

PIW 12

National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into: Poverty in Wales: Strand 1

Response from: The Trussell Trust



**Submission to the Assembly Communities, Equality and Local
Government Committee (September 2014)**

**(Strand 1) An Inquiry into the links between tackling poverty and
addressing inequality**

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Poverty and Inequality

1. It has become evident through the work of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that there is a clear link between poverty and inequality. They have in recent months/years produced a number of papers addressing this issue and it is assumed the Committee will want to seek oral evidence from JRF. In addition Victoria Winkler at the Bevan Foundation has provided comment on the specific issues that are faced in Wales and may also provide helpful evidence to the Committee.

2. The Trussell Trust in Wales is represented by its Regional Manager, Tony Graham, on the WCVA Third Sector Anti-Poverty Taskforce (the Taskforce) and we are aware that written evidence has been provided by that group and we suggest that account is taken of that evidence.

Initial Views of the Trussell Trust

3. As the Committee will be aware the Trussell Trust oversees the largest network of foodbanks in the UK and across Wales. Between April 2013 and March 2014 we provided emergency food aid to 79,919 individuals in Wales, which was a 124% increase on the previous year (35,650).

4. The first foodbank in Wales started in 2008 in Ebbw Vale and we now have 35 foodbank hubs that oversee nearly 80 distribution centres in every county and most cities and towns across the country. As a consequence we work closely with many of the communities most impacted by the effects of poverty and are able to confirm the devastating consequences of poverty and inequality across our nation. Thousands of volunteers assist in the running of our foodbanks each year and tens of thousands of people contribute to their local foodbank either through donations, supermarket collections or indeed providing financial support. The foodbank network is supported by and effectively operated by the local communities to serve those individuals in each community who find themselves in need.

5. We have stated in previous papers provided to the Deputy Minister for Poverty (prior to the most recent reshuffle) that we welcome and commend the Welsh Government's desire to tackle poverty in Wales. Even the establishment of a Minister for Tackling Poverty is a clear statement of intent regarding the priorities of the Welsh Government.

6. In addition there have been attempts to strengthen the relationship between the third sector and Welsh Government and particularly in the current climate this is to be welcomed. We believe a greater level of cooperation will be essential in the coming years as budgets are tightened and the capacity to achieve previous levels of service will be reduced.

7. This Committee is also to be commended for taking the opportunity to scrutinise and challenge the work being undertaken by the Welsh Government in this area.

8. This strand of the Inquiry considers the relationship between poverty and inequality and comments are invited in 3 areas. We will address each area in turn although if an area lies outside our area of expertise we will reference the Taskforce's comments.

How effectively do the Tackling Poverty Action Plan, Strategic Equality Plan and other government strategies work together.

9. Helen Wilkinson on behalf of the Taskforce has made detailed comments on this area and we would reference that paper. However, we have had some concerns at the lack of conversation that has occurred between Ministers, officials and front line Practitioners. This was brought home to us starkly when the last 'refresh' of the Tackling Poverty Action Plan in 2013 made no mention of food poverty or the massive increase in the rise/use of foodbanks across Wales at a time when numbers using foodbanks had more than doubled. This seemed, to us, a glaring omission in the plan and could have been avoided.

10. We have no doubt that the last Deputy Minister for Poverty (who had been nothing but helpful and courteous to the author) and his officials have much on their plate but there can be a perception that the conversation between Government and the Third Sector is conducted very much on Government terms and we would welcome conversation as an organisation and as a sector around areas of policy development and implementation.

11. To be fair to the Minister and officials a recent meeting was held and a conversation has commenced that give us cause for hope. How the most recent reshuffle will affect these conversations remains to be seen.

The impacts of poverty, particularly destitution and extreme poverty, on different groups of people

12. The Trussell Trust runs a network of 35 foodbanks in Wales (and over 400 across the UK), operating 80 local foodbank distribution centres and over 1200 across the UK. It is at these satellite distribution centres where most food is given out. Foodbanks are spread across a range of locations, including urban centres (Cardiff, Wrexham, Newport and Swansea) and rural areas (Powys, Anglesey and Cardigan), and can be found in areas of high deprivation such as Pontypool, New Tredegar and Neath as well as more affluent areas, including Monmouth, Abergavenny and Chepstow.

13. Rural poverty can be particularly difficult as increased living costs and access costs are compounded by insecure and low-wage employment. Low income households in rural locations may struggle to make ends meet where their urban counterparts might manage to get by.

A regional breakdown of Trussell Trust's latest figures can be found at www.trusselltrust.org/stats.

