



# FOOD POVERTY REPORT

By Sarah Chapman

This report measures food poverty and foodbank use in the London Borough of Wandsworth in 2015-16. It looks at the drivers of food poverty and its impact on those people who experience it.



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## ABOUT WANDSWORTH FOODBANK

Wandsworth Foodbank is part of the Trussell Trust, the largest national network of foodbanks in the UK. We provide emergency food, support and signposting to local people referred in crisis by local statutory agencies, charities and churches.

We are a partnership of five churches who each host one or two foodbank sessions a week, meaning that people in crisis can access emergency help seven days a week. The host churches are St Michael's, Southfields; St Mark's, Battersea Rise; St Paul's, Furzedown; Shaftesbury Christian Centre, Battersea; SW London Vineyard (at The Yard), Putney. We welcome people of all faiths or none.

All food and essential toiletries are donated by the generous people of Wandsworth – individuals, schools, churches, businesses and other community and faith groups. We're grateful too to each person who gave financially to Wandsworth Foodbank in the last year: we don't receive any government or local authority funding, so we're reliant on the generosity of people to help local people in crisis. Thank you!

We are also grateful for our advice partnership project with Citizens Advice Wandsworth (below) and to City Bridge Trust for funding it; and to *fuelbanks and families* for providing vital crisis support to foodbank guest families experiencing fuel poverty (see p31-32 for more information).

During 2015-16, an amazing 295 volunteers from churches and the wider community gave more than 9000 hours to help their neighbours. Words can't do justice to how thankful we are for each one of you.

## WHAT'S HAPPENED SINCE LAST YEAR'S RESEARCH REPORT?

Thank you to everyone who engaged with the findings of last year's report and recommendations. The findings have been used:

- As a submission to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty, chaired by Frank Field MP
- By Trussell Trust to contribute to their national policy and 'More than Food' initiative
- At a recent food poverty roundtable co-chaired by Jane Ellison MP, involving Wandsworth Borough Council's Public Health and Finance teams, local councillors and Citizens Advice Wandsworth
- To initiate a joint benefits crisis survey with Citizens Advice Wandsworth and Wandsworth Council
- As part of University College London's event *The impact of food poverty on health and wellbeing*
- In the national press to highlight issues around food poverty and fuel poverty

## NEW FOODBANK ADVICE PARTNERSHIP WITH CITIZENS ADVICE WANDSWORTH

Thanks to generous two-year funding from City Bridge Trust, guests to Wandsworth Foodbank's five centres now have access to a dedicated Citizens Advice Foodbank adviser, supporting them to resolve issues that have led to crisis and foodbank referral.

During 2015-16, 42 foodbank volunteers were trained by Citizens Advice Wandsworth to offer high-quality signposting around common issues such as benefits, housing and debt. Separate research found that 76% of guests had received information or signposting at the foodbank. Half had acted on this information three weeks after the visit; 67% of whom had already seen an improvement in their situation. 100% of guests rated the service as 'excellent' or 'good'.

*"When I went there I was just able to talk and they were willing to listen. And they helped me with other services like other information and leaflets about debt and finances."*

If guests needed additional support because of vulnerability and/or the complexity of the issues causing crisis, foodbank volunteers refer them to the Foodbank Citizens Advice adviser.

In the first 11 months (to March 2016), the Foodbank adviser has advised and supported 160 unique foodbank guests, who presented 626 separate enquiries. Consistent with Wandsworth Foodbank's findings, the majority of guests presented with multiple problems, needing different levels of support and ongoing casework.

*"I am so relieved to find a friendly person to help me. I felt hopeless and doomed. I see a chance of now resolving my problems."*

*"My adviser helped me to understand what my rights and options are. If she wouldn't help me, I don't know where I would end up."*

In 2015-16, the Foodbank adviser:

- Prevented homelessness and eviction by advising and acting to stop eviction; arranging new rent arrears agreements; and helping clients with homelessness applications
- Assisted guests to claim and complete various benefit claim forms, including personal independence payment and employment and support allowance
- Helped clients to challenge and appeal benefit decisions
- Helped clients to challenge debts, negotiate affordable repayments and advised clients on how to budget their expenses
- Helped clients apply for various charity grants and assistance, including purchase of essential furniture and items.

*"The importance of Citizens Advice Wandsworth's partnership with Foodbank cannot be overstated: it is absolutely essential that we work together to tackle the underlying causes of food poverty. The first year of our joint project has shown the value of Foodbank volunteers being equipped with Citizens Advice knowledge and of Foodbank guests having access to a dedicated and highly skilled adviser. It has also served to highlight the systemic failings that so frequently mean that people have a need for emergency food: benefit delays, caps and sanctions and the often scant assistance available from the Department for Work and Pensions for people in hardship. It's vital that, as we move into the second year of the project, we work together not only to help individuals in food poverty but to tackle the issues of poor policy, practice and welfare support that leave all too many people and families in our community hungry and in crisis."*

Phil Jew, Chief Executive, Citizens Advice Wandsworth

## KEY FINDINGS

- Food poverty is a significantly growing issue in Wandsworth. In 2015-16 the number of people receiving emergency food increased by 25% – considerably higher than the annual increase reported by Trussell Trust nationally (2% increase).
- In 2015-16, Wandsworth Foodbank provided enough emergency food to feed 4078 people for three days. Four in ten were children.
- There has also been an increase in the number of unique households referred to the foodbank at least once; up 22% to 1011 individual households.<sup>1</sup>
- Frontline care professionals see the foodbank as an increasingly essential part of the safety net, providing a service that does not exist in any other part of the system, and standing between people in crisis and destitution.
- Statutory agencies account for more than one-half of Wandsworth Foodbank's 208 Voucher Partners (referral agencies). These include 20 primary and secondary schools, 42 health services (eg GPs); and 15 social services teams.
- Food poverty severely impacts the lives of those who experience it, and was strongly associated by both Voucher Partners and guests with causing poorer mental health (eg stress, anxiety and depression). One-quarter of Voucher Partners reported clients displaying suicidal tendencies in 2015-16 – twice as many as in the previous year.
- Problems with delivery of benefits remain the most common reason for crisis referral to the foodbank, with the number of people receiving emergency food because of benefits problems increasing by 11%, to 1479 people.
- Sudden, unplanned-for interruptions in benefit payments were identified by guests and Voucher Partners as particularly problematic, leaving people with insufficient or no income for food.
- Three in five Voucher Partners said the current benefits system catered 'badly' or 'very badly' for their clients with mental health difficulties, and that these clients found it particularly difficult to negotiate the bureaucracy of the welfare system: specifically in meeting DWP requirements in terms of benefits conditionality, and understanding or completing complicated paperwork unsupported.
- Voucher Partners expressed concerns specifically about JobCentre Plus, and the quality of service, information, communication and support their clients with mental health needs receive from local advisers.

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<sup>1</sup> Trussell Trust online data collection system records the number of adults and children given three days' emergency food; not unique users. However, looking more closely at Wandsworth Borough, 2252 unique users/1003 unique households received emergency food at least once in 2015-16 (up from 1843/827 in the previous year – a 22% increase).

- Information and access to Short-Term Benefit Advances (STBA) continues to be poor, and subject to the discretion of individual JCP employees. None of the foodbank guests interviewed who were experiencing benefit delay had been informed about or helped to access this emergency provision, leaving them in unnecessary hardship.
- Individuals are more likely to successfully navigate the benefits system and access its emergency financial provision when supported by professionals from outside of the benefits system.
- While benefits sanction as a reason for referral declined in 2015-16, 70% of Voucher Partners said it was 'often' or 'sometimes a reason' for foodbank referral. More Voucher Partners this year than last expressed concern over how sanctions are applied, with over half viewing sanctions as 'rarely used fairly and proportionately'.
- Debt is an increasing problem for local people, accounting for 11% of all foodbank referrals (8% in 2015-16). Both guests and Voucher Partners reported an increase in use of high-cost credit to pay for food and essentials in the last year.
- One-third of guests were homeless or in temporary accommodation at time of interview, and this is consistent with the finding that one in ten Voucher Partners identified homelessness as a key factor in crisis leading to foodbank referral (although it may not be cited as the primary referral reason on foodbank voucher).
- Voucher Partners reported an increased number of clients in in-work poverty, citing low paid jobs; insecure contracts; and the difficulty of accessing in-work benefits such as working tax credit and free school meals when work hours are variable.
- Guests reported having to make poorer nutritional choices and experiencing poorer physical health as a result of their crisis situation. Voucher Partners also expressed concern regarding poorer nutrition and poor health, including children presenting as hungry and unable to concentrate at school.
- Almost every parent interviewed said that they or their partner had gone without food in the previous twelve months so that their children could eat; and more than twice the number of voucher partners reported parents skipping meals than did last year.
- Both guests and Voucher Partners strongly appreciated the 'more than food' aspects of Wandsworth Foodbank provision, particularly in terms of signposting guests to further help; the provision of a dedicated Citizens Advice Foodbank adviser for foodbank guests<sup>2</sup>; and the ability to refer clients in fuel poverty to *fuelbanks and families* for an immediate fuel voucher and specialist advice.
- Voucher Partners and guests were universally positive about the service Wandsworth Foodbank provided, with 100% of both groups rating it 'excellent' or 'good'.

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<sup>2</sup> This joint project between Citizens Advice Wandsworth and Wandsworth Foodbank is generously funded by City Bridge Trust. For more information, please see p3.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**It's a privilege to support local families and individuals who are referred to us in crisis from across Wandsworth Borough. However, we believe that no one in Wandsworth, or in the UK, should be going hungry in 2016. We therefore make the following recommendations to help tackle some of the underlying causes of food poverty, so that less people, not more, need to turn to Wandsworth Foodbank in the year ahead.<sup>3</sup>**

1. We ask that the government commits to making sure the social security system works well for every member of society: fixing the gaps that cause hunger, and protecting the most vulnerable. We call for improvements to benefit delivery; so that benefit payments people rely on are delivered on time, and that the system is as quick to reinstate adjusted benefits as it is to respond to noting a change of circumstance.
2. We ask that Wandsworth JobCentre Plus includes information about Short-Term Benefit Advances as part of the mandatory text in its Jobcentre scripts, in accordance with the Work & Pensions Select Committee's recommendation of September 2015: *"Jobcentre staff should ask every claimant whether they have an urgent financial need rather than wait for the claimant to volunteer that information."*<sup>4</sup>
3. We ask that the DWP provides high-quality mental health training for its JobCentre Plus advisers, so that they are well-placed to understand and support clients with mental health difficulties, and that benefit policy is sensitive to the additional needs of people with learning disabilities and/or mental health needs.
4. We ask local and national government to provide funding for additional advice workers to support vulnerable people to successfully navigate the benefits system, ensuring that they have equal access to social security and emergency financial provision so that they are not left destitute.
5. We ask that Wandsworth Council (including its sub-contractors) and businesses throughout the borough work towards paying their employees a minimum of the London Living Wage<sup>5</sup>, to ensure that work really does pay for people in our community; and that Wandsworth Council considers offering local firms a discount on their business rates if they pay employees the London Living Wage.

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<sup>3</sup> You may recognise some of these recommendations from last year's report. We've recommended them again if we believe there's still progress to be made...

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmworpen/372/37208.htm>

<sup>5</sup> The Living Wage is calculated according to the basic cost of living in the UK. The current London Living Wage is £9.40 an hour. For more information, see [livingwage.org.uk](http://livingwage.org.uk)

## ABOUT WANDSWORTH FOODBANK RESEARCH PROJECT

People are referred to Wandsworth Foodbank for a variety of reasons and our voucher statistics only show the primary reason for referral. By using findings from in-depth guest interviews plus responses from our Voucher Partners (referrers) alongside our voucher statistics, we can build up a fuller picture of people's experiences of food poverty in Wandsworth Borough in 2015-16.

