

Families in need of food parcels – the food poverty crisis unwrapped

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Executive Summary

"There is a distressing increase in the need to provide support to young people and their families with direct access to food parcels." (Leaving Care Service Manager, Scotland)

Barnardo's has long provided support to the UK's most vulnerable children and young people. Barnardo's works directly with over 200,000 children, young people and their families every year, and has over 900 services across the UK. A significant number of these services work with families who are living in poverty. Since 2012, we have become increasingly aware that a growing number of families on low incomes are struggling with the increased cost of living. This is resulting in many people struggling to afford essentials including heating and food. In the run up to Christmas 2012 we received a number of reports from our services saying that they were increasingly needing to refer families to food banks as families were unable to afford sufficient food to feed themselves. This was identified as a problem in the run up to Christmas but also throughout the year.

In November 2013 we conducted research to explore the growing issue of food poverty amongst families and young people. This comprised of a nationwide survey, conducted online, followed up with in-depth interviews to find out the extent of the problem and whether it was getting worse. 118 of Barnardo's services responded. Those services working primarily in areas affected by poverty and deprivation responded.

This report provides a summary of this research, highlighting the extent to which food poverty is an issue for our families and young people, and provides some insight into why affording food is becoming a growing problem for so many vulnerable families and young people. The results of the survey and telephone interview showed worrying trends.

Struggling to afford food at Christmas time – when Christmas lunch is a food parcel

A key finding from the survey was that families were finding it increasingly difficult to cope during the festive period. Many of our services give out Christmas food parcels to families and young people during this period, to help them cope with the added pressures the festive period brings. These parcels typically include food and sometimes small gifts, often donated by members of the public or local businesses.

Over the past three years, almost half (46 per cent) of the services who responded to the survey have made Christmas food parcels for the families and young people they work with. Some services are also providing other additional support to service users over the festive period, for example, by putting on a Christmas lunch for care leavers to provide them with food but also companionship over what is often a difficult time for those who do not have their own family.

In addition to the difficulties faced at Christmas time, a growing number of services reported working with families who were struggling to afford basic provisions of food throughout the year. Many pointed to families that were finding that their income from wages or benefits and tax credits simply wasn't keeping pace with the increased cost of basic essentials like food and fuel. This was resulting in the finances of the poorest families and young people being stretched considerably, with families having to make difficult decisions. Many services felt the problem was getting worse:

- 94 per cent of services reported that food poverty was an issue for the families and young people they work with
- 90 per cent of services reported referring families and young people to food banks in the past 12 months
- 94 per cent of those services making referrals to food banks stated that the number of referrals made over the past 12 months had either stayed high or increased.
- Almost half (45 per cent) of the services surveyed provide food directly to the families and young people
- 86 per cent of the services surveyed provided help with budgeting; 67 per cent provided cooking classes and 81 per cent ran healthy eating sessions

Evidence of the extent of food poverty

Mounting evidence shows that there are a growing number of families in the UK who are struggling to afford food. Over half a million children in the UK are living in families that are unable to provide them with a minimally acceptable diet.¹ Families struggling to afford food are being forced to take a variety of measures, including adults skimping on meals to protect their children from going without,² and shoppers moving away from more expensive fruit and vegetables to processed foods. Increasing numbers of people are turning to food banks, with the Trussell Trust food bank network (the largest food bank network in the UK) having provided 2,462 tonnes of emergency food to 346,992 people nationwide in 2012-13.³ FareShare, a charity that redistributes 'fit for purpose' food otherwise destined for landfill, fed 43,700 people between April 2012 and May 2013.⁴

Families with children are being particularly impacted upon; single-parent households and households with young children are reported to be making the largest switches away from fresh fruit and vegetables to processed foods.⁵ In May 2013 Barnardo's published a report on the effect of inflation on low income families.⁶ This report revealed that many families are struggling with the increased cost of essentials. These families had no choice but to make cut backs in their spending such as moving away from fresh fruit and vegetables in order to make ends meet.

