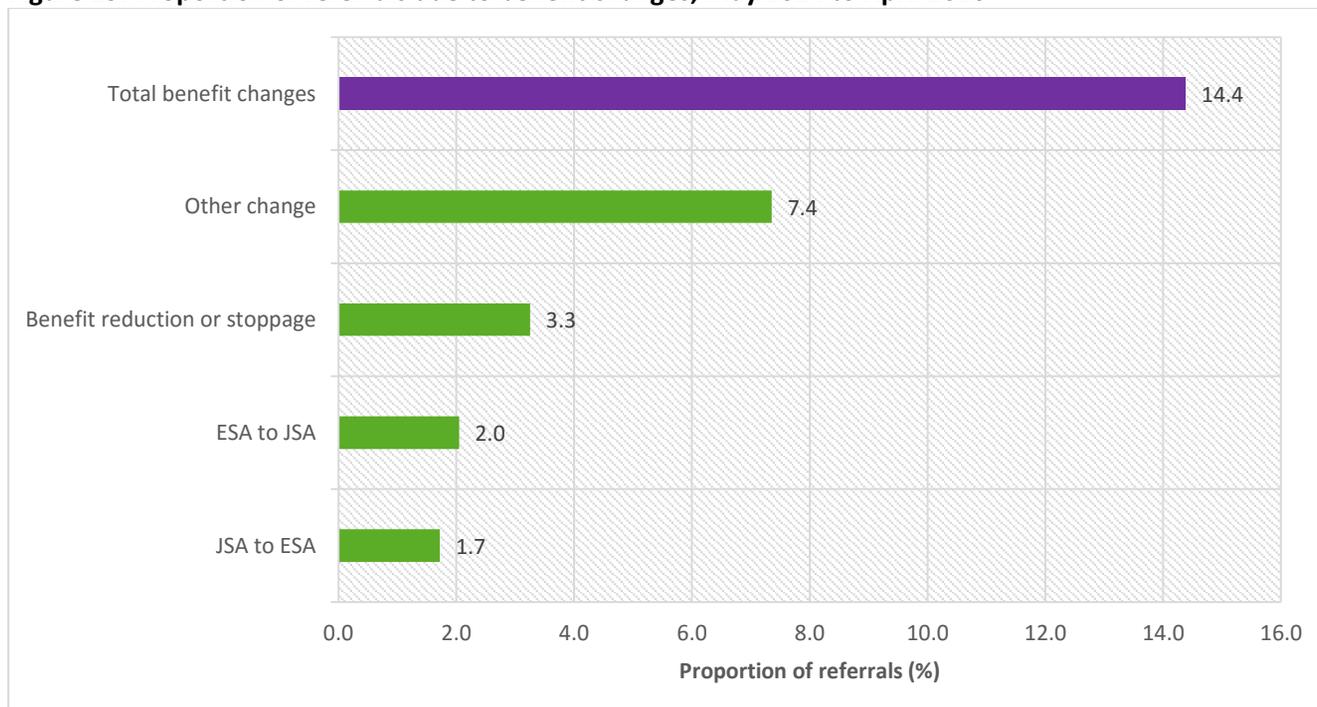
"I have been 'on the sick'⁷ for 30 years and I am unable to walk. I have a vertebra pushing in my spine. It is going to get worse. I have medical certificates but in February I failed my medical because for some reason my medical certificates were not available. I have been sending in sick notes ever since and they [the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)] are taking no notice. I have been told to wait for a "decision maker" to consider my case but no one has done so. I have had £80 hardship payment only and I am having to rely on my family for help."

Source: Participant narrative, West Cheshire Foodbank and Cheshire West Citizens Advice. Name has been changed.

Figure 19 shows the number of referrals to West Cheshire Foodbank due to benefit changes. Half of changes did not relate to a named benefit, suggesting that the changes that prompt people to seek emergency food provision are not necessarily straightforward movement between different benefits but may be more complex. A greater proportion of people were referred after moving from ESA to JSA than in the opposite direction, despite more people claiming ESA than JSA. This pattern probably reflects the lower value of JSA than ESA and suggests that people who previously received ESA have struggled to make ends meet when faced with lower value benefits payments.

Benefit changes affected 1,571 adults and children (Figure 20). Small but similar numbers of adults and children were affected by shifting between ESA and JSA, while benefit reductions and stoppages, and 'other' changes (including transfers to Universal Credit) affected a larger number of adults and children. Approximately one-third of people affected by benefit changes were children, and this proportion was similar across different categories of benefit change. Benefit changes accounted for comparable proportions of referrals from different household types. The impact of benefit changes varied by age, accounting for 11 per cent of referrals to young adults and 15 per cent to working age adults but only 3 per cent of people aged 65 and older.

Figure 19: Proportion of referrals due to benefit changes, May 2014 to April 2016



⁷ It is not clear which sickness benefits were claimed by this participant.

NARRATIVE 5: SANDRA’S STORY

“Sandra has been refused ESA and is sending in sick notes for JSA. She had four weeks over Christmas and New Year (2015-16) before the first payment of JSA came. An appeal against this was sent in by DIAL House⁸. Sandra had the tribunal letter dated 21st December (2015) but DWP still haven't received it. Sandra phoned the DWP at least five times and was passed around different departments The calls were made from Sandra’s mobile and took about 30 minutes each time so were quite costly. The phone calls led to no resolution.”

Source: Participant narrative, West Cheshire Foodbank. Name has been changed.

Figure 20: Number of adults and children receiving help from West Cheshire Foodbank due to benefit changes