14. How do Trussell Trust foodbanks work? Trussell Trust foodbanks provide three days' nutritionally-balanced emergency food and support to people in crisis. Over 90 percent of the food given out by foodbanks is donated by the public. Every foodbank recipient is referred by a frontline professional. Foodbanks also refer recipients to other agencies to help resolve the underlying cause of the crisis.

15. How do foodbank referrals work? Everyone who comes to a Trussell Trust foodbank is referred by a frontline organisation: people cannot receive food if they are not in possession of a food voucher. Over 28,000 professionals across the UK currently refer people to Trussell Trust foodbanks and over 50% of these are statutory agencies. Referrers include doctors, social workers, school liaison officers and Citizen Advice Bureau advisers, amongst others. These professionals assess the need and make sure that people they refer to foodbanks are in genuine crisis.

16. How many times can people be helped? Trussell Trust foodbanks are designed to address short term hunger and help people out of crisis. Trussell Trust foodbanks are structured to avoid long term dependency: no self-referral; no drop in service; time-limited support. Trussell Trust foodbank clients may redeem three foodbank vouchers in a row at which point the foodbank manager will contact the referral agent about putting together a support plan to help the client break out of poverty. Longer term support from the foodbank is available in exceptional circumstances as agreed between the foodbank manager and referral agent.

17. Do Trussell Trust foodbanks provide more than food? The Trussell Trust foodbank model aims to help stop short term hunger whilst also helping people to resolve the underlying cause of their crisis. Signposting people to local agencies and charities is a core part of what we do e.g. if a client is referred to the foodbank with debt problems, we will put them in touch with a local debt charity.

18. Our foodbanks make time to listen to people, and to understand their situation. Often foodbank clients tell us 'the emotional support was almost as good as the food'.

Trussell Trust figures and reasons for foodbank use.

19. How is Trussell Trust data collected and what does it measure? The Trussell Trust provides the only Wales-wide data on foodbank use. Trussell Trust foodbanks operate a voucher system. Put simply, every client is given a voucher by the referral agency. This includes data such as the number of adults and children in need of emergency food, as well as the main reason for the referral e.g. benefit delay or low income. Each foodbank inputs this data into an online data collection system. The Trussell Trust is therefore able to generate nationwide statistics.

20. Trussell Trust figures record the number of times three days' food has been given to people in crisis. This does not mean that each user is necessarily unique, but sample surveys of individual foodbank data indicates that 65% of foodbank clients have only one voucher in any six month period and less than 10% have four or more.

21. Why are people being referred to foodbanks? Static incomes, rising living costs, low pay, underemployment and problems with welfare are significant drivers of the increased demand experienced by foodbanks in the last year. Half of referrals to foodbanks in 2013-14 were a result of benefit delays or changes.

Primary referral causes to foodbanks

	Benefit Delay	Benefit Change	Low Income	Debt	Other
2011/12	29.59%	11.47%	19.46%	9.10%	30.38%
2012/13	29.69%	14.65%	18.45%	9.52%	27.69%
2013/14	30.93%	16.97%	20.29%	7.85%	23.96%

22. It is our experience that the welfare system has historically been slow to respond to sudden changes in people's circumstances or to process new welfare claims, resulting in a significant proportion of Trussell Trust foodbank referrals. It is concerning to see the proportion of people affected by these issues remaining significantly high and those affected by sudden changes to payments increasing significantly over the past few years. Many of these referrals are caused by inefficiencies in the system itself and are therefore preventable. A more thoughtful approach to welfare, and especially sanctions, would therefore prevent some of these referrals.

We will say more on the impact of Welfare Reform during the later strands of this inquiry.

Increased living costs and static incomes

23. *'[We have] seen an increase in those coming who have been sanctioned by the job centre. Also seen a switch in statistics, we used to see the majority for debt, now it is low income, people just are not coping.'* – Foodbank Manager

24. The evidence collated by Trussell Trust both in terms of anecdotal evidence from foodbank managers and our data has shown that many people have been struggling to cope with rising prices and static incomes in the last year. This trend has been evidenced by many other organisations and charities too – see joint paper by Oxfam, Church Action on Poverty and Trussell Trust 'Below the Breadline'.

<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/below-the-breadline-the-relentless-rise-of-food-poverty-in-britain-317730>

25. Insecure work, and low-income zero hours contracts in particular, make people particularly vulnerable to a financial crisis. Problems with low paid and insecure work have increased in the last twelve months.

26. A survey that The Trussell Trust did with parenting website Netmums conducted in March 2014 revealed that *more working families are struggling to make ends meet*.

