

SUBMISSION FROM OXFAM SCOTLAND

Oxfam welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Welfare Reform Committee to inform its upcoming Inquiry into foodbanks. While Oxfam is best known for its work to overcome poverty all over the world, we also work on poverty domestically. We do so in the same way we work overseas, supporting a range of community groups to overcome poverty and suffering by building on their assets – whether that be human, social, financial, physical or natural assets.

At a UK level Oxfam has a partnership with the Trussell Trust, although at a Scottish level we do not have any formal relationship with the Trussell Trust (the domestic poverty programme operates with distinct Scottish, Welsh and English teams). Oxfam Scotland does however have a partnership with Clydebank Independent Resource Centre and the associated West Dunbartonshire Community Foodshare.

West Dunbartonshire Community Foodshare

Foodshare in Scotland is an organisation that wants to get away from a ‘charity’ attitude to food aid, and move towards the idea of a community looking after its own. They also want to use the evidence they gather from people using the service to campaign for a welfare system that doesn’t force people into destitution. Their slogan is “We will feed, but we will fight.”

The story behind West Dunbartonshire Community Foodshare

West Dunbartonshire has suffered from years of industrial and economic decline, combined with decades of regeneration initiatives that have failed to make any significant difference. The area has the second lowest life expectancy of all Scottish Local Authorities, and a quarter of children in the area are growing up in poverty.

The Community Foodshare project was set up after a meeting was called to discuss how the community could respond to the growing problem of food poverty. The words of Dom Helder Camara (former Archbishop of Sao Paulo) resonated with the audience: “When I feed the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a communist.”

It was decided that the approach must be one of not only providing food, but also of community empowerment and resistance to policies which lead to food poverty. West Dunbartonshire Community Foodshare seeks to assist all those affected by poverty through: providing direct distribution of food to anyone in need; signposting of information, advice and support on matters of wellbeing; raising awareness of issues affecting the communities of West Dunbartonshire by lobbying and campaigning for changes in government policy on matters of social justice and poverty. Oxfam helped fund West Dunbartonshire Foodshare group and continue to offer advocacy advice and support.

Case studies from West Dunbartonshire Community Foodshare are included as an annex.

There were 358 visits to Foodshare's three outlets in West Dunbartonshire in January - up from 237 in December 2013 - an increase of 51%.

Some 41% of people seeking emergency support in January had families.

Part of the rise could be explained by increased awareness of the service. However, Foodshare has recorded a steady increase in visit numbers since July last year. There have been more than 1,400 visits so far in 2013/14 with food parcels worth more than £30,000 distributed.

Of those users giving a reason for their visit, 36% said it was due to having their welfare payments sanctioned with others citing financial pressures and rising utility bills.

The Trussell Trust

As stated above, Oxfam works with the Trussell Trust in England and Wales. The Trust support communities to open foodbanks that provide emergency food parcels for people referred from local agencies like job centres and advice services. Oxfam's money is not spent on buying food supplies but is focused on securing the insights that foodbanks can bring to the causes of (and solutions to) poverty in the UK. On a practical level Oxfam funds welfare advisers to guide often desperate food bank clients through the social security maze and offer them advice on managing debt and getting back to work (it also pays for Trussell to staff their distribution warehouses, for training and other forms of support).

In the UK over 350,000 people received three days' emergency food from Trussell Trust foodbanks between April and September 2013, triple the numbers helped in the same period the year before. In the same period in Scotland, a total of 23,073 people including 6,608 children needed support. It is completely unacceptable that in the seventh wealthiest nation on the planet, the number of people turning to food banks has trebled.

The Trussell Trust states that over 23,000 frontline professionals such as doctors, social workers and school liaison officers are now referring their clients. Between April – December 2013 the reasons for these foodbank referrals included the following:

- Homelessness - 4%;
- Benefit delay - 34%;
- Low income – 18%;
- Benefit changes – 19%

Other reasons why people had to use Trussell Trust food banks were changes to eligibility rules for crisis loans, delays in payments and Jobseeker's Allowance sanctions, domestic violence, sickness, refused short term benefit advance, debt and unemployment.

It is clear that many people turning to emergency food banks are experiencing some sort of benefit delay or sanction. People on benefits usually have the lowest incomes with no savings to cover unforeseen circumstances, and even a slight delay in receiving benefit can mean they have no money to buy food for themselves or their children.

However, there has been a recent change of clientele going to food banks. Food banks are starting to cater for people who can no longer afford to live. Rising food costs and falling wage levels are leaving thousands of working families unable to feed themselves properly.

Even small shifts in prices can have a big impact, because people simply don't have any money to spare. Food prices have risen by 12.6% above inflation over the past six years and rising energy prices this winter saw more people forced to choose between eating and heating.