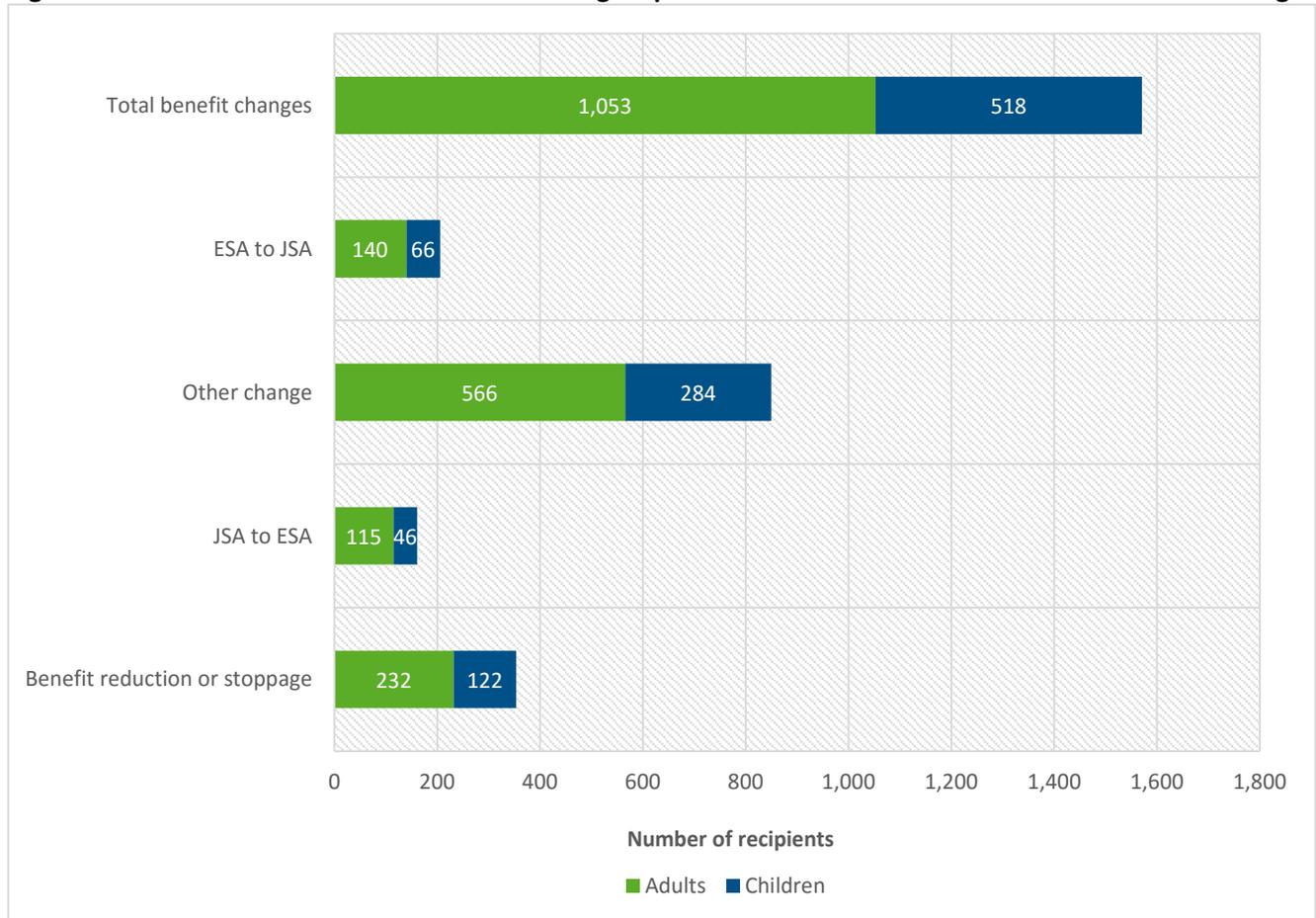
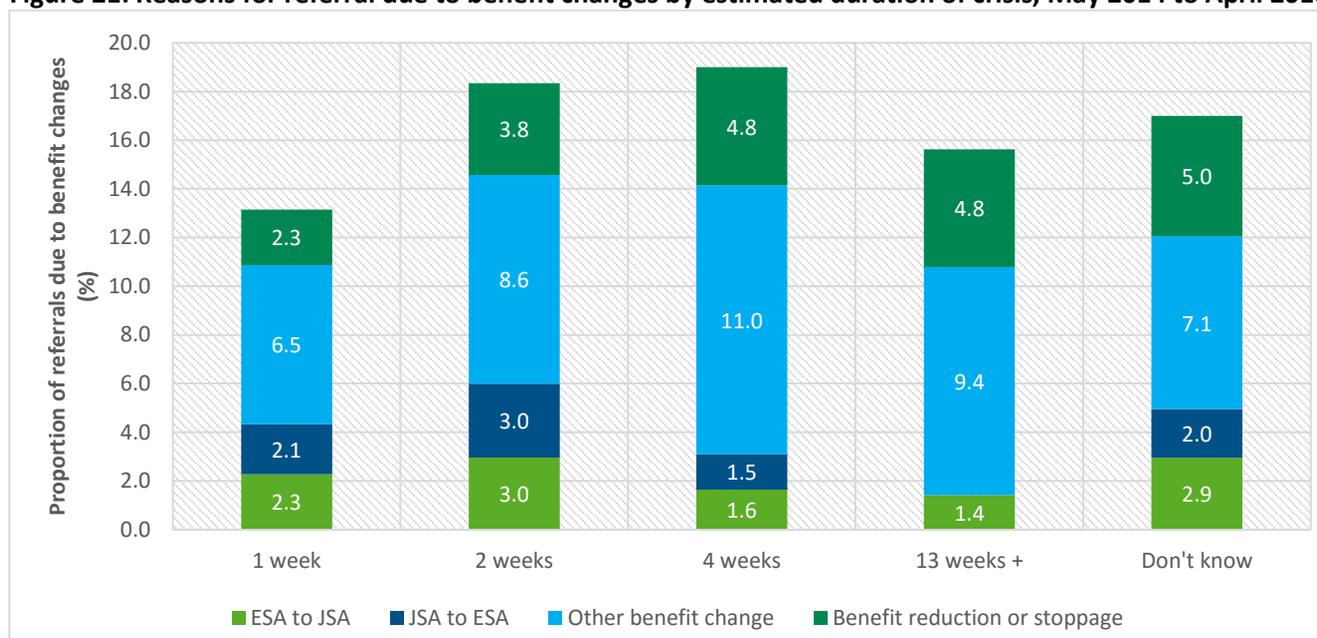


Figure 21 shows that referring agencies estimated that benefit changes typically resulted in crises lasting two or four weeks. Nonetheless, around one in six referrals due to benefit changes were for crises that lasted 13 weeks or longer. In many cases the estimated duration of crisis could not be ascertained, which may reflect a limited understanding of the benefits process and the timescale it operates by, making it difficult to judge the duration of income crisis prompted by a benefit change.

⁸ DIAL House (also known as DIAL West Cheshire), is a charity providing a range of services which aim to enable disabled people and older people to live sustained, independent lives.

Figure 21: Reasons for referral due to benefit changes by estimated duration of crisis, May 2014 to April 2016



6.4 Referrals due to benefit sanctions

Sanctions refer to situations where benefit payments are withheld from claimants who fail to meet the conditions of their assistance. The attachment of certain conditions – such as attending meetings at the Jobcentre and participating in employment or training schemes – to people receiving benefits is well established, but sanctioning has been pursued more aggressively in recent years amidst progressively toughening attitudes towards benefit recipients. For example, the number of sanctions imposed on Jobseeker's Allowance claimants increased threefold to reach 900,000 in 2013/14 (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2015) and a link has been reported between levels of benefit sanctions and use of emergency food provision (Loopstra *et al.*, 2015). Sanctions were responsible for Will and Ben seeking emergency food from West Cheshire Foodbank.

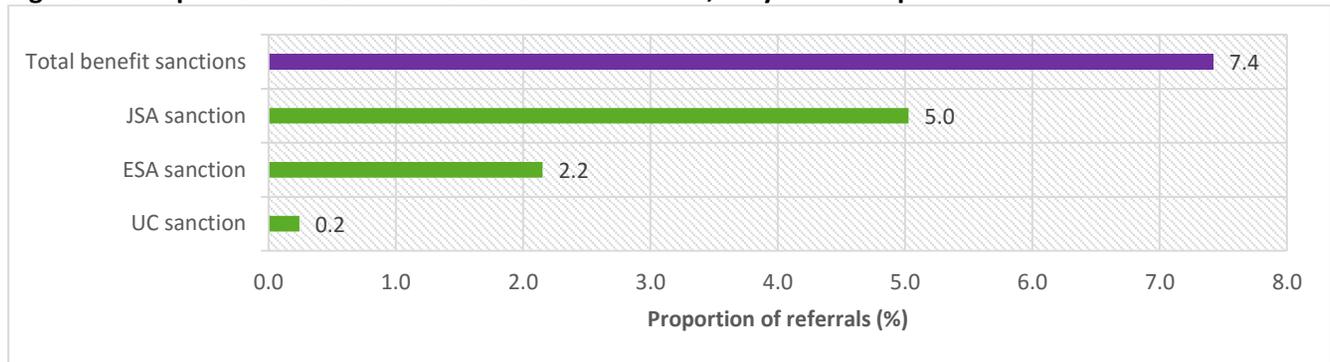
NARRATIVE 6: WILL'S STORY

While looking for new work, Will paid to go on a chainsaw license course in Preston. Getting up at 4am to attend meant he was unable to apply for jobs, but this meant he missed the target number of jobs needed for Job Seekers Allowance and his money was stopped for two weeks. Will was then put on a mandatory work programme, but was unable to collect his money from the Post Office until 9am, so couldn't get to the programme for 7am. He was sanctioned for two months.

Source: Participant narrative, West Cheshire Foodbank. Name has been changed.

Benefit sanctions accounted for 7.4 per cent of referrals to West Cheshire Foodbank. Sanctions were more than twice as prevalent for JSA as ESA claimants, demonstrating the greater vulnerability of this group of claimants to sanctioning. In contrast, sanctions for those claiming Universal Credit were rare, which probably reflects the small number of people claiming Universal Credit, rather than low levels of sanctions among this group of claimants. Benefit sanctions were most prevalent in one-person households (9 per cent of referrals), and less common 'other' households (4 per cent). Sanctions were more common in young adults and working-age adults (9 and 7 per cent, respectively) than older adults (3 per cent). Sanctions affected 659 adults and children, and it was largely adults that bore the brunt of benefit sanctions (Figure 23). Nonetheless, over one in five people affected by benefit sanctions was a child.

