

Minister for Housing and Welfare  
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Ms Esther McVey MP  
Minister of State for Employment

In 2014 Scotland Welcomes the World



By e-mail

30 April 2014

Dear Esther

You will be aware that Neil Couling gave evidence to the Scottish Parliament Welfare Reform Committee yesterday on behalf of the UK Government and the Department for Work and Pensions.

I was extremely concerned to note the comments of your official on the use of foodbanks. He indicated that people who used these were simply making “an economic choice” and that the increased usage is the result of more food banks being available.

At a time when the demand for emergency food aid in Scotland has increased significantly these comments appear to be irresponsible and fly in the face of the evidence that we have.

We know that in 2013/14, the Trussell Trust provided food to 71,428 men, women and children in Scotland. This is a 400% increase and five times the number compared to the previous financial year.

Research produced for the Scottish Government by Heriot Watt University, “An Overview of Food Aid Provision in Scotland”<sup>[i]</sup> was published in December 2013. This indicated that welfare and benefit changes are a major cause of the substantial increase in the use of foodbanks. Furthermore, I shared a copy of this research with Lord Freud during our meeting in January to inform him of some of the damaging impacts of your Governments welfare reform programme.

On 9<sup>th</sup> April the University of Sheffield published “Food bank provision and welfare reform in the UK”<sup>[ii]</sup>. Based on interviews with staff and co-ordinators of emergency food projects in England it found that “*At a national level, food bank demand appears to be signalling the inadequacy of both social security provision and the processes through which it is delivered*”

In addition, during the same evidence session yesterday, a range of front line organisations shared their views on the matter. These organisations have first-hand experience in providing support to individuals and families dealing with the impact of welfare reform.

Oxfam Scotland said that they do not think it is credible to say there's not a link between welfare changes and food bank use; Barnardo's Scotland said that their staff were highlighting the rising cost of living, welfare reform and benefits sanctions as the reason behind the increase in demand; and Citizens Advice Scotland said welfare reform and benefits sanctions were the biggest factors in food bank demand rising.

This follows information from Citizens Advice Scotland published in October 2013 where 73% of people they surveyed cited the benefit system as the main reason they needed to use a foodbank. This was not just about low levels of payment, but also benefit delays, and people losing their benefit through sanctions.

All of this evidence suggests that, contrary to the assertions made by your official, the welfare reforms being implemented by your Government are a fundamental reason why people are having to use foodbanks in order to make ends meet.

Your UK Government colleague Alistair Carmichael last week provoked similar bafflement when he described Westminster's welfare system as "fantastic", despite the 400% increase in food banks and warnings that 100,000 more children in Scotland face being pushed into poverty by 2020 as a result of UK welfare policy.

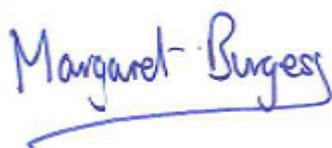
The reality is that UK Government welfare reforms, which the Scottish Government has consistently opposed, involve punitive cuts. These reforms carry no popular support here and are having a devastating effect on many of the most vulnerable people in Scotland.

I would ask if you agree with Mr Couling's comments and if he is reflecting the views of your department in making these comments and assertions?

If so, on what basis you have reached this conclusion?

In order to fully outline your position on this issue, I suggest an appearance by yourself at the Scottish Parliament's Welfare Reform Committee would be in order. Any decision to request such an appearance is of course one for the committee itself, and I am copying this letter to its Convener and Deputy Convener.

Kind regards



**MARGARET BURGESS**

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<sup>[i]</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2013/12/8757>

<sup>[ii]</sup> <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/SPERI-British-Political-Economy-Brief-No4-Food-bank-provision-welfare-reform-in-the-UK.pdf>