



## **CSAN (Caritas Social Action Network) response to Feeding Britain**

CSAN (Caritas Social Action Network) is the domestic social action arm of the Catholic Church in England and Wales. Our network includes a number of charities who work to alleviate poverty in its various manifestations, with food poverty, often a symptom of multiple and significant social challenges, of great concern.

This submission was prepared in partnership with CSAN member, Nugent Care. Nugent Care offers a diverse range of support to adults and children across Liverpool and throughout the North West of England. As a social care provider, Nugent Care works at the heart of some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, many of whom suffer hunger and food poverty. Ensuring people's rights, independence, interdependence, choice and inclusion is integrated into all of Nugent Care's work.

The submission also received contributions from the Cardinal Hume Centre, Catholic Care Leeds, Catholic Children's Society (Westminster), the Passage, St Vincent de Paul and Good Shepherd Ministry, a religious order of the Brothers of St John of God.

### **Summary of submission**

- The decline of support services, especially those traditionally funded by statutory bodies, has led to a gap in support provided for vulnerable clients. Rather than this decline being driven by a reduced demand for services, it is instead caused by reduced funding available for services. As a consequence, vulnerable people are being left without vital support services.
- CSAN charities have had to diversify their services to respond to the needs of clients who have struggled to meet the cost of food, utilities and household essentials. Charities are increasingly providing material goods, such as furniture, white goods and funds for electricity and gas key meters alongside emergency food provision.
- Asylum seekers and migrants have been acutely affected by food poverty, which is often exacerbated by significantly longer delays in benefit related issues.
- Benefit sanctions have remained a consistent cause of clients needing to access emergency food assistance.
- The growth in the private rental sector is putting a greater strain on families and individuals due to rental costs and the lack of security prevalent in the tenure.
- Child hunger, in particular during school holidays, remains a significant concern for CSAN charities. Although the issue appears to be widespread, there is a fear the problem is much deeper than currently understood due to parents being afraid to disclose their difficulties.

## Recommendations

- An inquiry into the withdrawal of local support services should be launched to assess the impact the loss of such services is having on the poorest and most vulnerable.
- Regular translation services should be provided by the Jobcentre and the DWP to prevent unnecessary delays, errors and benefit sanctions for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.
- An intermediary line for advisors of charities to call on behalf of clients, similar to the one available for HMRC, should be established.
- Programmes should be rolled out nationally and run at a local, community level for families to access lessons on healthy cooking on a low budget.
- It is the view of the network that free phone lines and phone-banks in Jobcentres should be restored to enable claimants to receive an update on their application at no cost to themselves.
- Vulnerable groups and people, such as those on ESA, with medical conditions or mental health issues, should be exempt from receiving a benefit sanction.
- Instead of prospective tenants being refused tenancies in Housing Association or Registered Social Landlord accommodation due to their financial situation, more proactive support should be offered to help them manage their financial difficulties. This will prevent many families and individuals from having to rent in the insecure and costly private rental sector.
- Registered Social Landlords should be discouraged from demanding upfront deposits from tenants, especially those from low-incomes.
- Projects should be explored, based in Primary Schools which often act as community hubs, to provide meals at least once a day to children and families during school holidays.
- Children who qualify for free school meals should be given tokens, vouchers or food parcels for their families to access healthy and free food during the school holidays.

## **How has your work progressed and developed since you gave evidence to the inquiry?**

Since the previous submission to the inquiry, CSAN charities have continued to respond to the needs of their clients; as such food parcels, cash and material support are still frequently provided.

The Cardinal Hume Centre is currently involved in developing a 'hub' of combined services, based in Pimlico, to benefit people in need in the local area. The Centre is part of a consortium of local faith groups and advice agencies who wish to collaborate in order to provide practical support and relief to those in immediate food, housing and income crisis in the area (Pimlico, in the south of the City of Westminster, London SW1). The location of the centre will be out of a new community location that will act as a hub for local residents. Following meetings with local church leaders, it was agreed that the Westminster Foodbank will provide a satellite service at the venue (a hall belonging to St Gabriel's Church) and together with another agency, Cardinal Hume Centre will be running advice sessions alongside the foodbank. The aim is that by locating the Foodbank in the local community, take-up will be higher than it is currently (its permanent location is in another part of Westminster, in a venue that is not very visible and also not close to the social housing in south Westminster) and that by offering advice and information alongside the provision of food, people in need will be able to access a range of services in one place. An initial pilot will begin in November 2015 and will run for six months.