Figure 22: Proportion of referrals due to benefit sanctions, May 2014 to April 2016

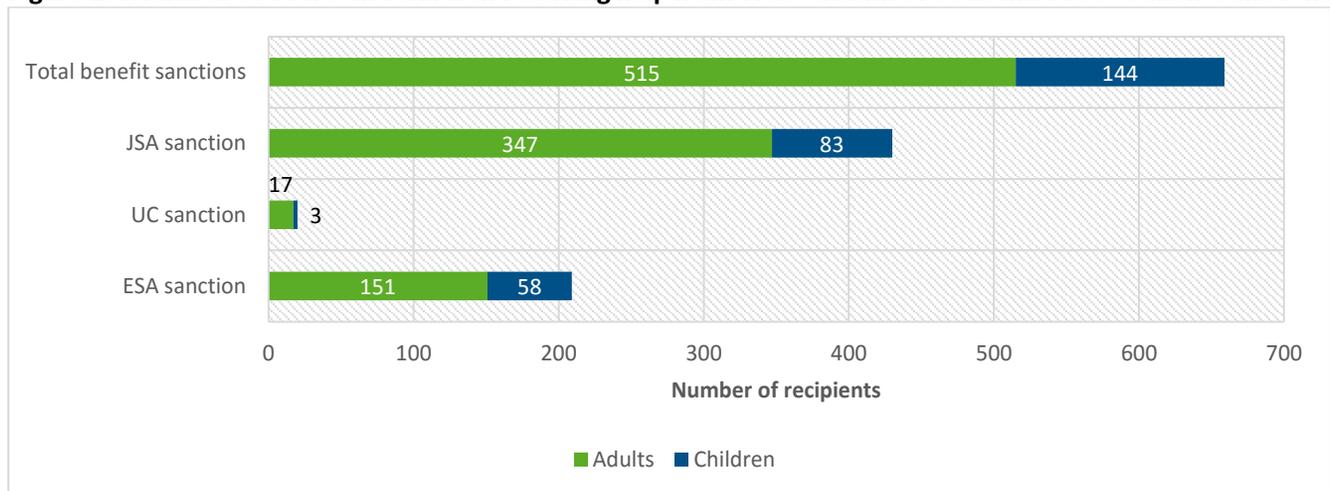


NARRATIVE 7: BEN’S STORY

“Ben has been in difficulty since Social Services asked him to leave the home where he was living with his wife and kids. He became homeless, sleeping in his car. Eventually he was awarded JSA and the council agreed to pay ground rent on a touring caravan after much debate. He was then sanctioned for not filling in computer forms as he is dyslexic. He thought when sanctions finished he would be able to manage but unfortunately housing benefit (ground rent) was stopped due to a misunderstanding with the caravan site. He is now trying to gather evidence and trying to manage rent and living expenses on JSA.”

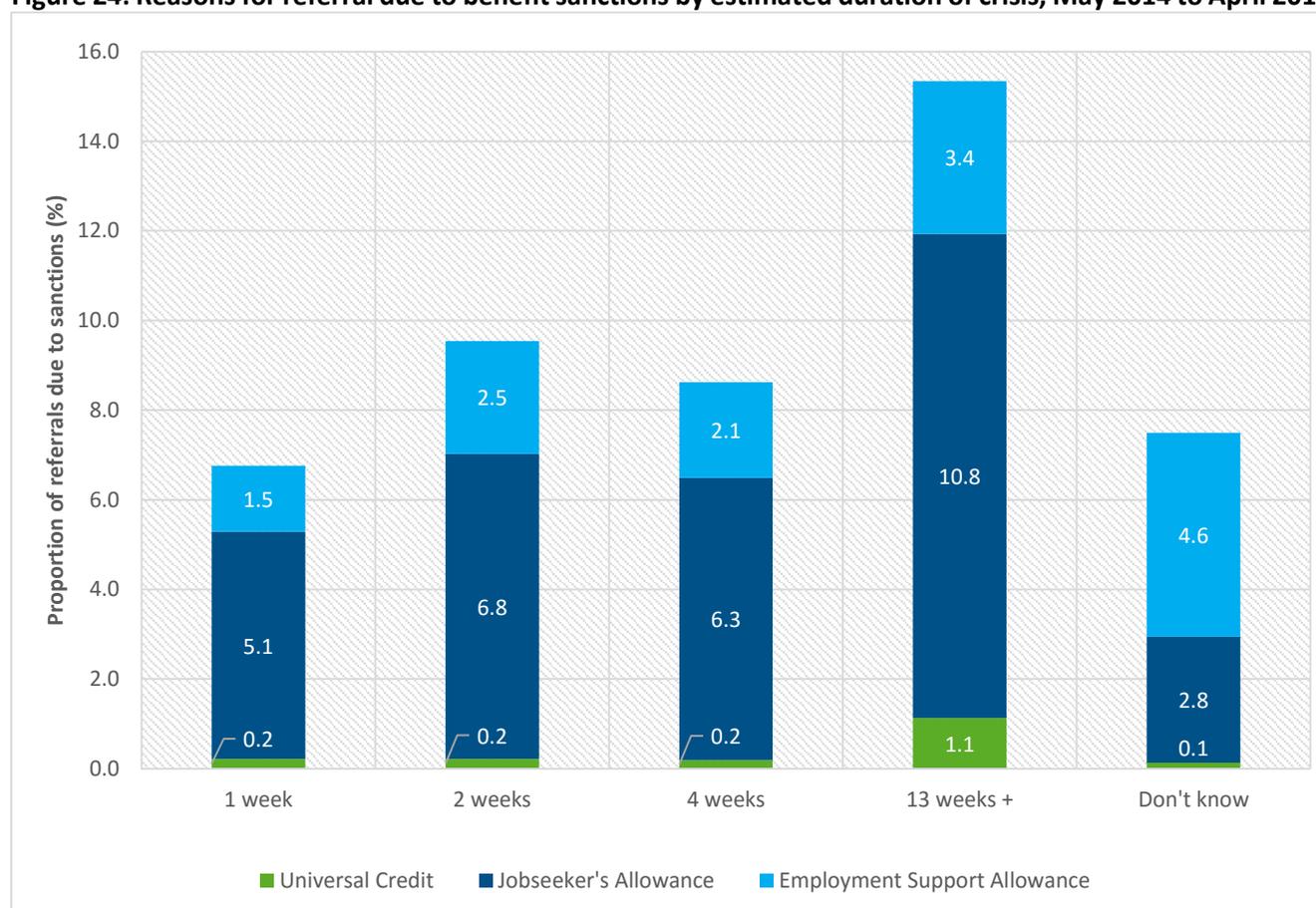
Source: Participant narrative, West Cheshire Foodbank and The Salvation Army. Name has been changed.

Figure 23: Number of adults and children receiving help from West Cheshire Foodbank due to benefit sanctions



The estimated duration of sanctions is noticeably longer than other crises. Nearly one in five people who received help from West Cheshire Foodbank due to sanctions estimated that their crisis would last 13 weeks or longer (see Figure 24). The duration of crises were fairly comparable between people claiming JSA and ESA. The number of people receiving Universal Credit who were sanctioned is too small to draw any clear conclusions about the duration of resulting income crises.