### DATA

Trussell Trust foodbanks collect data on an online database from the vouchers that are issued and fulfilled. Voucher Partners record on the voucher: name, address, age group, ethnicity, organisation making the referral, number of adults and number of dependent children. Reasons for referral are also recorded. One of the following categories is selected by the Voucher Partner as the main cause of crisis leading to food poverty:

- benefit changes
- benefit delays
- homeless
- sickness
- debt
- domestic violence
- low income
- child holiday meals
- delayed wages
- unemployment
- refused STBA
- other

We analysed the data available, from April 2015 to March 2016, comparing it to data from 2014-15.

### METHODOLOGY

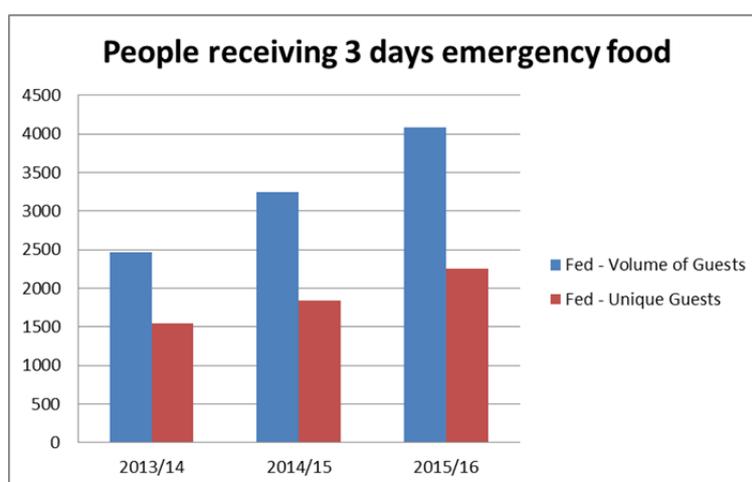
An online questionnaire was designed and sent out to all Voucher Partners. Areas of investigation included how partner organisations identify people in need of a voucher, how many people they had referred during the year, reasons why they referred people, benefit sanctions, and the interplay of mental health and the benefits system, as well as their thoughts on the service provided by Wandsworth Foodbank. An online questionnaire was sent to key contacts in 208 Voucher Partner organisations in April 2016. They were given one week to complete the questionnaire. We received 50 completed questionnaires within the timeframe. All responses were anonymous.

A second questionnaire was designed to be used with guests to the five foodbank centres during one week in April 2016. This questionnaire was conducted on a one-to-one basis with a member of the research team. Once guests had arrived and had been seen by a foodbank volunteer, they were approached and asked if they would answer a few questions about their experience of the foodbank. All interviews were anonymous. All but one guest who was approached agreed to be interviewed; 21 interviews were completed.

## THE NUMBERS

During 2015-16 Wandsworth Foodbank provided enough emergency food to feed 4078 people for three days. Two in five were children. This represents a volume increase of 25% compared with 2014-15, and a 76% increase compared with 2013-14 (the first year in which Wandsworth Foodbank was operating).

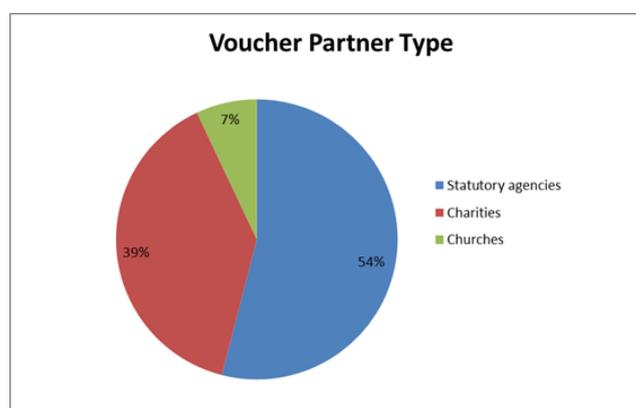
The number of unique people<sup>6</sup> fed at least once increased by 22% on the previous year, to 2252 people. The number of unique households fed rose from 827 in 2014-15 to 1011 in 2015-16 (an increase of 22%).



Forty-nine households were referred to the foodbank five times or more in 2015-16, compared to 39 in the previous year. The average number of vouchers per household remained constant at 1.8 however, indicating that the foodbank still is used as a crisis intervention rather than long-term provision.

## REFERRAL AGENCIES

In 2015-16, 208 local agencies working within Wandsworth Borough were registered Voucher Partners, enabling them to refer their clients in crisis to Wandsworth Foodbank.



<sup>6</sup> Trussell Trust online data collection system records the number of adults and children given three days' emergency food; not unique users. However, looking more closely at Wandsworth Borough, 2252 unique users received emergency food at least once in 2014-15 (up from 1843 in the previous year).

More than half of registered Voucher Partners (54%) were statutory agencies, including 14 children's centres; 20 primary/secondary schools; 42 health services (eg GPs and hospitals, Community Mental Health teams); 15 social services teams; and 6 other Wandsworth Borough Council teams (for instance, the Financial Inclusion Team).

Four in ten Voucher Partners (39%) were local or national charities, including Citizens Advice Wandsworth; Age UK Wandsworth; South West London Law Centres; Victim Support; Hestia; and 21 housing associations. Fourteen local churches (7%) also referred people to the Foodbank, many of them from church community projects such as Putney Job Club.

Of the registered Voucher Partners, 75% referred at least one client to Wandsworth Foodbank in 2015-16, between them making 1738 separate referrals. In addition, four JobCentre Plus offices made a total of 76 referrals.<sup>7</sup>

The majority of Voucher Partners (73%) made less than 10 referrals in the year; 15% referred 11-20 times; 10% referred between 21-50 times; and 2% referred 51-100 times. One Voucher Partner made more than 100 referrals during the year. The ten Voucher Partners referring clients most often in 2015-16 were:

1. Citizens Advice Wandsworth – Roehampton centre (190 referrals)\*
2. Wandsworth Borough Council – Financial Inclusion team (94) \*
3. Citizens Advice Wandsworth – Battersea centre (73) \*
4. Wandsworth Community Drug and Alcohol team (73) \*
5. Wandsworth Borough Council – Tenancy Support team (50) \*
6. Wandsworth Borough Council – Welfare Reform team (46) \*
7. East Wandsworth Community Mental Health team (46)
8. Hillbrook Children's centre (43)
9. Central Wandsworth/West Battersea Community Mental Health team (42)
10. JobCentre Plus Wandsworth (41)

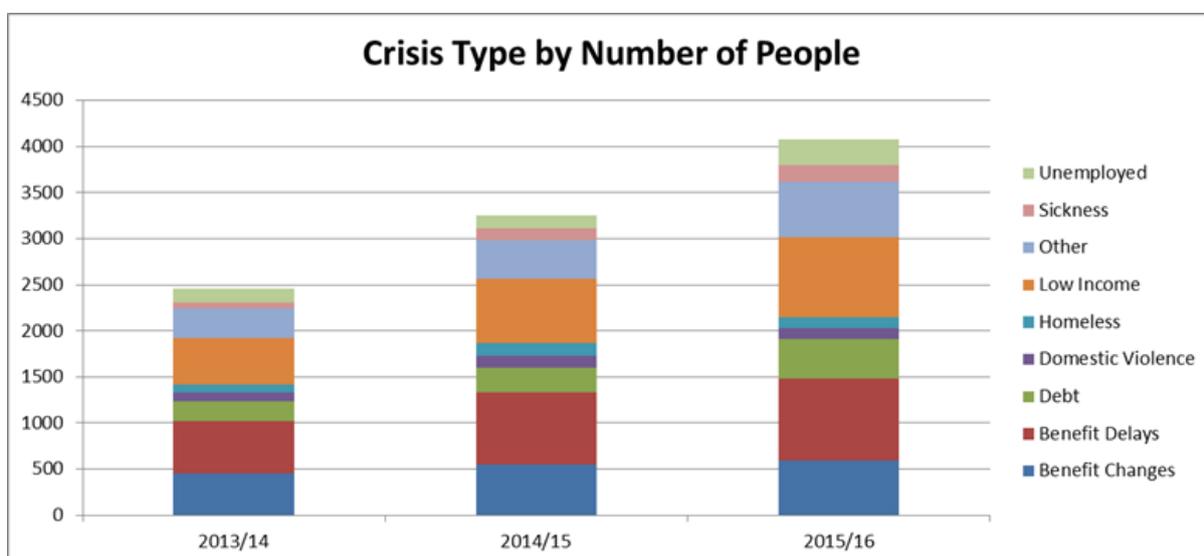
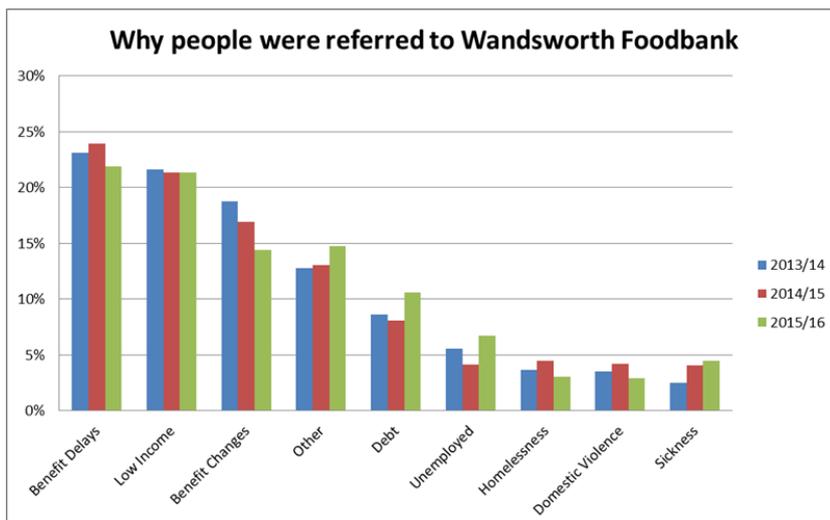
\* Indicates Voucher Partners that were also in the top ten referrers in 2014-15.

### CRISIS REFERRAL REASONS

Voucher data shows that benefit delays, low income and benefit change remain the most common reasons people were referred to the foodbank, followed by debt, unemployment and sickness.

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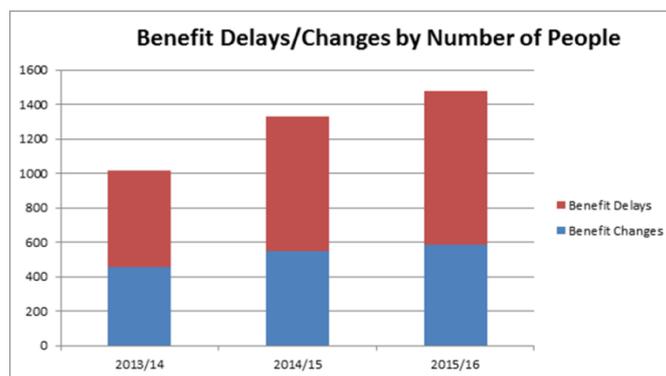
<sup>7</sup> No JobCentres Plus are registered as Voucher Partners, however in 2015-16, four JobCentres Plus 'signposted' clients to the foodbank using their own referral form (rather than standard Wandsworth Foodbank vouchers). JCP forms do not give a reason for referral, or any additional data about the household (apart from number of adults and children).



This year’s voucher data is consistent with the 2014-15 analysis, although it shows small changes that reflect both Voucher Partner and guest interview findings:

**Benefit delay and change**

While referrals due to benefit delay and change have reduced by 5% to 36% of all referrals (from 41% in 2014-15), this seems to be less to do with improvements to benefit delivery, and more to do with a worsening of other referral reasons, such as unemployment and debt. In fact the *number* of people receiving emergency food who were referred because of benefit problems increased by 11% to 1479 people in 2015-16 (see chart overleaf).