### **Foodbank case study, Good Shepherd Ministry a religious order of the Brothers of St John of God**

The Good Shepard Ministry, based in the centre of Wolverhampton, rent a Methodist Church building and provide food provision seven days a week, helping close to 250 people a day. The number of people accessing the centre has increased significantly in recent years, rising from 55,811 people in 2011 to 91,686 people in 2014. Based on statistics from the first 9 months of 2015, the number of people accessing the services is anticipated to remain at a similar level to 2014.

For four days each week, the Brothers distribute food for people to take away, on the other three days they provide a hot meal service (a 'soup kitchen'). Alongside food provision, they also provide clothes, bedding and toiletries.

The majority of the service users are in receipt benefits of some kind, and at any one time there are people attending the service as they have received a benefit sanction. A large minority are recent immigrants from Eastern Europe and the centre is also seeing a small number of refugees/asylum seekers from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Eritrea. Around a third of the service users suffer from addictions to alcohol, drugs and/or mental illnesses of various kinds.

Although the centre only provides basic emergency assistance, they signpost to other agencies who can help to tackle the root causes of the individual's issues. Representatives from other agencies regularly attend the centre to make contact with the service users.

Most of the food the centre receives is donated by local supermarkets, churches, schools and a number of other organisations and individuals. Although the centre could always do with more, the donations thus far have always been sufficient to meet demand.

A number of other parishes and charities have also established foodbanks; for example, the Southwark St Vincent de Paul Society set up a foodbank in response to local residents being affected by issues relating to benefit administration.

### **What barriers are there to your work?**

CSAN charities frequently cite the decline of external support services, especially services which were previously funded through statutory bodies. This has led to our charities' services becoming inundated with referrals as the demand for services is not declining, only the provision of services. In addition to this lack of alternative support, contracts for the charities themselves are also not being renewed.

This has been a particularly acute issue for Nugent Care in Liverpool, who have seen two housing services end in the past twelve months after four years of existence. Throughout this period, Nugent Care delivered vital support to vulnerable households. Nugent Care's housing services team would receive referrals to solve a specific issue, such as rent arrears; however, Nugent Care adopted a holistic and co-ordinated approach to tackle the root causes of the clients difficulty. This often included providing food parcels, however as is often the case with vulnerable people experiencing poverty, a solitary food parcel is rarely the solution. Instead, it was the additional support such as supporting a client through benefit related issues, accompanying them to medical appointments and Jobcentre appoints. This approach achieved excellent outcomes in terms of reinstated benefits and awards for clients, as a member of staff in the Nugent Care team explains:

*“Without support clients would not be able to get to an assessment and would struggle to say the right thing of express their difficulties. Many are unable to articulate their health issues and this can lead to them failing the medical”.*

The personalised and private approach also helped to counter the stigma and embarrassment some clients often feel around accessing emergency food provision. Staff at Nugent Care saw significantly reduced stress levels for the clients they supported in this service.

There are concerns regarding the impact that the withdrawal of this service, and similar services all across the country, will have on vulnerable households and those already in precarious situations.

### **Recommendation**

- An inquiry into the withdrawal of local support services should be launched to assess the impact the loss of such services is having on the poorest and most vulnerable.

### **What are the trends in demand for your services and how have they changed since you gave evidence to the inquiry?**

Since 2013 Nugent Care have had to expand the criteria for the distribution of funds to clients. In addition, in more recent times the type of items clients can receive financial support for now include rent, gas and electricity among other household essentials. Despite not being a major, or known, foodbank in the area they have distributed over 380 food parcels in the period of March 2014 to June 2015. Alongside this increase in providing support for utility costs and food,

Nugent Care also notes an increasing demand for household goods such as furniture and white goods.