¹ Gordon et al (2013) *Living Standards in the UK: PSE UK first summary report*. A minimally acceptable diet for children is defined as, 'three meals a day; fresh fruit and vegetables every day; and meat, fish or a vegetarian equivalent at least once a day'. Available on line at:

http://poverty.ac.uk/system/files/attachments/The_Impoverishment_of_the_UK_PSE_UK_first_results_summary_report_March_28.pdf

² Gordon et al (2013) *Living Standards in the UK: PSE UK first summary report*; IPSOS Mori (2013) *Child Hunger in London: Understanding food poverty in the capital* Available on line at:

http://www.ipsos-mori.com/DownloadPublication/1585_sri-ews-education-child-hunger-in-london-2013.pdf

³ The Trussell Trust (2013) *The Trussell Trust's UK Foodbank Network*. Available on line at:

<http://www.trusselltrust.org/resources/documents/Press/TrussellTrustFoodbanksMay2013Small.pdf>

⁴ FareShare (2013) press release

⁵ Griffith R., M.Connell and K. Smith (2013) *Food expenditure and nutritional quality over the Great Recession* Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available online at:

<http://www.ifs.org.uk/bns/bn143.pdf>

⁶ Mathers I, Smith N (2013) *The Real Cost of Living* Barnardo's. Available on line at: http://www.barnardos.org.uk/the_real_cost_of_living.pdf

"Fruit is expensive – it's difficult to afford the five-a-day the Government says you should eat. You can buy giant "super saver" packs at (some supermarkets) – but they go off really fast so they can make eating fruit even more expensive if you have to throw them away."

(Mother, Leicester, interviewed for Barnardo's' "The Real Cost of Living" report)

In the run up to Christmas 2012 we were also contacted by a number of services which reported working with families that were being forced to make almost impossible choices between buying food or other basic essentials such as fuel. Skimping on food to protect the children of a household can have a negative effect on the health of those that go without. Consider Leah, married mother of two children aged seven and ten, whose story was shared with Barnardo's in the run up to Christmas 2012:

Leah is accessing training opportunities and so is not earning a salary. She has accessed the food bank that is situated close to her home three times – the maximum number of times she can do so. She was pushed to depend on the food bank when her and her husband's benefits were suspended due to her inability to attend a job interview due to health reasons.

During the time when the benefits were stopped, the family struggled to purchase food for the children. The lack of food is having a negative impact on Leah; she has to prioritise the food that is available - the children eat first and the parents eat the leftovers. Leah says she is always tired and feels unwell as her diet is mainly made up of carbohydrates. The family also cut back spending on other essentials. This includes heating and lighting, which the family only use when necessary. Family activities are rare as they cost money. Instead, the family go for park walks or engage in other free activities. School holidays are particularly difficult as the children need breakfast and lunch. The children also want to attend school trips/activities but are unable to go due to the family's financial difficulties.

Leah, mother of two, Family Support Service, Cymru

Our latest 2013 survey continued to show worrying trends of more families struggling to afford food and having to make difficult decisions

in order to get by. 94 per cent of the 118 services surveyed reported that affording food was an issue for families and young people they are working with, and many services provided examples of families who were struggling and cutting back on food for themselves in order to feed their children.

Two grandparents are looking after their five-year-old granddaughter, of whom they have custody. The grandmother gave up work in order to care for their granddaughter and the couple subsequently struggled to cope on just one income. Nevertheless, they are not entitled to any state support. The two came to the children's service and the grandmother said that she was skimping on food so that their granddaughter could eat properly. The service provided them with vouchers for a local food bank.

Grandparents, Children's Centre, Worcestershire

As we will explore later in the report, the inability to afford food is resulting in a large number of Barnardo's services referring families and young people to food banks, or making use of Barnardo's emergency food provision.

Specific groups of vulnerable people who struggle to afford food

Some families and young people that Barnardo's work with are particularly susceptible to food poverty. These families and young people have little or no resources in terms of money or a family network. As such, they lack the resources that would help them resist those changes in the external environment or in personal circumstances that push people towards, or further into, poverty.

Care leavers

Children may be taken into care for a range of reasons: they may have been abused or neglected, or they may have families who are struggling to cope in difficult circumstances. Growing up in the care system can have a lasting effect on children and it can impact upon their adult lives. Care leavers are more likely than children who have

not been in care to be unemployed and they often struggle to cope financially.

