

**Barnardo's Scotland briefing
Welfare Reform Committee Debate: The Impact of Welfare
Reform 13th March 2014**

Key Points

- There has been an increase in the nature and severity of poverty among the vulnerable children and families we work with in Scotland.
- Barnardo's services are providing support to an increasing number of families who have been unfairly sanctioned by Jobcentre Plus due to non-compliance and delay.
- Our services are also seeing increasing numbers of families who do not have enough food, creating a growing reliance on food banks.
- 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.

Many of the children and families we work with are reliant on some form of benefits or welfare payments, including both out-of-work payments such as income support and in-work payments such as tax credits. Barnardo's Scotland has worked with other children's charities to highlight the particular and serious issues faced by vulnerable children and their families arising from welfare reforms. Already, years of little or no economic growth have left many of the families Barnardo's supports struggling to make ever-shrinking budgets stretch to cover the basics. Loss of work, cuts to in and out-of work benefits, and the soaring cost of essentials has forced poorer households to tighten their belts right to the last notch. We are seeing increasing numbers of families in crisis and destitution. Welfare reform is a major contributor to many of these issues faced by vulnerable families today. We have picked out three important areas we would like to specifically focus on in our briefing for this debate: benefit sanctions; food banks and the Scottish Welfare Fund.

Benefit sanctions

Barnardo's Scotland services have identified a particular demand for crisis support from families where parents have had benefits withdrawn and sanctions applied by the Job Centre. In order to ensure that children can be fed, food banks 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 decisions¹, this is particularly

¹ 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>

troubling. Our services report that increasingly, due to stricter approaches to sanctions, individuals and their families may face extreme financial pressures.

We recognise that responsibility for sanctions lies with the DWP and at a UK level we are challenging the UK Government over its sanctions policy and the hardships it has created.

We believe these families should be able to access the Scottish Welfare Fund with greater ease. However, the terminology of 'exceptional events' and 'exceptional circumstances' is currently used for eligibility criteria for the fund. We would argue that this terminology does not take into account those families who are experiencing hardships on a day to day basis because of sanctions and reductions in their benefits.

Food banks

Barnardo's carried out an internal survey into the use of food banks by the families and young people we work with². The survey had a number of concerning findings:

- 90% of Barnardo's services across the UK who responded to the survey were referring service users to food banks, 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 who responded, reported an increase in the demand for Christmas parcels to service users 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. Some of the reasons they identified were:

- 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.
- Stricter sanction regimes for claimants who can lose their benefits if they do not attend interviews at the job centre or training schemes. This means we are seeing an increasing number of people not receiving state support despite being entitled to 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.

Scottish Welfare Fund

As previously mentioned, the Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) is one of the means available to the Scottish Government to mitigate the impacts of the Westminster Government's Welfare Reform programme. The Scottish Government's own figures show, despite recent improvements, that there is still under subscription in demand for the fund³. This suggests that some families are turning to food banks in crisis situations rather than to the crisis funds that are distributed by Local Authorities in Scotland as part of the SWF.

² http://www.barnardos.org.uk/families_in_need_of_food_parcel - 2013.pdf

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>

On that basis, Barnardo's Scotland believes that the SWF can learn from what food banks do well and are able to provide as crisis support.

Principally, food banks provide instantaneous support to people in crisis, helping people meet immediate need. A wide range of organisations, both statutory and voluntary, can refer people to food banks, 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 SWF 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.

“Decisions take too long, at least one but sometimes up to two days. If someone is in crisis they normally need the money that day and can't wait. Previously under the DWP, money would be paid to an individual on the day they applied.”
(Leaving Care/Homelessness)

We suggest that in updating the SWF, 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 SWF reflects the complexities of the application process and at times inconsistent promotion. We believe that the Scottish Government's plans to put the SWF onto a statutory footing represents an opportunity for Local Authorities and the Scottish Government to work together to improve these aspects of the Fund.

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