

WRITTEN SUBMISSION FROM SOUTH LANARKSHIRE COUNCIL

Background

South Lanarkshire Council supports a Financial Inclusion Network, with representation from over 30 local agencies and organisations with an interest in and commitment to supporting residents most basic needs of food , fuel and money.

Last year, the Network established a Food Poverty sub group recognising there was increasing demand for food aid as a consequence of the UK Government's Welfare Reform programme and in turn a need for a local partnership approach to tackling food poverty.

The group has been in place now for around 6 months and members include local food banks, other providers of food related support, the CABs, Council departments including Social Work (Money Matters) , Housing and Regeneration , NHS Lanarkshire and others.

The Council, through its Tackling Poverty programme has provided a number of small grants via its Financial Inclusion Development Fund to help with the start up costs of food banks (and related services such as recycling projects).

More recently , the group were successful in leveraging in external funding (Support and Connect) to employ 2 new development workers to support improved networking across the sector, including referral pathways ; improve signposting to additional supports ; and to work with communities to develop additional provision (food banks; food coops and breakfast club type provision).

The Council has sought contributions from the Food Poverty Steering group , via these staff to this paper which we hope reflects a partnership perspective on Food Poverty and Food Banks in South Lanarkshire.

1. Do you have statistics on the use of food banks ? What does this data show?

A key role for the development staff noted above will be to provide the Food Poverty sub group and partners with statistics relating to emergency food aid/food bank supply and demand . At this point in time , only limited information is available .

It is clear from feedback from food banks and from referral bodies that over the last year there has been an increase in the number of food banks and an increase in the demand for these services however there is no baseline to establish the level of growth in demand.

There are 5 food banks currently operating in the South Lanarkshire local authority area, 3 food banks have been established using a nationally recognised model advocated by the Trussell Trust while the other 2 have developed their own operational models. Some of these food banks are covering full localities and have developed from smaller, less formal (and mainly church based) set ups amalgamating into a single service.

Around 100 food parcels are being provided each week through these food banks to referred individuals and it is clear that there are others receiving additional emergency food aid via Salvation Army, Loaves & Fishes and Beckford St, Hamilton which has a drop in facility providing food, shelter, clothing and showers etc.

The Money Matters Advice Service is South Lanarkshire Council's Welfare Rights and Debt Advice service. They began referring to foodbanks using a voucher system in December 2013 and 265 have been issued since then (around 17/week). They report that their debt advisers are seeing more people now than ever who have got into debt simply because they do not have enough money to meet their household bills, people who have never been in debt before.

2. Do you have the demographics of the people that are using the food banks?

2 of the food banks have provided us with a breakdown of food bank beneficiaries - By far the largest category of service users is single people with no children at 51% of all service users, and one of the services specify single men as the majority within this group.

24% are single parents; 15% parents; 6% couples with no children and 4% other.

Some food banks also monitor age and report that 8% of service users are under 25 years and 92% are 25 years and over. In rural Clydesdale, the foodbank there suggest a different picture with young men making up 66% of their total client group.

The Council's Money Matters team report that as well as those on benefits, they also refer working families to food banks. This is largely due to low wages/income coupled with increases in fuel costs as well as increases in all other household bills. At the end of the week or month, after paying all their bills, families have less money for food and they struggle on a day to day basis to feed themselves and their families. This is worsened if an unexpected bill comes in.

" we had a family coming in who had to make the decision between feeding the family or fixing their car for the breadwinner to get to work. We see increasing numbers of people coming to the service for debt advice caused simply because they do not have enough money to live on. "

3. If there has been an increase in food bank use what are the reasons behind this? Are there a variety of factors?

Overwhelmingly, benefit sanctions and benefit delays were cited as the main reasons for food bank use. This was followed by low income and unemployment.

The full list of reasons for food bank use provided by food banks and referral agencies is as follows (in no particular order) - Unemployment; budgeting issues; benefit delays; benefit sanctions; benefit changes; homelessness; stolen/lost money; destitution coupled with ineligibility for Scottish Welfare grants or Social Work section 12 payments; low wages/zero hrs contracts; delayed wages; debt; young single people in rented accommodation who cannot afford food or heating; sickness; unexpected bills;

In relation to benefit sanctions, several organisations have highlighted that when sanctions have been applied, subsequent appeals made and upheld that there is still an excessive waiting period before benefits are reinstated.

4. What do organisations in this area feel about the UK Government claim that there is no causal link between increased food bank use and welfare reforms, in particular the strengthened sanctions regime?

Those involved in the Food Banks in South Lanarkshire are clear that there are causal links between increased food bank use and the welfare reforms; this is best evidenced in the data gathered around crisis type, referral and the distribution statistics for food banks. Across the board, those involved in food banks state that there has been a substantial rise in the numbers using food banks and Welfare Reforms / sanctions was attributed as the major cause of this. The claim by the UK government that there are no causal links between the welfare reforms appears ignorant in face of the facts and case studies presented by organisations like the Trussell Trust, Child Poverty Action Group, Church Action and Citizens Advice Scotland.

“It is simply unacceptable, for the government of a democratic country to repeatedly ignore the plight of our most vulnerable citizens, not to mention the advice from organisations, local authority or third sector organisations who are actively working to support them.” Food Poverty Steering grp member.

The Councils Money Matters team has seen a substantial increase in the number of telephone calls and requests for appointments for people in a crisis situation because their benefit has been sanctioned. Although the claimant should be advised in writing that their benefit is to be sanctioned prior to their money being stopped, in too many cases we are told by the client that they have not been advised, or they have been advised that their benefit may be sanctioned but no letter

has come to them to advise of this. They only know about it when they go to withdraw cash.