Figure 24: Reasons for referral due to benefit sanctions by estimated duration of crisis, May 2014 to April 2016

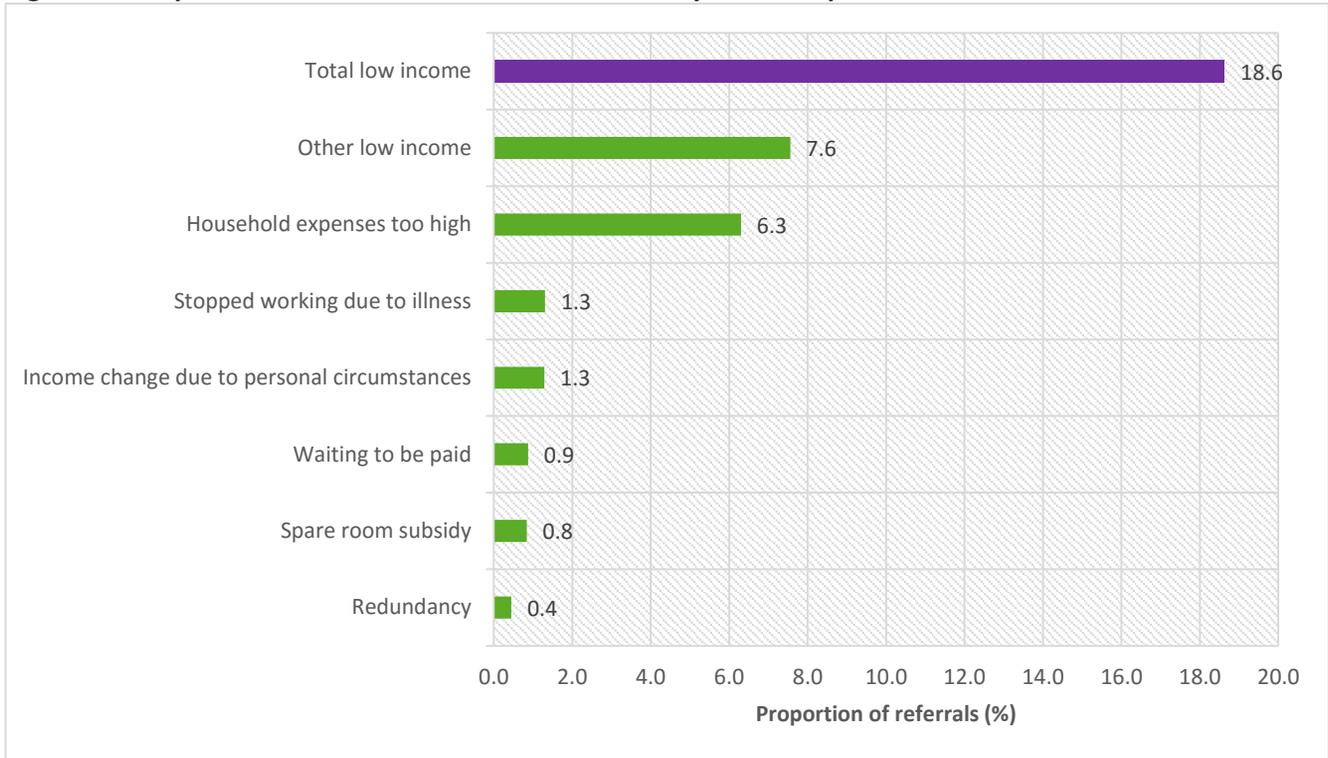


6.5 Referrals due to low income

Low incomes can affect both people who are working and those claiming benefits. For the first time in 2011/12 over half of households living in poverty contained someone in work (MacInnes *et al.*, 2013). Low income contributed to Lesley, whose story is below, seeking assistance from West Cheshire Foodbank.

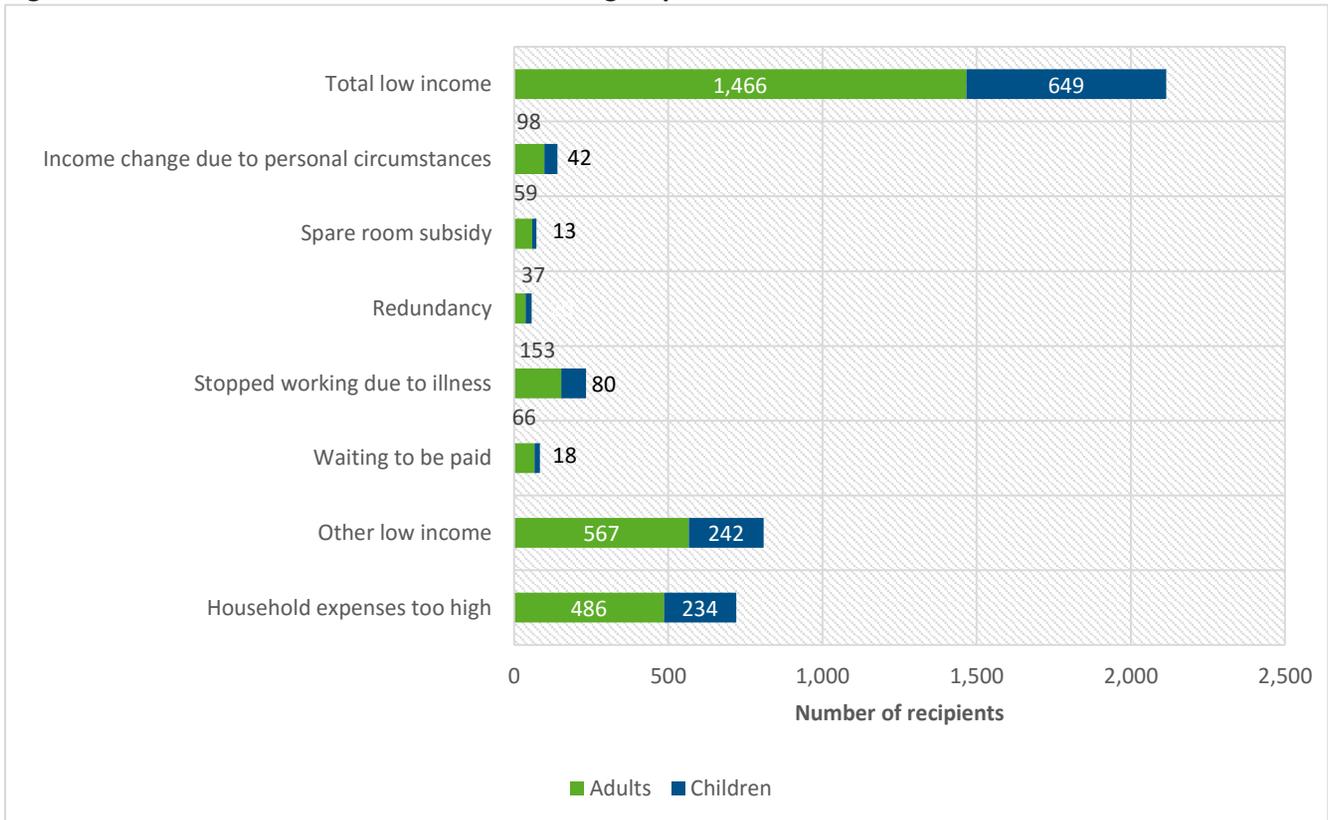
Low income accounted for 19 per cent of referrals to West Cheshire Foodbank between May 2014 and April 2016. The detailed reasons for referral due to low income are illustrated in Figure 25 below. High household expenses and 'other' reasons accounted for three-quarters of referrals due to low income. The high level of 'other' income problems and the absence of more detailed information on low incomes suggests that difficulty making ends meet cannot be pigeonholed into neat categories and instead reflects several potentially complex factors. We also see that the spare room subsidy accounted for less than one per cent of referrals so appears not to be a major driver of food poverty among people receiving help from West Cheshire Foodbank. The subsidy will nonetheless contribute to household expenses and general conditions of low income. Low incomes accounted for 16 per cent of referrals for one-person households, but 31 per cent of referrals for 'other' household types. Low incomes were more prevalent as a reason for seeking emergency food among older people (22 per cent) than young adults and working age adults (16 and 19 per cent).

Figure 25: Proportion of referrals due to low income, May 2014 to April 2016



Overall, 2,115 adults and children received help from West Cheshire Foodbank due to low income (Figure 26). High household expenses and ‘other’ low incomes accounted for the largest number of people affected by low income, of whom just less than one-third were children.