The Passage has also noted an increase in demand, as have many other CSAN charities, for funds for clients to top up electricity and gas key meters.

CSAN charities have also noted an increase in the number of migrants and asylum seekers who require emergency food provision. Nugent Care highlight issues in the benefit system, which is particularly difficult for migrants and asylum seekers to navigate due to language barriers. In fact, delays and errors often take significantly longer to be addressed in this context. The situation is intensified by the absence of translation facilities, as the onus is on the claimant to provide their own translation service. Jobcentres and the DWP should provide regular translation services to prevent unnecessary delays, errors and benefit sanctions.

Often, this cohort requires significant support from charity services to navigate the complex benefit system. In addition to translators being provided by DWP, an intermediary line for advisors of charities to call on behalf of clients, similar to the one available for HMRC, should be established.

Catholic Care Leeds have a project for supporting women with crisis pregnancy (women who find themselves unexpectedly pregnant). Asylum seeker, refugee and migrant women are being referred on a much more regular basis to this service. Catholic Care Leeds report that these women, in particular, experience food poverty and therefore frequently refer them to foodbanks.

## **Recommendations**

- Regular translation services should be provided by the Jobcentre and the DWP to prevent unnecessary delays, errors and benefit sanctions for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.
- An intermediary line for advisors of charities to call on behalf of clients, similar to the one available for HMRC, should be established.

## **What are the key problems facing people who are hungry, in respect to their living costs such as rent, food, water, communications, transport, gas and electricity?**

As mentioned above, CSAN charities have had to diversify their services to respond to the needs of clients who have struggled to meet the cost of food, utilities and household essentials. The primary cause of people accessing such services relates to the gap between income and outgoings; this remains consistent regardless of whether the individual's primary income is sourced via benefits or employment.

Many clients which Nugent Care provide with emergency food provision need this support due to an unexpected cost, or a higher than average bill. Their immediate priority therefore is not food, and as a result families and individuals are skipping meals; or in some cases going without food altogether that day. To provide support longer-term, Nugent Care has launched a programme which trains clients on healthy cooking on a low budget; although this does not solve the issue of not having the resources to purchase food.

Costs associated with communication, especially the cost of contacting the DWP, remains a key issue for clients of CSAN charities. The removal of the free phones in Jobcentres for claimants to use has created additional difficulties for those who wish to check on progress of a claim or appeal but cannot afford to call the expensive number in order to do so. It is the view of the network that free phone lines and phone-banks in Jobcentres should be restored to enable claimants to receive an update on their application at no cost to themselves.

## Recommendations

- Programmes should be rolled out nationally and run at a local, community level for families to access lessons on healthy cooking on a low budget.
- It is the view of the network that free phone lines and phone-banks in Jobcentres should be restored to enable claimants to receive an update on their application at no cost to themselves.

**If yes, have you been able to differentiate between, and therefore categorise, the various benefit-related causes behind each case of hunger? What room is there for improvement in this field, and how many and what proportion people who find themselves hungry have been affected by each benefit-related cause?**

As mentioned in CSAN's submission to the Work and Pensions Select Committee inquiry into benefit delivery, the benefit system has become more efficient in dealing with and processing claims from people who do not have any additional support issues. However, despite this welcome progress, there still remains significant issues in the efficiency and accuracy of processing applications which are not entirely straightforward.

Delays often occur when additional information, such as medical forms, are requested. In these cases it is not uncommon for DWP staff to be unable to locate clients' supporting information. This causes severe hardship and distress for clients who are awaiting an outcome of a claim and can often delay an application for many weeks.

### **Case study: benefit sanctions**

**Client A** has been without benefits since July 15, he is relying on a combination of food parcels, Liverpool Citizens Support Scheme (LCSS) and food bank vouchers. His benefits were stopped because he became unwell – the client is ex-army personnel and suffers Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - and subsequently was unable to attend an ESA Medical.

