

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

An insight into why young
people in England access
foodbanks

November 2014

YMCA

YMCA was established in 1844 and is the largest and oldest youth charity in the world, helping over 58 million people in 119 countries. Here in England where it all began, 114 YMCAs work to transform over 530 different communities, impacting on the lives of nearly 600,000 people every year.

YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

INTRODUCTION

There is mounting evidence to suggest that the number of people struggling to afford food in England is increasing year on year.

Anecdotally through research conducted over the past year, it has been recognised that young people are not been immune to this trend, with YMCAs increasingly having to refer those they work with to foodbanks for support. Furthermore, an increasing number of YMCAs have begun operating local foodbanks themselves.

However without a set of national statistics on the numbers accessing foodbanks and why this is taking place, it is difficult to secure a full understanding of the situation being faced by many individuals and families across the country.

The purpose of this research is to understand and offer **'food for thought'** on why young people are living in food poverty and being forced to access foodbanks in order to avoid going hungry.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What is forcing young people to use foodbanks?

- The vast majority (88%) of YMCAs participating in the research now have to refer the young people they work with to foodbanks.
- Just under four in five (79%) of those YMCAs referring young people to foodbanks reported having to do this as a direct result of delays in receiving benefit payments and punitive sanctions.

Why are the numbers of young people accessing foodbanks increasing?

- Over three quarters (76%) of YMCAs referring young people to foodbanks indicated that there had been an increase in the past year in the number of individuals they had to refer, with 40% reporting that this increase had been significant.
- It is estimated that YMCAs referred between 4,400 and 5,200 young people to foodbanks for support in the last year.
- When YMCAs were asked to explain this increase in food poverty amongst the young people they work with, more than four in five (81%) identified this being a result of the changes taking place to the welfare system.
- The new sanctions regime introduced in October 2012 was singled out as the main reason behind the growth in the numbers of young people living in food poverty.

How are YMCAs supporting young people in need?

- Where YMCAs were unable to prevent young people from falling into financial hardship, they support them to access food, both through referring them to foodbanks and providing food directly to them.
- YMCAs also run foodbanks which helped over 1,800 people last year.
- Recognising the issues being faced in the communities they serve, YMCAs deliver a range of preventative services to avoid young people ever needing to depend on hand-outs.
- This includes YMCAs helping almost 43,000 people last year to engage in education, skills and training to enable them to improve their opportunities in the job market.

What needs to be done to stop young people relying on foodbanks?

- Urgent action needs to be taken to address the problems with the welfare system, especially given the potentially negative impacts of changes yet to be rolled-out, and YMCA believes this should focus on;
 - Developing a more person-centred welfare system
 - Establishing additional exemptions and easements to protect the most vulnerable claimants
 - Better communicating the available safeguards and support
 - Undertaking a comprehensive review of benefit sanctions

KEY FINDINGS

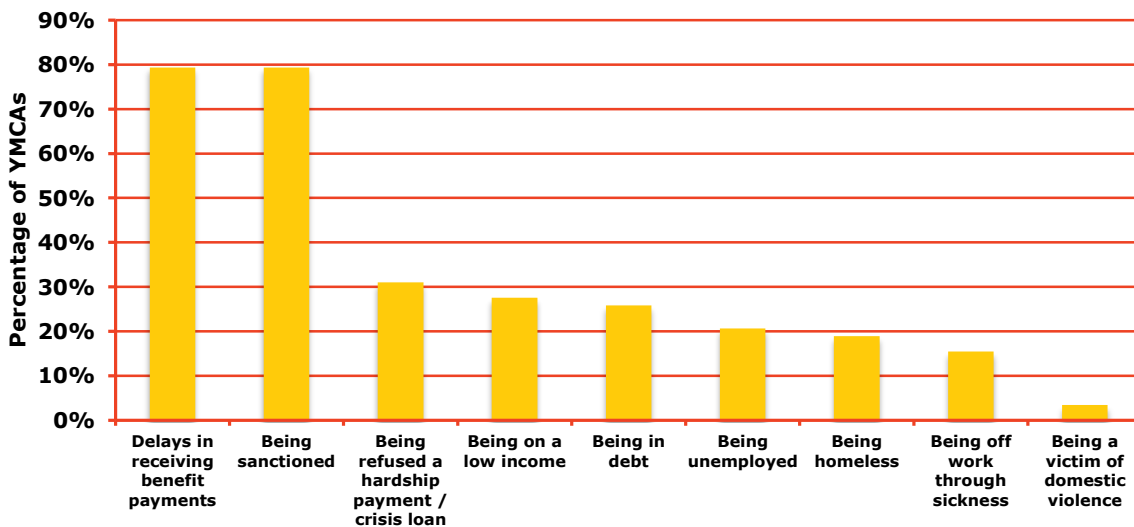
What is forcing young people to use foodbanks?

The vast majority of YMCAs participating in this research now have to send young people to foodbanks in order for them to be able to eat. 88% of YMCAs taking part in the research reported having to refer the young people they work with to foodbanks during times of severe hardship.

Worryingly it is the young people that are already most vulnerable that YMCAs are referring to foodbanks. In most cases, those being referred by YMCAs were young people living in supported accommodation.