### Unemployment

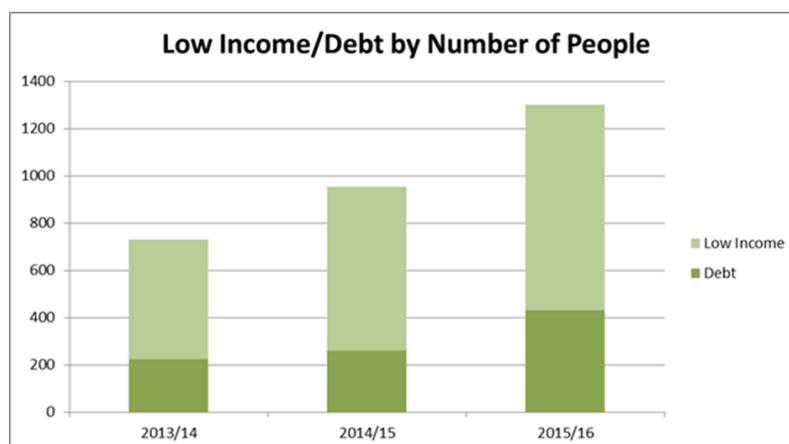
Unemployment as a referral reason increased by 3% to account for 7% of all referrals in 2015-16, affecting more than twice the number of people than in the previous year (274 people compared to 133 in 2014-15). Although UK unemployment figures are reported to be falling, this foodbank data may be indicative of the insecure contracts and employment 'churn' that guests report experiencing.

### Low income

Low income as a referral reason remained at 21%, although this represented a 26% increase in terms of numbers of people affected (870 people, compared to 693 in 2014-15). This reflects Voucher Partner and guest comments that income from low-paid jobs, insecure contracts and benefits (or a combination of two or more of these) are not providing sufficient income to soften the impact of benefit caps, and meet the cost of utilities, food, and London's high cost of housing.

### Debt

Debt as a referral reason rose 3% to account for 11% of all referrals in 2015-16 – representing 431 people fed (a 64% increase in numbers of people affected by debt in 2014-15) – and resonates with Voucher Partner and guest reports of increased unmanageable debt and use of high-cost lenders in the previous 12 months. This appears to signal that people are borrowing more to make ends meet, in order to cope with persistent low income or sudden crisis.



## Sickness

Although sickness as a referral reason remained constant at 4% of referrals (as in 2014-15), there was an 80% increase in numbers of referrals made by mental health Voucher Partners in 2015-16 (158 referrals, compared to 88 referrals in 2014-15). This is consistent with guest and Voucher Partner findings which show poverty as both a cause and effect of poorer mental health; and the difficulty people experiencing poor mental health can have in navigating the current benefits system.

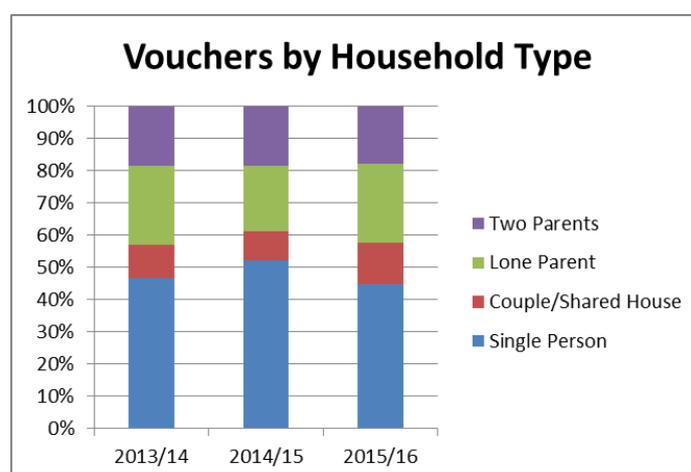
The remaining 25% of people fed were referred due to: homelessness (4%); sickness (4%); domestic violence (3%); delayed wages (1%); child holiday meals (1%) and other (12%). These are very similar levels to last year.

## AGE, ETHNICITY AND HOUSEHOLD TYPE

The majority of people referred with a voucher to Wandsworth Foodbank were aged between 25-64 years (89%); followed by 17-24 year olds (5%) and over-65s (2%)<sup>8</sup>. This was broadly in line with last year's data.

The largest ethnic group accessing the foodbank was the total White population (34%), followed by the total Black population (27%). This echoes the previous two years' findings. During 2015-16, the number of vouchers issued to Asian people increased from 7% to 9% of all vouchers. This was the largest increase by ethnicity. However Voucher Partners selecting 'Other' or 'Not disclosed' rose to 25% of voucher referrals (from 18% in 2014-15), perhaps indicating that ethnic categories on vouchers do not reflect well the diverse ethnicities that London enjoys.

Just under half (45%) of people receiving emergency food in 2014-15 were single people – a 7% decrease on the year before, but still the household type most referred. The number of single parent households referred saw the largest increase – up 5% to account for one-quarter of all referrals, and possibly reflecting research elsewhere which suggests single parents have been hit particularly hard by welfare reform. Couple families with children accounted for 16% of referrals, followed by couples with no dependent children (10%).<sup>9</sup>



<sup>8</sup> 'Undisclosed' age of voucher recipient accounted for remaining 4% of referrals.

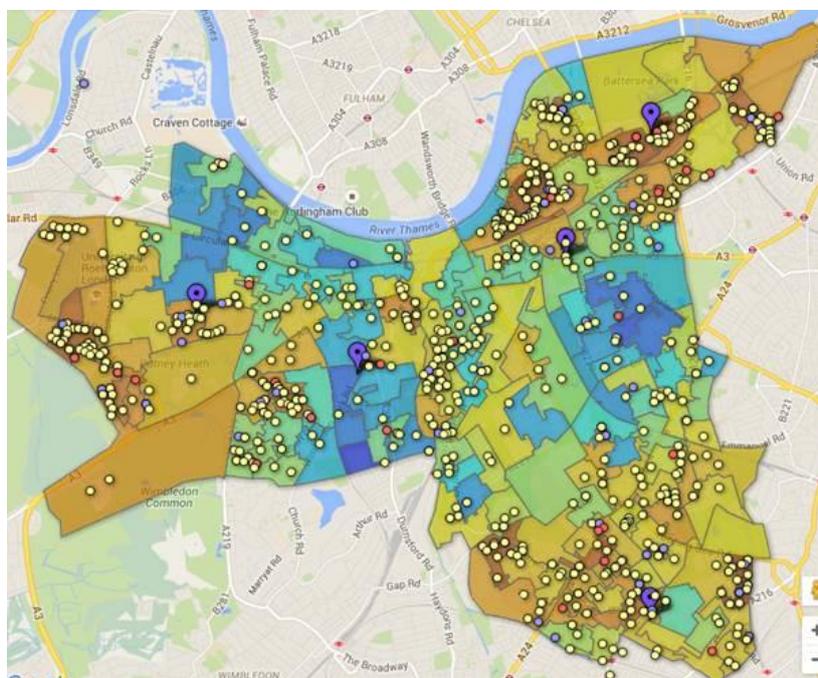
<sup>9</sup> 'Other' accounted for the remaining 4% of households referred.

### FOODBANK REFERRAL BY WARD

The chart below shows the ten wards experiencing the highest number of foodbank referrals, which together accounted for two-thirds (66%) of all referrals in 2015-16. Roehampton and Putney Heath saw the most residents referred in crisis to Wandsworth Foodbank, followed by Latchmere, West Hill, Queenstown and Graveney.



The need for the foodbank is clearly higher in wards experiencing high levels of deprivation, as reflected in the map below, which shows location of households referred to the foodbank last year, against areas of highest deprivation (red) to lowest (blue).



- KEY:**
- Yellow dots = households referred 1-3 times
  - Blue dots = households referred 4-5 times
  - Red dots = households referred 6+ times
  - Blue place icons = location of five Wandsworth Foodbank centres

## VOUCHER PARTNER REFERRALS

Local people are referred by Voucher Partners to Wandsworth Foodbank, and cannot self-refer.<sup>10</sup> The foodbank therefore relies on the expertise and professional judgement of its 200-plus Voucher Partners to identify and refer their clients in crisis, as part of assessing other sources of support available and ensuring that supportive action is taken to help their client address the wider crisis.

When needed, Voucher Partners complete an orange Wandsworth Foodbank voucher (selecting cause of crisis leading to referral, number of adults and children in household and other client information) and issue it to their client, who can exchange it for emergency food at one of the five foodbank centres located in churches across the borough throughout the week<sup>11</sup>.

Wandsworth Foodbank and Trussell Trust recognise that three provisions of 3-days-worth of food may not be sufficient, for instance when a household faces interruption in benefit payment for a number of weeks, or when facing multiple life shocks in one year.

The guidelines are therefore **'three vouchers per household, per crisis; or up to 12 vouchers per year.'** If a Voucher Partner believes a client needs more support than this, they are asked to discuss the situation with the Foodbank Manager, and discretion can be applied.

Guests to the foodbank are also offered signposting support from trained volunteers, as well as referral to the dedicated Citizens Advice Foodbank adviser (p3).

**For this research, Voucher Partners were asked 'What criteria do you use to identify that a client is in food poverty and needs a Foodbank voucher?'**

As well as describing situations of general hardship or crisis (60%), the most common specific issues spontaneously cited by Voucher Partners involved benefits: some form of benefit change or delay was mentioned by nearly half (44%) up from 32% last year; benefits sanction by 8% (down from 15% last year); and some other cessation of benefits by nearly one in five (18%), up from 11% last year. No or low income, including in-work poverty, was cited by 36% of Voucher Partners (more than three times as many as last year).

*"We check for evidence of benefit stoppage; benefit delays; other debts; delayed wages, which impact upon their capacity to buy food." Voucher Partner (VP)18*

*"We conduct a holistic welfare and money advice overview. The aim is to provide short term assistance from the foodbank whilst putting into place a long term plan to avoid a repeated need for provision. Often the client has been told that their benefit is ended in retrospect and therefore has no income whatsoever and is destitute." VP 41*

*"We look to see if the client has the money to feed their children and themselves once all their bills are paid." VP3*

<sup>10</sup> If someone comes to foodbank centres in crisis but has not been referred with a voucher, volunteers do their best to contact a care professional involved in their care to discuss the situation and arrange an immediate referral where possible, and appropriate.

<sup>11</sup> For more information, please visit [wandsworth.foodbank.org.uk/locations](http://wandsworth.foodbank.org.uk/locations)

Other key factors identified as leading to a crisis and foodbank referral included: debt, cited by one in ten Voucher Partners; mental health difficulties (12% of Voucher Partners); homelessness, including families housed in temporary homeless accommodation (12%); and unemployment (8%).

*"We have an ongoing relationship with clients and we monitor their situation, we usually refer individuals who are unemployed or those drowning under a sea of debt." VP45*

*"Homelessness and people living with unaffordable rent." VP42*

*"Families who are living in homeless accommodation and families where there are mental health issues such as depression." VP27*

Other issues raised by one or more Voucher Partners included: domestic violence, clients being discharged from hospital without benefits in place; and clients facing immigration issues such as No Recourse to Public Funds. Four Voucher Partners spontaneously referred to children presenting as hungry at school.