Barnardo's has long provided support to children who are leaving care and currently has 22 services across England and Wales, which are specifically aimed at meeting the needs of this vulnerable group of young people. In all, 14 of Barnardo's leaving care services responded to the survey, with 100 per cent of these services reporting that the young people they worked with are struggling with food poverty, and the majority of services (86 per cent) referring young people to food banks when they got into difficulty.

The reasons why care leavers so frequently struggle to afford food are complex and are often the result of multiple issues. Reasons include a lack of affordable accommodation and, for some young people, making poor financial decisions – particularly when they are learning to live independently. Our services report that when budgets are tight they see young people cutting back on food and struggling to manage a healthy diet.

Julie, who is 19, is struggling to afford food. She has been in care since she was a toddler and has recently moved to live in supported lodgings. She is coming to the end of a two-year waged program to train as a nursery nurse. To be nearer to the centre where she is training, Julie moved into private rented accommodation. Julie was unable to find single person accommodation and so had to rent a three bedroom flat. The government will only pay her the amount it was costing to rent a one bedroom flat, even though she is paying rent for a 3 bedroom place. This means that her actual rent is £100 per week – around £40 over what she receives in housing benefits. As a result of this extra strain on her income, Julie struggles to afford food and often skips meals.

Care leaver, Leaving Care Service, Cymru

Young families

Barnardo's also provides a number of services which work with teenage mothers, expectant mothers and these mothers' partners. Many of these young people have had chaotic living arrangements before arriving at Barnardo's services. As a result, when they first arrive at the service, much work needs to be done to stabilise the young people's situation and ensure that they are ready for the

demands of parenthood. Increasingly, our services are finding that part of this work is simply ensuring that the young people have sufficient food to maintain a healthy diet.

Speaking of the destitution that some lone and expectant teenage mothers face, one service manager from Greater Manchester described how:

"We get girls coming in, expecting [a baby], and they aren't on benefits. Sometimes it's because they have to prove estrangement from their parents and because some parents are still claiming child benefits for the expectant mother, it's hard to get [the parents] to relinquish them. Even once estrangement is proved, new claims can take four to six weeks to be processed and during that time the mums have no income. Usually we approach children's services for funds and we get around £30 which we use to buy food for service users. But resources are tight and it can be hard to secure help for service users that are not already in the system. It's really hard. Some young mothers-to-be come with nothing, after having slept on sofas and floors – we have to provide them with accommodation and food." (Service manager, family support service, greater Manchester)

Young couples are also struggling, as Paul and Claire's story highlights:

Paul and Claire are expecting a baby and are finding it hard to afford food. Paul has mental health issues that have led him to self-harm. As such, he has a chaotic lifestyle and finds it hard to meet the necessary requirements as a job seeker. His benefits have been sanctioned in the past. Paul lives with Claire who already has a child, and they're expecting a new baby together. Claire is claiming benefits through Paul and so her benefits are reliant on him meeting the job centre's requirements. Paul's last sanction went on for four weeks and though Claire was entitled to child benefit and tax credits, this was not enough to cover their basic needs – including food - and the family were struggling badly. Their local Barnardo's service visited them five or six times during that four week period with food and food bank vouchers. (Staff went to the family as the family had difficulties accessing both the service and food banks because of the cost of

travel.) Neither Paul nor Claire have family they can really rely on: Claire's mother is going through homelessness so there is no support available.

Paul and Claire, Family Support Service, West Scotland

How is Barnardo's helping families and young people struggling to afford food?

Given the increase in food poverty, Barnardo's services are coming up with a variety of responses to help families and young people who are struggling to afford food. Many of our services are working with local food banks to help families that need to access food. Services are also providing their own provisions of emergency food as well as food parcels at Christmas time in an attempt to help with the specific pressures that the festive period can incur on family finances. Many Barnardo's services are also working to help tackle some of the issues underlying families' struggles to afford food by helping them learn budgeting skills or learn how to cook healthy nutritional food on a limited budget.

Helping families and young people access emergency food support in the area

A large number of our services help families access food in an emergency. Of the 118 Barnardo's services that responded to the survey, 106 have been referring families and young people to food banks over the past 12 months because service users were struggling to afford food. Out of those services making referrals, 93 per cent have seen that demand for food bank referrals increase or else remain high. Barnardo's services are also involved directly in issuing vouchers for food banks and over half (56 per cent) of services surveyed provide this service.

