

Voices from the frontline...

The rising demand for food parcels

Introduction

The Scottish CAB Service forms the country's largest independent advice network. Citizen advice bureaux (CAB) are the key frontline service that hundreds of thousands of people turn to and they deal with over half a million new issues every year. As welfare changes begin to affect clients, CAS is producing briefings in our series Voices from the frontline. These provide personal experiences of welfare reforms as they take effect in households across Scotland. Through these briefings, citizens advice bureaux will show the impact of welfare changes on the frontline.

Food parcels

Citizens advice bureaux helped clients to make over 2,200 applications for charitable support in 2011/12 – more than double the number of applications made in 2009/10. The majority of these applications concerned essential goods and services, such as food and heating, which the client was unable to afford. Bureaux are therefore seeing an increase in clients for whom benefits are not meeting their need for essentials.

Evidence from bureaux, and from food banks themselves, indicate that benefit delays and welfare reform are driving increased need for food parcels. Whether it is delays in payments, changes to Crisis Loan eligibility rules, Jobseeker sanctions, or sickness benefit reassessments, welfare changes are placing a significant burden on many low income families and making it difficult for them to put food on the table.

A range of organisations that provide food parcels have experienced huge demands for their services in the last year. The Trussell Trust provided food parcels for 128,697 people in crisis in 2011/12 – more than double the number in the previous year. Almost 46,000 children were fed by the Trust during the year. It estimates that half a million people a year will be in receipt of a food parcel by 2016, by which time it aims to have opened 500 food banks.¹ A range of other organisations, such as the Salvation Army, local churches, and social work departments, also provide much needed food parcels.

Who needs food parcels?

Many might expect food parcels to be mainly given to those who are homeless or who are facing extreme poverty. However, food banks report that most of those who are accessing their services are low income families who are experiencing some sort of crisis point, whether it is unemployment or losing benefit entitlement. Many of those who need food parcels are in low income working households.²

A range of factors are pushing families and individuals into food poverty and increasing the need for food parcels. The cost of food is one factor, with Oxfam reporting that food prices have risen by 30.5% in the last five years – almost double the rate of inflation and 2.5 times the rate of increase in the National Minimum Wage.³ Food is expensive, but this is only one factor in the increase in demand for food parcels. The Trussell Trust collects information from people on the reasons that they needed to use their service:

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Table 1: Reasons for accessing a food parcel (Trussell Trust)⁴

Nature of need	2009	2010	2011
Benefit issues	44%	50%	48%
Unemployment	15%	15%	20%
Debt	24%	24%	18%
Delayed wages	2%	1%	3%
Family crisis	2%	1%	3%
Sickness	2%	1%	2%
Asylum/immigration	3%	1%	2%
Homelessness	7%	6%	1%

Based on this evidence, almost half of need for food parcels was caused by benefit issues, including delays in payments and changes in entitlement. This would imply that over 60,000 people required food parcels from the Trust last year due to benefit issues.

Evidence from citizens advice bureaux

Scottish CAB are reporting that changes in benefits are causing an increasing number of clients to fall through the social security safety net. Some of these clients may be able to rely on family and friends, but for many their only way of sourcing food is through a food parcel. As a result, advisers are increasingly referring clients to food banks and churches in order for them to eat. This briefing looks at the aspects of the benefits system that may be driving demand for food parcels, including:

- Changes to the Social Fund
- Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) sanctions
- Delays in benefit payments

The Social Fund

The Social Fund is designed to be a safety net for people who need it to cover costs such as food and housing, and who need emergency financial support through Crisis Loans. However, a series of changes to the Social Fund have reduced the number of awards being made. In particular, the limit of three Crisis Loan awards for living expenses in a twelve month period has had an effect on clients. This policy does not address any of the reasons why an individual may need a Crisis Loan and only serves to push the individual towards other sources of help.

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- ▶ **A West of Scotland CAB** reports of a client who was told that he is not entitled to another Crisis Loan due to the 'three strikes policy'. The client advised that two of his previous Crisis Loan applications were due to delays in the processing of his ESA application. The bureau phoned the DWP who confirmed that the client cannot apply for a Crisis Loan for another two months. The client's energy supplier agreed to a one-off credit to the client's meter of £25 so he can afford electricity while the client has been referred to a local church for a food parcel.
- ▶ **A West of Scotland CAB** reports of a client claiming Jobseekers Allowance whose application for a Crisis Loan was refused as he had already had three loans in the past 12 months. The client is separated from his partner and children and has no contact with them or his family. The client suffers from depression, anxiety and agoraphobia. The bureau phoned the Social Work department to see if they could offer support, but they could not as the client is single with no dependents. The CAB referred the client for a food parcel.

JSA sanctions

Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) claimants are required to meet a number of conditions in order to show that they are actively seeking employment. A failure to meet these conditions may result in the claimant's JSA payments being sanctioned for a fixed period. Claimants who have been sanctioned may be entitled to limited hardship payments but have no access to Crisis Loans. Claimants can receive sanctions for a number of reasons, including failure to apply for or accept a job, failure to attend a mandatory Jobcentre meeting, or failure to participate in the Work Programme.