An appeal was put in by staff at Nugent Care, which took 15 days after being submitted for confirmation of receipt by the appropriate department was received.

Despite Nugent Care staff contacting DWP to check progress on the appeal, they were informed this could take up to a further 28 days in order to be granted a decision.

Client A, with the support of Nugent Care, applied for Jobseekers Allowance, which took several weeks to process. However, as mentioned, Client A is unfit for work and will almost certainly fail to keep to the criteria in the claimant commitment. He has exhausted LCSS with 3 awards - £100 for two and the third for £50. He cannot apply again for a further reward so is completely reliant on Nugent Care's service until the appeal is finally dealt with.

*Nugent Care, Liverpool*

Benefit sanctions have remained a consistent cause of clients needing to access emergency food assistance. As CSAN has consistently reiterated, benefit sanctions for vulnerable claimants - such as those on ESA, with medical conditions or mental health issues, is inappropriate and counter-productive. It is vital steps should be taken to exempt this group entirely from receiving a benefit sanction.

### **Recommendation**

- Vulnerable groups and people, such as those on ESA, with medical conditions or mental health issues, should be exempt from receiving a benefit sanction.

**Aside from living costs and benefit-related issues, what other factors are causing people to be hungry and how has this affected demand for food assistance? In particular, how has the number of people turning to you for assistance because their wages are insufficient to make ends meet changed?**

Housing has become an increasingly pertinent cause for clients of CSAN charities needing to access support services and emergency provision.

Housing Associations and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) for example, are increasingly imposing strict conditions on prospective tenants, with many being required to provide a complete financial breakdown of their situation. Frequently, this results in prospective tenants being refused tenancy. As a consequence, many people have been pushed out of social landlord properties and into the private rental sector, which is insecure and costly. This change has led to increased stress for many clients, as they struggle to meet the increased rental costs and therefore many have had to cut back on food and other essentials.

Over the past 12 months, Nugent Care has also increasingly provided clients with money for rental deposits. Even RSLs are increasingly demanding money in advance from prospective tenants. Almost all of the clients Nugent Care support in this regard would not be able to find the money on their own; often the only alternative would be to visit a loan shark or a high-interest payday loan, which obviously has dire consequences on the long-term financial stability of the family/individual. The sourcing of a deposit often has a detrimental impact, even with assistance from a charity or family and friends, on what the affected family's finances. As a result, they will often reduce the amount they spend on food and other essentials until they have paid back any money they owe.

### **Recommendations**

- Instead of prospective tenants being refused tenancies in Housing Association or Registered Social Landlord accommodation due to their financial situation, more proactive support should be offered to help them manage their financial difficulties. This will prevent many families and individuals from having to rent in the insecure and costly private rental sector.
- Registered Social Landlords should be discouraged from demanding upfront deposits from tenants, especially those from low-incomes.

## **How big an issue has child hunger become – both during term time and the school holidays – and how should this be ameliorated?**

Child hunger is a significant concern for our charities, specifically during school holiday periods. Catholic Care Leeds, who work with children from 4 to 18, are aware of many families who are skipping meals during school holidays or are regularly only eating cereals.

There is also a real concern within CSAN charities that the problem is more prevalent than currently understood. The Catholic Children's Society, Westminster cite a concern that many parents hide their problems in fear of repercussions from the authorities; many worry that if they admit they are struggling their children will be removed from their care.

More recognition is needed on child hunger during the school holidays; projects should be explored - ideally based at Primary Schools, which are often community hubs - for food to be provided for families in need during the school holidays. Charities within the CSAN network have stated that they would be willing to provide support staff, especially social workers, at such projects. In addition, children who qualify for free school meals should be given tokens, vouchers or parcels to ensure they receive food during the school holidays.

### **Recommendations**

- Projects should be explored, based in Primary Schools which often act as community hubs, to provide meals at least once a day during school holidays.
- Children who qualify for free school meals should be given tokens, vouchers or food parcels for their families to access healthy and free food during the school holidays.

30 October 2015