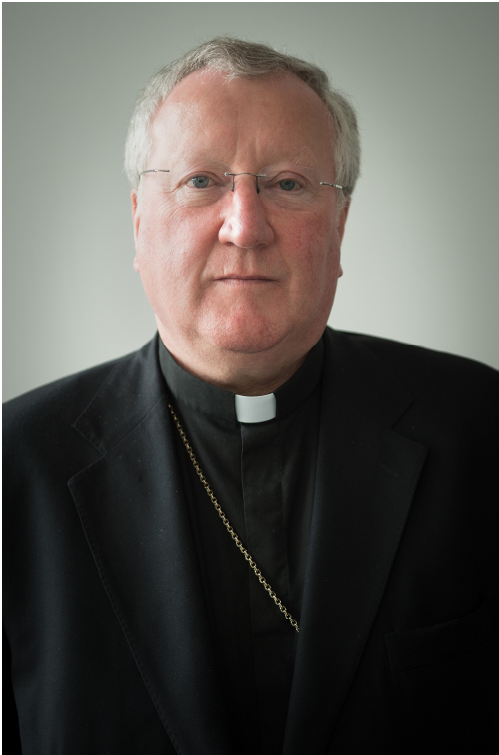


Caritas reports:

The impact of welfare changes



Caritas Social Action Network
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Bishop Terence Drainey Chair of CSAN Trustees

Poverty exists, in a variety of manifestations, on our doorstep in our communities. Poverty in the UK may not always be visible, but, for the families and individuals in insecure accommodation, struggling to meet living costs and foregoing meals, it is very real.

The figures on poverty in the UK are stark and shocking. With 3.7 million children living in poverty and 3 million people suffering from malnourishment, this issue must be a priority for us as a Church, as well as a nation. Voluntary organisations, charities and communities play a vital role in helping to alleviate poverty and working with some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Many of CSAN's charities are racing to keep up with the demand. The stories included in this report, such as those of Peter, Adelina and Katrin, all illustrate the very real human impact which recent changes to the welfare benefit system, and especially the sanction regime, have had on the lives of people up and down our country.

They are people who are very often already vulnerable and in need of the support provided by a social safety net - whether that be because they have fallen ill, lost their job, or have fled war or danger in another part of the world.

As the Catholic Church in England and Wales, we recognise the need to raise greater awareness of the 'hidden' poverty that exists on our doorstep. This report aims to speak into this vital conversation, bringing together the real stories of people in poverty who use CSAN members' services, alongside the voices of the staff who help them. This report forms a coherent and genuine picture of the impact of poverty in the UK, and we offer it as material for developing an effective and person-centred response to this crisis.



"After Christmas, I saw a lady by a bin, taking eggs and meat from the bin. She was Romanian, couldn't speak very good English, I said, 'please come to Brushstrokes' and we helped her with food for the children"

**Adelina, former refugee and volunteer
Resources Assistant, Brushstrokes Centre**



"What happened to me one time was I was sick and I needed medication. The medication makes you, like, down. For three months I was without anything. No money no food. And they don't care. There was nothing I can do."

Mark, client, Caritas Anchor House

Overview: CSAN has found that the welfare changes of the past five years and the delivery of those changes in the UK are pushing claimants and support staff to the edge of their capacity.

Originally a report that would solely investigate the impact of reform, it became clear that CSAN charities were dealing with wider issues of the culture and the processes of the welfare system that were making it increasingly difficult for clients to survive, let alone flourish. The effect of welfare reform cannot be isolated to individual pieces of legislation. Rather, it is the multiplicity and speed of these reforms, hand-in-hand with the tightening of the sanctioning process, that has increased the desperate state of many people's lives.

The welfare system is perceived by clients and staff often to punish those seeking help, marked by a reality of poor communication and human distance. Staff of CSAN charities are under increased pressure to provide support in the face of a rigid welfare system, which they see as a return to 'Victorian' poverty, and which prevents them from addressing the underlying, long-term issues in their clients' lives.

CSAN wishes to see a welfare system in operation which is more person-centre and able to respond to the real needs of the individual.