One project worker at a leaving care service in the North West of England described the increased need for emergency food in her area.

"I looked into making links with our local food bank four months ago (June 2013) because I was getting more and more concerned about the state of things among our service users."

The same project worker, speaking a month later revealed that:

“There’s a real need for food here. Three new food banks have opened since September.”

It is not necessarily the case that Barnardo's services wait for the families and young people they support to come to them for help. Staff at some of the services surveyed actively go to the homes of families and young people to provide emergency food and issue food vouchers. Among their reasons for doing so is the fact that the cost of transport is prohibitive.

“What you’ve got to understand is that service users can’t afford the public transport to come to us and get to the food bank – that’s why we go to them with vouchers and food.” (Family Support Service Manager, West Scotland)

However, despite their own and others’ efforts to alleviate the demand for emergency food, services are worried there is insufficient supply to meet the increased demands. 44 per cent of those services that responded to the question about demand felt that there was a problem. For example, services reported that food banks had to limit the amount of help they were providing to ensure there was sufficient provision.

“The challenges are out there for the food banks – increased demand etc. They are restricting [food parcels] to three parcels in seven months.” (Leaving Care Service Manager, Cymru)

Some service managers are concerned that families are becoming aware that food banks are having to limit the amount of food they can offer and that this fact is making service users 'save' approaching food banks for 'a rainy day' when they are already in desperate situations.

“I asked Ruth [our service user] if she wanted me to refer her to a food bank, but she said no. She said she wanted to save going until she was really desperate, but she was already skipping meals – and she has a child too. I don't know how they're going to manage.” (Young Parent’s Service Manager, Greater Manchester)

Barnardo’s provision of emergency food

Barnardo's also provides emergency food to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable families and young people. Almost half (45 per cent) of the services surveyed provide this kind of support. Those services that

offer food at their service do so for a range of reasons. Service managers stressed that the emergency food that Barnardo's offers in this way is very much a last resort.

Typically Barnardo's offers emergency food when applications for emergency funds made to children's services or the job centre have failed to come through, or else when a young parents' service is faced with a destitute and expectant mother seeking accommodation and support. Service managers also pointed to the fact that food banks are sometimes inaccessible to families and young people and are not necessarily open when their needs are greatest and most urgent.

"We offer food here because the food bank is in the neighbouring town and can be difficult for service users to get to." (Service manager, Midlands)

"We've always given out food because food banks aren't open all the time." (Family support service manager, Scotland)

In order to make sure there is enough food in their store cupboards, Barnardo's services actively seek to make connections with churches and schools, and rely on donations from the public and members of staff to provide this service.

Christmas Food Parcels

"Key workers go out to visit families before Christmas to check they've got enough fuel and food to get them through the Christmas period, you know. If we're worried, we give the family vouchers [for food banks] and special Christmas food – as well as some food to tide them over just after Christmas." (Family support service manager, Scotland)

Christmas can be a very difficult time for some of the families and young people Barnardo's works with. Many Barnardo's services provide support over the festive period. Over the past three years, almost half (46 per cent) of the services surveyed have made Christmas food parcels for their service users. Of those that have made Christmas parcels in the past, 92 per cent have seen demand for these parcels increase or stay high.

Last year, one of our family support services in the East of England gave out 115 Christmas hampers. The hampers included food bought with Barnardo's funds and gifts donated by local businesses. The hampers contained: a chocolate log, six apple pies, a litre of fruit juice, tinned tomatoes, tinned beans, tinned spaghetti, canned vegetables, a meat pie, potatoes, tinned peas, canned sweet corn, tinned tuna, pasta, strawberry jam, long life milk, teabags, sugar, pasta shells, soap, multi-pack of crisps, cereal, variety biscuits and a chocolate orange. A few toys and gifts for parents and children were also included. These were then given out to families either for free or a small charge (well below what the contents cost). They were very well received by families.

"All the tinned foods, pasta. It was very helpful. They helped me try new foods with my child." (Hamper recipient)

A leaving care service will be giving out parcels and is also planning to put on Christmas dinners for the young people who depend on the service. The service manager described care leavers' needs as being especially distressing at Christmas time as they have neither food nor family.

