**Welfare Safety net: Work and Pensions Committee**

**April 2019**

Written Evidence submitted by Dr Mhairi Bowe, Dr Juliet Wakefield, and Nottingham Civic Exchange

1. **Executive Summary**
   1. This submission builds on research within Nottingham on foodbank volunteers and users. In partnership with the Trussell Trust, our team of social psychologists have been exploring the culture and activity within foodbanks.
   2. Between March and July 2016, we interviewed 30 foodbank users and volunteers to understand the inner dynamics of foodbanks and how external factors result in foodbank use.
   3. In response to this inquiry we suggest that the government should record and monitor foodbank usage across the UK as a reliable proxy for food insecurity.
   4. Our qualitative interviews have provided a valuable insight into the personal stories of foodbank users, and how they perceive foodbank volunteers’ actions as reducing the stigma of foodbank use, increasing the uptake of this much-needed support. We have already published academic literature based on this research (Bowe et al., 2018), which can be viewed online [here](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/ejsp.2558).
   5. Across Nottingham, we have seen three main causes of foodbank use: the rising cost of living; increasing mental ill health, which has affected employment and increased isolation; and changes within the welfare system.
   6. Our research with foodbank users occurred before the roll out of Universal Credit across Nottingham, which poses a potential additional risk for many foodbank users.
   7. Low incomes from paid work, the limited support available from the welfare system, relationship breakdown, and job loss were the four primary reasons for foodbank users to seek foodbank support in times of crisis.
2. **About the authors**

* 1. [Dr Mhairi Bowe](https://www.ntu.ac.uk/staff-profiles/social-sciences/mhairi-bowe) is a Chartered Member of the British Psychological Society and a Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology and Mental Health in the Department of Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. Dr Bowe’s current research is focused on the links between social relationships and health, and how these impact upon the experience of community members undergoing challenges such as identity transition, social stigma, isolation, and poverty. Dr Bowe’s research has been sponsored by the ESRC, third sector charities, and local councils; it currently focuses on foodbank use, community volunteering, and the effectiveness of social prescribing; and it has been published in the European Journal of Social Psychology and Journal of Health Psychology. Recent findings from Dr Bowe’s work on foodbank use were submitted to the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights as part of his visit to the UK in November 2018 (Wakefield & Bowe, 2018; [available here](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/EPoverty/UnitedKingdom/2018/Academics/NottinghamTrentUniversity.pdf)), and were included in a report entitled Economic and Social Rights in Nottingham, submitted to the United Nations in March 2019.
  2. [Dr Juliet Wakefield](https://www.ntu.ac.uk/staff-profiles/social-sciences/juliet-wakefield) is a Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology and in the Department of Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. Dr Wakefield’s current research is focused on the impact of group memberships on people’s everyday lives, including aspects such as their health and well-being, and their help-giving and help-seeking behaviour. Dr Wakefield has received research funding from third sector charities and local councils: her recent projects explore issues such as foodbank use and foodbank volunteering, the lived experience of poverty, the effectiveness of social prescribing initiatives, and the social psychological dynamics of eating disorder recovery. Her research has been published in numerous journals, including the British Journal of Health Psychology and Psychiatry Research. Recent findings from Dr Wakefield’s work with Dr Bowe on foodbank use were submitted to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights as part of his visit to the UK in November 2018 (Wakefield & Bowe, 2018; [available here](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/EPoverty/UnitedKingdom/2018/Academics/NottinghamTrentUniversity.pdf)), and were included in a report entitled Economic and Social Rights in Nottingham, submitted to the United Nations in March 2019.
  3. [Nottingham Civic Exchange](http://www.ntu.ac.uk/nce) is Nottingham Trent University’s pioneering civic think tank with a primary focus on issues relating to the city and the region. Nottingham Civic Exchange enables discovery by creating a space where co-produced approaches are developed to tackle entrenched social issues. Nottingham Civic Exchange supports the role of NTU as an anchor institution in the city and the region. Nottingham Trent University holds engagement with communities, public institutions, civic life, business and residents at the core of its mission.

