

Foodbanks, welfare reform, and 'cash flow problems'

By Bernadette Meaden

MAY 30, 2017

Yesterday (29 May 2017) on a live television show, former Justice Minister Dominic Raab stated that people who used foodbanks were not “languishing in poverty” but experiencing a “cash flow problem”. He was quite insistent that Trussell Trust data showed that this was the case. You can see the video [here](#)

As a registered charity, the Trussell Trust is constrained by the Lobbying Act from making political comment during an election campaign. However, it was prompted [to tweet](#) “Seen those comments on #VictoriaLive about #foodbanks and want to know the truth? Here's The Trussell Trust's response >” There followed a statement from Chief Executive David McAuley, in which he said:

“our data shows that the main reasons for a foodbank referral are delays and changes to benefits, and low income issues that include people who are struggling with low pay or insecure forms of employment. It is our experience that people living in poverty are more likely to experience a sudden short term crisis which would lead to them being referred for emergency food and support.” So, not a temporary cash flow problem, but people living in poverty plunged into crisis.

There is another aspect to this story worth noting. When a person is referred to a Trussell Trust foodbank, staff complete a form, to collect the data to which Mr. Raab referred. They tick a box on the reason for referral. On the [latest figures](#), benefit delays and benefit changes combined accounted for 42.66% of referrals.

These phrases, ‘benefit delays’ and ‘benefit changes’ are relatively innocuous, suggestive of bureaucratic inefficiency or the understandable hiccup which may occur when a person’s circumstances change. However, these phrases may, inadvertently, be quite misleading.

When the Trussell Trust foodbank network was established in 2004, the social security system was very different. Benefit sanctions existed, but prior to the 2012 Welfare Reform Act, they were very rarely used. So there is no ‘benefit sanction’ box to tick on a Trussell Trust form. Presumably nobody envisaged that a seriously ill person, or a person with a learning disability, would have poor timekeeping punished by having their income stopped for a minimum of four weeks.

So the way the Trussell Trust has historically collected its data has inadvertently meant that the proliferation of benefit sanctions, a deliberate government policy, has been rather downplayed as a key driver of hunger and foodbank use. 'Benefit changes and delays' could be, and on occasions have been, explained away as a symptom of public sector inefficiency.

As another product of welfare reform, Universal Credit rolls out across the UK, a minimum six week delay to payments is inevitably driving foodbank use upwards – who could survive without any income for six weeks? Presumably, Trussell Trust foodbank staff will record this as a benefit delay, which could obscure the fact that it is a deliberately designed feature of the benefit.

However, the Trust has done some significant research, both independently and through co-operation with academics, so we do have more precise information on what has been driving foodbank use.

For example, in October 2016 researchers from Oxford University investigated “how trends in foodbank usage over the last four years relate to changes in the economy and welfare system”. **Their report** found, “clear evidence of sanctions being linked to economic hardship and hunger, as we see a close relationship between sanctioning rates and rates of foodbank usage across local authorities in the UK.”

The Trust itself produced, ‘**Early Warnings: Universal credit and Foodbanks**, and found, “The effect of a six-plus week waiting period for a first Universal Credit payment can be serious, leading to foodbank referrals, debt, mental health issues, rent arrears and eviction. These effects can last even after people receive their Universal Credit payments, as bills and debts pile up.”

So, a superficial reading of Trussell Trust data can be used to obscure the reality of life for people who use foodbanks, and dismiss it as a ‘cash-flow problem’. Proper analysis shows that government policy is exacerbating, not just hunger, but all the numerous problems that are caused by poverty and deprivation.

© **Bernadette Meaden** has written about political, religious and social issues for some years, and is strongly influenced by Christian Socialism, liberation theology and the Catholic Worker movement. She is an Ekklesia associate and regular contributor. You can follow her on Twitter: @BernaMeaden

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