**The Trussell Trust submission for the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights’ visit to the UK**

The Trussell Trust welcomes the UN Special Rapporteur’s visit and the opportunity to submit evidence. We are an anti-poverty charity that runs a network of over 420 foodbanks providing a minimum of three days’ worth of nutritionally-balanced emergency food and support to people in crisis across the UK.

During April 2017 - March 2018, foodbanks in our network provided 1,335,952 three day emergency food supplies to people in crisis across the UK, a 13% increase on the previous year. Of these, 484,026 went to children.[[1]](#endnote-1) The key driver of foodbank use is a lack of income to cover basic essentials, and is most likely to be due to issues with benefit payments.

**A. GENERAL**

The Trussell Trust employs both absolute and relative definitions of poverty to describe the material conditions and lived experience of people referred to foodbanks in our network.

**Absolute poverty**: Households referred to foodbanks are likely to be in extreme poverty, experienced as both a lack of material resources, social capital, and basic essentials like food, shelter and appropriate clothing. Research from the University of Oxford has found that households referred to foodbanks have, on average, £319 in income in the month preceding their referral, with a fifth of households having no income at all in this time. This falls well below even low income thresholds and well within absolute poverty measures.

**Relative poverty**: The majority of households referred to foodbanks are in ‘relative poverty’, falling well within the definition of 60% of median household income in the UK (see above).

We are concerned that there is no official measure of food insecurity and no official measure of material deprivation in the UK, which leaves unofficial and piecemeal measures like foodbank use or polls having to represent a problem far greater in scope. Given the scale and severity of hunger and destitution reflected in data from foodbanks, it is crucial that independent, national measures of food insecurity and destitution are gathered annually, to better understand their drivers and work to end them.

We would strongly recommend the Special Rapporteur visit a foodbank, preferably one in an urban and one in a rural area, and one in an area of full Universal Credit rollout, to see the experiences of people needing foodbanks. We would also recommend the Special Rapporteur meet with claimants, particularly people with disabilities and families, who are disproportionately likely to fall into financial crisis and need a foodbank.

**B. AUSTERITY**

The reductions to benefit payment levels, through cuts and ‘freezes’, and cuts to local government budgets, have had a significant impact on vulnerable people and pushed more people into destitution. Trussell Trust data on reasons for referral to a foodbank highlights the growing proportion of foodbank referrals due to benefit levels not covering the costs of essentials, driving the increase in foodbank use overall. ‘Low income – benefits, not earning’ is the biggest single, and fastest growing, reason for referral to a foodbank, with ‘low income’ accounting for 28% of referrals UK-wide compared to 26% in the previous year. Analysis of trends over time demonstrates it has significantly increased since April 2016, suggesting an urgent need to look at the adequacy of current benefit levels.\*

The devolution of the Social Fund and the removal of statutory ring-fencing of local welfare assistance has also had a significant impact on poverty in the UK – where local welfare funding was a line of defence against people falling into hardship, now foodbanks and other voluntary organisations provide ad-hoc support. Research from The Trussell Trust into supported findings from Shelter and the Centre for Responsible Credit that this provision was dwindling and piecemeal. Our research found:

* Need for local welfare assistance schemes (LWAS) is substantial. Tens of thousands of people accessed LWAS in the last financial year and this is likely to be a very conservative estimate, as this does not include applications. Availability and access appears to be an issue in many cases.
* Foodbank engagement with emergency welfare service provision is significant. Local authorities and foodbanks are being innovative and flexible in their approach to supporting local people who end up in a financial crisis but more needs to be done with regards to long-term strategy and budgeting.
* The continued rise in referrals to Trussell Trust foodbanks for emergency food since 2015 would suggest that the decrease in spending on LWAS is not due to a decrease in need. The insecurity around future LWAS provision is an annual concern for foodbanks and the communities they serve. A longer-term and more secure, funding structure would bring substantial relief and would also encourage improved monitoring and evaluation across the board.