Figure 26: Number of adults and children receiving help from West Cheshire Foodbank due to low income



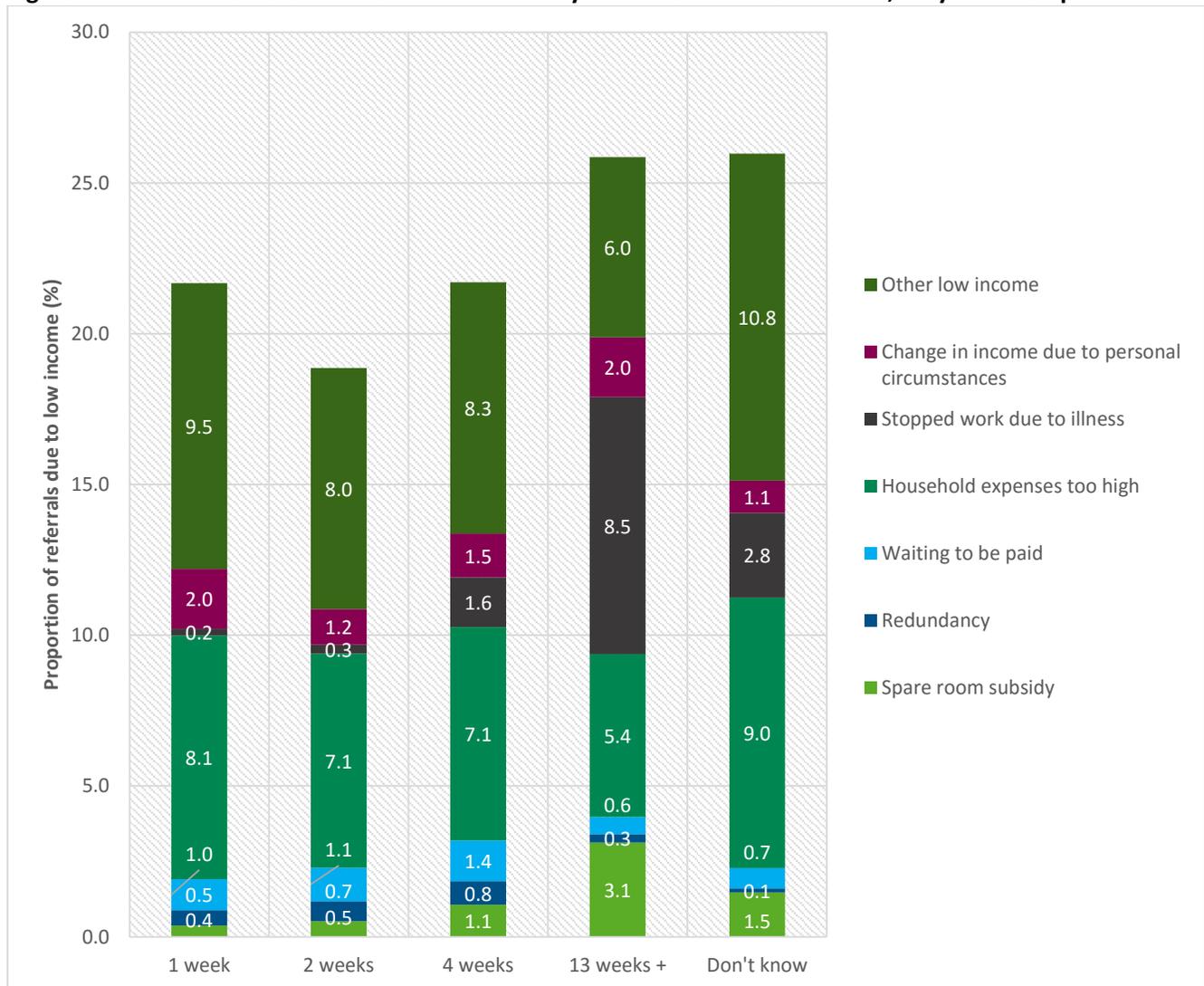
NARRATIVE 8: LESLEY'S STORY

“My marriage has broken down and I am on benefits, I have three sons aged 19, 18 and 10 years. My eldest son has chronic fatigue and is waiting for Personal Independence allowance⁹. My 18 year-old son has a job on a zero hours' contract.”

Source: Participant narrative, West Cheshire Foodbank. Name has been changed.

Estimates from referring agencies show that reasons of low income result in crises with a range of durations (see Figure 27). Predictably, long crises were predicted when people stopped work due to illness or were faced with the spare room subsidy. Perhaps surprisingly, crises resulting from high household expenses were most commonly expected to last one week, which replicates past research noting that seeking emergency food is often prompted by an acute and short-term crisis (Perry *et al.*, 2014).

Figure 27: Reasons for referral due to low income by estimated duration of crisis, May 2014 to April 2016



⁹ The respondent is probably referring to Personal Independent Payment, a benefit intended to help with the additional costs of living with a disability or long-term health condition.

6.6 Referrals due to debt

Problems of debt among the most vulnerable people in society reflect broader trends of declining personal savings and mounting debts. In 2013 an estimated one-quarter of UK households had no financial assets or were in debt, leaving them just one unexpected bill away from financial crisis. Unsurprisingly, these problems are concentrated among low-income groups, and in 2005 the poorest tenth were estimated to have non-mortgage debts totalling £6,900, three times higher than a decade earlier (Hills et al., 2013). The popularity of payday lenders who charge enormous interest rates for loans to people who may have exhausted other options is another problem to have emerged in the past few years. Previous research has highlighted debt as contributing to one-third of cases of destitution in the UK (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016). Sarah, Allison, and Maria's stories illustrate the problems with debt that can result in people seeking emergency food.

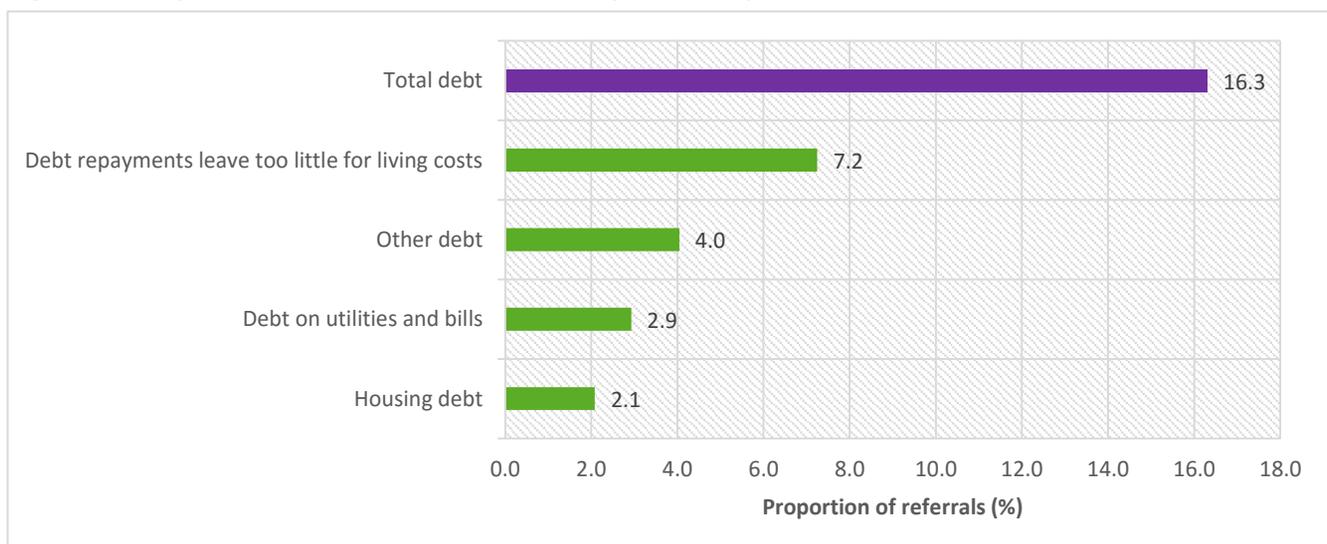
NARRATIVE 9: SARAH'S STORY

"Due to circumstances over the last few months I have found myself in debt. I am struggling to pay bedroom tax and am now in arrears and have to go to court. It has been a case of either heating the house or eating. I would be happy to move to a smaller property but there is nothing available so I have to remain in the property but can't afford the bedroom tax and I now face being evicted. The situation is affecting my health and has increased my depression. I have disabilities that affect my mobility but cannot go into any sheltered accommodation until I'm 55 years of age."