Even where YMCAs are not currently referring young people to foodbanks, they are still seeing individuals in need. However, rather than referring these young people to a foodbank for support, they are providing them with food directly.¹

Figure 1: Reasons why YMCAs are referring young people to foodbanks



As can be seen from the table above, when asked why the young people they work with were in hardship and had to be referred to foodbanks, the main reasons identified by YMCAs focussed on issues relating to the current welfare system.

Delays in receiving benefits

When an individual makes a claim for benefits or transfers between two different benefits, claimants are often required to wait a number of days before they receive their first payments.²

Many individuals experiencing a short break in employment are able to manage financially during this time without the need to ever access a foodbank. However, a number of factors mean this is not the case for many young people.

Due to a combination of lacking essential financial skills and not having been in employment for long enough to build up enough savings which they are then able to fall back upon when beginning a claim, the impact from a delay in receiving a benefit payment can be particularly damaging for young people.

YMCA works with vulnerable young people including care leavers, young people who have become estranged from their parents, young people who have been sleeping rough on the street or sofa surfing, those who have faced abuse at home, and those who have relationship breakdowns with partners or other members of their family. For these young people, budgeting struggles and living hand-to-mouth is an everyday reality.

In addition to them facing greater difficulties managing their finances, their claims can often be more challenging and time consuming to set up. This can be as a result of them struggling more with lengthy and complex application processes, lacking access to a computer or phone, not having an active bank account or being unable to provide suitable identification.

Therefore, not only can vulnerable young people's claims be more difficult to set up, the impact that any delay or break in income can have on them is much more severe and damaging, both when they are first setting up a claim as well as when they are transferring between different benefits due to a change in their circumstances.

Delays in receiving benefit payments for those young people seeking to claim Employment Support Allowance (ESA) can be particularly cruel and damaging given that those individuals making this claim are doing so as a result of suffering from illness or a disability. For this group it is not only the initial delay when a claim is first submitted but also the time taken to receive an assessment.

While waiting for an assessment to take place, ESA claimants receive a basic allowance (Assessment Rate) that often does not suitably meet their greater support needs. According to figures recently released, it is estimated that more than 700,000 people are currently in this position of waiting for assessments for ESA and are therefore not receiving their full entitlement of benefits.³

As a result of these factors, YMCAs identified benefits delays as one of the main reasons they had to refer young people to foodbanks. Nearly four in five (79%) of those YMCAs referring young people to foodbanks reported having to do this as a result of them experiencing delays in receiving their benefit payments.

The impact that benefit delays are having in pushing individuals into food poverty is supported by evidence published by the largest provider of foodbanks in England. During 2013/14, 31% of those referred to the Trussell Trust foodbanks were as a result of benefit delays.⁴

Leon, 16, Southampton

Leon was made homeless when his sister was no longer able to support him and spent five weeks sofa surfing before coming to stay at the YMCA.

Upon coming to YMCA, Leon was not in employment, education or training, so applied to his local Jobcentre Plus for support. However while the Jobcentre and local council determined who was financially responsible for supporting him during this difficult time, he found himself without any income, savings or family support.

His support worker at YMCA Fairthorne Group referred him to a foodbank at Above Bar Church in Southampton, which he accessed for four weeks while waiting for his claim to be set up.

"It was really depressing going to the foodbank, but I had no choice. I had no money and if I didn't go there I would have starved."

While he was grateful for the food he received from the local church, as a result of these delays Leon has been forced into borrowing money from friends to cover his other living costs, which he will have to pay back once his claim is finally set up.

To address some of these concerns the Government are currently in the process of rolling out some of the most radical transformations of the welfare system in 60 years. At the heart of these reforms is the introduction of Universal Credit which seeks to combine six existing benefits.

By bringing together a range of existing benefits, the introduction of Universal Credit should remove the current breaks in receiving payments caused when transferring between benefits. In turn this should result in fewer individuals having to be referred to foodbanks and other agencies for support once their claim is set up.

However, any benefits for claimants resulting from this could potentially be undermined by other reforms taking place within the welfare system. Both the extension of benefit waiting times as well as changes to the payment arrangements associated with Universal Credit have the potential to make the situation more difficult for individuals at the beginning of their claims.

Currently individuals are entitled to begin receiving Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and ESA three days after they become unemployed, but from October 2014 this will be extended to seven days. For most under 25s claiming either JSA or ESA, the reforms would mean a reduction of nearly £33 in their first benefit payment, which is a significant amount for the young people YMCAs work with.⁵

However, given that these benefits are paid fortnightly in arrears, in reality these new proposals will further reduce the amount young people will receive by a third, when they initially begin claiming – leaving them with just £2 a day to spend on essential items such as food, toiletries, household bills and travel during the initial four week period after making a claim.

In addition to the extension of benefit waiting days, the introduction of Universal Credit also has the potential to further delay and limit the amount claimants will receive when they initially begin their claim. The introduction of monthly payments means the majority of Universal Credit claimants will have to wait over twice as long as they would on JSA or ESA before they receive any benefit payments.