Methodology: The CSAN team visited three member organisations to meet with both staff and clients: Nugent Care which works across Liverpool, Father Hudson's Society's Brushstrokes collaborative project in Sandwell, Birmingham, and Caritas Anchor House in Newham, east London. These locations share a history of long-term unemployment and high levels of deprivation which welfare reform had aimed to address:

- Liverpool was ranked as the most deprived Local Authority area in England (2010)
- Sandwell was the 12th most deprived local authority in the country (2010)
- Newham is in top ten of most deprived boroughs, both in London and nationally

Names of clients have been changed

Key findings

The welfare system:

- operates an inflexible sanctioning process
- has removed free phone lines and face-to-face interaction therefore reducing accessibility
- is perceived to have moved from compassion to coldness

The clients:

- are, in many cases, living in food and material poverty
- experiencing dramatic increases in mental health issues
- are battling against negative stereotyping

The CSAN charities and staff:

- are frustrated: time is wasted on issues with the system and root problems are not addressed
- are losing purpose of services and staff roles
- see an increase in demand as more people are vulnerable

The responses: CSAN charities have shown great creativity in responding to new and different challenges, including:

- employing specialist liaison posts
- building formal joint-working initiatives
- developing volunteer opportunities for clients
- creating informal partnerships with other agencies

Recommendations: A number of changes will help to create a more person-centred welfare system:

- Introduction of an explanatory system into the benefit sanctioning process
- The end of financial sanctions for people with mental health problems or learning difficulties
- Training for JobCentre Plus staff on working with vulnerable people
- Regular outreach visits and shared training between JobCentre Plus staff and local charities
- The development of strong partnerships between local authorities and charities

“Over the past two years we have seen an overwhelming amount of changes to the welfare benefits system, so much so that we have had to employ a specialist adviser to support our staff.

It would be hard to single out an individual policy as the ‘straw which broke the camel’s back’, but it is rather the accumulated impact of so many reforms which is tearing a large hole in the safety net which the welfare state was set up to provide. The changes to welfare benefits have come thick and fast, with barely any time to properly evaluate the impact. It doesn’t take a lot of research though to know that when families are already struggling to make ends meet then the sudden loss of even £40 a week can make all the difference in the harsh choice of being able to pay the rent or to put food on the table. Yes, reform was necessary but not when it hits the most vulnerable people.”

Cathy Corcoran, CSAN Trustee, CEO Cardinal Hume Centre

Timeline of key changes

Benefit Sanctions

Since 2012 a stricter sanctioning regime has been in place. In March 2015 a Work & Pensions Select Committee report called for review of how sanctions are applied by JobCentre Plus.

April 2013

Under-Occupation Penalties (also known as Bedroom Tax)

Housing benefit reduced for households deemed to be under-occupying social housing.

Local Housing Allowance (LHA) Changes

LHA up-rated in line with the Consumer Price Index (CPI) instead of local rents.

Benefits Up-rating cap

Annual up-rating of all major in-work and out-of work benefits (excluding Disability Living Allowance and the Support Group of Employment and Support Allowance) in April 2013, April 2014, April 2015 limited to 1% (instead of in line with inflation).

Abolition of Council Tax Benefit (CTB)

CTB abolished; funding reduced and devolved to local authorities for discretionary schemes.

Changes to the Social Fund

Crisis Loans and Community Care Grants abolished; funding reduced and devolved to local authorities for discretionary schemes.

Roll-out of Universal Credit (UC) Begins

UC combines Jobseekers Allowance, Income Support, Employment and Support Allowance, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit and Housing Benefit/Local Housing Allowance into one monthly payment to one account per household. The roll-out is expected to be completed by 2017.

Roll-out of Personal Independence Payments (PIP) Begins

PIP replaces Disability Living Allowance for people who are ill or disabled. The roll-out is expected to be completed by October 2015.

July-September 2013

Benefit Cap

Total household benefit income restricted to £350 (single individuals) or £500 (couples and families) per week. Exceptions for households receiving Working Tax Credit, PIP/DLA or War Widow(er)s Pension.

March 2014

EU Migrant access to benefits

From March 9 2014, new regulations introduced by the Government mean new EU migrants are prevented from claiming benefits until they have started work.

Katrin's story

Katrin is a mother of three from Poland. She had been struggling to afford food and living costs after her Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) was sanctioned by the benefits office whilst she searched for a cleaning job.

