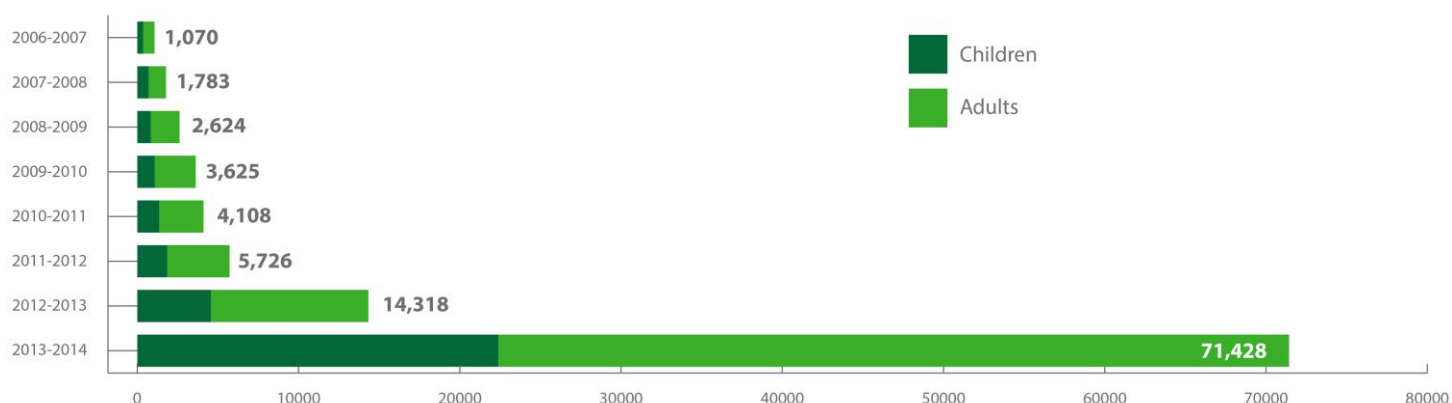


## **The Trussell Trust Submission to the Smith Commission**

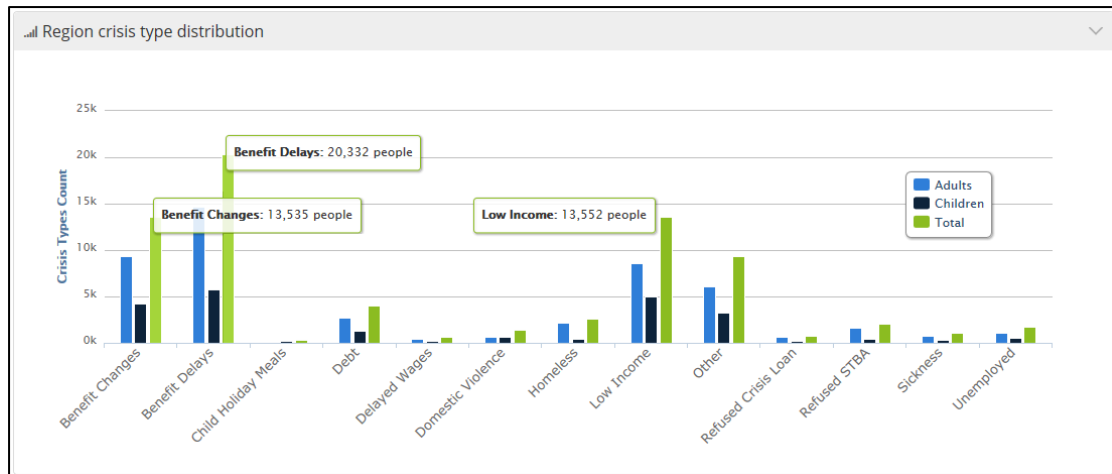
The Trussell Trust provides the only Scotland-wide data on foodbank use. In the following document we outline and detail the rising demand for emergency food relief focusing primarily on the increase over the last two financial years.