**C. UNIVERSAL CREDIT**

**Universal Credit has four key aims:**

* simplify and streamline the benefits system for claimants and administrators
* to improve work incentives
* to tackle poverty
* to reduce fraud and error

Evidence from foodbanks suggests that the design and administration of Universal Credit may be hindering these aims, and at worst be a less effective and efficient system than the one it replaces. There is little evidence than Universal Credit is tackling poverty – on the contrary, evidence from frontline organisations suggests that it may be lowering incomes or pushing people into crisis. Trussell Trust analysis has found that foodbanks in full UC rollout areas for a year or more experienced an average increase of 52% in the twelve months after the full rollout date in their area, compared to twelve months before. Analysis of foodbanks either not in full UC areas, or only in full rollout areas for up to three months, showed an average increase of 13%.\*

The Trussell Trust undertook research with 284 Universal Credit claimants referred to foodbanks to examine the issues which might lead a claimant of UC to fall into crisis. We found that the wait for a first payment had severe and immediate consequences: 70% of respondents found themselves in debt, 57% experienced issues with their mental or physical health, and 56% experienced housing issues. The majority of respondents were waiting or had waited the intended weeks for their payment but this wait still had severe financial implications. Advance payments, the Government’s flagship financial support during this wait, must be repaid and was pushing many claimants further into debt.

Only 8% of respondents said that Universal Credit payments, when paid in full, covered their cost of living – this fell to just 5% for people who stated they had disabilities. Reductions and freezes in award amounts mean that people with additional pressures, like caring duties, disabilities, or travel costs, also find it hard to comply with requirements.

For many, the system was more complicated, not less, than the legacy system it replaced. We found that many people in our sample were finding Universal Credit difficult to understand, with over 34% of those who responded to our questions about having issues whilst on Universal Credit saying they had issues with communication. Most commonly, people stated hearing different things from different people and not understanding the benefit.

In theory, working people claiming Universal Credit should never reach crisis point and need a foodbank referral. However, our research suggested that both the wait for the first payment and the experience of being on the benefit was difficult for people in work or for improving incentives to work. Seasonal or insecure work, the most likely form of work for someone in financial distress acute enough to warrant a foodbank referral, was also the most problematic form of work for individuals moving onto Universal Credit. Respondents mentioned that they needed to re-apply when they moved out of work, leaving them with no wages and no other financial support to tide them over:

*‘I work in a call centre so when I am laid off, I have to re-apply and have nothing to spend on food.’*

The wait also left some with so little that debts actively jeopardised their ability to look for work or attend job interviews. One respondent wrote:

*‘Due to the delay of my UC payments I am in over £2000 of debt and I am not able to go to job interviews as I have no income - only able to wash when we have gas to eat and wash.’*

In our sample, people at foodbanks receiving payments whilst working reported that their combined income from work and U.C. did not cover the cost of essentials. Many people felt they were not able to keep enough of the money they earned, or felt they would be better off not in work:

*‘I worked 14 hours and earned 1p over my entitlement so UC only paid us 1p!’*

Finally, there is little evidence that Universal Credit has reduced error – in fact, payment timeliness, while it is improving, remains far below expectations. DWP data published by the National Audit Office has shown that payment timeliness is significantly worse for people claiming anything other than the standard allowance only – in December 2017, claims including the limited capability for work element were paid on time only 33% of the time. Late payments can have severe and immediate consequences – many people in our sample were currently waiting for their first payment or had waited much longer than the intended 6 weeks for their first payment.

While on Universal Credit, the most common complaint from members of our sample was poor administration. Over a third (34%) cited issues with communication, such as being told different things by different people. 30% cited underpayment, 25% cited issues with processing their claim, 25% cited general administrative issues, such as lost paperwork, and 14% cited overpayment. People in work in our sample were more likely to experience incorrect payments than other groups, as people in low-paid work tended to work irregular hours or seasonally and the system could not adapt to these variable incomes.