Source: Participant narrative, West Cheshire Foodbank and Cheshire West Citizens Advice. Name has been changed.

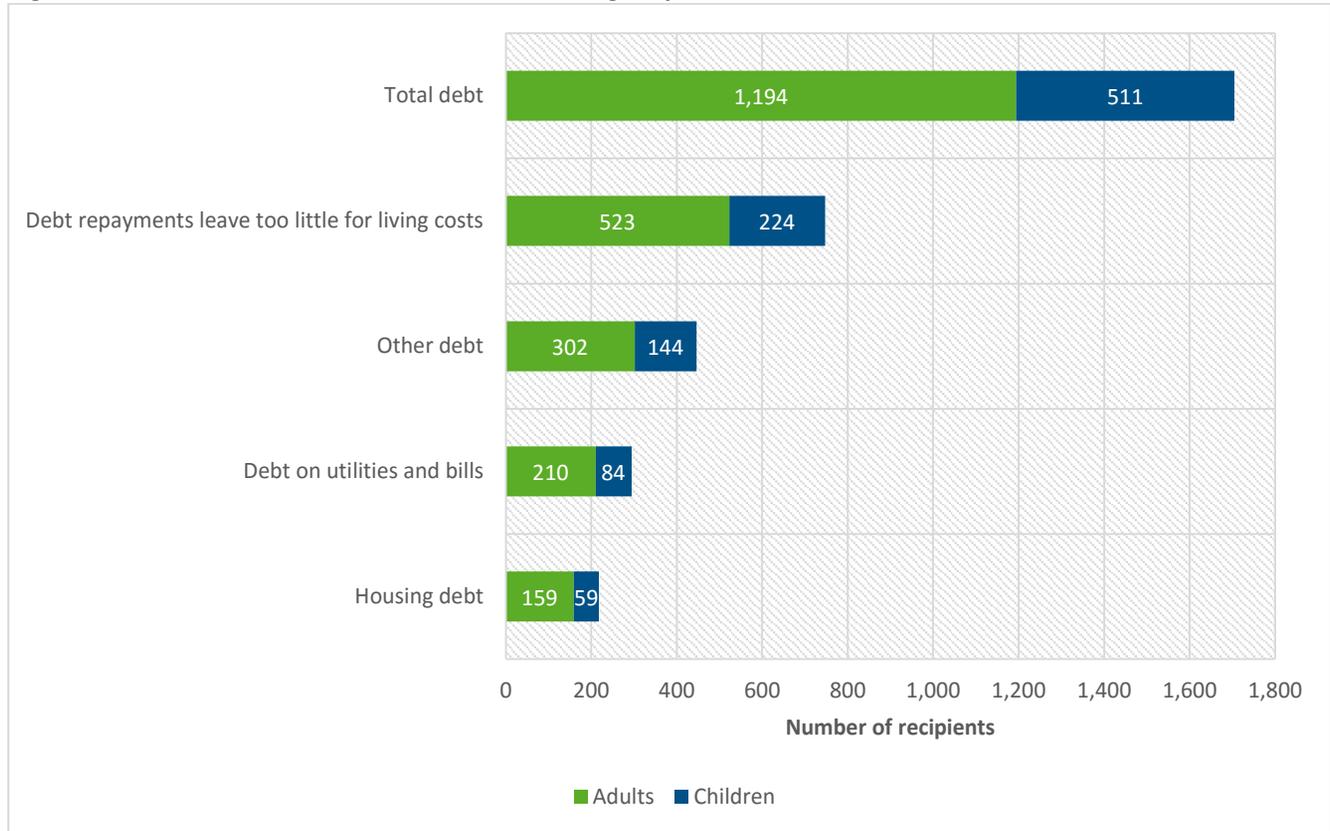
Overall, 16 per cent of referrals to West Cheshire Foodbank between May 2014 and April 2016 were due to issues of debt. The detailed reasons for referral due to debt are shown in Figure 28 below. The main reason for debt-related problems was debt repayments that leave people with too little money for living costs. 'Other' debt also accounted for nearly one-quarter of debt-related reasons. This 'other' category might capture experiences of people borrowing informally from family or friends, or using payday loans with high repayment charges. Debt was a greater problem for couples without children referred to West Cheshire Foodbank (19 per cent) than 'other' household types (13 per cent), and was far more prevalent among older people (29 per cent) than young adults and working age adults (10 and 17 per cent).

Figure 28: Proportion of referrals due to debt, May 2014 to April 2016



In total, 1,705 adults and children received help due to debt (Figure 29). Debt repayments that cripple households' ability to pay daily living costs accounted for the largest number of adults and children affected by debt. Debts relating to housing, utilities and bills, and debt from other sources were also common. Across all types of debt, nearly one-third of people affected by debt were children.

Figure 29: Number of adults and children receiving help from West Cheshire Foodbank due to debt

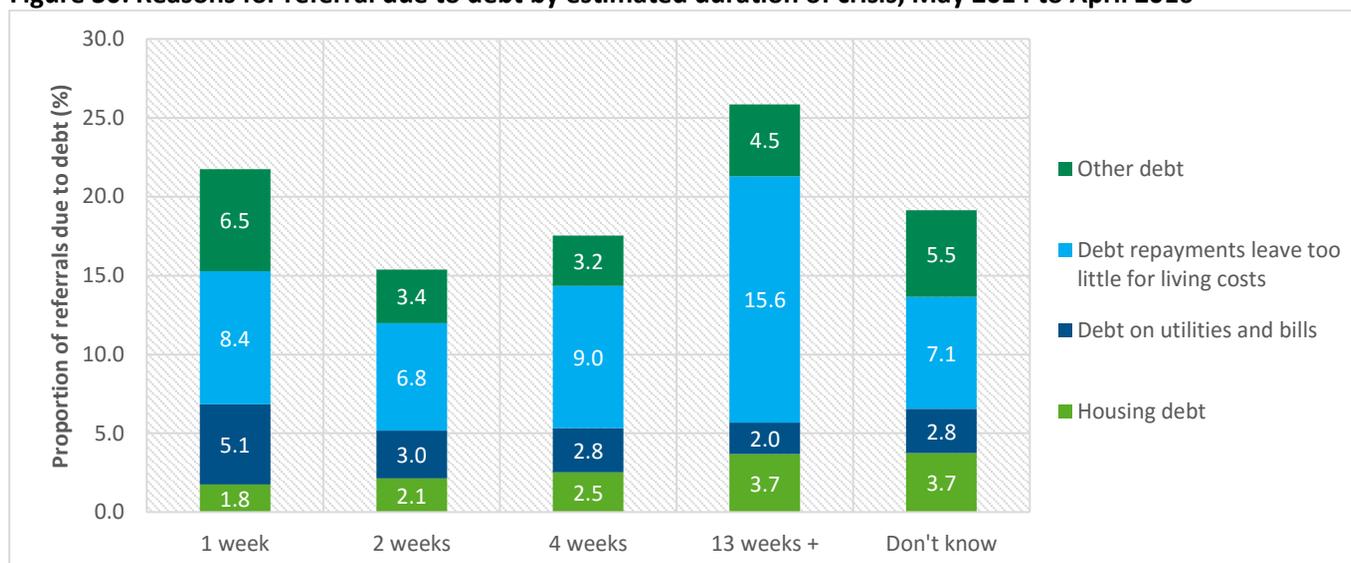


NARRATIVE 10: ALLISON'S STORY

"We have to pay a mortgage, but at the moment we rely on benefits and my partner is looking for work. We get paid fortnightly but one payment goes straight to the mortgage which leaves us with nothing. We have already been to court about mortgage arrears, if we miss one payment our home will be repossessed."