27. The survey of 2,178 working families showed that:

- One in five working parents had had to choose between paying an essential bill or putting food on the table in the last 12 months.
- 78% of parents in working families had cut spending over the last 12 months. 56% admitted to buying cheaper, lower quality food.
- 43% of those surveyed admitted that they are only 'just about coping' with balancing their family budgets and a quarter stated they have suffered stress as a result of not eating properly.
- Only 1 in 40 had turned to a foodbank for help, with more than 70% saying that they would only do so as a last resort. This reinforces evidence from the government's recent DEFRA report which states that turning to a foodbank is very difficult for many. It also reinforces the fact that Trussell Trust foodbank figures only reflect part of the problem of UK food poverty.

29. A recent survey by Bristol University, 'Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK' found that the number of households living below the minimum standard of living has risen from 14% to 33% in the last 30 years, despite the economy doubling. We would refer the Committee to statistics from JRF/Bevan Foundation on standards of living in Wales.

30. It highlighted that in 93% of households where children suffer from food deprivation, at least 1 in 4 adults have skimped on their own food to allow others in their household to eat and that half a million children live in families who can't afford to feed them properly.

Full report: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2014/june/poverty-study.html>

31. There are issues with seasonal variations which will be touched upon now but expanded on in later evidence.

32. Winter can cause challenges for families struggling to make ends meet. As the cost of heating increases this stretches budgets even further. Some foodbanks have reported children sleeping fully clothed or families sleeping in one room so they only have to use one heater in the house.

33. Christmas can be a huge challenge for families who want to give their children presents. Some Foodbanks report parents going without food to give a small present to a child or eating beans on toast for Christmas dinner.

34. Summer holidays can cause different pressures. During term time families may be entitled to free school meals which may for many be their only hot meal of the day. When that is not available for 6 weeks many parents struggle to make up the shortfall. As a response many foodbanks have introduced holiday schemes to assist families who struggle during this period.

35. Responses from both care professionals and beneficiaries confirm that foodbank's timely interventions in situations of dire need prevent the escalation of short term crisis into crime, housing loss, family breakdown and mental health problems.

36. Whilst many clients are initially reluctant or embarrassed to go to a foodbank, with many only turning to them as a last resort (as evidenced by DEFRA's report on food poverty and by research by Netmums), foodbank clients regularly give very positive feedback about the way in which they have been listened to

and treated with dignity. Many foodbank clients leave feeling much better equipped to cope with their situation because of the personal interaction they have had with volunteers, and the signposting to other local services. Foodbanks deliberately create a warm, welcoming environment to help recipients to feel at ease. They make time for people, which is something state-run services like Jobcentres rarely have the resource to do. Foodbank volunteers are trained to provide a listening ear over a cup of tea and sometimes this makes the biggest difference.

37. Various AM's and MP's who have visited Foodbanks have commented on the warm and friendly environment provided for some of the most vulnerable members in society.

xxxx told us: 'Getting food from the foodbank really helped to reduce stress but it wasn't just the food, it was the welcome that was brilliant. Just talking to someone who genuinely cared for ten minutes changed my perspective. It gave me the confidence I needed to keep on applying for jobs and now I've got one. Without the foodbank I'd still be homeless and on the dole. The foodbank is the best thing in the world.'

38. In conclusion, the Trussell Trust believes that its foodbanks provide a vital emergency food assistance service that is valued by large numbers of frontline agencies across Wales. Trussell Trust foodbanks help to prevent crime, housing loss, family breakdown, neglect of children, mental and physical ill health.

39. Foodbanks are a local community based service and we want to see a foodbank in every community to ensure help is genuinely accessible when someone is in crisis. However, the Trussell Trust has become increasingly alarmed by the dramatic growth in the numbers of people in local communities who find themselves in crisis and the increasing frequency with which this occurs. Put simply too many people need foodbanks. The evidence suggests the prevalence of food poverty has risen significantly. The Trussell Trust believes far fewer people should need foodbanks.

40. Ultimately what the Trussell Trust sees in its foodbanks, and what we have attempted to describe in this submission, are the consequences of an increasingly unequal society where more than twice as many households today compared to thirty years ago, cannot afford minimum living standards. We applaud the Committee for asking the questions of how poverty and inequality continue to be so prevalent in a relatively wealthy country and for seeking to explore what should be done to address it.

41. We hope that the problem of food poverty will be given due prominence by politicians. The Trussell Trust remains committed to sharing its experiences with policy makers seeking to better understand hunger in Wales.

How legislation, policy and budgets targeted at tackling poverty and reducing inequality are coordinated and prioritised across Welsh Government

42. In view of the limits placed by the Committee regarding the length of submission we refer to the comments prepared and submitted by the Taskforce.