One young care leaver who will definitely be attending the Christmas meal provided by this service is Jon Black. Jon is 19, though a combination of learning difficulties and lack of education mean that cognitively he functions more as a 12 or 13 year old. Jon has had an erratic life. He's been in and out of care all his life, having spent time moving between his mother and two uncles. Jon craves the attention and affection of his family, and desperately wants to be part of a family unit. But Jon has a very volatile relationship with his family – his mother is an alcoholic and his uncles are prone to violence. Due to these difficult circumstances, Jon finds himself having to leave home quite a bit and sometimes turns up at the service dirty because he has been on the streets with nowhere to go. Jon's benefits have also been sanctioned in the past because he failed to go to his job centre – six miles away

from where he lives – because he prioritised sorting out a family argument over the meeting.

Over the past six months, Jon has been coming to Barnardo's once a fortnight to ask for food vouchers or emergency provisions of food. He is also one of the young people who is always available for the Sunday lunches that Barnardo's tries to provide its most vulnerable care leavers (those without food or family). Jon is tall but weighs only about seven or eight stone: it is clear that he needs help with food and will be coming to the Christmas dinner that Barnardo's will be holding.

John, Leaving Care Service, Cymru

Helping families and young people enhance their skills

Barnardo's is committed to helping families and young people living in poverty find a way out of financial difficulties and to realise their potential. Part of this involves helping service users develop life skills such as budgeting and cooking. An overwhelming number of the services that responded to the survey are helping their families and young people develop key skills to enable them to buy and cook affordable and nutritious meals. 86 per cent of services provide budgeting lessons, 67 per cent provide cooking lessons and 81 per cent provide healthy eating lessons.⁷

Guidance with budgeting is given on a one-to-one level with families and young people. Both money and the ability to provide for your family are sensitive topics, and many families and young people who access the service are too proud to discuss their financial circumstances. Barnardo's is sensitive to this and staff tend to offer advice or support only once a sufficiently strong relationship has been built with a family or young person.

One family, living on benefits, has been struggling to afford food. The mum receives child tax credits and benefits for their four children, all of whom are under six, and the father has health issues and is on employment and support allowance. He was sanctioned after not attending meetings at the job centre. This led the family to accrue a large debt with regard to their housing. Their reduced

⁷The percentages listed come to more than 100per cent as almost a quarter (23 per cent) of the services that responded to the survey offer more than one way of enskilling families and young people.

income meant they got into debt with their utilities (about £800 with regard to gas and £1000 with regard to water) and the family were really struggling to afford food. Their debt situation was especially bad because the family had relied on payday loans to help them meet their day-to-day costs, such as food. This situation had been going on for about a year.

Their local Barnardo's service issued food vouchers, signposted them to food banks, and worked with the family to help them deal with their debt. Though the family initially struggled to make payments and keep up with them, the family is now in a position where they are on track. In fact, the mother was in a position where she made an overpayment to a utilities company and got some money back!

Couple with four children, Family
Support Service, Leeds

Many services also run cookery lessons to help families and young people to understand how to prepare and cook fresh food. In many cases, running cookery lessons was motivated by the recognition that families and young people were struggling to afford food. One leaving care service hoped to both reskill and provide food for its young people after noticing how much some of them were struggling.

I wanted to run a project [for care leavers] that worked weekends and evenings, and one that had a drop in service. I started doing morning-time coffee and toast for service users, [but around 2008 I] realised the need for food among service users was just getting bigger and bigger. They were coming to the service hungry and were skipping meals.

So I started doing cooking lessons Tuesday nights – they really enjoyed this. I also began providing Sunday lunch. We rotate [the lunches] among the service users to make sure everyone who needs to come, can. (Leaving Care Service Manager, Cymru)

Cookery lessons can also help service users who have little experience of cooking to learn how to prepare healthy meals relatively cheaply. Services provide lessons that teach a range of skills – from how to boil an egg to making pasta dishes. One children's centre manager spoke of his determination to reintroduce cooking lessons after they had to be suspended due to difficulties in securing funding.

The cooking lessons were really good – the service users loved it! We taught them to make healthy kebabs and pizza, and also run cooking for service users and children [together] to get the family involved.