*"Staff alert me to any concerns that arise in the lunch hall. These range from inadequate or non-existent packed lunches to very hungry children, as well as identifying those that say there is no food at home." VP7*

*"When their benefit is delayed, benefit has been stopped and they've just been discharged from hospital and are facing financial difficulty." VP30*

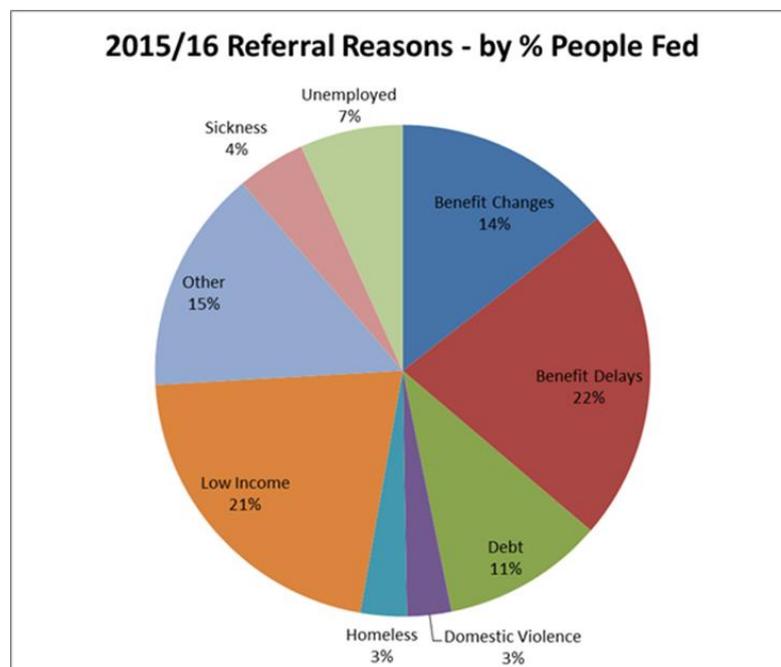
*"Families who are escaping domestic abuse." VP40*

Voucher Partners demonstrated care, clarity and insight in their answers, consistent with their role as professional frontline agencies.

## DRIVERS OF FOOD POVERTY

Many people who need emergency food are in crisis because they have suffered a number of life shocks and have exhausted their usual coping mechanisms. In addition, the high cost of living in London, low paid work, insecure contracts, illness and unemployment have left many foodbank guests unable to build up financial resilience: there is simply no, or very little, money left each week after the costs of rent, utilities, travel and food are met.

However, problems with benefits – delays, changes and sanctions – remain the single most common driver of people being referred in crisis to Wandsworth Foodbank in the last year (accounting for 36% of people fed). While the percentage of referrals due to benefit issues has fallen, the *number* of people receiving emergency food because of benefits problems increased by 11%, to 1479 people.



### BENEFIT DELAYS AND CHANGES – VOUCHER PARTNERS

Voucher Partners and guests were asked about their experience of the benefits system in the previous 12 months, and their responses covered a wide range of impacts and insights into delivery of benefits in 2015-16.

When asked how frequently benefit delay was a reason for referring a client to Wandsworth Foodbank, more Voucher Partners said it was 'often' or 'sometimes' a reason for crisis referral than in the previous year (90% compared to 78%). The number of Voucher Partners saying it was 'rarely' or 'never' a reason for referral fell to just 10% of all responses (from 23% in previous year).

The majority (68%) of Voucher Partners thought delays had increased; just over one-quarter thought length of delays had stayed the same (27%), and two Voucher Partners (4%) thought length of delay had decreased.

When asked what in their view were the most common causes of benefit delays, Voucher Partners most commonly cited delays caused by processing times within the benefits system, either of new claims or when payment of one benefit stops before another one is in place (due to change of circumstance or benefits being reassessed), leaving clients in hardship (24% of Voucher Partners):

*“New claims and changing between benefits. Clients present all the required information but then are waiting for the payment to be assessed and paid. I’m not aware of DWP giving any specific reasons for the delay.” VP31*

*“Change of family circumstances from partner leaving family home because of domestic abuse. It appears that any change in benefits becomes a very long process and families get lost in the process and there is no understanding of the importance to benefits being paid quickly.” VP39*

*“The most common cause of a delay is that processing times no longer carry a target. Additionally, whereas the DWP would routinely contact me to discuss missing evidence or an unclear aspect and I could fax this across or advise what the accurate situation is; now they do not routinely do this. Requests are made by post, or more frequently not at all, and a claim is closed.” VP41*

Six Voucher Partners (12%) specifically cited delays in payment of sickness benefits such as employment support allowance (ESA) and personal independence payment (PIP) in answer to this question; particularly in relation to clients who were waiting for medical assessments or mandatory reconsiderations/appeals of previous adverse decisions (who during this time were often left without any payment, or with a lower job seekers allowance (JSA) payment):

*“There is a big back-log of assessments for ESA and PIP.” VP10*

*“In particular PIP assessments, when individuals fail the tests but then have to make appeals, which, in most cases, are successful.” VP34*

*“Clients being found fit for work and losing ESA and having to sign on, then this is successfully appealed but it takes ages for the ESA to be put back in payment. Clients used to rates of ESA find it hard, if not impossible to adjust to JSA rates and so clients borrow money or go hungry.” VP15*

*“I work with individuals with mental health needs coming out of long term institutions such as hospital or prison. They claim ESA and wait at least 3 weeks (sometimes more if they have no GP set up, bank account or ID) until their first payment. They can claim PIP however this takes many months to receive.” VP38*

Non-payment of ESA during mandatory reconsideration, and its knock-on effects, was also raised by Voucher Partners, who called for the DWP to:

*“End the loss of entitlement whilst a Mandatory Review is being considered. Even if payable at a hardship rate of 60% of a single person’s benefit, it would be better than leaving people without*

*any money, compounded with Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support simply ending. A person with mental health problems must simply spiral into despair if unassisted.” VP41*

*“Not insist clients who ask for mandatory reconsideration of their ESA decisions can only claim JSA (not ESA) while awaiting outcome.” VP10*

Bureaucratic error by JobCentre Plus (JCP) or the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) was the second most-cited cause of benefit delay (18% of Voucher Partners), ranging from paperwork being ‘lost’, to clients being given incorrect information by advisers.

*“Bureaucratic error and misinformation by JCP staff.” VP1*

*“Missing post at the DWP mail handling centres.” VP30*

*“Letters not being sent to clients in time – to attend an appointment or to call the agency.” VP32*

*“System crash, benefits office can’t find clients’ documents or delay in decisions process and appeal.” VP 37*

A smaller number of Voucher Partners (3) referred to error or missing information on their client’s side, although this was most usually cited in the context of the benefits system being hard to navigate, particularly for people with poorer mental health or with learning disabilities.

*“Usually some error made by client or a change in their circumstances that has altered their benefits which leads to more paperwork and meetings and then poor communication between all parties.” VP33*

*“Not understanding how the system works and what they need to do.” VP8*

*“DWP losing documents or staff giving clients incorrect advice. Client may have learning difficulties or unable to access form via the internet.” VP42*

## **BENEFIT DELAYS AND CHANGES – GUESTS**

Apart from one guest, all guests interviewed were either in receipt of in-work or out-of-work benefits, or were in the process of a new benefit claim.

However five foodbank guests did not have any income from work or benefits at time of interview, leaving them destitute. Four out of five were waiting for a new benefits claim to be processed and paid (p20).

The fifth guest with no income was a refugee, was mentally very unwell and was homeless (although had just been given a bed for the night by a lady from an Eritrean church in London). She appeared to have been supported until recently under Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act (1999) but was currently not in receipt of any benefits, and no benefit applications were in process.

90% of guests interviewed reported experiencing delay and/or change to their benefit payments in the previous 12 months (19/21 guests). Of these, one-third (7) had experienced delay only; one-third

(6) had experienced change only (although this often carried inherent delay); and one-third (6) experienced both delay and change to their benefit(s).

Guests described experiencing a range of benefit problems that were similar to those cited by Voucher Partners. They included<sup>12</sup>:

- interruption of payment of existing benefit claim (7 guests)
- delay in first payment of new benefit claim (6 guests)
- reduced payment of existing benefit claim (4 guests)
- changes to benefit claim as a result of change of circumstance (3 guests)
- deductions from existing benefit claim (3 guests)
- benefit sanction (1 guest)
- no benefit claim or payment in place (1 guest)

Only two of the changes experienced were viewed as positive by guests (a successful claim for ESA after a single mother was made redundant; an increase in child benefit after the birth of another mother's second child). The remaining 23 issues were viewed by guests as negative and causing hardship, including food poverty.

#### Interruption in payment of existing benefit claim

More than one-third of guests interviewed (7) reported one or more benefits had been suddenly stopped or not been paid into their account on the day it was due in the previous 12 months, for periods ranging from one day to several weeks.

For one guest, a minor delay had little or no impact: he made a rapid reclaim after his jobseeker's allowance was not paid, and received payment later the same day. A second guest correctly notified HMRC of a change of circumstance when she was made redundant in January and her working tax credit claim was stopped.

However for five other guests, sudden, unexpected interruptions to benefit payments had led to financial hardship. Two related to non-payment of housing benefit; leaving one guest in rent arrears, and the other (a single mother of a young child in private-rented accommodation) in debt to a friend and without money for food or bills.

*"My housing benefit stopped last month and I'm not sure why. I earn £400 from work and receive £200 [child tax credits and child benefit], and rent is £900, so I had to borrow £300 from a friend – and it's left me with nothing." Guest (G)13*

One guest, recovering from a period of mental ill-health and working part-time for a mental health charity, had both his housing benefit and working tax credit (WTC) stopped for one month while an HMRC-outsourced company 'checked' his situation, for reasons that were unclear to him:

*"This company called Concentrix came in and asked to investigate everything and stopped everything. But anyway they looked into it all and said yeah, you're good to go, but [your working tax credit] has gone down £20." G17*

<sup>12</sup> Several guests had experienced more than one form of benefit change or delay during the previous 12 months, or were experiencing multiple benefit issues at the same time.

However, at the time of interview, the guest's work tax credit payment had still not been paid and – as well as appearing to have lost a month's payment and facing food poverty – this guest, like several others, said the interruption to benefits he relied on had left him feeling anxious and insecure:

*"My confidence was really building, and I was really loving my job. It just wakes you up that a little setback can throw you off the ball and knock your confidence right back down. There was a while I thought this could really fall apart if I don't really concentrate."* G17

A fourth guest's ESA had ceased to be paid due to an apparent bureaucratic error after the guest missed a medical assessment:

*"My money has been delayed by the benefits agency, which means I've got no money, which means I've got no food. I wrote to them and told them why I missed my medical, and they phoned me to say they've received my letter and we'll send a confirmation letter in the post, which I did get from Belfast. But when I went to the cashpoint to get my money out, it wasn't there. I phoned them up and they said 'We haven't received your letter'. And I said 'You have received it, because I've received a letter from you!' And she said 'We'll look into that and get back to you', and that was two weeks ago."* G12

The fifth guest relied on subsistence funding, paid by the local council under Section 17 of the Children's Act 1989<sup>13</sup>, after leaving her abusive partner a few months previously. With no other income, and unable to work due to immigration restrictions, repeated delays in payment were difficult to manage:

*"Those days when you're meant to get it is the day when you really need it. It has a massive impact when it's not there, it's daunting. You make plans for it. It's not a lot, but the days it's meant to pay in is the day you've got so much planned; to get fresh food, to maybe get something for myself – a simple thing as sanitary wear."* G14

### **Delay in first payment of new benefit claim**

Nearly one-third of guests interviewed (6) had experienced delays related to new claims being processed and paid in the previous 12 months, five of whom had been waiting for between three weeks and sixteen weeks at time of interview.

Four guests had no income at all during this time and were destitute.

One guest had recently become unemployed and was waiting for a new claim of JSA to start two weeks later, which he hoped would mean his housing benefit claim would also re-start and he would not be evicted from his council accommodation:

*"I have got rent arrears at the moment, but hopefully it's being sorted with the JSA payment. I got eviction delayed until the benefits are paid, and then it will catch up with a bit of back pay as well."* G2

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<sup>13</sup> An emergency provision for parents who have No Recourse to Public Funds

Two guests had been released from prison three weeks previously without any employment, benefits or accommodation in place. One was sleeping rough and was waiting for his ESA claim to start; one had been housed in temporary accommodation outside the borough the previous week and was awaiting his first payment of JSA<sup>14</sup>.