The first Universal Credit payment that claimants receive is also likely to be affected by the seven days waiting period, which is due to be introduced as part of Universal Credit from April 2015. The details of how this will be applied is yet to be determined, however given that Universal Credit will include not just out of work benefits (e.g. JSA, ESA) but also support for housing costs, the potential hardship for claimants caused by any delays in receiving benefit payments could be even greater.

To address some of the potential negative impacts from these reforms, Alternative Payment Arrangements and Short-Term Benefit Advances are being made available to claimants. For individuals in immediate financial need, Short-Term Benefit Advance can be accessed, while for those claimants who are considered to be at risk of ongoing financial difficulties, Alternative Payment Arrangements can be agreed with Jobcentre Plus.

Whilst these appear to address many of the concerns raised, for them to be successful it is critical that when individuals make their initial claim they are made aware of these options and, where appropriate, supported to access both Short-Term Benefit Advances and Alternative Payment Arrangements. In practice, YMCA know that in many cases claimants are not being made aware of the availability of such schemes, as is the case with Hardship Payments for those that been sanctioned.⁶

In addition to this, it is also important that the process for agreeing and then providing claimants with Short Term Benefit Advance payments and Alternative Payment Arrangements is as efficient as possible. Any delays to this process undermine the purpose of having these schemes in place.

Being sanctioned

In order for individuals on JSA and ESA to receive their benefits, they need to comply with a set of conditions set down with Jobcentre Plus. The length of time an individual can have some or all of their benefit payments taken away for not meeting these conditions can vary from four weeks for a first offence to up to three years for a third offence.

Since new arrangements came into place in October 2012, there has been a significant rise in the number of sanctions being issued, with over one million sanctions being issued against JSA claimants in England in just over a year.⁷

Young people have been forced to bear the brunt of this new regime. Despite making up only 26% of JSA claimants, young people have accounted for 41% of the sanctions issued.⁸ This equates to nearly 1,000 young people having their benefits taken away from them every day since October 2012.

While the young people YMCAs work with agree with the need for some form of conditionality and penalties for individuals not doing what is being agreed with Jobcentre Plus, there was an overwhelming belief that the way in which sanctions are currently being applied was not fair.

The data released by the Department for Work and Pensions would appear to add weight to the belief that sanctions are being applied unfairly. Since October 2012 52,800 young people had their original sanction decision overturned after being reconsidered or appealed, which represents nearly half (48%) of those who challenged the decision.⁹

As with other failings within the current welfare system, at the heart of the problems being experienced with sanctions are poor communications and processes that fail to adequately identify and support those in most need.

Our research found that whilst young people currently claiming JSA and ESA were broadly aware they could be sanctioned, communication from Jobcentre Plus as well as work programme providers, is failing young people on three fronts by;

- Not providing them with adequate support about how they can avoid being sanctioned
- Not explaining why they have been sanctioned
- Not giving them practical advice and support on what they can do once they have been sanctioned

Through research YMCA conducted earlier in the year that focussed on the impact of benefit sanctions on young people, it became evident that many of them were being forced to go without food or relying upon the support of foodbanks as a direct result of sanctions.

Of those individuals questioned as part of this research, the vast majority (86%) that had been sanctioned reported being forced to go without essential items during the period when their benefits were cut, with the most common area they were forced to cut back on, or go without, being food (84%).¹⁰

This evidence from our previous research is reinforced by the vast majority (79%) of YMCAs that refer young people to foodbanks doing so as a result of them being sanctioned, making it the second most common reason why YMCAs were sending young people to foodbanks.

In the data gathered by the Trussell Trust for 2013/14, benefit changes, which includes the reform to sanctions, were identified as the third most common reason for individuals being referred to their foodbanks.¹¹

Joshua, 21, Nelson

Joshua came to the YMCA after his mum was no longer able to look after him and a breakdown in his relationship with his dad.

In preparation for a volunteering scheme, Joshua attended a residential course run by his YMCA. Despite having informed his local Jobcentre Plus and provided them with evidence of the trip and the benefits this would offer to him in finding future employment, when Joshua arrived back he was immediately sanctioned for having missed an appointment.

Given he had been previously sanctioned, as a result of missing his appointment, Joshua had his Jobseeker's Allowance taken away for three months. To help him be able to eat during this period, his key worker at YMCA Blackburn put him in touch with local foodbanks.

"I went three months living on food parcels from the local mosques and the church, which was really degrading because you lose all your dignity. The assistance I got was purely from the YMCA and Stepping Stones¹², other than that I think I would have starved."

Being refused a hardship payment / crisis loan

Linked to the two previous reasons detailed, Jobcentre Plus are able to offer Hardship Payments to individuals who have been refused benefits or had their benefits stopped and are deemed to be suffering financial hardship. In addition to Hardship Payments, claimants may also be able to receive support from local authorities who offer Local Welfare Assistance schemes.¹³

The Local Welfare Assistance schemes are comprised of two elements. Crisis support, which is designed to help people with vital short-term expenses such as food or clothes, and grants to help people in severe crisis obtain basic living essentials such as beds and cooking equipment. Given that Local Welfare Assistance schemes are devolved, local authorities across England have established a variety of schemes which operate in different ways.