At the time of the sanctioning, Katrin did not receive an explanation despite repeatedly saying she would like clarification. Katrin went to Brushstrokes Centre for advice where she told them: *"I didn't have any letter or anything, he sanctioned me or something, but my payments did not come in and....I do not know what's going on...I don't receive any payment, nothing. No letter...nothing"*. Katrin was left confused and panicked by her experience.

When the outreach officer at Brushstrokes helped Katrin to question the job centre on the reason for the sanction, she was told that she had not applied for the sufficient number of jobs to qualify for JSA. Further investigation revealed that Katrin had in fact applied for the correct number, but that three of the jobs she applied for on the Jobcentre Plus' own website - Universal Jobmatch - were either duplicates or had expired. They therefore did not count towards Katrin's quota. The job centre's own error was given as the reason for Katrin's sanctioning.

Inflexible system

Katrin's experience is not unique. Across the CSAN network, staff and clients have said that the welfare system is inflexible, lacks any sense of human judgement, and takes a 'blanket' approach which fails to understand the subtlety of individual circumstances. Sandra, the outreach co-ordinator at Brushstrokes, who supported Katrin during her sanctions, described the job search process as *"tripping people up"* - an overly complex system that leads to confusion and removes an individual's sense of control or ownership over his or her own life.

Sanctions

Through discussions with staff and clients, it is clear that the sanctions regime lacks compassion or understanding: Keith Fernet, Director of Caritas Anchor House said, *"the system belongs to the decision-maker."* Keith outlined how it can sometimes be errors made in the JobCentres that result in sanctioning: *"We know that people have been sanctioned because [the job centres] have lost letters – not that we have not sent them, not that we haven't done our bit or the residents haven't sent them. No, they've lost them. The result? The client is sanctioned and the system completely disconnects their lives."*

"Rather than encouraging individuals with complex needs, arbitrary sanctions – and, crucially, sanctions that are applied without explanation – have a largely counter-productive result."

CSAN members have said that the application of financial sanctions to someone in a precarious situation is almost always detrimental to their progress and it has been hard to see how sanctions have positively helped individuals to seek and ultimately gain secure employment"

CSAN response to Work & Pensions Committee inquiry into benefit sanctions policy, Dec. 2014

This 'first strike and you're out' approach means that people are sanctioned despite having valid reasons for failing to meet JobCentre Plus criteria. In many circumstances, the offence had been caused by unavoidable events (delayed public transport, emergency hospital treatment) or the fault of JobCentre Plus.

A system which leaves no room for human discretion means that sanctions appear overly severe and arbitrary. As CSAN wrote in our testimony to the Work and Pensions Committee inquiry into benefit sanctions, sanctions applied without valid reason or proper explanation are frequently counter-productive, only effective in further alienating people from the process and leaving them confused and without control.

For this reason, we recommend the introduction of a system that would give claimants a chance to provide an explanation for an 'offence' and be heard. We would also look for the DWP to identify frequent categories for sanction and introduce analysis of validity to ensure justice in the system.

From pillar to post

Good communication between clients and the welfare system is vital, however the past ten years has seen the removal of free phone lines, reduction of face-to-face interaction and minimising of paper trails of evidence. The distribution of knowledge and power is one-way and opportunities for open dialogue are closed. Finding clear and proper answers to questions can be incredibly challenging.

Raj, a benefits adviser at Brushstrokes centre in Sandwell, identified a difference in culture between today's welfare system and the social security department he worked for in the 1980s: *"if you look at the last five, seven, ten years... the face of the social security office, their presence in the high street, their responsibility and their communication, their contact with the public... instead of being there and showing their presence, opening up offices and increasing the contact, they are actually doing exactly the reverse."*

Rachel, a staff member at Nugent Care, also cited poor communication as a problem: *"no-one takes any ownership of what needs to be done. We're just passed from pillar to post; it's just a nightmare at the moment, an absolute nightmare with the benefit system."*

The removal of free phone numbers has been a big problem for claimants. The 0845 numbers are expensive, particularly if the caller is put on hold for a long period of time, which is a common experience. Call-handlers are often inadequately trained and staff in JobCentres appear ill-equipped, with little understanding of how to deal with the complex needs of people's lives. For example, an individual may have a number of related issues, but - because the system deals on an issue-by-issue basis rather than taking a holistic view - that person will have to contact different services or departments to get the answers they require. We heard stories of information then contradicting other information, further confusing the individual.