Source: Participant narrative, West Cheshire Foodbank and The Salvation Army. Name has been changed.

Figure 30 shows that reasons of debt tend to be associated with either very brief crises lasting one week, or results in more sustained income problems lasting 13 weeks or longer. A large proportion of people who said that debt repayments leave too little for living costs expected their income crisis to last 13 weeks or longer, demonstrating that debt imposes long-term difficulties on household budgets. Housing debt was likewise a long-term issue, in contrast to debt on utilities and bills, which tended to inject an intense but brief income crisis.

Figure 30: Reasons for referral due to debt by estimated duration of crisis, May 2014 to April 2016**NARRATIVE 11: MARIA'S STORY**

After her marriage broke down, Maria's financial situation changed dramatically. The money she had received via tax credits, carer and child benefits then stopped once her daughter reached 20, even though both of Maria's daughters were in full time education. Maria used her JSA and child maintenance to pay her debts and bills but this left her with no money for food. Maria said "I am due to start a new job on Monday but it will be three weeks until I receive a wage."

Source: Participant narrative, West Cheshire Foodbank and Cheshire West Citizens Advice. Name has been changed.

6.7 Referrals due to 'other' reasons

As already mentioned, the reasons underlying income crises that prompt people to seek emergency food provision are complex and it may not be possible to easily categorise these. For example, Justin's story highlights several problems that together prompted him to seek emergency food. Overall, nine per cent or 543 referrals to West Cheshire Foodbank between May 2014 and April 2016 were due to 'other' reasons. This affected 622 adults and 235 children. The duration of crises prompted by 'other' reasons were fairly short, with two-thirds of crises estimated to last one or two weeks. Long crises lasting 13 weeks or more accounted for only 3 per cent of referrals for 'other' reasons. 'Other' reasons were most prevalent for one-person households (11 per cent) and least common for 'other' household types (3 per cent), and more common for older and younger adults (both 14 per cent) but less prevalent for working-age adults (9 per cent).

NARRATIVE 12: JUSTIN'S STORY

"I had been with my partner for 13 years and we have two kids together. My relationship broke down and I lost everything that I'd worked for during the 13 years. I ended up homeless and was put in a shelter. Now I've got a room in a hostel. The foodbank helped me in a big way providing me with the essentials I needed to keep going until I sorted out my benefits. I have never been in this situation before and didn't know what to do. Without the foodbank, I wouldn't have anything at all."

Source: Participant narrative, West Cheshire Foodbank and Foundation Enterprises NW. Name has been changed.

7.0 CONCLUSIONS

Last year, the Trussell Trust distributed over one million emergency three-day food supplies to people in crisis. One third of their recipients were children. We are now realising the scale and persistence of food poverty in the UK. The huge growth in the Trussell Trust's foodbank network and the sustained commitment from its volunteers have provided much-needed support for some of our most vulnerable families, yet charitable food provision has been unable to solve the problem of hunger. This report has explored the characteristics of people accessing emergency food in West Cheshire, their reasons for doing so, and the length of time they are expected to need help. Drawing on evidence from over three years' of referrals, and exploring additional detailed information on reasons for referral and the expected duration of income crises offers us new insight into food poverty, and points to policy changes that could dramatically reduce food poverty in the UK.

Between 2013 and 2016, the growth of emergency food provision in West Cheshire echoed the expansion of the overall Trussell Trust network. Over this period, one-third of people receiving help from West Cheshire Foodbank were children. The number of food parcels distributed displays some fluctuation: there is some evidence of 'holiday hunger' in the summer months, but referrals did not increase in the winter months when fuel bills are higher.

The broad reasons for referral to West Cheshire Foodbank are comparable to those across the Trussell Trust foodbank network, with two-thirds of referrals due to benefit delays, low income and benefit changes. People referred to West Cheshire Foodbank were however less likely to report problems of low income and more likely to report difficulties with benefit changes and debt than those across the overall Trussell Trust network. These differences reinforce the importance of exploring in detail the local characteristics of foodbank use to examine local need.

Over half of households receiving emergency food from West Cheshire Foodbank contained one person, while over one-quarter of households contained children. Few food parcels were distributed to people aged 65 and older. People receiving help from West Cheshire Foodbank were concentrated in disadvantaged areas of Cheshire West and Chester that are characterised by low educational qualifications, above-average unemployment and a high prevalence of social renting. Nonetheless, food parcels were distributed to people living in all 46 wards in Cheshire West and Chester, demonstrating that food poverty is widespread across this area.

During the two years between May 2014 and April 2016, additional detailed data were collected on reasons for referral and the expected duration of crises that prompted people to seek emergency food. This provides greater insight into the experiences of some of the most vulnerable people living in Cheshire West and Chester and captured several other patterns of foodbank use that have not been explored previously. Reasons for referral cannot always be categorised into a single cause so it is important to be cautious when considering the underlying reasons for foodbank use.

Benefit changes – which accounted for 14 per cent of referrals – mainly comprised movement between JSA and ESA, and benefits that had been reduced or stopped entirely. Likewise, fairly even proportions of the 19 per cent of referrals due to benefit delays applied to ESA and JSA, while delays to UC were uncommon. Encouragingly, the number of people seeking help due to benefit sanctions halved between May 2014 and April 2016. Sanctions were twice as prevalent for people claiming JSA as for people claiming ESA, which probably reflects the more stringent eligibility conditions of JSA compared with ESA as well as the different characteristics of these groups. Very few people were referred because of sanctions to Universal Credit. Delays in the introduction of Universal Credit mean that low numbers of sanctions are more likely to reflect the small number of people claiming Universal Credit (currently only new jobseekers), rather than low rates of sanctioning in this group.

Less positively, we found rising numbers of referrals to West Cheshire Foodbank for reasons of low income and debt. A range of reasons relating to low incomes were reported, in particular high household expenses. The spare room subsidy accounted for less than one per cent of referrals so appears not to be a major driver of food poverty in West Cheshire, although it may have contributed to other reasons for referral. Nearly half of problems relating to debt reflected debt repayments leaving people without enough money for their living costs, although it is not possible to distinguish debt repayments to utility firms or credit card companies from higher-cost doorstep loans.

Overall, nearly half of food parcels were distributed to people who estimated their income crisis to last between one and two weeks. However, six per cent of referrals were for crises lasting 13 weeks or longer, raising questions over the suitability of emergency food provision to address longer-term problems of low income. The voucher system employed by Trussell Trust foodbanks – in which people can be issued with three vouchers of emergency food, each containing enough food for three days – means that the emergency food provided by Trussell Trust foodbanks will provide adequate protection against hunger for fewer than half of households referred to West Cheshire Foodbank.

The duration of crises varied according to the main reason for referral: benefit delays and changes typically lasted between one and four weeks, while sanctions generally lasted longer. Many crises due to low income were short-term in nature, suggesting that people receiving help from West Cheshire Foodbank may have been pushed into a financial crisis by a sudden or unexpected change in income which left them vulnerable to short-term but immediate problems. In the past, these problems may have been alleviated by crisis loans to help with emergency costs. The ending of crisis loans in April 2013 has removed this protection against severe poverty prompted by unexpected costs, potentially contributing to increased numbers of people seeking emergency food due to low incomes. Problems with debt tended to be associated with either very brief crises lasting one week, or resulted in sustained crises lasting 13 weeks or longer.

We also identified some clear differences in the personal characteristics of people referred to West Cheshire Foodbank. Approximately one-third of people referred to foodbanks for problems of benefit delay, benefit change, low income, and debt were children. Although benefit sanctions affected a greater proportion of adults than children, over one in five people affected by benefit sanctions was a child. Benefit sanctions and delays were common among one-person households, debt was prevalent in couples, and low-incomes were a common reason for referral among 'other' household types. There was also a clear distinction in the reasons for referral between age groups: younger adults and working age adults were typically referred due to problems with benefits – whether delays, changes, or sanctions – while older people were more likely to seek emergency food for reasons of debt and low incomes.