Even prior to applying for one of these schemes, many young people are unable to access Hardship Payments and Local Welfare Assistance schemes through not being suitably informed of their availability. In research YMCA undertook earlier in the year, 42% surveyed were not aware that they could receive financial assistance when they were sanctioned.¹⁴

For those young people that are aware such schemes exist, they can still prove difficult to access. The Local Welfare Assistance schemes have proven the most difficult of these schemes for young people to access. In previous research YMCA has undertaken with young people accessing financial support when they had been sanctioned, less than 5% received help from a Local Welfare Assistance scheme.¹⁵

The difficulties individuals have faced accessing Local Welfare Assistance schemes is demonstrated by the significant underspend of this fund by local authorities. During the first 10 months of the Local Welfare Assistance schemes the average spend by councils was just 43% of the available budget.¹⁶

As a result of the difficulties faced in accessing support when facing financial difficulties, nearly a third (31%) of those YMCAs referring young people to foodbanks did so due to them being refused a Hardship Payment or Crisis Loan.

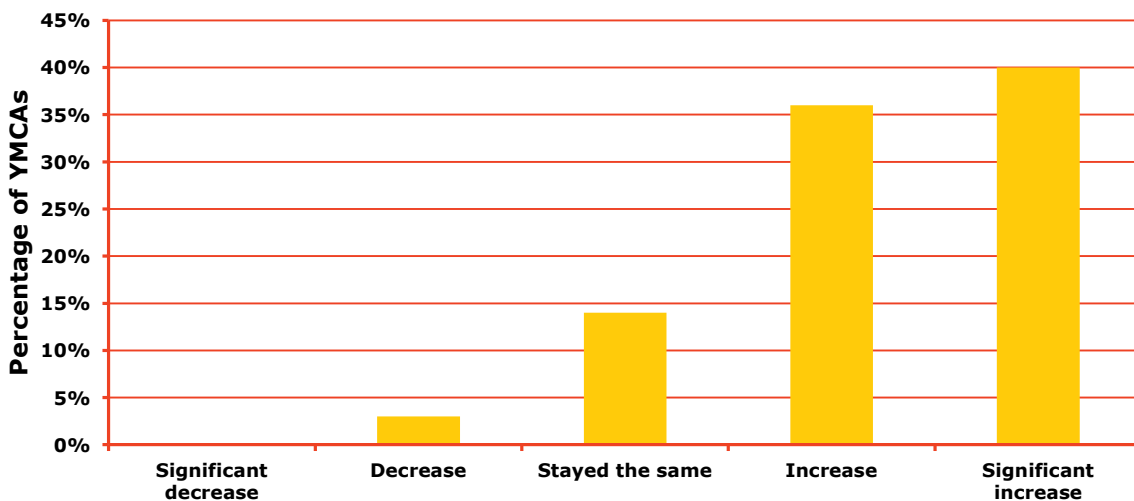
Whilst Hardship Payments are set to continue (although under a scheme where they may need to be repaid¹⁷), this year's local government finance settlement revealed that funding for the Local Welfare Assistance scheme would not be renewed. This means that even the small numbers who have to date been fortunate enough to access Local Welfare Assistance schemes may no longer be able to do so after 2015, which could potentially lead to even more young people being forced to depend on foodbanks for support.

Why are the numbers of young people accessing foodbanks increasing?

In the last year, the number of young people that YMCAs are referring to foodbanks has increased. Four in five (80%) YMCAs responding to the research indicated there had been an increase in the past year in the number of young people they had to refer to foodbanks, with 40% reporting that this increase had been significant.

Only two YMCAs (3%) reported that there had been a decrease in the number of young people they had to refer to foodbanks, with the remaining YMCAs (14%) indicating that the numbers had remained consistent in the last year.

Figure 2: How the number of young people referred by YMCAs to foodbanks has changed over the past 12 months



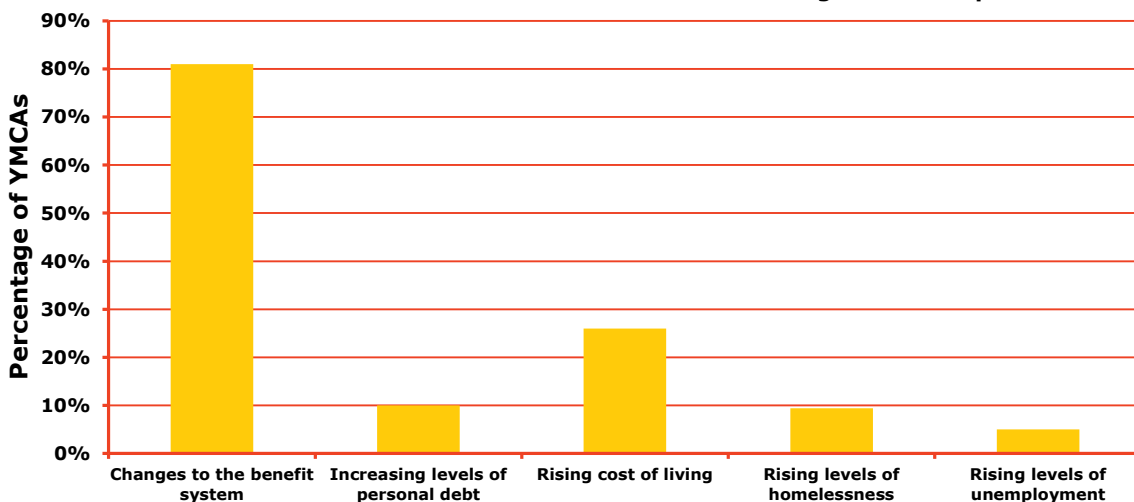
The number of young people that each YMCA refers to foodbanks for support varies, often relative to the number of individuals they work with. This ranges from nearly 40 young people a month being referred at larger YMCAs to only one or two young people at smaller YMCAs.

