

Barnardo's Scotland briefing
**Member's Debate (Stuart McMillan MSP): Society's Increasing
Reliance on Foodbanks 6th February 2013**

Key Points

- Barnardo's services are seeing increasing numbers of families who do not have enough food, creating increasing reliance on foodbanks.
- A recent Barnardo's report found that Christmas dinner was a food parcel for a disturbing number of children this year because of the impact of rising living costs and changes to the welfare system.
- The Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) is one of the main forms of support for families in crisis. Barnardo's Scotland suggests that Local Authorities and the Scottish Government need to consider how the SWF application process can be sped up, as part of plans to put the SWF on to a statutory footing.

In keeping with the findings of other charities in Scotland, and the wording of Stuart McMillan MSP's motion, Barnardo's Scotland has found increasing levels of demand for food banks across Scotland. Barnardo's Scotland is extremely concerned about what this indicates about the severe levels of poverty that increasing numbers of families and young people are experiencing.

Barnardo's carried out an internal survey into the use of foodbanks by the families and young people we work with¹. The survey had a number of concerning findings:

- 90% of Barnardo's services across the UK were referring service users to foodbanks, and these services had either seen already high or increasing numbers of referrals over the past 12 months.
- Nearly half of Barnardo's services across the UK are also directly providing the families and young people they support with emergency food.
- 92% of services providing Christmas parcels to service users had seen an increase in demand for them over the past three years.

Our front-line service managers provided a number of reasons as to why food poverty is a growing issue amongst the families and young people they work with across the UK. The main reasons they identified were:

- The rising cost of living: food costs are increasing; between 2007 and 2012, food prices rose between 19 per cent and 47 per cent, well beyond the general inflation rate. This has impacted both on out-of-work families and those reliant on low wages.
- Cuts to the levels of welfare support such as cuts to housing benefit entitlement have meant that many families are struggling to afford essentials, as any money available is needed to top up their housing benefit.
- Delays in getting benefits, combined with a stricter sanction regime for claimants who can lose their benefits if they do not attend interviews at the job centre or training

¹ http://www.barnardos.org.uk/families_in_need_of_food_parcel - 2013.pdf

schemes. This means we are seeing an increasing number of people who should be entitled to state support that are not, in fact, receiving it.

Our front-line services are also finding that as parents become more and more concerned about simply how to put food on the table for their families, it becomes increasingly difficult to make other interventions to support those families, until the most basic of needs have been met.

Barnardo's Scotland services have identified particular demand for crisis support from families where parents have benefit withdrawal sanctions applied by the Job Centre. In order to ensure that children can be fed, foodbanks may be the only resort for these families. Given that there is widespread evidence that many people are being unfairly sanctioned and are then successfully appealing decisions², this is particularly troubling.

One of the means available to the Scottish Government to mitigate the impacts of the Westminster Government's Welfare Reform programme is the Scottish Welfare Fund. The Scottish Government's own figures show, despite recent improvements, that there is still undersubscription in demand for the Scottish Welfare Fund³. This suggests that some families are turning to foodbanks in crisis situations rather than to the crisis funds that are distributed by Local Authorities in Scotland as part of the Scottish Welfare Fund. On that basis, Barnardo's Scotland believes that the Scottish Welfare Fund can learn from what foodbanks do well and are able to provide as crisis support.

Principally, foodbanks provide instantaneous support to people in crisis, helping people meet immediate need. A wide range of organisations, statutory and voluntary, can refer people to foodbanks, and they are located on a very local basis, within community locations and settings, such as community centres and places of worship, helping to make access as easy as possible. Whilst the Scottish Welfare Fund can provide rapid crisis support through the Crisis Grant element, this can still take several days to reach the recipient. For families who are unable to heat their homes or feed their children, this is still insufficient. We suggest that in updating the Scottish Welfare Fund the Scottish Government and Local Authorities need to consider how the distribution of funds can be sped-up. We are also concerned that the low uptake of the Scottish Welfare Fund reflects the complexities of the application process and at times inconsistent promotion. We believe that the Scottish Government's plans to put the Scottish Welfare Fund onto a statutory footing represents an opportunity for Local Authorities and the Scottish Government to work together to improve these aspects of the Fund.

The changing nature of poverty in Scotland, as reflected in the increase in food poverty and use of foodbanks should also be reflected in the updated Scottish child Poverty Strategy due to be published in spring 2014.

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² The DWP's own figures state that 53% of reconsideration requests and appeals of sanctions are successful - <http://www.cpag.org.uk/content/3-year-benefit-ban-hits-120-disabled-people-under-new-sanctions-regime>

³ Scottish Government figures indicated that only £18.8m of an available £33m was spent in the first 9 months of 2013/14 - note that these figures are marked by the Scottish Government as "informal and unvalidated" <http://news.scotland.gov.uk/News/Scottish-Welfare-Fund-spends-18-8m-88d.aspx>