**Universal Credit as ‘digital by default’**

Our research suggests some claimants, particularly disabled people, are finding it hard dealing with the new IT system, as well as the ‘digital by default’ nature of the benefit. One respondent wrote of the wait and IT issues:

*‘The major flaw…is internet access. Using a mobile and having broadband installed has cost me £150 off my advance (if the Government wants it all online they should at least subsidise a contract via mobile or broadband to supply the information). Even the Jobcentre Plus internet connections were so slow in there... Like I said in the real world, in rural locations it’s not so easy. In a city I could sit in McDonald’s or outside, not some in rural towns when the library only gives you a few hours for free.’*

Issues with IT were a key reason why people said they found it difficult to meet requirements. Within repayments and reductions in the award, some felt they did not have enough to take bus fares to interviews at the Jobcentre or even job interviews. Others had cancelled their phone contracts or broadband, or were simply unable to top-up their mobile phones, and so job-searching via Universal Jobmatch was unfeasible:

*‘I’m meant to spend 35 hours a week on my Jobsearch, I can’t afford to put credit on my phone to go online and have long cancelled my home broadband as I couldn’t afford it.’*

When issues with IT arose, individuals stated they sometimes needed to call the Universal Credit helpline, which, until November 2017, was charged. One respondent wrote that, in the process of having to chase up underpayment, they made ‘costly and lengthy phone calls.’ Another mentioned that ‘from phone call to phone call I get conflicting information. This usually takes 3 calls to put right if ever.’

Finally, while the Government’s flagship transitional support programme, Universal Support, was intended to give digital assistance to claimants, there is little evidence it is widely available or reaching people who need it most. Some people received IT support from their support worker or Citizens Advice, but the overwhelming majority of respondents received no IT support and so were more vulnerable to a sanction. IT support would be invaluable for many people claiming U.C., who may not have access to technology or have the skills needed to use it, particularly people with disabilities and health conditions.

**Universal Credit and sanctions**

Research by the University of Oxford has found a “strong, dynamic relationship” between sanctioning and food bank usage. Even after accounting for differences between local authorities, their modelling showed that for every 10 additional sanctions applied in each quarter of the year, on average five more adults would be referred to Trussell Trust foodbanks in the area. As sanctioning decreased, foodbank use also decreased.

Foodbanks in The Trussell Trust network experienced a spike in numbers after 2013, when over one million sanctions were applied, and researchers have found that even after accounting for new foodbanks opening, this spike was evident across the network. Changes to the sanction regime and Jobseeker’s Allowance at this time included increasing benefit conditionality for claimants, sanctions imposed immediately for failure to meet these conditions, and longer sanctioning penalties, starting from a minimum of four weeks to up to three years.

Foodbank managers have told us that sanctions can be applied with little regard for the individual’s circumstances and the system is punitive rather than supportive. Taking a household’s income away can leave people destitute and less likely to be able to continue to look for work and travel for job interviews. This is particularly the case with claimants with mental or physical health issues, and foodbank managers felt disability, in particular, should be treated with more discretion. In one case, clients were unable to access the disability assessment centre due to it not being accessible and are sanctioned when they can’t attend. Support and discretion rather than financial penalties would help ensure vulnerable groups don’t find themselves needing a foodbank.

The protections in place, such as hardship loans or Universal Support, do not seem to be protecting people most in need of support from falling into crisis. Where protections were in place, it was often due to voluntary organisations providing help. One foodbank manager wrote *‘the people we see don't seem to get much help from anybody except CAB [Citizens Advice)’*. The strong relationship between foodbank use and sanctioning further suggests that protections within the system are not adequate.

Universal Credit creates new requirements on claimants and imposes requirements and sanctions on new groups, such as people on low-paid and part-time work. DWP statistics show that the rate of benefit sanctions for Universal Credit is notably higher than for other benefits and underestimate the rate of sanctioning as they express it as a proportion of all claimants, including those exempt from job-searching requirements (such as those in the ESA Support Group).

In our *Left Behind* research looking at Universal Credit and foodbank use, difficulties meeting claimant commitments, such as attending appointments or searching for work, affected a third of respondents, while sanctioning affected over a fifth. Testimonies from respondents suggested that many of issues which affected the previous conditionality regime had been brought over to Universal Credit. People were sanctioned unduly for missing appointments or for applying for unsuitable jobs. One individual was sanctioned by their Work Coach for not applying to a job, though they were not qualified for the position.