Based on those YMCAs who currently monitor this data, between 370 and 440 young people each month are referred to foodbanks by YMCAs, which is equivalent to between 4,400 and 5,200 young people a year.

While these figures seem relatively small in proportion to the total numbers now relying on foodbanks, given that those that are being referred by YMCAs are some of the most vulnerable young people, this makes distressing reading.

When YMCAs were asked to explain this increase in food poverty amongst the young people they work with, by far the biggest reason identified was the changes taking place to the benefits system (81%).

Figure 3: Why the number of young people referred by YMCAs to foodbanks has changed over the past 12 months



Changes to the benefits system

As outlined previously in this report, the welfare system in England is currently undergoing some of the most radical transformations in a generation and there is an overwhelming consensus amongst YMCAs that these reforms are leading to more young people needing to access foodbanks.

At the heart of these reforms is the introduction of Universal Credit, however delays in its roll-out have meant fewer than 14,000 claimants have so far been moved onto the new system, making its impact to date relatively minimal.¹⁸

In addition to this, whilst benefit delays were identified as being one of main reasons why YMCAs were referring young people to foodbanks for support, they were not considered to be a key contributing factor behind the significant rise reported.

The change which YMCAs felt was having the biggest impact on food poverty amongst young people has been the reforms to the sanctions regime that were introduced in October 2012. Benefit sanctions were seen by YMCAs as not just one of the primary reasons why individuals are accessing foodbanks, but also the main cause of the overall growth in the number of young people being forced to rely on hand-outs to eat.

The concerns raised through this research in regard to the impact of benefit sanctions are broadly consistent with information collected by other organisations. For example, when Trussell Trust foodbanks were surveyed during March and April 2014, 83% reported that sanctions to benefit payments have caused more people to be referred to them for emergency food in the last year.¹⁹

The belief amongst YMCAs and other organisations that benefit sanctions are a growing issue is also reinforced by the data released by the Department for Work and Pensions. This shows that since the new sanctions regime was introduced, the proportion of young people claiming JSA that have been sanctioned has more than doubled, from 2% under the previous arrangements, to 5% of claimants since October 2012.²⁰ For ESA claimants this rise has been even more substantial, with the number of young people being sanctioned having increased by over 60% in the last year.²¹

As previously set out in this report, whilst there is recognition amongst YMCAs and young people that conditionality is an important element of any benefit system, the way it is currently being administered and the focus on punishing perceived 'bad behaviour' over rewarding those doing the right thing is having a detrimental effect on the wellbeing of young people.

By failing to effectively communicate how individuals can avoid being sanctioned, why they have been sanctioned and what they can do once they have been sanctioned, Jobcentre Plus is unnecessarily forcing more and more young people to rely on foodbanks for support.

Despite falling numbers of those claiming out-of-work benefits, given the potential impact of the reforms yet to come into place (e.g. extension of benefit waiting times) and those to be rolled-out more widely (e.g. Universal Credit), the benefits system could yet drive even greater numbers of young people into financial hardship and cause the demand on foodbanks to increase further.

Rising cost of living

The second largest reason identified by YMCAs for the rise in the number of young people they had to refer to foodbanks was a rise in the cost of living (28%). Cost of living is the amount of money needed to sustain a certain level of living, including basic expenses such as housing and food.

High levels of youth unemployment mean more young people in the past few years have had to rely on out of work benefits to cover their living costs.

From a low of around 10% between 2000 and 2004, the levels of youth unemployment rose gradually before the economic crash. Since the UK entered recession in 2008, the level of unemployment amongst young people has increased by over 45,000.²²

Despite a more recent decline, young people who lack a good education or practical work experience are still finding it difficult to secure a job. Over 955,000 young people are not in education, employment or training (NEET) and nearly 12 times as many young people are now spending longer than two years on JSA than before the recession.²³

Meeting basic living costs can be a challenge for anyone who depends on benefits but as a result of being treated differently by the tax-benefit system, for young people this can prove even more difficult. Those under the age of 25 receive a lower rate of both JSA and ESA, and by virtue of receiving only enough housing support to pay for a single room in a shared property until the age of 35, they often also receive considerably less in Housing Benefit than older age groups.