“We see too many people with poor mental and physical health in this situation, too many young vulnerable adults, too many people with chaotic lifestyles.”

In addition since the sanctions regime was introduced for ESA claimants in December 2012, the service reports they have seen an increase in the number of people with fairly significant poor mental and physical health having benefit stopped until they complied with the work programme.

“We helped one lady whose benefit had been stopped because she did not attend the work programme. She had previously worked but because of physical and mental trauma in her childhood she found it increasingly difficult to go out of the house. She had tried herself to contact the DWP and the work provider to explain her situation but because of her agitation and fear she became abusive and angry on the phone. By the time she contacted us she had no food and no money. Because her benefit had been sanctioned she was ineligible at that time for a Scottish Welfare Fund payment. We referred her to a food bank to address her immediate needs. Following intervention on her behalf she now has benefit back in payment and is awaiting a decision on a request to have her placed in the support group. However, the impact of this on the lady’s already fragile mental health was significant and this is not an isolated case.”

Money Matters staff highlight that people who are sanctioned do have the right of reconsideration/appeal and they can ask for a hardship payments but it can take some time for this to be processed and they need to have the letter telling them that their benefit has been sanctioned, as previously mentioned this can take some time to obtain. Meanwhile the person is without money. Because the Scottish Welfare Fund could not pay out Crisis Grants when a person is sanctioned it left them with very little choice of available options. They can ask for a Section 12 payment from Social Work but if they are single and not vulnerable they will be refused this also. The only option then is to ask for a Food Voucher. The Scottish Welfare fund can now make payments to people with a benefit sanction, but only in limited circumstances.

5. What are the personal impacts of food bank use on individual’s health and well being?

The general feeling is that people only use food banks when they have exhausted all other support available to them.

“People often present in a very vulnerable and demoralised state, clients are “dragged down” unable to cope, they are often very low physically, mentally and” in spirit”,

“people are hungry, undernourished ,massively stressed, some feel that they don't matter in society .Many have no money at all “

In South Lanarkshire , to respond to these issues, Food banks have extended the produce they provide to include personal care items, household cleaning products, and some provide baby food and nappies. The issue of fuel poverty and its impact has become more evident, those involved in the Food banks have become more aware of the need to sensitively raise the issue. Dependant on individual circumstances staff carefully select appropriate food items to ensure that the person has adequate facilities to cook or warm foodstuffs.

Some Food banks are exploring the potential of extending the scope of their service - giving consideration to development of cafe provision to enable them to support vulnerable individuals and families to access to hot food, warmth and social contacts. Many Food banks are offering hot snacks as a matter of course recognising that some may have gone without food for some time before they seek assistance.

“Volunteers work very hard to make clients feel valued and welcome but there is no doubt that it can be a very embarrassing experience. Most people wouldn't want to depend on a food bank to feed our family and few feel comfortable about taking charity.”

“ Food parcels are nutritionally balanced but this is not a replacement for fresh meat, fruit and vegetables.”

“A concern is the number of people in communities suffering from mental illness, vulnerable people with complicated problems, often caught up in a cycle of receiving benefit, being declared fit for work, losing benefit appealing against it, winning the appeal and then the whole process starts over again. It is difficult for people to make a meaningful recover with so much added pressure”

6. What additional strain is being placed on Scottish local authorities and third sector organisations?

Whether a local authority or a third sector partner - the additional pressures faced are similar. Front line staff and volunteers are seeing more and more individuals and families in financial crisis and desperate for support and this can have an impact on their mental health and wellbeing .

The increasing demand placed on services also creates a resource challenge at a time when budgets are already under pressure . The increase in demand for crisis support has a knock on affect on services ability to support clients requiring non crisis assistance.

Because of the pressure individuals in crisis are experiencing, some staff report an increase in the level of verbal abusive and anger they are encountering. Some front line staff have undergone Safetalk training to help them recognise when a person may be suicidal, and know what to do to help. A number of staff have

reported that they have given clients money out of their own pocket, when no other solutions are available.

On a more positive note, a service manager in the voluntary sector, supporting a local food bank has highlighted that the communities response in his area to the issue of food poverty has been overwhelming. Individuals, charities, churches and the private sector all making contributions and in some cases significant donations of food and other goods and time (volunteering).

7. What positive steps would organisations like to see to improve this situation in Scotland?

Local organisations would ideally like for there to be no need for food banks. However, in the short term the following may help:

- Quicker/better responses from DWP regarding decisions.
- Better decisions being made by DWP regarding benefit sanctions.
- Crisis Grants can now be paid to some people who are subject to a sanction and we hope that this will help ease the situation although we know that this is a cash limited budget. Reinforcement of a positive use of the SWF guidance to help sanctioned claimants obtain crisis payments would be helpful.
- Increased support for food banks to open for longer.
- Acknowledgement of the impact of poverty on benefit claimants and those on low incomes.
- Government acknowledgement of the impact of welfare reforms and sanctions on the increase in food bank usage.
- More help for those in fuel poverty to reduce the pressure on individuals and families on having to decide whether to heat or feed themselves.
- A change in the language that is used in the media and more broadly, to describe benefit claimants and those on low incomes.
- Abolition of bedroom tax.

Kay McIntosh
Tackling Poverty Programme Manager
Community and Enterprise Resources
South Lanarkshire Council
April 2014