*"You just come out, and you've got no money and I don't know what they expect you to do: bank robbery or something like that? And you'd go back in."* G1

With the help of the police, the fourth guest had recently fled domestic violence and forced servitude and was currently homeless (living with her very young children in one room of a relative's house). She had been advised that it would be another 6 weeks until the first payment of a new child benefit claim. This was the third time social services had referred her to the foodbank:

*"I was told it would take 12 weeks from the end of February for any benefits."*(G9)

A fifth guest had been waiting 16 weeks for a claim for PIP to be processed, but was in receipt of ESA at time of interview (although this had been reduced by £200 a month after he 'lost the premium', which seemed to relate to being moved from ESA Support to ESA Work Related Activity Group).

The sixth guest had experienced a delay of 4-6 weeks to a new claim for ESA when he had been released from prison six months earlier. He had been referred to Wandsworth Foodbank by his probation officer at that time, and he also questioned the sense of releasing people from prison without work or benefits in place:

*"People should have some sort of safety net instead of being on the street: that could make you commit crime, or you're hungry again and you shoplift. It could lead back into prison because you're on licence and the whole object is to keep you out of prison, get you a job."* G7

### Reduced payments or deductions from existing benefits

Benefit payments are designed to give a basic income, and as such, guests reported struggling to manage when benefits were reduced (due to deductions for arrears or overpayments, or a perceived change of circumstance). This was in line with Voucher Partner findings.

Four guests were experiencing recently reduced payments of an existing benefit at time of interview. One involved a reduction of £20/month to working tax credit, following a Concentrix investigation (see page p19). Two related to employment support allowance; one guest was receiving £200/month less than previously and one guest's ESA appeared to have been halved while he waited for a Work Capability Assessment:

*"They just said they sanctioned part of my claim. I was getting £250 [a fortnight] and now I'm getting £106 – fifty quid a week. Service charge is £20 so I'm left with hardly anything really, just under £30. Then I've got to put my phone on, and I've got to pay travel as well."* G7

The fourth guest, a single lady referred by a local mental health hospital who lived with her sister, was left without sufficient money for food after using her ESA benefit to pay her rent after her housing benefit was halved, apparently in error, ten weeks previously:

<sup>14</sup> Although the guest called the benefit JSA, as a single claimant, it is possible that this might actually be Universal Credit.

*"I'm in rent arrears because my housing benefit has been cut [by 50%] and I have to pay more rent. They thought my sister finished studying in February, but in fact she's doing a 3-month work placement to complete her studies to be a nurse." G19*

For three guests, deductions from their benefits were contributing to their current financial hardship. Two related to apparent overpayments (one of housing benefit, one of childcare element of working tax credit), which were being deducted from ESA and child tax credit respectively.

*"I rang them and it was an overpayment back from 2014 which no one told me about. They said it was because I got help with childcare in the holidays, but for some reason they're telling me I wasn't entitled to it, so I have to pay back all the money – £900. It makes me feel angry because no one told me about this and now I'm not even at work [having recently been made redundant], and **now** they're telling me." G21*

One guest, a single mother of a child with special needs, was having a number of deductions taken from her income support every fortnight in addition to her rent:

*"My rent comes out of that and some loans, I did a job for the BBC once that I got penalised for because I didn't tell them, I had to pay that back." G18*

In summary, housing benefit was the most commonly affected benefit (cited 7 times), consistent with it being a benefit that is dependent on receipt of other benefits. This was followed by employment support allowance (5 times); job seekers allowance (4 times); working tax credit (twice); and child tax credits, child benefit, income support and personal independence payment (once each).

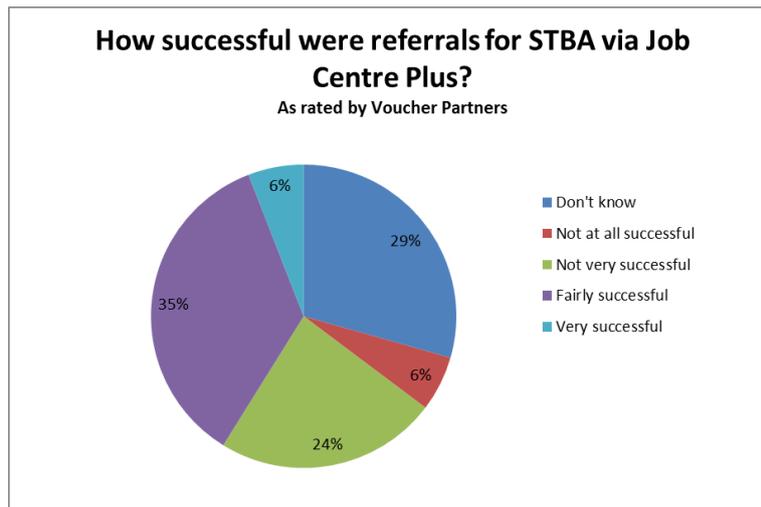
### **Short-Term Benefit Advance (STBA)**

When benefits are delayed, JobCentre Plus advisers have discretionary provision to issue Short-Term Benefit Advances (STBA), so that people are not left destitute while waiting for new benefit claims to be processed and paid.

Individuals may be given a STBA on a first benefit payment if they are in urgent financial need and have either: made a new claim for a benefit and are waiting for the first payment; or had a significant change in circumstances that means their benefit will go up by a large amount and they cannot wait until the next payment.

We asked Voucher Partners if they had supported clients to apply for STBA in the previous 12 months, and how successful these applications had been.

One-third (34%) of Voucher Partners said they had helped clients apply for STBA. Of those that knew the outcome of the application (12 Voucher Partners), just over half said applications had been 'fairly' or 'very' successful, while just under half said applications had been 'not very' or 'not at all' successful.



However, none of the 13 guests interviewed who experienced benefit delay in the previous 12 months reported being told about Short-Term Benefit Advance by JCP – as was the case in last year’s research. This suggests that clients are more likely to be granted STBA if supported by a professional, than if they attempt to access this provision by themselves.

Of concern is the experience of one interviewed guest who had lost his job, was facing eviction and had no money for food. He appeared to have been misinformed by a JCP adviser when he asked if there was any emergency financial provision available until his new claim of JSA was paid:

*“I did ask but they said they didn't do them. I said is there any way I can get any cash in advance, you've promised to pay me, and they said we don't do crisis loans anymore. I said is there any kind of equivalent and they said no. It's brutal.” G2*

However when a council staff member contacted Wandsworth JCP on his behalf, she apparently received a different response:

*“[She] got on the phone and they said 'Oh yeah, yeah, we'll put the form in for you'. I suspect this guy was having a bad day and he took it out on me. The two things I asked, he was like 'No, no', but for [her] he just done both.” G2*

These guest findings suggest that there has been no tangible improvement in communication about STBA in the last 12 months, although Wandsworth JCP say they now ‘display posters about STBA’ within the JobCentre building.

Both Voucher Partner and guest findings suggest that proactive, accurate information-giving by JCP advisers is needed to ensure local residents are not left destitute. This is in line with the Work & Pensions Select Committee recommendation of September 2015, which says:

*“We recommend that the Department include information about Short-Term Benefit Advances as part of the mandatory text in Jobcentre scripts. Jobcentre staff should ask every claimant*

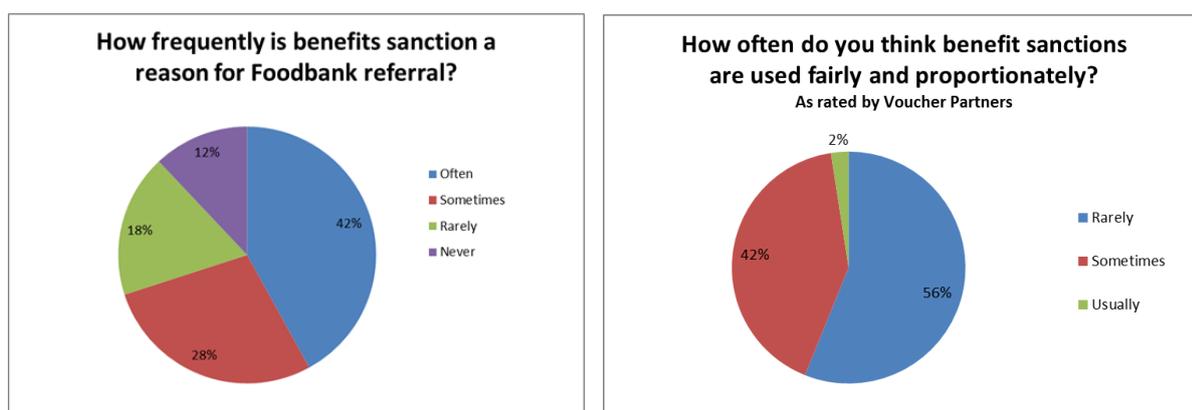
*whether they have an urgent financial need rather than wait or the claimant to volunteer that information.”<sup>15</sup>*

## BENEFITS SANCTION – VOUCHER PARTNERS AND GUESTS

As there is no ‘benefit sanction’ box on the foodbank voucher (they are recorded as ‘delay’ or ‘change’), it is not possible to ascertain from the voucher data how commonly benefits sanctions are a trigger for referral. We therefore asked Voucher Partners and guests about their experience of benefits sanction in the previous 12 months.

As last year, Voucher Partners were asked how frequently benefits sanction (where payments of job seekers allowance, employment support allowance or universal credit are completely or partially stopped for between four and 52 weeks) was a reason for referring a client to the Foodbank.

Twenty-one Voucher Partners (42%) said it was ‘often’ a reason for referral, almost identical to the previous year (43%). Fourteen (28%) said it was ‘sometimes’ a reason, a third less than in the previous year (41%), possible indicating a welcome overall slight reduction in sanctions as a referral reason. In line with this, more Voucher Partners this year said benefits sanction was ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ a reason for referral, compared to last year (30%/15%).



However when asked to what extent sanctions were ‘used fairly and proportionately’, more than half (56%) of Voucher Partners said they were ‘rarely used fairly and proportionately’ in their experience – a 20% increase from the previous year.

Similarly, Voucher Partners reporting sanctions as ‘sometimes’ or ‘usually used fairly and proportionately’ decreased, with just one Voucher Partner agreeing with the statement that they were ‘usually used fairly and proportionately’ (compared with 3 responses in 2014/15).

Voucher Partners were invited to make any other comments about benefit sanction, and of the 20 Voucher Partners responding, 17 (85%) expressed strong concerns over both the policy and impact of sanctioning people’s benefit payments, particularly for families or for those struggling with mental health issues. The remaining three responses were neutral, simply saying they would like to know

<sup>15</sup> Giving information about STBA is currently not mandatory, therefore allowing information to be given solely at JCP employees’ discretion: “If a claimant indicates that they have an immediate financial need”. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmworpen/372/37208.htm>

more about sanctions before they commented. There were no positive comments about benefit sanctions.