Compassion to coldness

A number of the clients and staff we interviewed and the member charities that provided testimonies for CSAN's response to the benefit sanctions inquiry reported that sanctions had been given to people with mental health problems or learning disabilities. They felt this reflected the changing attitude of the welfare system, one that has shifted from compassion to coldness.

Just one example is Mark who had been a chef and lives at Caritas Anchor House. He was sanctioned whilst he was dealing with his depression: *"for three months I was without anything for 90 days. No money no food, no nothing. And they don't care."*

It is the view of CSAN that the sanctioning of people with mental health problems or disabilities is inappropriate and we recommend that such sanctions be stopped. This would encourage other solutions to be explored for some and may begin to shift the restrictive system-based culture which is evident today.

Raj said to us, *"in the 21st century when we should be mindful of people's problems and supporting them emotionally, we are doing the reverse. In the long-run we are as a society paying for it one way or another by increasing mental health problems. We are going, I would say, in the wrong direction"*.



We recommend:

- The introduction of a system enabling claimants to explain and be heard for an 'offence' and which could provide evidence for potential change to the system
- The end of financial sanctions on people with mental health problems or learning disabilities, and to explore and learn from the alternative solutions

Christopher's story

Christopher is in his early 60s and has been coming to Brushstrokes for material assistance and benefits advice. Christopher had worked at a car manufacturing plant until heart problems meant it was no longer possible for him to do the work required of him. His pension did not provide enough and Christopher applied for welfare support. A combination of delays in his Employment Support Allowance (ESA) and the Under-Occupancy Penalty meant he has fallen into rent arrears for the first time in his life. Christopher and his wife now receive support from Brushstrokes through food packages and benefit guidance.

As a consequence, Christopher now suffers from stress: *"I keep breaking out in these sweats... I suffer with anxiety. That's why I couldn't sort of properly interview, I can't answer questions, I can't get the words out, what I want to say."*

Christopher also described how he feels when telling people he is claiming benefits: *"You know, when you haven't seen nobody for ages and they say 'oh where are you working?' and you say 'I'm not at work'. It's not nice. But that's the way it is."*

Most worryingly, Christopher made a reference to feeling suicidal as a result of the stress of benefit delays: *"I never took tablets in my life. And now over the last three months I have to take four a day now. So, it's just... motions putting a gun to his head and pulling the trigger* ...Bang. That's what it feels like."*

Evidence from CSAN Directors

As faith-based charities, one of the most devastating impacts of welfare reform and change in welfare culture is the erosion of human dignity and self-worth. The directors of 14 CSAN charities reported they have seen their clients struggling to afford costs and there has been a 100% increase in demand for services, including material support, foodbanks and debt advice.



A significant impact of welfare reform and the resultant undermining of people's independence has also been the increase of mental health issues. All the directors surveyed reported that they have seen an increase in anxiety, depression and other mental health problems. This cannot, of course, be attributed solely to the changes in welfare provision over the past few years, but they are part of a toxic melting pot.

Support workers in CSAN charities feel that a lot of the positive work that they undertake in building the confidence and self-esteem of their clients is undone by the treatment they receive by the system. There is sense of embarrassment in being forced to use foodbanks and shame in using the services of charitable organisations.

Sian, a key worker at Caritas Anchor House, said that she spends much of her time, *"having to mop up the hurt, the sense of 'do I deserve this?', 'I'm a scumbag because I'm on benefits' – that's the message people are getting. The impact of the benefit changes, less employment, less access to housing... means people's mental health is just falling apart"*.

Stereotyping those on benefits

A common theme that ran through many of the clients' stories was that they sought to prove their self-worth, whether it was through reiterating that they have made many years-worth of tax contributions or that they had always been honest. All were defiant that they did not represent the stereotype of benefit recipients as 'scroungers', yet many people we spoke to still felt victimised and tarnished by that image.

James's story typifies the experiences of many of the people with whom we spoke.

James's story

James worked as a manual labourer, a landscape gardener and as a street cleaner for over twenty years before physical illness made it impossible to work. He has a history of mental health problems and substance abuse; he sofa-surfed with friends before securing a place at Caritas Anchor House.