### **Numbers referred to Trussell Trust foodbanks in Scotland**



Evidence from Scottish foodbanks indicates that the rising costs of food and fuel, insecure employment for those in work, minimal employment opportunities for those seeking work, problems with welfare (including benefit delays, changes, sanctions and issues with the administration of welfare reform) have been significant drivers of the increased demand experienced by foodbanks in the last year. Almost half of referrals to foodbanks in 2013-2014 were a result of benefit delays or changes and the majority of those referred were from working age families.

### **Primary referral causes to Trussell Trust foodbanks in Scotland**



In 2013-14, 49,041 adults and 22,387 children received a three-day supply of emergency food, totalling 71,428. There was a 400% percentage increase in foodbank use from 2012-13 to 2013-14 but only a 50% increase in the number of new foodbanks joining the Trussell Trust during this period.

The busiest Scottish foodbank is based in Dundee and has been open for nine years. It experienced a 77% increase in demand in 2013-14 compared to previous financial year showing that established foodbanks saw a significant increase in demand.

### Benefit delays and changes

Problems with welfare payments have consistently been a principal driver of foodbank referrals. Benefit delays and benefit changes generally relate to:

1. Delays when a new means tested welfare claim is made, often whilst eligibility is assessed. During this time an individual or family can have no income resulting in a referral to a local foodbank. Sometimes a claim can take weeks to be processed.
2. On occasions personal circumstances change or welfare payments are reduced as a result of a change in eligibility criteria. This can include something as simple as a client notifying the benefits office of a change of address, which can lead to a total cessation of benefits and whilst this change is being processed an unexpected shortfall in income can lead to a foodbank referral.
3. Bureaucratic errors by the benefits office leading to delays in payments. This can include decision makers incorrectly logging details that affect a person's claim and leave them without an income for, in some cases, multiple weeks.
4. Lack of flexibility in the benefits system to account for personal circumstances. This includes not reacting fast enough to a change in circumstances, as well as not providing adequate support to people with mental health problems or learning difficulties to assist them in successfully navigating an increasingly complex welfare system.

5. Sanctions resulting in the cessation of welfare payments. This is causing an increasing proportion of referrals to foodbanks and is usually recorded by the referral partner as 'benefit changes' on foodbank vouchers. Some of the reasons given for the sanction appear to be seemingly unfair or disproportionate.

Comparing the figures from the financial years 2012-13 and 2013-14 shows one significant increase. There was only a 1% decrease in those referred because of a benefit delay and 1% increase in those referred due to a low income compared to the previous year. However, benefit changes rose significantly.

In 2012-13, 15% of clients were referred to a Scottish foodbank because of a benefit change whereas the following financial year, after the introduction of a number of welfare reforms, the number rose to 19%. The numerical rise of those referred because of a benefit change was from 2,168 to 13,535. Anecdotal evidence collected from Scottish foodbank managers highlights sanctions as a primary factor influencing this increase.

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.

### **Impact of welfare reform**

Following welfare reforms in April 2013 the Trussell Trust saw proportionately more people referred to foodbanks because of benefit delays or changes (see above). These included more people referred to Trussell Trust foodbanks who had been sanctioned, including for seemingly trivial reasons. The Scottish Government commissioned and published its 'Overview of Food Aid Provision in Scotland' in December 2013 and stated: "Providers who participated in the study were in agreement that welfare reform, benefits delays, benefit sanctions and falling incomes have been the main factors driving the recent trend observed of increased demand for food aid."

### **What might prevent people from using foodbanks:**

Research commissioned indicates that the following might prevent people from using from using food banks:

1. **Sustain and improve access to emergency financial support:** continue to improve the accessibility of support through the Scottish Welfare Fund and other Local Welfare Assistance Schemes

2. **Increase awareness of emergency financial support:** increase awareness, simplify the claim process and improve data collection to identify the support needs of those utilizing the service.
3. **Reform sanctions policy and practice:** clarify communications about sanctions, mitigate the impact whilst a sanction is being reconsidered, address issues for Housing Benefit and increase awareness of available external support.
4. **Improve support during the appeal period:** ensure claimants are not left without income whilst challenging a decision made because of missing medical certificates or missed appointments.
5. **Ensure the Job Centre provide an efficient supportive service for all clients:** develop the awareness of Job Centre advisors awareness of additional support available and improve their personal awareness and technological ability to respond to those with mental ill-health or learning difficulties.