One of the most shocking pieces of evidence that Oxfam has seen which highlights the depths of people's demise and dilemmas is that people who use food banks have actually started giving back food items that need cooking because they can't afford to turn on the electricity to cook the food they desperately need. People can't even afford to cook food, even if they get it for free.

What needs to change

In October, Oxfam GB (along with Church Action on Poverty) published a report called 'Walking the Breadline'. This report examines the scandal of food poverty in the UK and made recommendations to tackle the issue. It called for:

- The House of Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee should conduct an urgent **Parliamentary Inquiry** into the relationship between benefit delay, error or sanctions, welfare reform changes and the growth of food poverty.
- The Department for Work and Pensions should **publish data** on a regular basis on the number and type of household who are deprived of their benefits by reason of benefit delay, error or sanctions; the numbers leaving and returning to benefits after a short period of time, and the number of referrals from Jobcentre plus staff to local food banks.
- The Department for Work and Pensions should commission **independent monitoring** of the roll-out of Universal Credit, to ensure there is no unintentional increase in food poverty.

- All referrals to food banks/emergency food aid provision, made by government agencies, should be recorded and monitored in order to **establish more accurate numbers** on people experiencing food poverty in the UK.
- HM Treasury should **make tackling tax dodging an urgent priority**, including promoting robust and coordinated international action - to reduce the need for future cuts in benefits.

Oxfam Scotland believes that cuts to our social safety-nets have gone too far, the holes in these so called safety nets are getting bigger and wider, more people are finding themselves falling through these holes. It is leading to destitution, hardship and hunger on a large scale.

We welcome the fact that Scottish Parliament Welfare Reform Committee will be examining the use of Foodbanks and look forward to the Parliament putting pressure on the UK Government over this issue. We also look forward to the Committee examining ways in which Scotland can mitigate the changes here in Scotland.

For example, we note that you cannot normally access funding from the Scottish Welfare Fund if you are subject to a sanction from the DWP. We would encourage the Committee to look at ways in which this can be rectified.

Oxfam also believes a Poverty Commissioner for Scotland could help ensure Scotland does all it can to tackle poverty - including food poverty. A Poverty Commissioner would make sure new policies were designed to reduce poverty whilst pushing for changes in existing policies that do not have the same effect. They would scrutinise the performance of officials and take direct feedback from communities living day-to-day with the effects of poverty. They would investigate complaints when public authorities fail to meet a new overarching duty, which we believe should be placed on them, to ensure policies cut poverty and inequality.

Oxfam firmly believes that in the 7th richest country in the world, it is an injustice that we have people who don't have enough to eat. Food banks provide a vital emergency service to the people they support but they do not address the underlying structural causes for the growth of food poverty. We must care for people's immediate needs but at the same time we must also create a fairer economy that provides for the poorest in our society.

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February 2014

Case studies from West Dunbartonshire Community Foodshare

Marc a Foodshare user

“I worked for 20 years, but I’ve been unemployed for around two years now. It’s been murder trying to find work. I’m a qualified forklift driver and even I can’t get any work.

They say there are jobs out there, but it’s mostly agency work. If you’ve got to take that and then sort your council tax and all the rest of it, it messes your money up and you’re left with debts.

They send you to places outside the town to look for work, and you’ve got to get the money together to get out there. You get expenses back eventually, but you get so little money in the first place that it makes things even harder. I ask my mother for help sometimes if I need bus fares, but she’s not got much herself.

The food I’m getting today will make a real difference, but you don’t want to get too reliant on it. I don’t feel bad about coming here – I feel angry that I’ve been put in this situation.”

Paul a Foodshare user

Paul is 42 and single. He is homeless at the moment and is living temporarily with a friend in Duntocher. He has worked continuously since 1987 in various different jobs. Around six months ago he had to leave his job in Glasgow to take care of a family member who was going through a crisis.

"I've worked all my life since I was on the YTS scheme. I must have applied for around 20 jobs in the last six months. I walk around the building sites as well, looking to see if they have any work going. I've seen me walk 20 miles in a day doing that." Around four weeks ago, the Department for Work & Pensions told Paul that there was a gap in his jobs diary and that he was going to be sanctioned as a result. He has had no payments from the DWP since then.

It's terrible what they're doing. I've not done anything differently in my job search, so if there is a problem with what I've been doing they should have picked it up long ago. I feel like I'm being targeted. They tried to sanction me a while back for being late signing on, but I won that on appeal because some of the staff at the Jobcentre were able to confirm that I was on time.

I feel numb. You worry about where you're going to get money for food. I'm lucky that I've got good friends and family around me. I've been getting food from my mum, but she's worried about my health now, she thinks I've been losing weight.”