This report provides the most systematic and detailed exploration yet conducted of people receiving emergency food in the UK. Our stories illustrate the experiences of people who have received emergency food from West Cheshire Foodbank, stories that cannot always be reduced to a single clear reason for referral. Over forty per cent of referrals reflected problems in the benefits system – whether changes, delays or sanctions. Problems of low incomes and debt were also prevalent. This report underlines the importance of undertaking rigorous research to identify the characteristics and experiences of people affected by food poverty. This knowledge is crucial to gain a better understanding of the problem of food poverty, and help identify policy measures aimed at reducing hunger in the UK.

8.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations suggest practical and measured 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 income loss is unavoidable. Recommendations one to five focus on restoring the welfare safety net, while recommendation six focuses on making sure that work pays.

1. IMPROVE JOBCENTRE PLUS ADMINISTRATION AND SERVICE

We recommend that the Department for Work and Pensions should:

- i. *Ensure local Jobcentres process social security payment applications more quickly. We support the recommendations of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Food Poverty and Hunger that payments should be delivered within 5 working days¹⁰ (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty, 2014).*
- ii. *Ensure appropriate support is given to help people make a social security claim, in particular but not limited to cases where claimants have mental health issues or low levels of IT literacy.*
- iii. *Improve awareness of and access to short-term benefit advances and hardship payments.*

2. REFORM BENEFIT SANCTIONS POLICY AND PRACTICE

We recommend that the Department for Work and Pensions should:

- i. *Introduce robust safeguards for people to ensure that sanctions never place individuals or families in a position where they cannot afford food or other essentials.*
- ii. *Ensure that claimants fully understand the expectations upon them so that sanctions are not applied where claimants have a poor understanding of the system.*
- iii. *We support the recommendations of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Food Poverty and Hunger (2014) that require that claimants who are sanctioned “be immediately informed of their right to appeal the decision, and provided with the necessary documentation to do so”¹¹.*

We recommend that the Government should:

- iv. *We support the recommendations of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Food Poverty and Hunger (2014) to provide clear guidance stating that “a sanction decision is only lawful if letters are sent, and can be proven to have been received, to the claimant explaining the reason that a sanction is being imposed (including dates, what the failure was, and why there isn’t good cause), the period the sanction will apply for, and whether Hardship Payments may be granted, and if not, why not.”¹²*
- v. *Provide clear guidance regarding what constitutes a reason for sanctioning and ensure that sanctions can only be applied where there have been severe and repeated breaches of welfare conditionality.*

3. REFORM THE MANDATORY RECONSIDERATION PROCESS

We recommend that the Department for Work and Pensions should:

- i. *Introduce a time limit for the Mandatory Reconsideration period.*
- ii. *Continue the payment of Employment and Support Allowance for the duration of the Mandatory Reconsideration period.*

¹⁰ Recommendations R47 and R51

¹¹ Recommendation R60

¹² Recommendation R59

4. ENSURE SOCIAL SECURITY PAYMENT LEVELS ARE ADEQUATE

We recommend that the Government should:

- i. *Ensure that social security payments provide sufficient income for recipients to achieve an acceptable standard of living, with reference to minimum income standards¹³*
- ii. *Ensure that all social security payments levels automatically increase in line with inflation.*

5. SUSTAIN AND IMPROVE ACCESS TO THE LOCAL WELFARE ASSISTANCE SCHEME

We welcome the council's commitment to make tackling poverty and inequality a local priority. We especially welcome the investment in establishing 'West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission'¹⁴ and the work undertaken to improve eligibility for and access to emergency support through the local welfare assistance scheme.

We recommend that Cheshire West and Chester Council should:

- i. *Continue to raise awareness of the emergency financial support available through the local welfare assistance scheme.*
- ii. *Continue to ensure funding is sustained and increased to allow administrators to meet existing demand.*

6. ENSURE WAGES ARE SUFFICIENT AND WORK IS SECURE

We recommend that employers¹⁵ should:

- i. *Pay the Living Wage¹⁶ to all staff and encourage the payment of a living wage through procurement policies.*
- ii. *Guarantee staff a sufficient and regular income through provision of guaranteed minimum hours.*
- iii. *Ensure staff are given adequate financial protection in the event of sickness or personal difficulty.*
- iv. *Ensure that staff receive their full¹⁷ wages without delay¹⁸.*
- v. *Review the use of insecure employment strategies – including agency work, low-hour contracts and self-employment – and ensure these strategies are mutually beneficial and are not used simply as a cost-saving device for employers.*

We welcome the council's commitment to make tackling poverty and inequality the local priority including the decision to pay directly employed staff a local Living Wage.

We recommend that Cheshire West and Chester Council should:

- vi. *Insist, in the strongest possible terms, that all staff within council-owned companies, schools within the borough and council contractors receive a Living Wage.*

¹³ Minimum Income Standards define levels of income needed to achieve an acceptable standards of living. For more information see <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/minimum-income-standard-2014>.

¹⁴ The 'West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission', catalysed by West Cheshire Foodbank in partnership with other organisations including Cheshire West and Chester Council and Citizen's Advice Bureau, is an initiative aiming to bring together key decision makers with those living in poverty. The Commission is founded on the principle that poverty will only truly be addressed when those who experience it first-hand are at the heart of the process.

¹⁵ The unitary authority, local business and third sector organisations including faith-based organisations and other charities

¹⁶ The term 'Living Wage' refers to the hourly wage rate calculated in relation to the basic cost of living in the UK by the Living Wage Foundation. The current UK Living Wage is £8.25 an hour outside of London. Employers are encouraged to voluntarily adopt this accreditation. See <http://www.livingwage.org.uk>. The Living Wage is distinct from the government's national living wage of £7.20 per hour for employees aged 25 and over

¹⁷ Without deductions; except for tax and national insurance contributions, repayment of student loans, deductions following a court order or deductions formally agreed and for which written permission has been received from the member of staff

¹⁸ As detailed in the employee's written statement of their terms and conditions of employment

9.0 FURTHER RESEARCH

The current work has provided insight into the characteristics of people receiving help from West Cheshire Foodbank, their reasons for seeking help and how long their income crisis was expected to last. The project findings have raised further questions about foodbank use in West Cheshire that would be worthwhile to address in future research. In particular, future research should consider:

- Distinguishing between people who received emergency food once, and those who have received emergency food on more than one occasion. This information would provide an estimate of the total unique number of people receiving emergency food, which has not previously been established. The Trussell Trust have estimated that people generally need two vouchers in a year (Trussell Trust, 2016a). It is relevant to consider whether the same patterns are true of people using West Cheshire Foodbank, as this information could also help identify ways of supporting different groups to avoid food poverty
- Identifying the total number and proportion of people seeking emergency food on more than three occasions. People using Trussell Trust foodbanks may be issued with up to three vouchers, after which they may receive further vouchers if the foodbank manager considers this necessary. Identifying the number of people receiving emergency food for longer periods will provide insight into the characteristics of people experiencing persistent food poverty and for whom the root causes of food poverty have not been adequately addressed
- Exploring changes over time in the characteristics of people accessing emergency food in West Cheshire, their reasons for referral and duration of crises. In the current report we are able to make some broad explorations of trends over time, and it is worthwhile to extend these analyses over a longer time frame as more data become available
- Continuing to scrutinise the associations between use of emergency food and ongoing changes to the benefits system. In particular, exploring the impact of Universal Credit on foodbank as Universal Credit replaces existing welfare provision

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Images: Rose, Jonny, Adrian and Louise supporting the work of West Cheshire Foodbank.

“We should recognise that we have some of the best data in the UK on hunger in our area thanks to the work of West Cheshire Foodbank and others” *Cllr Sam Dixon, Leader of Cheshire West and Chester Council*

People are #stillhungry.

Get in touch to find out more.



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