Trussell Trust research has found that only a small minority of individuals are offered any kind of Universal Support (8%), and an even smaller number offered a hardship loan or crisis grant (less than 1%)[[2]](#footnote-1). This is particularly worrying with the rollout Universal Credit, as sanctioning rates are higher and the system places new requirements on claimants, such as managing their claim digitally and seeking more hours when in part-time work. One manager wrote:

*‘Claimants with reading difficulties, unable to use a computer, do not understand the UC system they are in, or have nobody to help them fill in the forms, are disadvantaged from the very start when applying for, or changing to UC.’*

Issues with IT were a key reason why people said they found it difficult to meet requirements. Within repayments and reductions in the award, some felt they did not have enough to take bus fares to interviews at the Jobcentre or even job interviews. Others had cancelled their phone contracts or broadband, or were simply unable to top up their mobile phones, and so job-searching via Universal Jobmatch was unfeasible. Most received no IT support and so were vulnerable to sanction:

*‘Overpayments of housing and tax which is being taken out of UC along with paying back 2 loans, leaving £60 left out of the UC payment. Find it hard to get in to the JCP for appointments due to not much money for bus ticket, leading to sanction and deductions.’*

Coupled with poor administration, requirements were even more difficult to meet. One respondent wrote that they had to attend the Jobcentre three times to give the same information, while another, mentioned previously, spent £30 on the phone to correct an administrative error. Disability and health conditions also exacerbated the likelihood that an individual might not meet their conditions, in particular mental health conditions which could be less obvious and lead to a person being given a higher requirement threshold. This is a particular problem as claimants are, under U.C., subject to full-conditionality until they have assessed as having limited capability for work by Work Capability Assessors. For example, one individual was sanctioned because they could not provide evidence of medical condition and were suffering from PTSD.

1. **\*Trussell Trust foodbank statistics:**

   * Trussell Trust statistics are a measure of volume rather than unique users. Our data system can calculate the average visit frequency within a time period and shows people visited on average around two times in 2017-18, leading us to estimate that approximately 666,476 people are likely to have been unique users in this year.
   * The data is collected using an online system into which foodbanks enter data from each foodbank voucher, and the number of three day emergency food supplies (containing enough food for 10 meals) is recorded.
   * Referral reasons are recorded by the agency or professional referring someone to a foodbank:
   * ‘Benefit delays’ refer to people not receiving benefits to which they are entitled on time, this category can also include problems with processing new claims, or any other time-lags in people receiving their welfare payments.
   * ‘Benefit changes’ refers to the problems resulting from a change in people’s welfare payments, for example, people having their benefits stopped whilst they are reassessed. This can also include a sanction.
   * ‘Low income’ refers to anyone whose level of income does not protect them falling into crisis.
   * Trussell Trust figures cannot be used to fully explain the scale of foodbank use across the UK, because our figures relate to foodbanks in our network and not to the hundreds of independent food aid providers. Research suggests that Trussell Trust foodbank centres account for roughly two-thirds of all emergency food aid provision facilities in the UK: you can read more about this [here](http://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/mapping).

   New analysis of 38 foodbanks that have been in full UC rollout areas for a year or more shows that these projects experienced an increase of 52% in the twelve months following the full rollout date in their area, compared to twelve months before. This has been calculated by summing individual foodbank data for the twelve months before and after UC full service went ‘live’ in their area and calculating the percentage increase between the start and end points of the ‘best fit’ trend line.

   Comparative analysis of random samples of foodbanks taken from 247 that are either not in full UC areas, or only in full rollout areas for up to three months, showed an average increase of 13%. This has been calculated by assigning each foodbank an equivalent ‘go live’ month at random, summing individual foodbank data for 38 foodbanks at a time, and calculating the percentage increase from the point of ‘go live’ and twelve months after it. Over 20 trials with different randomised foodbanks, the average increase was 13%. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Trussell Trust, 2018, ‘Left Behind: Is Universal Credit Truly Universal?’ <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/trusselltrust-documents/Trussell-Trust-Left-Behind-2018.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)