They did come out with funny things though – one parent said she didn't know how to open one particular kind of vegetable – everything she'd eaten had come out of can or packet. You've got to bear in mind that in our area there are two frozen food shops and then there's chip shops – and the only supermarket, where you could get fresh fruit and vegetables, is a way away and if you don't drive, public transport is expensive so it's very hard to get to. (Children's Centre Manager, North Tyneside)

Why has there been an increase in food poverty?

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. The main reasons 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 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.
- Reforms to the Social Fund⁸ have also had an impact on families and young people. In April 2013, the government abolished its scheme of interest free loans available to families in crisis.

⁸ The social fund operated up until April 2013. Applicants used to be able apply for either 'budgeting loans' to meet intermittent needs, 'crisis loans' for emergency situations, and 'community care grants' to help vulnerable people live independently. As of April 2013, community care grants and crisis loans were abolished, and the responsibility handed to Local Authorities (LAs). Crisis loans for benefit alignment only are available through the DWP, and are known as 'short term advances'.

Instead the decision was made to devolve this form of emergency support to local authorities. This has reduced the options for families when they hit a financial crisis

We address each of these issues in turn below.

Rising cost of living

A significant trend amongst the low income families we work with is that they are finding it harder to meet the basic costs of living from the income they receive. Over half of the services who responded to the survey pointed to the cost of living as impacting upon families and young people's ability to buy food.

In May 2013 we produced a report called "The Real Cost of Living"⁹ which included evidence from focus groups with low income families across the UK. The overwhelming trend that Barnardo's found among the families and young people we work with was that these groups were finding the cost of essentials such as food, transport, energy and childcare going up significantly and their incomes were failing to keep pace with increases in prices. The impact of rising prices and falling incomes is worse for families in the lower income bracket as essentials such as food are typically rising faster than the overall rate of inflation.

Moreover, while this trend of decreasing incomes looks set to reverse for families primarily reliant on wages – with average earnings expected to rise sometime in 2014-2015¹⁰ – the same cannot be true for those reliant on benefits and tax credits. The government's decision to uprate most working-age benefits by 1 per cent for the next three years from April 2013 means that income from state benefits paid to working age people will continue to fall in real terms in each of the next three years¹¹. What is more, this effect will be compounded by other benefit cuts introduced since 2010, such as cuts to council tax benefit and disability benefits.

This means that lower income families will continue to struggle to stretch their incomes in order to cover the basic cost of essentials. In

⁹ Mathers I, Smith N (2013) *The Real Cost of Living*
http://www.barnardos.org.uk/the_real_cost_of_living.pdf

¹⁰ Office for Budget Responsibility, 2013.

¹¹ Crib J, Hood A, Joyce R and Phillips D (2013) *Living Standards, Poverty and Inequality in the UK: 2013, IFS report R81*. Available on line at:
<http://www.ifs.org.uk/comms/r81.pdf>

our survey we found that families are continuing to struggle to afford food due to the fact that the income they were receiving from wages and tax credits was simply insufficient to meet the increased cost of their day-to-day essentials.

It is not just parents and young people out of work that are struggling to buy food. The same is true for families where there is a parent on low wages – 66 per cent of children in poverty live in a family where at least one parent is working.¹² These groups also struggle to meet the increased cost of essentials, and they will continue to do so since in-work benefits, such as working tax credit, are also affected by the 1 per cent uprating decision.

One family that a children's centre in North Tyneside recently helped was a working family. The father had asked the service for some nappies but when a project worker went to their home, she noticed that all the family had in to eat were a few biscuits and some packets of crisps. The parents said they had been skipping meals to make sure their children had something to eat. The father had not asked for help with food because he was too proud to do so.

The mum is working at a call centre and the dad stays at home to look after their three children – one of whom is not yet school age. As the mum is earning too much to qualify for many means tested benefits, the family has lost access to free school meals as well as their nursery place for their two year old. Their house was also deemed too big for their family, and they were hit by the under-occupancy subsidy.

Family, Children's Centre, North Tyneside

Welfare Reform

In April 2013, the government introduced a number of reforms to the welfare system including the introduction of the under-occupancy subsidy for social housing tenants and changes to disability benefits. These changes have impacted upon many vulnerable families and 44 per cent of services surveyed pointed to various aspects of welfare.

