

SUBMISSION FROM LOAVES AND FISHES

INTRODUCTION

Loaves and Fishes is a Christian charity registered in June 1989 with the main remit to feed and clothe people who are homeless and in poverty. We are currently located in Kelvin Industrial Estate, East Kilbride and there are no paid members of staff; everyone is a volunteer.

We depend entirely on the generous donations of many individuals, organisations, companies, churches and schools to help people in need by donating money, food, and clothing. We receive no government or lottery funding. The majority of the money we receive goes towards providing meals, buying food, toiletries and the upkeep of a van for collections.

In the early years the Charity ran a mobile soup kitchen in Glasgow city centre and distributed food and clothes to people living on the streets. We also provided Christmas food parcels to the needy in East Kilbride. In 2003 we moved indoors for the first time where we are able to provide greater comfort, warmth and a less hostile atmosphere for the people we help. We currently use the Oasis restaurant in Renfield St Stephens Church, Glasgow and provide a sit-down meal for around forty people twice a week.

Due to the rising cost of food and fuel and the recent changes to the benefit system, more people in South and North Lanarkshire are struggling to cope financially. We are now receiving a significant increase in requests from Social Work, SACRO, health centres, East Kilbride homeless unit, churches, Citizens Advice and individuals to supply emergency food parcels. As a result, a lot of the charity's work now revolves around being a food bank for East Kilbride and the surrounding area.

FOOD BANK

Wherever we can, we help people with the basic necessities of life that help them retain their personal standards and dignity during difficult times. All food we receive is checked to ensure that it is not out of date and tins are not dented. During the Christmas period we hand out a £10 voucher which people can use to buy fresh meat at a local butchers. We have a rule that we will not distribute food that we would not eat ourselves.

The food bank is staffed by volunteers, most of whom are either retired or unemployed. When new volunteers start with the charity their initial reaction is one of shock at the hidden level of deprivation in the East Kilbride area and how many requests we receive for emergency food parcels. Some users of the food bank are so grateful for the help they receive from the charity that they offer to help us in any way they can.

Since the changes to the benefit system, requests for food parcels have increased by more than fifty per cent as the following statistics illustrate:

Year	No of Food Parcels	No of Adults	No of Children
2012	800	800	180
2013	1250	1250	300

Reasons for increase in food parcels

It is no longer just the homeless or unemployed seeking emergency food parcels but also families struggling to cope on minimum wages, having their hours cut or starting a new job and have no money between benefits finishing and receiving their first wage. People are struggling to make their fortnightly benefits last the full two weeks and routinely having to go without for the last few days before their next payment arrives or come to the food bank for a food parcel. Instead of food banks being only used for emergency situations they are now required in some cases to supplement low incomes month after month. A significant number of our users have to choose whether to pay their bills or put food on the table. Many have pre-payment electricity meters which have high running costs and they effectively cut themselves off when they have no money.

We do not operate a voucher system and do not ask people why they are coming as the majority of users have been referred via other organisations such as Social Work. A number of social workers and health workers collect food parcels on behalf of their clients. When we chat to users they tend to volunteer the information but there is no requirement to do so as a lot of people find it embarrassing and degrading having to come to a charity for a food parcel. As our unit is based in an industrial estate it is not easy to access without a car and some people are so desperate that they walk three or four miles from their home to collect a food parcel and then have to walk back home with their groceries which tend to be heavy as the majority are tinned. Of those giving a reason for their visit, the majority cite problems related to the benefit system with almost half saying it related to having their benefit sanctioned, sometimes by a number of months, or benefit delayed.

Cases

The following are some case highlighting how sanctions are affecting people. To protect identity names have been changed.

John said that he was in the armed forces for fourteen years and served in the Gulf War. I was discharged from the forces as a result of an injury and took up various paid employment. Unfortunately, I kept being sacked for falling asleep on the job or collapsing and not remembering what I was doing. Every time I went back to the jobcentre I was sanctioned as they said it was my fault I was sacked. It was not until recently that I was eventually diagnosed with severe epilepsy. As a result of the sanctions I had to borrow money and ended up in debt which I am still paying back off my benefits. Due to the hardship of not having any money I ended up sleeping rough and turning to crime to survive. It will be very difficult for me to get out of debt as I only have £11 a week left which I use for food. The sanctions also

affected my mental health and I contemplated suicide a number of times. If it wasn't for Loaves and Fishes I don't think I would be here today. They gave me so much help and support and enabled me to turn my life around."