For those fortunate enough to also be able to rely upon the support of their families, being treated differently by the welfare system is not necessarily an issue. However for the thousands of young people for whom this isn't the case, meeting basic living costs whilst on benefits can be a day to day struggle as they are forced to meet comparable costs (e.g. housing costs, household bills and everyday costs such food and drink) to older age groups but on a much reduced income.

For young people fortunate enough to be in work, not only is their earning power much lower than older age groups - with the median weekly income around half of that for individuals aged between 30 and 59 years old - in recent years their wages have risen at a much slower rate than prior to the recession.²⁴ Again this disproportionately affects those young people unable to depend upon the support of their families to supplement their income.

Given that young people's wages and benefits have risen slower than inflation in recent years, this has meant the money they receive is not keeping up with rising everyday costs such food and drink, housing costs and household bills putting them under greater financial pressure and at risk of falling into hardship.

How are YMCAs supporting young people in need?

YMCAs offer a range of services targeted at preventing young people ever needing to depend on hand-outs from foodbanks.

YMCAs help almost 43,000 people every year engage in education, skills and training to enable them to improve their opportunities in the job market. The training opportunities YMCAs provide span all abilities from basic life skills such as cleaning and cooking a meal, through to advanced apprenticeships and post-graduate qualifications.

To help address some of the budgeting issues responsible for driving some young people into hardship, YMCAs offer them a variety of financial education courses which are run locally.

In conjunction with organisations such as Lloyds Banking Group and Barclays Bank, during the last year over 10,000 people accessed YMCA basic life skills and financial budgeting courses. These include one-to-one support, debt counselling, informal sessions and budgeting training courses for young people.

In response to the role that the welfare system is having in driving young people to depend on foodbanks, YMCAs are spending more of their time attempting to set up and maintain young people's benefit claims.

As well as ongoing advice they provide through regular support meetings, staff and volunteers at YMCAs have begun implementing a range of preventative measures to help young people maintain their claims. These include keeping track of dates their residents are required to sign on, supporting them with job search activity and working more closely with local Jobcentre Plus and other agencies such as the Citizen's Advice Bureau.

In response to the communication shortcomings identified with Jobcentre Plus, YMCA has also begun producing and circulating guides relating to the welfare system targeted at young people. YMCA has produced guides on the new claimant commitment, sanctions and Universal Credit.

Where YMCAs are unable to prevent a young person from falling into financial hardship, they are fortunate to be able to depend on local foodbanks. As highlighted in this report, 88% of YMCAs now depend upon this generosity to ensure the young people they work with are able to eat.

In addition to referring the young people that YMCAs work with to foodbanks, many act as hubs responsible for assessing and referring other individuals from the wider community in their times of need.

The foodbanks YMCAs access vary in size and form, from nationally run operations, through to those run by local churches and community organisations. In some cases seeing the need of the young people YMCAs work with, local communities have come together to create a foodbank able to support them.

Responding to the needs of the communities, in some areas YMCAs have also been involved in the setting up and running of foodbanks. A total of eight YMCAs are currently involved with running local foodbanks, which supported over 1,800 families and individuals last year.

Burton YMCA Foodbank

Burton YMCA had always collected food at harvest festivals for individuals in need, but found more and more people were coming to them throughout the year asking for food. This demand led to them setting up a foodbank in 2001.

Through having well established links with the community, over the past 13 years Burton YMCA has been able to rely upon donations from a wide range of organisations and individuals to stock its foodbank. These include Asda, local churches, schools, rotary clubs and women's institute groups.

While the foodbank is managed by the team at Burton YMCA, the food donated is sorted and packed by a team of enthusiastic volunteers, who give up their time every week to give back to their community. Each food parcel they pack contains enough food to last a family for 3 days.

By locating the foodbank within the heart of Burton in their Reconnect Centre - a training and support centre for the homeless and home to 31 people that the YMCA have rescued from being homeless - the foodbank is able to open 365 days a year. Being based there also means staff handing out food parcels are able to signpost those in need to other services, including the homeless prevention team and family mediation services.

The demand for food parcels at Burton YMCA has jumped significantly over the past few years. In 2010, they handed out 602 food parcels, however by last year this number had more than doubled to 1,259.

Beverley Finney who manages the foodbank at Burton YMCA said:

"We have a great team of staff and volunteers who work extremely hard to keep the service running, but knowing that the bag of food you've packed will enable a family to eat a hot meal, maybe for the first time in 2 or 3 days, and the simple "thank you" makes it all worthwhile."

"We could not deliver this service without regular donations of food. We are constantly amazed by the generosity of the local community. As demand for food has increased, local individuals and groups have responded by increasing their donations of food."

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What needs to be done to stop young people relying on foodbanks?

YMCA acknowledge that it will take time to return to pre-recession standards of living and that the Government has been taking actions which are now beginning to remove many young people out of hardship and into sustained and better paid employment. However, the progress made is being undermined by failings within the welfare system.

The welfare system was set up to protect and provide a safety net for those individuals in their time of need. However, increasing numbers of young people are being forced to depend on hand-outs as a direct result of issues within the welfare system, which demonstrates that it is fundamentally failing in its role.