James claims Disability Living Allowance and Employment Support Allowance but in the past two years has faced three court appeals regarding his disability benefits. He has won these appeals but it has been a long and painful process involving numerous medical assessments and challenging tribunals. The appeals process was hugely damaging for James's self-esteem especially when he was advised to dress scruffily to emphasise his disability.

Having to be like that to prove that you're not a well person....Even though, at the time, I had a Freedom Pass, a Taxi Card, they had all that evidence at the appeals. It's stressing. Very stressing."

"I haven't always been on benefits. I don't like it. I would like to do something else. I don't like signing on...I'm quite an active person, I like to do things and it holds me back and I don't like being bogged down, locked up, just sitting in a room and watching Jeremy Kyle. It kills me."

Christopher and James have very different stories and their lives have taken different paths - but what unites them both has been a 'one size fits all' approach by the welfare system. We acknowledge that the state has a challenging role in responding to a huge spectrum of need but, as mentioned, a blanket approach is pointless, failing to support individuals in whatever stage of short- or long-term crisis.

Ignoring the complexities of a person's life, questioning the validity of illness or delaying support allowances goes against human dignity. It has been this approach, along with the divisive rhetoric seen in recent years in some media outlets, that has in many cases served to trigger or exacerbate existing mental health issues.



For that reason, we recommend the development of professional training for Jobcentre Plus staff on how to support and speak to vulnerable people. This, we hope, would begin a cultural change within JobCentres and on telephone lines so that vulnerable people are spoken to clearly, with respect and understanding. This would begin to combat negative stereotyping and would start to alleviate some of the mental health issues experienced by clients.

We recommend:

- The development of professional training for JobCentre Plus staff on how to assist vulnerable people

Rachel's story

Rachel works for Nugent Care's New Beginnings service, which offers support for individuals who are homeless or at risk of becoming so. Pressures on the New Beginnings team have changed in recent years. As well as the usual focus of quality accommodation and needs-based support, the work is now also heavily weighted towards challenging sanctions and chasing benefit payments. This is a serious challenge to capacity within the team.

Rachel said that with the increased demands and the closing of support services, she and her colleague Peter are, *"sort of taking it on ourselves to do it, so it's not just about giving support, it's everything recently."* Each Friday, Rachel and Peter go out in a van to collect old furniture that people donate: *"Where people are moving out, it's the best we can do. Touch wood, it's working okay at the moment, but it's stressful and it's hard work. This is a direct result of recent welfare reform including the withdrawal of Community Grants."*

The changes are having an impact on the staff of CSAN charities concerned, forcing them to deal with various bureaucratic processes instead of dealing with the specific problems of the people they are trying to help. The result is mutually devastating: time cannot be devoted to supporting clients with primary issues, and staff resources are stretched beyond capacity.



Misuse of professional time

The culture and complexity of the system's approach means that staff are wasting their time form-filling, dealing with sanctions and, as mentioned earlier in this report, struggling to communicate with the benefits office.

Appealing against incorrectly applied sanctions and medical assessments, as well as navigating the complex and changing rules issued by the DWP, means that staff are spending copious hours on paperwork they deem to be ineffectual. Peter, who works for Nugent Care's housing services, described his experience of the welfare system as *"a massive paper exercise"*. One member of staff reported that she spent considerable time nearly every day for six months on the telephone to get benefits in place for just one client. This relates to EU nationals habitual residence test legislation.

Time that is essential to deal with underlying issues – addiction, mental health, family breakdown, low skills – is often compromised through dealing with complex welfare system issues.

"We know the pinch points"

The frontline staff of CSAN's member charities have a growing frustration born of a system that ignores their expertise. They know the entire lives of their clients - the backstories, the complexities and the pinch points - and are often asked to provide evidence which they then feel is ignored by the bureaucratic nature of the assessment and appeals systems. Sian, a keyworker at Caritas Anchor House, described the depth and the breadth of the knowledge she possesses on her clients' lives: *"I'm the individual who can pull information out the top of my head without going through fifty, sixty pages of contact sheets."* In 2014, Sian was required to provide substantial testimonials for a client's medical assessment process, yet despite this raft of evidence, Sian was called to attend three appeals. Many staff feel this is a system that completely undermines their skills as frontline practitioners.

In order to improve the relationship between welfare system and charity staff and to encourage the sharing of information, we propose regular visits by Jobcentre Plus to local charities to promote joint-working.