*"I don't think it is ever reasonable to sanction benefits. People depend on benefits for a very basic standard of living and the loss of even £1 per week can have a drastic effect on their ability to manage."* VP31

*"Clients are on a very low income already and to have additional sanctions that hit them financially is too harsh and causes increase in rent arrears and council tax debts, and poor health from the stress of having no money."* VP49

*"They seem like a blunt instrument, not taking account of need."* VP26

*"Many people are scared of benefit sanctions, have reported the experience of the cruelty of the officials and lack of empathy."* VP28

*"Sanctions are used to punish unemployed people and fool the public into thinking 'workless are feckless', leaving people hungry and angry and desperate."* VP2

Two Voucher Partners appeared to question the implementation and duration of sanctions, rather than the basic policy:

*"It is not obvious why people need to have such long periods of sanctions in certain circumstances; I am sure one or two weeks would be bad enough."* VP30

*"They do not take into account the impact on children in household facing sanctions. I have no issue with them enforcing sanction, but it must be done fairly."* VP42

Particular concerns raised by Voucher Partners included the impact of applying benefit sanctions to households with children; people experiencing mental health difficulties or with learning disabilities; people who are homeless; and those who would struggle to access the internet for job searches etc because they do not own a computer, or face challenges in using it:

*"Benefit sanctions are simply not the answer to addressing poor compliance issues in relation to those with complex needs e.g. mental health, substance misuse, offending, Personality Disorders, learning difficulties etc. More practical help and creative ways of engaging them in seeking work are needed."* VP18

*"They are penalising people who have difficult enough circumstances to deal with, those with mental health specifically."* VP6

*"Benefit sanctions not only affects the person claiming benefits but also their children, and it is agencies such as Foodbank which picks up the fallout, which I do not believe is recognised in government data."* VP40

*"It is very difficult for homeless people with limited access to computers and the internet and people with dyslexia etc. to do their job search regularly without any help."* VP9

*"I feel parents' ability to understand the system, through language or cognitive difficulties, should be taken into consideration, as any incorrect information given by families, may not automatically be for fraudulent reasons, or intended deceit." VP43*

Of the guests interviewed, only one was currently experiencing sanction. She had been referred to the foodbank by her JobCentre Plus adviser. A mum of two, with one child a student and the other working as an unpaid intern, her job seeker's allowance had been sanctioned after she missed one day's work voluntary experience due to a hospital appointment:

*"[JCP] asked me to do some work experience in a charity shop. It clashed with a hospital appointment. I informed JCP in December that I couldn't start on [the date in January] due to the hospital appointment. I was told I can't change the date or time of starting. I offered to work an extra day at the end but was told 'You will hear from DWP'. I got a letter telling me about sanction. I filled out the [mandatory reconsideration] forms, with a photocopy of hospital appointment. JCP adviser now says they didn't receive anything, but they never called to chase it up, so I assumed it had been received. My housing officer tried to help but after being on hold for one hour had to hang up. Already £73 doesn't go far, to have it stop is very problematic." G15*

However the adult daughter of another guest interviewed had had her ESA sanctioned, and while she should automatically qualify as 'vulnerable' and be paid at the 'hardship rate' of 60%, she had not been informed about how to appeal the sanction.

*"The system is terrible, they don't tell you anything – they just tell you what they want from you. They don't give you any reasons for anything." G5*

The daughter's sanction, coming on top of 'bedroom tax' and rent arrears, had contributed to the household being without sufficient money for food. Mother and daughter had tried unsuccessfully to phone the DWP to query the sanction and to ask for help:

*"You just get through to the talking machine. Do you remember the last time, we kept getting cut off? And you pay for the calls out of your money. They don't care." G5*

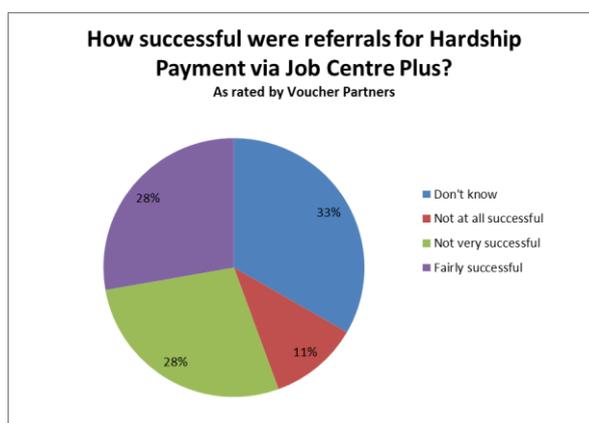
### Hardship Payment

Hardship payments are reduced payments of income-based jobseeker's allowance (JSA) or income-related employment and support allowance (ESA) which can be paid if someone is experiencing hardship<sup>16</sup> because their normal benefit is not being paid in specified circumstances, including benefit sanction.

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<sup>16</sup> "Note: Hardship means a lack of the necessities of life, i.e. food, heating, accommodation, clothing and hygiene. What varies is what an individual may require in order for that essential need to be met, for example, a person with a severe mobility problem may need more heating, or a person with severe diabetes may have more complex and more expensive needs to provide food than a normal healthy adult. All JSA claimants fall in scope to be considered as "persons in hardship" after 14 days, therefore it is the physical needs that put them into an 'at risk' (vulnerable) category for hardship purposes for the first 14 days." Department for Work and Pensions, Decision Maker's Guide (Section 35095)

When we asked Voucher Partners what emergency financial support options they referred clients to alongside offering a foodbank voucher, just over one-third (36%) cited Hardship Payments via JobCentre Plus. This was identical to last year (36%).



However, applications for Hardship Payments were the *least* successful of all emergency financial options cited (behind Short-Term Benefit Advance, Discretionary Social Fund, fuelbanks & families<sup>17</sup>). The majority (58%) of Voucher Partners who knew the outcome said hardship applications had been 'not very' or 'not at all' successful. Less than half (42%) of Voucher Partners said applications were 'fairly successful'. No Voucher Partner said applications had been 'very successful'.

In line with the Government's pledge to ensure that sanctioned claimants are properly informed about hardship payments (following concerns raised in the Oakley review, December 2014<sup>18</sup>), people experiencing sanction should be told about Hardship Payments by their Jobcentre adviser.

The single mother interviewed at the foodbank who was experiencing sanction (p27) had been told about Hardship Payment by her JCP adviser, which was positive. However she hadn't applied for it because she "*was worried about paying it back*", indicating a lack of clarity of information about the provision (ie you do not have to repay a Hardship Payment) which led to her being referred to the foodbank by her JCP adviser.<sup>19</sup>

Local JobCentre advisers follow DWP guidelines in judging who can apply for a hardship payment from the first day of a sanction, and who can apply from the 15<sup>th</sup> day after sanction. To qualify for hardship payment from the first to the last day of the sanction period, JCP advisers need to assess that a person is more vulnerable than a 'normal healthy adult':

*"It would be usual for a normal healthy adult to suffer some deterioration in their health if they were without: 1. essential items, such as food, clothing, heating and accommodation or 2. sufficient money to buy essential items for a period of two weeks..."*

<sup>17</sup> Please see p 32 for more information.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Oakley, Independent review of the operation of Jobseeker's Allowance sanctions validated by the Jobseekers Act 2013, 22 July 2014

<sup>19</sup> In separate research conducted in December 2015/January 2016 with Citizens Advice Wandsworth and the Financial Inclusion team and Welfare Reform team at Wandsworth Borough Council, not one out of the nine people experiencing benefit sanction reported being told about hardship payment by their JCP adviser. This resonates more closely with what we see throughout the year at our foodbank centres.

*“The [Decision Maker] must determine if a person with a medical condition would suffer a greater decline in health than a normal healthy adult and would suffer hardship (DMG 35142 et seq).”*<sup>20</sup>

However, the same DWP guidance (confirmed verbally by an adviser at Wandsworth JobCentre Plus in April 2016) makes clear that JSA claimants with mental health conditions (rather than physical health conditions) are *specifically excluded* from accessing the immediate hardship payment, and have to wait until the third week of a sanction to apply:

*“Requests for hardship payments may be made by people who say they have a mental health condition. A person will only be a member of a vulnerable group for hardship purposes, i.e. have access to hardship without a waiting period, if the condition causes limitation in functional capacity because of a physical impairment.”*<sup>21</sup>

This group would include people with mental health issues who are challenging ‘fit to work’ decisions and whose employment support allowance has been stopped completely during the mandatory reconsideration period. For those who start claiming job seekers allowance (so that they have some rather than no income during the mandatory reconsideration period), they would not only be subject to increased conditionality and risk of sanction, but would also no longer automatically be classed as ‘vulnerable’, as ESA claimants are, should they be sanctioned and apply for hardship payment.

This is a concern, backed up by recent research by the charity Mind which shows a 668% rise in people with mental health conditions having their benefits stopped due to sanction<sup>22</sup>, cited by a Voucher Partner:

*“...clients with mental health problems are easy to sanction because they are more likely to struggle to comply with conditionality within the benefit system.”* VP41

Government policy around mental health and hardship payments appears to lack equality and risks genuinely vulnerable people being left in hardship without any immediate support, simply because they are mentally rather than physically unwell.

<sup>20</sup> Department for Work and Pensions, Decision Maker’s Guide, section 35099

<sup>21</sup> As above, section 35095

<sup>22</sup> A joint analysis of the figures by the Independent and the mental health charity Mind, published May 2016, found that 19,259 people with mental health problems had their benefits stopped under sanction in 2014-15 compared to just 2,507 in 2011-12 – a 668 per cent rise. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/benefit-sanctions-against-people-with-mental-health-problems-up-by-600-per-cent-a6731971.html>

## IN-WORK POVERTY

Although we did not include any questions directly about in-work poverty, this was an issue spontaneously raised by Voucher Partners and guests in their responses.

Issues raised included the impact of zero-hours contracts on in-work benefits; the difficulty of paying rent and other essential bills on a low wage; the lowered threshold at which families lost benefits such as free school meals (FSM); the lack of affordable childcare; delayed payment of wages leaving households in hardship; the payment gap between stopping out-of-work-benefits and receiving first wage, leaving households without income for 4-6 weeks.

*"We have seen an increased number of parents who are trying to work and have low income jobs which barely pay enough for their families to stay in rented accommodation and have enough food on the table three times a day. With the recent changes to benefits, these families are no longer eligible for free school meals for their child. This means money has to come from somewhere else to enable their child/ren to eat at lunchtime.... Working may pay slightly more but that takes them over the threshold into FSM being taken away." VP14*

*"In-work poverty; [when parents go] back to work, benefits stop on notification but parents are not paid first time between 4-6 weeks so they are without money for this time... what is difficult is all forms of poverty will not change or get better as even parents who move from benefits to work are not necessarily better off." VP39*

*"Back to work mums' are accessing our services more." VP44*

*"[We have seen an increasing number of] people who are working but on zero-hours contract. Due to low income and not steady hours, they're not able to qualify for working tax credit, or it affects other benefits, eg housing benefit, due to constant changes." VP47*

*"More people in work are not able to afford food." VP2*

*"It is sad that the majority of people I have referred are either in low-paid work or desperate to be in work." VP7*

Of the guests interviewed, three were employed or were in households where at least one person was employed.

However, each of these jobs was low-paid and part-time: one single mum was a cleaner for two hours a day (to fit around free childcare offered by a friend); and one single man worked part-time in a charity shop as he recovered from poor mental health. The third guest's partner worked variable hours for McDonald's, but said:

*"I never thought this would happen. I get paid every two weeks, but it's just not enough. I always go for the most cheapest thing, to try and get more for your money but it doesn't always work out." G14*

The interaction of low pay and stoppages or delays to payment of benefits, was the 'final straw' for each guest, leaving them without sufficient income for food: two had experienced sudden,

unexpected stoppages to benefits (housing benefit, working tax credit); and one was impacted by the delay in her partner's new benefit claim being processed and paid.

*"I was working in a restaurant, but it finished because I don't have anyone to take my daughter. Now because I work just two hours in the day and it's not a lot, my salary. I need help because my housing benefit now has gone, I don't know why. This month, it's terrible for me." G13*

Three other guests had recently been made redundant (2) or had recently become unable to work because of sudden ill-health (1); however their previous employment had also been low-paid and they had been unable to build up sufficient financial reserves to avoid crisis and food poverty now.

Additionally, one of the guests in social housing had used the second bedroom in their home as an office (he had been self-employed), and was previously able to pay the 'spare room subsidy' out of his earnings. Now unwell and unable to work, he and his partner were struggling to meet this cost on their reduced income, and had fallen into arrears. Their sudden change of circumstances, leading to foodbank referral, was a shock:

*"Once you get over the shock of needing to use the foodbank, it's helpful. I used to put food in the collection point at the supermarket: I never thought I'd need to use it." G11*

## HOMELESSNESS

While homelessness as a reason for referral remained at 4% (as in 2014-15), more than one-third of guests were homeless at time of interview (up from one-quarter of those interviewed last year).