The lack of flexibility in the current policies and practices make the welfare system unable to respond to individuals' circumstances and challenges, leaving many young people dependent on hand-outs and in some cases even causing them to disengage from support entirely. These are individuals who with the right support, could make a fuller contribution to society.

While safeguards are supposed to be in place to support those people suffering as a result of benefit delays and sanctions, this research and the numbers of young people currently accessing foodbanks, proves that these are failing.

Recognising the issues being faced in communities, YMCAs are dealing with the situation on the ground through delivering a range of programmes and initiatives. From equipping young people with advice, skills and training, to providing them with food parcels when they cannot afford food to eat.

As the foodbanks delivered by ourselves and other organisations across the country show, we are fortunate to live in a country where people and communities give so charitably. However, relying upon this goodwill and other organisations to pick up the pieces should not be seen by the Government as a substitute to fixing a welfare system that is currently driving many young people into hardship rather than employment.

With this overwhelming level of mounting evidence, the Government cannot continue to put its head in the sand with regard to the root cause of the problems which are driving more young people each year to depend on food parcels in order to eat.

Urgent action needs to be taken to address the problems with the welfare system, especially given the potentially negative impacts of changes yet to be rolled out, and YMCA believes this should focus on;

- 1. Developing a more person-centred welfare system**
- 2. Establishing additional exemptions and easements to protect the most vulnerable claimants**
- 3. Better communicating the available safeguards and support**
- 4. Undertaking a comprehensive review of benefit sanctions**

These recommendations are set out in detail below.

1. Developing a more person-centred welfare system

For many young people in order for them to make that important transition to independence and employment, they first need people around them on which they can depend.

Becoming someone who young people can depend upon requires an investment of time in developing personal relationships and understanding their circumstances, something which the inflexibilities within the current welfare system inhibit.

As a result of this lack of flexibility, rather than being seen as people who are able to provide them with support and on whom they can depend, those working within Jobcentre Plus are being seen by many young people as the cause of them facing frequent delays and breaks in their benefit payments which leave them dependent on foodbanks.

To help overcome this fundamental lack of confidence and the failings that are driving young people into financial hardship, the welfare system needs to be able to provide better support tailored around the individual.

To achieve this, Jobcentre Plus should be enabled and encouraged to invest more time in understanding the often complex barriers that young people face in finding sustained employment.

Having identified these, Jobcentre Plus should have the flexibility to develop and commission more tailored support which can encompass a wider range of training and work experience opportunities. This includes being able to place individuals on training for longer than 16 hours a week where lack of skills and qualifications is a key barrier to them finding employment.

In doing this those working within Jobcentre Plus should be encouraged to develop closer working relationships with representatives from other organisations, particularly those already working closely with vulnerable individuals.

As well as helping to personalise the support provided, improving links with other relevant organisations would help to better understand the barriers faced by claimants and keep check on the progress they are making.

To ensure these relationships continue throughout the length of their claim and to avoid the delays and breaks resulting in young people being unable to speak with someone who knows about them and their claim or being bounced between different departments, it is important that claimants are provided with a genuine single point of contact for any issues relating to their claim.

Through its reforms, the Government is taking steps which aim to increase flexibility and deliver a more personalised service through Jobcentre Plus. Work Coaches replacing Personal Adviser, the new Claimant Commitment, the lifting of the 16 hour rule for traineeships, alongside the Intensive Activity Programme being piloted as part of the roll-out of Universal Credit could potentially go some of the way to addressing some of the current shortcomings.

However, despite these recent reforms Jobcentre Plus staff are still largely required to focus their efforts on pushing individuals straight into intensive work search activity and training focussed primarily on the process of looking for and applying for jobs (e.g. CV writing, social media training) regardless of the barriers they face to finding sustained employment.

This runs the risk of young people failing to find sustainable employment which can have a negative impact on motivation and self-esteem and runs the risk of them becoming long-term unemployed.

Recommendation 1: YMCA proposes that Jobcentre Plus invest more time in undertaking a comprehensive assessment of claimants at the outset of their claim to better understand the barriers they face in finding sustained employment.

Recommendation 2: YMCA proposes that restrictions on the length of time which claimants can be in training and still receiving benefits be removed, allowing Jobcentre Plus to place individuals on training for longer than 16 hours a week where lack of skills and qualifications is a key barrier to them finding employment.

Recommendation 3: YMCA proposes that Work Coaches be encouraged to develop close working relationships with other organisations providing claimants with support.

Recommendation 4: YMCA proposes that claimants have a single point of contact within their Jobcentre Plus, who they can contact regarding any enquiries or issues regarding their claim, even when the claimant is referred to back to work schemes.

2. Establishing additional exemptions and easements to protect the most vulnerable claimants

As this research demonstrates, the welfare system is failing to provide a safety net for even the most vulnerable young people and in many cases is causing unnecessary hardship. To end this situation where those most vulnerable claimants are being unduly punished by the welfare system, it is important that targeted exemptions and easements be put in place.

Where a need has previously been identified, the Government have introduced some welcome exemptions and easements for vulnerable claimants. Most recently we have seen the introduction of easements from work search activity for recently homeless individuals claiming JSA, as well as the creation of a new 'specified' category of supported accommodation which means residents living in this type of housing will have their Housing Benefit paid direct to their landlord.