¹² Department for Work and Pensions *Households Below Average Income (HBAI) 1994/95-2011/12* (2013). Available on line at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/206778/full_hbai13.pdf

Their housing costs are increasingly being put in the position of facing a short fall between their entitlement and their rent. This is putting serious strains on already stretched family finances. In such situations it is often the food budget that is cut.

A young couple, Anna and James, are living in social housing. They had been living in their flat for a year-and-a-half before the under-occupancy tax was introduced in April this year. Their second bedroom is incredibly small. Nevertheless, the flat is still classed as a two-bedroom property so the couple are having to pay the extra rate.

Barnardo's has been in discussion with the Local Authority over the classification of the flat as a two bedroom property and has helped Anna and James to secure a discretionary fund to help them meet the extra cost. Unfortunately, the discretionary fund only lasts for four weeks, after which they must apply for the fund again. There have been occasions where the fund hasn't come through and Anna and James have had to wait for three to four weeks to receive it again.

During these times, Anna and James have really struggled and have had to choose between getting into housing debt or buying food. Barnardo's supported them by issuing them with food vouchers and directing them to food banks. Anna and James are trying to move to get out of the problems they face, but there is a lack of one bedroom properties in the area for them to go to.

Anna and James, leaving care service, Midlands

Benefit delays and sanctions

Almost a quarter of services (23 per cent) that responded to the survey pointed to benefit sanctions and delays as a reason behind why they were seeing families in food poverty. Delays were reported as usually lasting between four to six weeks and the majority of the delays were said to relate to new claims.

Mary and John are in their thirties and have a two-year-old girl. They had been living with a relative, but when this person passed away they had to move as they had no claim to the property. As such, the family recently moved into local authority housing. The conditions are very basic: the accommodation is damp, there is no cooker (just a camping stove) and their gas and electric are on a key meter. The couple moved from making individual claims to a joint claim at around the time they moved house. This resulted in a delay in their receiving benefits for a number of weeks. During this time, the service provided them with food and food vouchers.

While they were waiting for their benefits to come through, the family struggled with food, skipping meals, and even after the benefits claim was sorted out they were without food for three days. The family's situation was especially difficult because their little girl suffers from health problems and her parents struggled to pay the travel fare to take her to the hospital in the nearest city.

Parents of one child, Children's Centre
Service, Worcestershire

In addition to delays, the tougher sanction regime for key work related benefits (including job seekers allowance and employment support allowance), means that Barnardo's is seeing an increasing number of vulnerable claimants being sanctioned for failure to comply with elements of their benefits claim.¹³ This situation is frequently made worse by families who are unaware that they are to be sanctioned until the benefit payment they are expecting is not paid into their account. The result is a dire situation where the family needs to find money for basic essentials at short notice. Many of these people will successfully apply for hardship payments through the job centre, but while waiting for these to come through they struggle to afford food and are reliant on food banks and charity services such as Barnardo's.

Michael, aged eighteen, was sanctioned for not turning up at the job centre for his appointment in early November this year. The reason he absented was that his sister went into labour and was giving birth – and he wanted to be with her. Over the two and a half weeks that followed, he has effectively been without an income. He applied for a hardship claim at the job centre (£30) and although it was meant to come through quickly, it didn't. Barnardo's also applied for £20 from Local Authority Children's Services for Michael but this failed to come through. He's been left with nothing and has been relying on food banks. His project worker has no idea how he's been making ends meet and is worried that he has been engaging in risky behaviour.

Michael, Care Leaving Service, North West England

Removal of crisis loans

In the Welfare Reform Act 2012, the government abolished the system of Crisis Loans. Previously, families and young people in a financial crisis were able to make applications for interest-free loans from the social fund to meet their immediate short-term needs. Successful claimants then had the repayments deducted from benefits. In 2009/10, around 2.7 million Crisis Loans were awarded to help people deal with emergencies.¹⁴ Families and young people typically resorted to Crisis Loans to meet emergency expenses, for example a homeless person or care leaver moving into a flat for the first time might apply for financial help to cover a deposit for furniture, or a family who faced unexpected expenses in relation to job losses or having to flee domestic violence might have applied for this type of loan.