A single dad of two boys said "I was sanctioned by the job centre as I was forced to leave my work due to stress and childcare problems. As a result of the sanction, I was left almost penniless and got into debt with rent, council tax and housing benefit. This caused mental health problems and many family problems. The food bank helped me to put food on the table for my children. It is a sad state of affairs in the 21st century, but saved me begging in a corner or stealing or even other crimes to make ends meet. "

Jean, a young single female was arrested and held over the weekend for an outstanding fine she had from three years ago. As she was held by police she was unable to attend a work focused interview and her money was sanctioned for one month. She gave her reasons but the DWP did not lift the sanction. Jean has poor mental health, she has no family and she relied on charity donations to feed her for the month.

Brian who has Hepatitis C did not attend his work focused interview as he was not feeling well. He had no mobile phone and therefore could not contact the job centre to let them know. Due to his condition there are times when he is very lethargic and tired and cannot get out of his bed. He has appealed their decision and is currently waiting on a decision. In the meantime he relies on food banks to feed him.

Mark, 23, said "I was sanctioned for six weeks as they said I wasn't trying hard enough. I missed an appointment at the job centre because I was in Hamilton attending a work focused group that the job centre had told me to attend. I was informed that there was NO appeal for a sanction.

The Homeless Unit at Lindsay House, East Kilbride, depend on Loaves and Fishes to supply emergency bags of food to their clients. They have young people, 17 and 18 years of age, coming to their unit who have to leave their family home due to relationship breakdown and arrive with only clothes and no money for food. It can take several weeks before their benefit claims are processed and in the meantime have to depend on charity donations.

A general comment made by people is that the DWP do not understand or realise the hardship on families, especially the children, when they take away your money and leave you destitute and have to rely on charity food banks. It is degrading and makes you feel ashamed at not being able to provide food for your family.

Why Food Banks Are Essential

Minimum wage does not support the basic human need to eat and heat, fuel poverty is a reality and people are going without food to heat their homes (minimum amounts of gas and electricity are being used), or vice versa

People are economising in every other area of their life and going without sustenance in order to survive financially

Benefit sanction - how exactly are those people to eat and pay bills when they genuinely have no income – Benefit offices should be assisting clients to ensure they are not sanctioned.

There are genuine instances where budgeting skills have never been taught but how can you budget what you don't have for those that are sanctioned. How can people meet the requirements for benefits when they are not PC literate and have no access to a PC, no means to buy one, no internet access at home and libraries are struggling to cope with the demand. What measures are the DWP putting in place to deal these very real barriers to benefits?

Service Users

Social Work Department

SACRO

Lyndsay House

Hairmyers Hospital

Shelter

Homeless Support Team

East Kilbride Welfare Nurses (Hunter Health, Alison Lea Med Centre, Greenhills, Red Deer and Strathaven)

Legal Aid

Churches. etc.

POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVES TO FOOD BANKS

Is charity the answer to people being let down by the government - are there alternatives?

CONCLUSION

Food banks should only be a temporary measure and should not be encouraged to form part of the benefit system as they do not address the underlying problem of poverty and inequality. The welfare system must take account of the real cost of living to ensure people on benefits or low incomes can provide adequate food for their families without compromising on other essentials such as heating. The gap between the rich and the poor is becoming greater. There is a clear link between the recent benefit reforms and rising food poverty evidenced by the significant increase in requests we have received for food parcels since 2013 and also by the comments and stories provided by our users.

The use of the new Job Seekers Allowance sanctions regime needs to be reviewed as it is imposing extreme hardship, not only on the individual, but also on their families, particularly children.

There also needs to be a government Inquiry into the relationship of the recent changes to the benefit system and the increased number of people having to depend on food banks to survive. Other alternatives to food banks should be investigated to allow people to have a choice of food and avoid the stigma of relying on charity food banks.

Denis Curran
Chairman
Loaves and Fishes

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