This indicates that while issues around homelessness and insecure housing are common for foodbank guests, these may be viewed as a secondary rather than primary cause of crisis referral (when Voucher Partners are selecting one crisis referral reason on the foodbank voucher).

This is consistent with the finding that over one in ten Voucher Partners (12%) identified homelessness as contributing to the crisis leading to foodbank referral:

*"Benefit cap and housing has put families in extreme poverty." VP39*

*"Homelessness and people living with unaffordable rent." VP42*

Of the eight guests who were homeless when interviewed, four were staying with friends or family, three were in temporary homeless accommodation, and one was rough-sleeping.

Additionally, six guests reported that they had been at risk of becoming homeless in the previous 12 months: 5 had faced eviction but managed to stay in their home, and one had actually been evicted.

## FUEL POVERTY

Voucher Partners were asked 'How frequently was fuel poverty also an issue for clients you refer to the foodbank?'

More than two-thirds (71%) of Voucher Partners said that fuel poverty was 'often' or 'sometimes' an issue for clients they referred (up from 55% in the previous year), with less than one-third saying it was 'rarely' (22%) or 'never' (7%) an issue.

*"People living below the poverty line will not be able to afford to eat and heat their homes. One of my pupils said she was asked by her mum to make a choice between packed lunch the next day or warmth for the evening. She said the family often went to bed early to keep warm."* VP7

Guests were asked: 'In the last 12 months, have there been any times when you've been unable to heat your home, use hot water, or cook because you haven't had enough money for gas/electricity?'

Two-thirds of guests who responded said yes, and one-third said no (the same as the previous year). Of those who had experienced fuel poverty, 42% said it had 'often' been their experience, 33% said 'sometimes' and 25% said 'rarely'.

One guest on a low income, unwell with cancer and recovering from surgery that had taken place two weeks previously, said:

*"When it's really cold, it's whether you eat or whether you keep warm. All through this winter, I just can't pay the bills really. Electric goes off sometimes, like last week."* G5

For others, low income, poorly insulated homes, homelessness and the premium on prepayment fuel were contributing factors to fuel poverty:

*"The house is so cold but we couldn't afford to heat it, especially with the poor insulation around the windows and door."* G11

*"Being homeless, I was just freezing anyway. Even staying with my cousin, gas is so dear, and sometimes the electric would go..."* G7

*"That's the one thing I try and make sure I have to be honest, even if I don't have food. I just changed over to someone who's supposed to be cheaper too, so I don't know how this has happened. My electricity has been on emergency since yesterday, I've got £1 on my gas so it's not on emergency yet."* G18

*"I go to shopping centre to warm up."* G10

Another guest, a lady who had fled domestic abuse with her young children, said:

*"We used to stay in the house with no gas or electricity, and the house was cold, and he used to say 'Wait, I'll pay later'. He didn't care really. I used to put the children's coats on them when it was cold in winter and we had no electricity, to make sure they were warm. We used to wear coats inside the house. I had no other choice to survive."* G9

## FUEL BANKS AND FAMILIES

Since April 2015, Wandsworth Foodbank Voucher Partners have also been able to refer families in fuel poverty to *fuelbanks and families* – a new charity partner working within Wandsworth Foodbank centres to provide immediate fuel vouchers; free specialist debt, benefits and housing advice; and discretionary grants for school uniform and shoes, and winter coats.<sup>23</sup>

When asked: *‘When you give a Foodbank voucher to a client in crisis, what, if any, emergency financial support options do you also refer people to?’*, *fuelbanks and families* was the option most-cited by Voucher Partners (54%).

Of these, 99% said *fuelbanks and families* had been ‘helpful’ or ‘extremely helpful’ to the families they had referred in fuel poverty in the previous year:

*“Offering support with fuel is absolutely essential. Not many services can offer this much-needed, direct, immediate support and this makes such a big difference in crisis.”* VP46

*“It is really helpful that there’s access to a representative to help families with housing and benefits once a family has been given a fuel voucher.”* VP27

*“A brilliant addition to Wandsworth’s vulnerable residents.”* VP44

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<sup>23</sup> For more information, please visit [fuelbanksandfamilies.com](http://fuelbanksandfamilies.com)

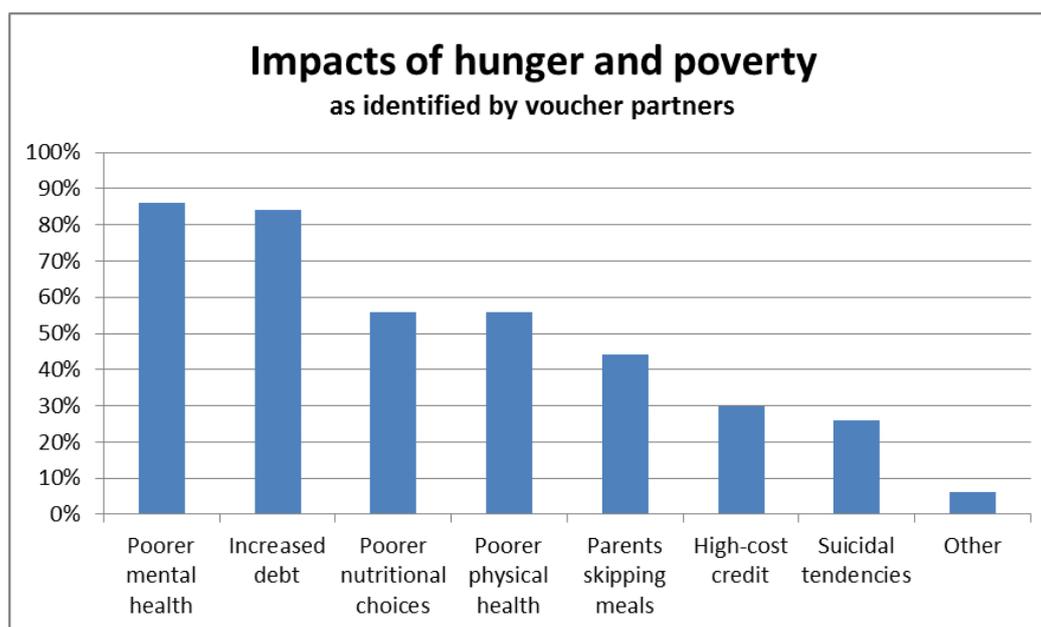
## IMPACTS OF FOOD POVERTY

Food poverty severely impacts the lives of those who experience it: it is very strongly associated by both guests and Voucher Partners with causing stress, anxiety and depression, as well as a negative impact on nutrition and physical health. It is also associated with increased financial difficulties, as people access high-cost credit to pay for food, as well as essential costs of housing and utilities.

### IMPACTS OF FOOD POVERTY – VOUCHER PARTNERS

Voucher Partners were asked 'In the last 12 months, what are the most common impacts of being in food poverty that you've seen in your clients?' and invited to select as many as relevant from a list of possible impacts.

As last year, poorer mental health was the most commonly cited impact, selected by 43 of 50 Voucher Partners (86% of responses, almost identical to 2014-15). One-quarter of Voucher Partners said they had experienced clients displaying 'suicidal tendencies' – twice as often as last year (26% in 2015-16 compared with 13% in 2014-15).



The second most-selected impact was clients facing increased unmanageable debt (eg rent arrears, credit card debt, overdrafts, utilities, threat of eviction), cited by 84% of Voucher Partners.

The next most common impacts were: clients having to make 'poorer nutritional choices' (eg having to buy cheaper 'filling' food/less fruit and vegetables); and clients experiencing 'poorer physical health'. Both impacts were cited by more than half of Voucher Partners responding (56% each) and suggest an association between poverty, nutrition and health that would be not unexpected. One Voucher Partner said that without the foodbank:

*“The impact would be massive. Children would have to go hungry (and this wouldn't be down to ‘poor budgeting skills’ – most of the parents I work with have impressive budgeting skills, however their income is very limited) or they would have to eat very low quality food.”* VP46

Worryingly, more than twice the number of Voucher Partners said this year that they witnessed ‘parents skipping meals’ compared to the previous year (44% in 2015-16 compared to 19% in 2014-15).

Voucher Partners were given the opportunity to cite other impacts not listed, and three responses were given:

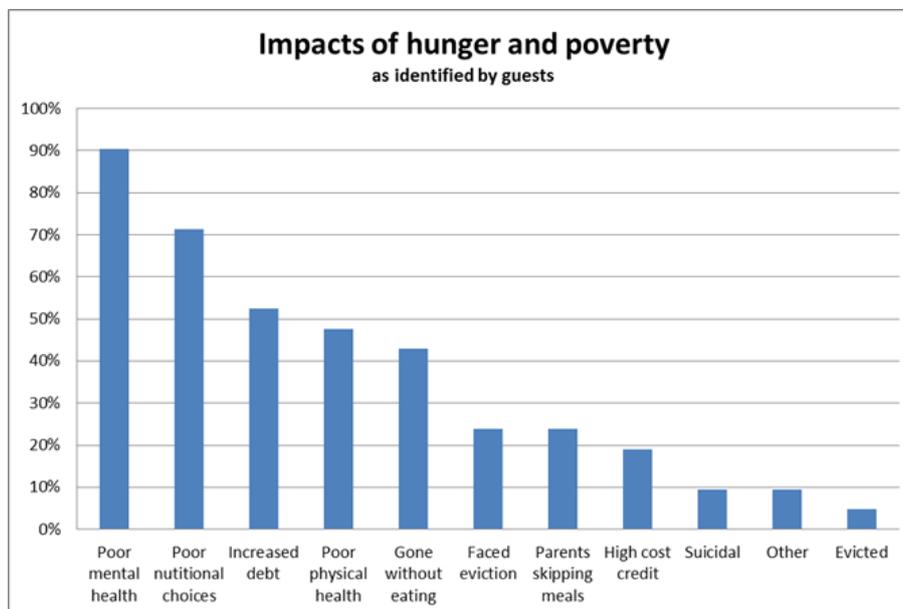
*“Relationship breakdown (often poverty is one of the main reasons families argue about).”* VP47

*“Client benefit stopped and could not afford shopping.”* VP29

*“Increased aggression through feeling stressed and, because of feeling stressed, feels no one is helping them.”* VP15

### IMPACTS OF FOOD POVERTY – GUESTS

Guests were invited to select from a list of potential impacts any that they had experienced in the previous 12 months (with the option of citing ‘other’), and responses were consistent with the fact that the foodbank helps people in crisis.



### POORER MENTAL HEALTH

As with Voucher Partners, the most common impact cited was ‘Poorer mental health’, selected by 90% of guests interviewed (19/21 guests). Three guests attributed their current crisis to recent onset

of mental health difficulties; for four others, they felt that crisis has exacerbated a pre-existing mental health conditions.

*"I was working until I had a mental breakdown last summer, when I was sectioned and in hospital for two months. I'm still not able to work, and the meds I'm on make me groggy."* G11

*"Anxiety and depression, it started with post-natal depression and it's just got worse."* G3

*"I've got mental health problems, panic attacks, and you could see I was in a state when I first got here [to the foodbank]."* G6

Just under half of the guests (8 of 19) felt that the poorer mental health they were experiencing had been triggered by the stress of their current situation.