In 2011/12, clients sought advice on over 1,850 new issues relating to JSA conditions, sanctions and hardship payments at citizens advice bureaux in Scotland. Many of the clients seeking advice on these issues had reached a crisis point where the disruption in their income as a result of the sanction had left them in a desperate situation. A number of these clients had incurred 'minor' sanctions of two weeks which meant that they were not entitled to hardship payments to help them cope.

- ▶ **A West of Scotland CAB** reports of a client who is reliant on food parcels that he is receiving from local churches. The client is currently homeless and recently received a sanction of two weeks to his JSA claim after missing a signing on date for the second time this year. The client cannot claim a hardship payment or Crisis Loan, so the bureau referred the client for a food parcel. The client approached the bureau two weeks later as he still has no money, cannot afford to travel to the Jobcentre, and is now reliant on food parcels to survive.
- ▶ **A West of Scotland CAB** reports of a client who was sanctioned for missing an appointment at the Jobcentre. The client was volunteering and forgot about the meeting. The client has been refused a Crisis Loan and has been told he does not qualify for a Hardship Loan as his sanction is for 14 days (it needs to be for 15 days or more to qualify). The bureau arranged for a church to deliver a crisis bag to the client.

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Benefit delay

The Trussell Trust estimates that around 30% of people accessing their services do so because of 'benefit delay'.⁵ This type of issue makes up a significant proportion of benefit issues that bureaux advise on with clients seeking advice on over 13,000 benefit payment issues in 2011/12. Even where the target time for processing a claim is met (for example, two weeks for JSA claims), this gap between need and payment can be a long time to cope without support. In other cases, claimants can be left without payments for long periods with little indication of when they can expect payment.

- ▶ **A West of Scotland CAB** reports of a client who has been without benefits for a number of weeks due to delays. The client has been wheelchair bound for nearly a year due to a diabetes related degenerative disease. The client was found fit for work in her assessment for ESA and lost her appeal. She was advised to apply for JSA, but when she went to the Jobcentre for her first interview she was told she was not fit for work and should re-apply for ESA. The client made another application three weeks ago and has been told it could take a further 14 days to process her claim. The client has been given one Crisis Loan but was refused another. The bureau made a referral for a food parcel and asked the DWP to address the client's ESA claim as a matter of urgency.
- ▶ **A South of Scotland CAB** reports of a client who is experiencing hardship due to a delay in a benefit decision. The client was receiving Income Support as a single parent before making a joint application for JSA with her partner. When they made the application, the client's claims for Child Tax Credit, Housing Benefit, and Council Tax Benefit all stopped. Currently the client's only income is Child Benefit. It is now two weeks since they applied but they have heard nothing. When she asked about the delay she reports that they could give no reason and told her they would have to wait for the decision. The client has no money for food, so the adviser signposted the client to a local food bank. The client and her partner have a six month old baby.

Conclusion

A number of factors are driving the increasing demand for food parcels, including unemployment, low income and rising food prices. However, evidence from citizens advice bureaux and food banks suggest that problems and changes in the benefits system are the most important factors. A number of welfare changes are causing claimants to need food parcels, including changes to the Social Fund, JSA sanctions and the sickness benefit reassessment. With recent changes in Tax Credits and future changes to DLA and Housing Benefit, we expect the number of Scottish CAB clients that require food parcels to increase further.

Whilst food banks and charities are meeting the essential needs of many people facing crisis, it must be highlighted that food parcels do not address the underlying causes of poverty. The rise in demand for food parcels should be seen as a warning about the significant hardship that families are facing. Food parcels should not be seen as a policy response to the issues that are raised in this report; rather, policy should be focussed at ensuring that families do not experience these problems at all and are able to put food on the table.

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References

¹ Trussell Trust press release 26/04/12, *UK foodbanks double numbers fed in one year*, <http://www.trusselltrust.org/resources/documents/UK-foodbanks-double-numbers-fed-in-one-year1.pdf> [accessed 10/08/12]

² <http://www.trusselltrust.org/latest-news> [accessed 10/08/12]

³ Oxfam, *The Perfect Storm: Economic stagnation , the rising cost of living, public spending cuts, and the impact on UK poverty*, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/download?Id=460571&dl=http://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/oxfam/bitstream/10546/228591/2/bp-the-perfect-storm-uk-poverty-140612-en.pdf> [accessed 10/08/12]

⁴ Trussell Trust press release 26/04/12, *UK foodbanks double numbers fed in one year*, <http://www.trusselltrust.org/resources/documents/UK-foodbanks-double-numbers-fed-in-one-year1.pdf> [accessed 10/08/12]

⁵ Trussell Trust press release 26/04/12, *UK foodbanks double numbers fed in one year*, <http://www.trusselltrust.org/resources/documents/UK-foodbanks-double-numbers-fed-in-one-year1.pdf> [accessed 10/08/12]