Loss of purpose

With the focus and energy of staff often skewed towards resolving the specific benefit issues, primary services are being side-lined or altered. Rachel told how her work is often dominated by challenging and chasing benefit payments: *“over the last two years - and especially the last 12 months - there has been a change in how we’re supporting our tenants. Things are just completely different.”* One charity described how the clients using its Job Club (a service that helps to develop skills for the workplace) are under so much pressure to adhere to JobCentre criteria that the sessions are used simply to apply online for jobs, rather than for its original intention of practical training.



Staff overloaded

Even the most resilient staff members said that the increased pressure on them, their colleagues and services, is unsustainable. A principal strain on staff is the gap in knowledge they are required to plug as other services have been reduced. Many staff described that they feel they are juggling, learning as they go along and filling in for services that have disappeared. *“You go on to be social worker, benefits advisor, counsellor, a million different things. Even things like showing someone how to clean, or prompting them to have a wash. It can be absolutely anything with that person. But we’re having to do that and adapt because the services aren’t there for people to go to or the waiting times are too long,”* said Rachel.

One member of the Brushstrokes team in Sandwell, when asked how she managed with the increased workload said: *“we just do, you know, we don’t think about it; it’s different when you look from the outside in. I don’t get time to think about it much. We are really too busy.”*

The charity staff do not have the time or the training to navigate the welfare support for their clients. They said that they should be delivering meaningful support to clients, rather than focusing on securing basic welfare provision. We therefore recommend the development of outreach initiatives where JobCentre Plus staff would come out into communities to provide advice services within local charities. Welfare services would be more accessible, people would have more opportunity to understand processes, ask questions and get clear answers, and staff would be free to address the longer-term issues of their clients’ lives.

More people ‘vulnerable’

The people using CSAN members’ services have changed significantly in the past two years. Nugent Care’s housing team worked exclusively with people who were street homeless, but now there are wider bands of people who have slipped through the net. Peter, who works on the housing project, said: *“The categories have widened out effectively. Go back a year ago, maybe longer, the categories would be much narrower, now it’s completely stretched because of the bedroom tax and welfare changes. It’s not just one [group], it’s many groups who previously did not require a service.”*

Brushstrokes Centre in Sandwell has also seen a shift in the demographic of their clients. Originally established as a centre for destitute asylum seekers, with no recourse to public funds, over the past 18 months the centre has experienced a 30% increase in people needing food aid - the vast majority of these are British citizens from the local area as more and more people fall into the category of ‘most vulnerable’.

We recommend:

- Regular visits by Jobcentre Plus (JCP) to local charities to promote joint-working with front-line staff
- The development of outreach initiatives where JCP staff provide advice services within local charities

Despite pressure, the CSAN charities are responding with creativity and resilience. Some of the responses are small and simple, others are at a strategic level - all demonstrate the creativity of the charities working on the frontline in response to new and increased challenges.



Overcoming the 'silo approach'

A number of CSAN members have established new liaison posts, employing people whose role is to work directly with others in an attempt to improve communication and overcome the 'silo' approach. Nugent Care has employed an individual to work closely with Catholic charities and local priests in deprived areas of Liverpool to increase the capacities of churches to respond to local needs and isolation.

Becoming 'Stig of the dump'

The 2013 devolution of Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans to local authorities made it much more difficult for people to apply for white goods, furniture and bedding. The response by Nugent Care to this shortage of available funding has been to collect donated goods which Peter described as being like *"Stig of the Dump! Seriously, we're having to beg or borrow household stuff. We're very lucky as an organisation because we've developed great partnerships with donors, such as the police, social landlords and even banks."* Nugent Care housing team has an arrangement with local supported accommodation providers and receive calls from the wardens if a resident has passed away. The housing team then goes to the home and can take the furniture and clothing that the family doesn't want. Peter reflected on the arrangement: *"I always think it's quite Victorian, but that's where we're at, that's the reality."*

Joint-working across the sector

Nugent Care works in collaboration with other Liverpool city charities and organisations to support the redevelopment of services for vulnerable people in a very difficult economic climate. The group has developed a method of joint working with the full engagement of Liverpool city council to seek to deliver services in new and innovative ways within a reducing budget. In many of our charities, we have seen partnership working at its best and this way of working is one we would greatly encourage.