Given the impact that being forced to wait for an extended length of time before they receive any financial support is already having on young people, and the reforms yet to come in are likely to make this situation worse, a set of exemptions and easements need to be introduced.

Recommendation 5: YMCA proposes that vulnerable young people living in supported accommodation (exempt or specified) be exempt from the planned extension to benefit waiting days.

Recommendation 6: YMCA proposes that vulnerable young people living in supported accommodation (exempt or specified) be automatically offered the option of receiving alternative payment arrangements (including more frequent benefit payments) when making their initial claim.

3. Better communicating the available safeguards and support

Despite having introduced a range of safeguards within the welfare system intended to help avoid individuals having to go without, the increasing numbers relying on food parcels indicate these are failing to ensure individuals can even afford to feed themselves.

While in some cases this is due to not being eligible or the payments being insufficient to meet individual's basic costs, this is not always the case. Our research indicates that lack of awareness and understanding of how to access resources such as Short-Term Benefit Advances, Hardship Payments and Local Welfare Assistance schemes are meaning young people have to access foodbanks.

Improving how such schemes are communicated would help prevent many individuals unnecessarily going without when support is available to them. To do this the Department for Work and Pensions along with local authorities need to ensure that the materials they produce are clear and understandable to different client groups, such as young people.

Recommendation 7: YMCA proposes that the Government and local authorities should work with key stakeholders to review the information currently being provided to claimants on available safeguards and support.

4. Undertaking a comprehensive review of benefit sanctions

Conditionality and sanctions have an important role to play in the welfare system. However, YMCA evidence shows benefits sanctions have become a key reason for the growing number of young people needing to access foodbanks.

As with the other failings within the current welfare system, at the heart of the problems being experienced by young people with sanctions, is poor communication and complex processes. Too frequently YMCAs see claimants who lack access to basic information on; what they can do to avoid being sanctioned, why they have been sanctioned, how they challenge sanctions and how to access support.

A range of the measures already proposed in this report such as those on developing a more person-centred welfare system would help in reducing the numbers of young people unnecessarily suffering as a result of benefit sanctions, as would some of the measures recommended by the Independent Review led by Matthew Oakley.²⁵

However, given that benefit sanctions are unduly punishing young people over other age groups and are having a direct role in driving increasing numbers of individuals into food poverty, a more fundamental review is necessary.

By limiting the focus of the previous review to cover only those on back to work schemes which account for only a third of sanctions currently being issued against young people, the review was only able to scratch the surface.

A future review needs to examine whether benefit sanctions are actually achieving their stated goal of encouraging individuals to comply with requirements to help them move into or prepare for work, or as it currently seems, simply punishing the most vulnerable people in society.

Recommendation 8: YMCA proposes that a more comprehensive review of benefit sanctions should be undertaken to fully address the existing problems leading to and resulting from their implementation.

NOTES

A total of 66 YMCAs participated in the research between March and July 2014. To gather the relevant information for this research a survey was prepared and sent to all YMCAs in England. The survey was completed in hard copy, online and through a telephone interview.

We would like to thank all YMCAs and young people who took part in the research; in particular those who shared in detail their stories.

¹ Five of the Eight YMCAs not referring to foodbanks were able to provide the young people with food directly through their catered facilities.

² The Department for Work and Pensions currently does not set targets or publish figures for how quickly benefit claims are processed. However historically they have measured the number of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and Employment Support Allowance (ESA) claims processed within 16 days and the vast majority of the claims are dealt with within this period. While for Housing Benefit claims, local authorities currently take an average of 22 days to process new claims and 12 days to deal with a change of circumstances.

³ [BBC, June 2014](#)

⁴ [Trussell Trust, 2014](#)

⁵ For most under 25s claiming either Jobseeker's Allowance or Employment Support Allowance, the reforms would mean a reduction of from £90.12 to £57.35 in their first benefit payment.

⁶ [YMCA England, March 2014](#)

⁷ [DWP, August 2014](#)

⁸ [DWP, August 2014](#)

⁹ [DWP, August 2014](#)

¹⁰ [YMCA England, March 2014](#)

¹¹ [Trussell Trust, 2014](#)

¹² [Stepping Stones](#)

¹³ Local Welfare Assistance schemes replaced Community Care Grant and Crisis Loan schemes in April 2013.

¹⁴ [YMCA England, March 2014](#)

¹⁵ [YMCA England, March 2014](#)

¹⁶ [The Guardian, April 2014](#)

¹⁷ For those claimants on JSA and ESA, the Hardship Payments they receive will not need to be repaid, however for those already on Universal Credit, the payments they receive may need to be repaid when their benefit payments start back up.

¹⁸ [DWP, September 2014](#)

¹⁹ [Trussell Trust, June 2014](#)

²⁰ [DWP, May 2014](#)

²¹ [DWP, May 2014](#)

²² [DWP, September 2014](#)

²³ [DWP, September 2014](#)

²⁴ [ONS, December 2013](#)

²⁵ [DWP, November 2013](#)



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YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

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