Difficulty in navigating the benefits system is a common feature of the foodbank user experience. The benefit system is often experienced as complicated, remote and, at times, intimidating, especially when trying to resolve problems that occur with a claim. Lack of clear communication about what help is available or how to access it is a particular problem for people who have always worked and never claimed benefits before.

If the responsibility for welfare policy and implementation were devolved in Scotland The Trussell Trust would press for clarity in communication for and with those using the benefits system. The charity believes that this would reduce the number of people coming to foodbanks as a result of benefit sanctions and delays.

Many people coming to the foodbanks have expressed disappointment at their experience of Job Centre Plus. Job Centre staff have provided wrong or misleading information or failed to give the help or support needed. They have been referred to as 'judgmental' and 'unsympathetic'.

The Trussell Trust would welcome any opportunity to share the experiences of those going to Job Centre Plus with those in government in order to ensure the best possible outcome for those in need.

## **Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) and impact on the Spare Room Subsidy**

The Trussell Trust in Scotland welcomed the devolving by the UK government of the power to set the cap on Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) in Scotland.

The Trussell Trust has noted that the payments have been used by the Scottish government to mitigate the impact of housing benefit changes.

## **Trussell Trust and government**

In April 2014, The Trussell Trust Chairman, Chris Mould said:

“In the last year we have seen things get worse, rather than better, for many people on low incomes. It’s been extremely tough for a lot of people with parents not eating properly in order to feed their children and more people than ever experiencing seemingly unfair and harsh benefit sanctions.

Unless there is determined policy action to ensure that the benefits of national economic recovery reach people on low incomes we won’t see life get better for the poorest anytime soon. A more thoughtful approach to the administration of the benefits regime and sanctions in particular, increasing the minimum wage, introducing the living wage and looking at other measures such as social tariffs for essential like energy would help to address the problem of UK hunger.”

The Trussell Trust is disappointed that the London based Department of Work and Pensions has not engaged constructively with the charity in discussions that, the charity hoped, would achieve policies resulting in fewer people visiting foodbanks across the country.

Offers have been, and continue to, be made to share experience and views in order to better inform those responsible for the formulation of policy.

The Trussell Trust in Scotland welcomes the positive relationships that have been developed with the Scottish Government. The Trussell Trust is extremely grateful that the Scottish Government commissioned and published the ‘Overview of Food Aid Provision in Scotland’ report in December 2013, for the willingness of the Scottish Government to raise a debate on ‘foodbanks’ in the Scottish Parliament in February 2014 and the distribution of over £500,000 to food providers in Scotland.

The Trussell Trust believes that its foodbanks provide a vital emergency food assistance service that is valued by large numbers of frontline statutory and voluntary agencies across Scotland.

Trussell Trust foodbanks help to prevent crime, housing loss, family breakdown, neglect of children, mental and physical ill health. They are community-based services 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.

Too many people need foodbanks. The evidence suggests the prevalence of food poverty has risen significantly and is not expected to decrease in Scotland in the coming months. The Trussell Trust believes far fewer people should need foodbanks. Our experience tells us that a significant proportion of the people who are helped by Trussell Trust foodbanks find themselves in crisis because of benefit delays, changes and sanctions.

If a relationship with Scottish Government, with devolved powers, bore a yet more fruitful result in terms of debate, discussion and engagement, the Trussell Trust would welcome such an outcome. The Trust believes that a number of these particular crises are preventable and that the robust administration of welfare would benefit both clients and taxpayer.

We hope that the problem of food poverty will be given extensive consideration by elected officials in Scotland from across the political spectrum and by any presiding administration. The Trussell Trust remains committed to sharing its experiences with policy makers and seeking to better understand Scottish hunger.