Focus on volunteering

CSAN charities highlighted volunteering as an important response to the welfare changes. Many have established volunteer programmes to provide opportunities for people looking for training and work experience. Staff report that through volunteering their clients' self-esteem and confidence has grown.

Volunteer opportunities focus on giving practical and valuable training and experience: at Brushstrokes the food aid distribution is now run by Adelina and Leonora, who previously came to the centre in need of support. Karen, a volunteer manager at Nugent Care, says that the team work with an individual to identify skills and build a path back into employment: *"People feel part of Nugent Care when they're here; they don't feel different to anyone else. They're not walking around with a big label on saying 'volunteer', they feel part of the establishment and are being treated the same as everyone else."*

We recommend:

- The continuation of partnerships between faith-based charities and statutory agencies, encouraging open and practical joint working

CSAN would like to see the welfare system and the way it is operated to moving towards a more person-centred approach that respects human dignity. We look for a culture of understanding and support.

In bringing about this aim, we propose the following vision and specific recommendations.

Our vision for the future:

- For human dignity to be restored to the heart of our welfare system
- For knowledge to be shared between all organisations helping people in need
- For faith groups, charities and local authorities to have confidence in working together



CSAN recommendations:

Sanctions

1. The introduction of a system whereby claimants are given a chance to provide an explanation for a first 'offence'.
2. An end to the use of financial sanctions for people with mental health problems or learning disabilities.

Staff training

3. The development of professional training for JobCentre Plus (JCP) employees on how to assist and support vulnerable people.

Joint-working

4. Regular visits by Jobcentre Plus (JCP) staff to local charities and organisations to meet front-line staff and clients. We also support the growth of outreach initiatives where JCP staff provide advice services within local charities and organisations.

Partnerships

5. Faith communities to continue to work openly and practically with local authorities. We recommend building upon the beneficial partnerships which faith-based charities have with statutory agencies, acknowledging that charities reach many socially isolated people more effectively than statutory services.

The research found a welfare system which is too rigid in its processes: clients unable to progress, staff prevented from doing their core job of addressing deep-rooted issues, and charities responding in creative ways to cope with constant change.

The culture of the existing support system has changed from one based on compassion and support, to one focused on efficiency and process. The impact on vulnerable people has been felt in a number of ways - from the direct use of benefit sanctions to the more indirect difficulty in communicating with job centre staff. For the individuals to whom we spoke, the net effect of this cultural change has made life more difficult, exacerbating their existing issues and affecting physical and mental health.

Looking forward, we see major issues if the system of welfare support continues to impose a 'one size fits all' approach, distances itself from claimants and ignores the experience and expertise of charity organisations and staff.

“There is an element whereby the welfare system needed to be reformed... But I think it is just the culture within which it's done, and the lack of finesse, it's just a very blunt instrument, whereby it doesn't matter who you are, what your situation is, people aren't being treated as individuals with individual difficulties...”

Teresa Clements
Centre Manager, Brushstrokes Centre



Helen O'Brien Chief Executive

We have seen in this report, the real stories of people and families in poverty and acute need in our own communities here in the UK. We have also heard from inspirational staff members, people in CSAN charities who dedicate their time and career to being there, supporting and caring for people going through the hardest moments of their lives. They are expressive of God's love for each and every person, they are living out the Gospel message to 'love our neighbour'.

Looking to the future, and building a way forward for the welfare of our people, we need to consider carefully the values on which we wish our government to base their policies, and the culture we create through the language we use in speaking about poverty and welfare.

Finally, as a Church, and as a wider society, we should be speaking clearly and with courage about the benefits which a social security system holds for all of us. We all derive security from a safety net existing for us in times of crisis. At some point in our lives any of us could find ourselves in a position where we need the support it provides - whether we lose our job, fall ill, or receive a state pension in our retirement. Holding to the principles of solidarity, compassion and justice, we should speak into the conversation about human lives, and how we may live and flourish free from poverty and injustice in the UK today.



CSAN (Caritas Social Action Network) is the domestic social action arm of the Catholic church in England and Wales.

We represent 42 charities across England and Wales who work with children, families, people with disabilities, older people, refugees, vulnerable women, those affected by prison and those without a home.

We are a community of organisations who help each other to help others.