Since the abolition of Crisis Loans in April 2013, money previous allocated to fund Crisis Loans has been given to local authorities in England to fund their own local welfare assistance schemes.¹⁵ However, often the money available through these schemes is insufficient and there are strict application criteria – for example, requiring a family to have lived in an area for six months before they are able to apply. The removal of this “last resort” of financial help for those in difficulties has resulted in the poorest families and young people resorting to other sources of credit. This pushes vulnerable people into having to service unmanageable debt, which can have a knock on effect on their ability to afford food.

¹⁴ *Local welfare assistance to replace Social Fund community Care Grants and Crisis Loans for general living expenses, Equality impact assessment, October, 2011*

¹⁵ The money for the social fund was given to the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales who have decided to continue with interest free loan schemes.

A young man, Terry, a twenty-year-old care leaver, lives on his own. He has multiple debts with regard to housing, council tax and his phone company that date back to when he first began living independently as he was struggling to cope and didn't budget at all at that time.

He is now facing these debts and is paying off all he can through payment plans and he just about manages to pay all his bills and essentials. However an unexpected bill arrived, which meant that he had to find another £50 in order to pay this off – or get further charges added. He managed to borrow this money from family and friends. In order to pay them back Terry went without electricity and cut right back on food. The project worker assisting Terry feels that Terry would have been better off if he could have secured this help through a crisis loan as he incurred bad feeling from some of the people he asked for help – and this was a source of distress for him.

Terry, Leaving Care Service, Midlands

Messages for the government

There are 3.8 million children in the UK living in poverty. Poverty blights the lives of children.¹⁶ Growing up poor has been shown to impact on many areas of children's lives, putting them at risk of worse health, worse exam results and too frequently poor children grow up to become poor adults.

The number of children living in poverty in the UK is also predicted to grow over the next decade. The Institute for Fiscal Studies suggest that that number could rise significantly between now and 2020, with as many 1.1million more children ending up in poverty by the end of the decade.¹⁷ The primary reason for this predicted increase is the fact that the government's cuts to welfare will have a particularly significant impact on the incomes of those at the lower ends of the income spectrum. As the evidence of this report demonstrates, living in poverty in the UK today is about children going without many of the essentials which other children take for granted. At its most extreme, this includes a sufficient and nutritious diet.

Food poverty is growing issue for families on low incomes. Rising food prices and falling incomes mean that it is becoming increasingly

¹⁶ Department for Work and Pensions *Households Below Average Income (HBAI) 1994/95-2011/12* (2013). Available on line at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/206778/full_hbai13.pdf

¹⁷ Brown J, Hood A and Joyce K (2013) *Child and Working Age Poverty in Northern Ireland from 2010 to 2020* Available online at <http://www.ifs.org.uk/comms/r78.pdf>

difficult for families on tight budgets to meet even basic expenses. The effects of the decision to suppress the uprating of benefits for three years from April 2013 to April 2015 combined with other benefits cuts also mean that tax credits and other working age benefits will likely continue to be insufficient to meet the increased costs of living over the next two years at least. This will create a gap which more and more families and young people in the lower income groups will struggle to meet.

However, the government is committed to ending child poverty: the Child Poverty Act 2010 puts a requirement on the government to eradicate child poverty in the UK by 2020 and the first child poverty strategy was published in 2011. The second child poverty strategy, which will set out the government plans for tackling child poverty in detail, is due to be published in April 2014. We believe that this strategy provides an opportunity for the government to look at the experiences of families and young people living on the poverty line and the difficult decisions that they are being forced to make. The strategy should consider how families on the lowest incomes are being impacted by the rising prices of essentials. It should also consider what could be done to protect the poorest and most vulnerable children and young people from having to go without food, simply because they cannot afford it.

We believe that the government needs to look again at the uprating of benefit levels to ensure that they keep pace with inflation. The government should also monitor the impact of other benefit and welfare cuts and consider reforms aimed at dealing with some of the worst impacts of these cuts, particularly those that introduce size criteria into the social housing sector.

Minimum actions which we believe the government needs to take include:

- Commitment to restoring the link between benefits and inflation by promising to uprate all working age benefits by Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation.
- Monitoring the impact of welfare reform on families – especially the new rules on housing under occupancy in the social sector and the new harsher sanctions regime.

*Families in need of food parcels – the food poverty crisis
unwrapped*

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