1. **Submission**
   1. This submission responds to the categories of question laid out in the terms of reference for the inquiry published in November 2018.
   2. Data on the prevalence of food insecurity, defined as a lack of secure access to “sufficient, safe and nutritious food” (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2017, p. 107) should be collected nationwide as an indicator of experiences of extreme poverty in the United Kingdom. Foodbank users indicate they often experience food insecurity for several days before deciding to accept help from a foodbank, suggesting foodbank use is a useful metric with which to measure extreme food insecurity.
   3. Our interviews with Trussell Trust foodbank users in Nottingham show that they typically experience extreme poverty before visiting a foodbank. They cite rising costs of living, utility costs, low paid work, long-term ill health (mental and physical), lack of social support, and benefit delays and sanctions as the causes. This mirrors the findings of large-scale national surveys on Trussell Trust user characteristics (Loopstra & Lalor, 2017). Each of these contributing factors needs to be addressed, for example through investment in healthcare, social prescribing, and helping community members into contracted, fairly-paid employment in order to ease pressure on the community voluntary sector and reduce the need for foodbank reliance.
   4. Our data suggest that there are increased levels of hardship in Nottingham and that this is due to: 1) costs of living, which are described as rising; 2) increasing experiences of mental ill-health in the population leading to unemployment and isolation; and 3) changes to benefit systems, particularly in terms of entitlement, increased sanctions, and claiming procedures. Specific changes such as the introduction of Universal Credit decrease the likelihood of individuals receiving sufficient and timely welfare support. Recording and collating foodbank users’ experiences of poverty and hardship can provide insights into the causes of poverty and hardship experiences, and are a way to monitor change over time.
   5. Our data suggest that as well as challenges posed by low income and changes to welfare state provision, foodbank users in Nottingham often report that personal circumstances such as relationship breakdown and job loss lead them to rely on state benefits. However, the safety net previously provided by the benefits system is no longer sufficient to assist them in avoiding extreme food insecurity. Policy makers should engage with accounts of the lived experiences of UK citizens experiencing poverty in order to allow them to develop a welfare state that is responsive to citizens’ needs.
   6. The experiences of foodbank users were similar across Nottingham in terms of their circumstances and the cited causes of their foodbank use. Nottingham has been identified as having high rates of child poverty and distinctly low levels of disposable income. It can therefore be used as a reliable context within which to explore experiences of hardship. Indicators of hardship, such as foodbank use, should be compared across UK regions for greater insight into the effectiveness of the welfare system across the UK.
   7. Evidence from foodbank users’ accounts in Nottingham suggest that delays, sanctions, inaccessibility of claim procedures, and reductions in entitlement are primary reasons for the hardship that leads to food insecurity and foodbank use. Evidence of these justifications for foodbank use can be collected easily at point of receipt of food at charitable food providers across the UK. This can be corroborated by large-scale survey data, which is collected by the Trussell Trust.
   8. At the time of data collection, Universal Credit had not been rolled out in Nottingham. Comparative data could be collected and used to identify variation in causal explanations for foodbank use in locations with and without the roll out of Universal Credit. Existing comparative data suggests that foodbank use increased 52% in Universal Credit areas in 2018, compared with only a 13% yearly increase in areas without Universal Credit (Trussell Trust, 2018).
   9. For many foodbank users experiencing extreme food insecurity, the welfare system does not provide sufficient resources in order to maintain the basic human right to food. Foodbank users often discuss long waits without benefit payments, which frequently occur due to sanctions and benefit changes. However, foodbank users also discuss being pushed into a corner where alternative options for providing for themselves include crime, unmanageable debt, and even suicide. There needs to be sufficient engagement with regulators and services such as the Financial Conduct Authority, the NHS, and the Police regarding these risks and their relationship with poverty and hardship.
   10. Vulnerable populations such as those experiencing extreme poverty, ill health, and employment challenges are still being unfairly treated by the benefits system. For example, our research with foodbank users suggests those making a shift to ESA due to ill health often need to wait up to six weeks between welfare payments, and are left without access to food as a result. In addition, many foodbank users describe how they struggle to navigate online claiming procedures, and report that welfare system staff are not willing or able to assist them with these difficulties, or with issues such as revoking unfairly received sanctions (e.g., missing a benefits appointment due to a hospital visit).
   11. In order to monitor where the welfare safety net is currently failing, it is necessary to chart the causes and consequences of poverty and hardship. Measures of food insecurity and foodbank use provide indicators of where extreme poverty occurs and for whom. By recording the reasons for foodbank use at the point of food collection, it is also possible to identify the causes of poverty and the role of the welfare system. This can be used to identify problems such as delayed benefits payments and how they impact on food insecurity. This should be done across the UK, and figures should be compared longitudinally to explore the impact of change and reform.
2. **Recommendations**
   1. Our research indicated that data on the prevalence of food insecurity should be collected nationwide as an indicator of experiences of extreme poverty. The use of foodbanks by UK citizens is a useful metric with which to measure food insecurity, and we call on the Government to track the number of foodbanks, frequency of visits, and volume of support given at these services.
   2. Our interviews with foodbank users in Nottingham show that they typically experience extreme poverty before visiting a foodbank. They cite rising costs of living, utility costs, low paid work, long-term ill health (mental and physical), lack of social support, and benefit delays and sanctions as the causes. Each of these contributing factors needs to be addressed through investment in healthcare, social prescribing, and helping community members into contracted, fairly paid employment in order to ease pressure on the community voluntary sector and reduce the need for foodbank reliance. Projects like Good Work Nottingham are beginning to explore how to provide good work for all in Nottingham, and we will be sharing our research on local social prescribing models in the next few months.
   3. Our data suggest that there are increased levels of hardship in Nottingham. The three main factors cited are the costs of living; increasing experiences of mental ill health in the population leading to unemployment and isolation; and changes to benefit systems. Recording and collating foodbank users’ experiences of poverty and hardship can provide insights into the causes of poverty and hardship experiences. We call on the government to collect and monitor experiences of poverty and hardship to ensure new welfare provision is built up from the lived experience of citizens who are most in need.
   4. Evidence from foodbank users’ accounts in Nottingham suggest that delays, sanctions, inaccessibility of claim procedures, and reductions in entitlement are primary reasons for the hardship that leads to food insecurity and foodbank use. Any updated Welfare Service needs to ensure these concerns are addressed.
   5. At the time of data collection, Universal Credit had not been rolled out in Nottingham. Comparative data should be collected and used to identify different reasons for foodbank use. Existing comparative data suggests that foodbank use increased 52% in Universal Credit areas in 2018.
   6. We are asking for more in-depth engagement with regulators and services such as the Financial Conduct Authority, the NHS, and the Police regarding the risks faced by foodbank users and their relationship with poverty and hardship.
   7. We call for the welfare system to be re-designed to take into account the vulnerable nature of foodbank users. Our research highlighted that the welfare system staff are not willing or able to assist users’ difficulties, or with issues such as revoking unfairly received sanctions.
   8. Dr Mhairi Bowe and Dr Juliet Wakefield are happy to speak to committee members confidentially about aspects or our research that can’t be made open to the public; they are also happy to present oral evidence to the committee or individual committee members.

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