*"It's stressful. I worry about my children."* G10

*"I've been to the doctors and they're telling me that I've got depression and trying to give me tablets, but I'm not very one for taking tablets."* G21

*"I've never been like this, I've always worked, I've always had money. When you've got no money, it does put a strain on you. You feel like a failure and you just feel lost."* G12

*"It's frightening; it's a really dreadful feeling not knowing if you're able to provide for yourself and your child, because that's your responsibility. All the emotional impact that it has on you, you draw into yourself, you're not you anymore."* G14

Experiences of poor mental health ranged from feeling stressed and anxious to feeling severely depressed and, in two cases, suicidal. One gentleman, who had lost his job two months previously and was still waiting to receive his first out-of-work benefit payment, described feeling:

*"Down in the dumps. To be honest it [suicide] has crossed my mind, but the next morning I dismissed it sort of thing, but I did think about it. I was thinking about what family and friends would think and I couldn't do it."* G2

Three guests described experiencing psychotic episodes in the previous 12 months (two of whom were referred to the foodbank by a local psychiatric hospital); one further guest was clearly very unwell at the time of interview, and was awaiting a psychiatric assessment.

## POORER NUTRITION

The second most commonly cited impact was poorer nutrition, with 71% of guests interviewed agreeing that they had *'Made poorer nutritional choices than [they'd] like'*; for instance choosing cheaper, filling foods over fresh fruit and vegetables.

*"Bread and bread and bread, isn't it?"* G5

*"It's just been during this sanction. Yesterday I only ate a tin of fruit."* G16

*"My three year old is very weak and clumsy. I worry I am not able to give her good enough food."*  
G10

*"Over this month things have just got less and less. Instead of rice, broccoli and cheese, it was rice and broccoli, and no cheese, do you know what I mean? So I've managed to eat but maybe not as nourishing as ideal."* G17

For one guest, 'poorer nutrition' appeared to be a combination of low income and her experience of domestic abuse (a situation from which she had only recently escaped):

*"He never used to allow me to leave the house to go to the shops. He didn't buy proper nutritional food like meat and vegetables. We were suffering. The children were so tiny for their age."* G9

Additionally, 43% of guests said they had gone one or more days without eating anything at all in the last 12 months; and five out of seven parents of children under 18 said they had 'skipped meals so their kids could eat' (71%).

*"I don't really eat a lot, only if we do a meal at night times. During the day [my daughter] has breakfast, lunch, dinner."* G3

*"I've probably done that unconsciously, I just say [son] you eat, and after that if there's anything left..."* G14

Guests reported using a variety of strategies to cope with reduced or insufficient income:

*"It's a lot of trips to Brixton market because I know I can try and get fresh produce for good prices. It's between that and the foodbank."* G14

*"I get a packet of mince and cut it in half and try to make something with that."* G6

*"Now I've stopped eating meat, that's better, meat can be so expensive."* G17

For almost half of guests, this was their first visit to the foodbank, however for two-thirds of guests this was not the first time they had not had enough food in the previous 12 months; showing that for many food poverty was persistent.

*"Most weeks."* G5

*"Yes, but I didn't know foodbanks existed then."* G10

*"I did have a hard month. I wasn't quite up to speed with your good work here, so I didn't know, never having done it before."* G2

## **POORER PHYSICAL HEALTH**

Almost half of guests (10 out of 21) reported experiencing poorer physical health in the previous 12 months, an association that would not be unexpected in the context of food poverty.

Seven guests attributed this to lack of sufficient food, citing: weakness and a loss of energy (3 guests); unwanted weight loss (3 guests); and the impact of taking prescribed medication on an empty stomach (1 guest).

*"Weaker, I suppose you could say." G2*

*"It impacts on your health because you see that you're losing weight in the wrong way, and you feel a bit weaker, a bit more tired, because your body is not getting those nutrients." G14*

*"I've got arthritis and where I take medication, I need food. When I take it without, I get stomach ache and side effects." G7*

### DEBT AND HIGH-COST CREDIT

Half of guests interviewed (52%) said that they had experienced increased unmanageable debt in the previous 12 months, and 19% said they had accessed high-cost credit to buy food (eg pawnbrokers, payday lenders, doorstep lending).

*"I'm paying rent, the gas and electricity... and then they [debt collector] want £100 and I was like, well I'm sorry. I was stressed enough today and I was crying and they phoned me up again, and I said to my husband, let them take me to court." G6*

*"I've got loans out with Moneyshop, Wonga, Satsuma. But they couldn't take payment yesterday because of the situation, so now I'm going to get into trouble with them." G3*

*"I've pawned some stuff, ended up losing stuff, lost my laptop in there, still got my telly in there and my phone. It's not great is it?" G7*

Debt in the form of rent arrears had resulted in six guests facing eviction during the previous year; one of whom had actually been evicted (and was currently rough-sleeping in a tent on a local common).

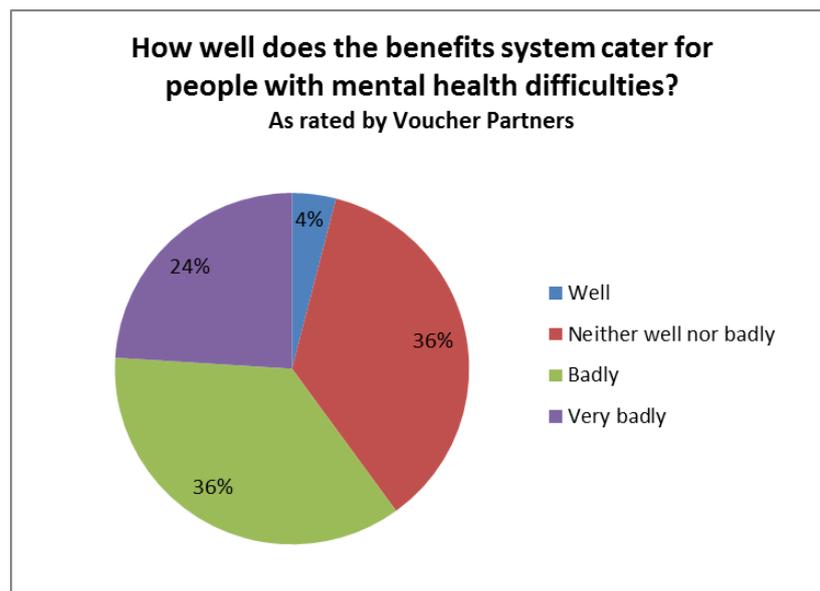
For seven guests currently experiencing rent arrears, six appeared attributable wholly or partially to delay or change to benefit payments (either to housing benefit directly, or as a knock-on effect on to housing benefit from delays to out-of-work benefits such as JSA or ESA). The remaining guest appeared affected by the benefit cap, as his housing benefit no longer covered his privately rented home, leaving a monthly shortfall of £200.

*"I lost my job in February so I did have a hard month. [JSA and housing benefit] is delayed and hasn't been paid, and I'm waiting two more weeks for any type of payment. I've got eviction delayed until the benefits are paid." G2*

## MENTAL HEALTH AND THE BENEFITS SYSTEM

A new question in this year's research asked Voucher Partners 'How well do you think the benefits system caters for your clients who experience mental health difficulties?' and Voucher Partners were invited to give a score ranging from 1 - 'Very well' to 5 - 'Very badly'.

Worryingly, 60% of Voucher Partners responded negatively, saying that the current benefits system catered 'badly' or 'very badly' for their clients with mental health difficulties. Just over one-third had no strong opinion either way (selecting 'neither well nor badly') and two (4%) Voucher Partners selected 'well'. No Voucher Partner selected 'very well'.



When asked why they gave the score they did, nearly half of Voucher Partners (46%) referred to the difficulty their clients with mental health needs had in negotiating the bureaucracy of the welfare system: specifically in meeting DWP requirements in terms of benefits conditionality; understanding/completing complicated paperwork; and attending appointments or meetings.

*"The system is not only overcomplicated, jargon laden and hard to access (significant hours of our work time are spent on hold to their 0845 number), but letters are barely comprehensible to somebody who is used to reading their letters, therefore acting as a significant barrier to those with any additional learning need such as dyslexia, mental health issues, Acquired Brain Injury etc." VP23*

*"Often there is no appreciation by the DWP of the link between missed/late appointments; poor employment searches; non-attendance on work programmes with those suffering from a mental health difficulty." VP18*

*"In our experience, there remains a lot of documentation to be completed in relation to benefits, which those with mental health issues would find daunting." VP34*

*"It can be more difficult for persons with mental health to respond to letters, complete forms and attend appointments. I can see that, without support, many of our clients would have lost benefits." VP30*

*"There's no leeway for people who struggle to deal with bureaucratic systems due to their mental health." VP48*

Of those responding negatively, one-third (33%) expressed concerns specifically about JobCentre Plus, and the quality of service, information, communication and support their clients with mental health needs receive from local advisers.

*"Work coaches at the JobCentre make little or no allowances for clients who experience mental health difficulties. Even when informing work coaches, there's little support provided." VP49*

*"I've noticed that staff at JCP tend to misinform clients and there are many hurdles to claiming and staying on benefits." VP1*

*"The JCP 'work coaches' are often unable to provide any clarity as they do not seem to know proper, up to date, information regarding the benefit they administer." VP23*

*"Patients aren't supported to fill in their forms. Patients who are unable to work due to mental health difficulties are penalised by losing their benefits." VP17*

*"Clients who have mental health difficulties appear to be expected to manage without much help and struggle to make ends meet when their benefits are stopped." VP5*

However one respondent felt that some JCP advisers were as helpful as they could be within the current system:

*"My experience is that some front-line officers are sympathetic, but they are bound by the rules and policies – eg where it would be beneficial to a client to have a later signing-on time to avoid crowded transport, individual officers are not able to accommodate this." VP31*

Five Voucher Partners voiced specific concerns about the quality and delivery of the medical assessments their clients experienced (ie Work Capability Assessments, PIP or ESA assessments):

*"I believe the ESA health assessment is woefully inadequate for clients with mental health issues as many come to us having been found fit for work but then, with our help, are successful at appeal." VP10*

*"The system expects clients to respond within time limits, gather medical evidence to prove mental health impairment and functional limitation. The system as contracted out gives no allowance for a failure to attend a WCA or PIP assessment, and Decision Makers in the DWP narrowly interpret "good reason" for failure to attend." VP41*

One Voucher Partner however said they had seen examples of good practice, although this was in the context of a mixed review:

*"I feel that ESA one-to-one reviews can miss the clients' mental health difficulties at times. I have also seen some very thorough reviews so I have mixed views on this." VP3*

One-quarter (24%) of all responses expressed concern about mental health and the benefits system at a structural level, citing a lack of understanding of mental health within its design:

*“The benefits system has not been designed with mental health in mind, and DWP assessments are often not fit for purpose when it comes to the assessment of mental health needs.”* VP46

*“There seems to be little understanding at a corporate level of the issues faced by clients who are mentally unwell.”* VP31

*“I feel that the benefit system does not look at mental health as it does physical disabilities”* VP3

*“It isn’t discerning enough of the particular problems people face.”* VP26

Three Voucher Partners said they had rated the benefits system as catering ‘very badly’ for people with mental health because it was the main reason they referred clients to Wandsworth Foodbank:

*“Because most of the clients that attend here and need a food voucher is due to benefit delays or not having enough money due to benefits being very low.”* VP32

*“Because this is the main reason we refer to the foodbank.”* VP36

### **Mental health and the benefits system – guests**

As highlighted elsewhere in this report, guests reported many of the issues raised by Voucher Partners in relation to the difficulty of navigating the benefits system, especially when experiencing poor mental health.

Of the guests interviewed, three-quarters (15) were currently experiencing mental health difficulties, including two guests with learning disabilities. Of these 13 (87%) were also experiencing benefit delivery problems that had caused or contributed to crisis leading to foodbank referral.

### **Room for improvement?**

Voucher Partners were invited at the end of the survey to ‘*suggest one thing to the government that they could do to improve the situation of your clients in the next year*’, and one in five responses specifically related to improving the delivery of benefits to people experiencing health issues, particularly poor mental health.

Suggestions included improving the quality of medical assessments and providing more support to affected people:

*“For benefit reviews to be more detailed especially around mental health.”* VP3

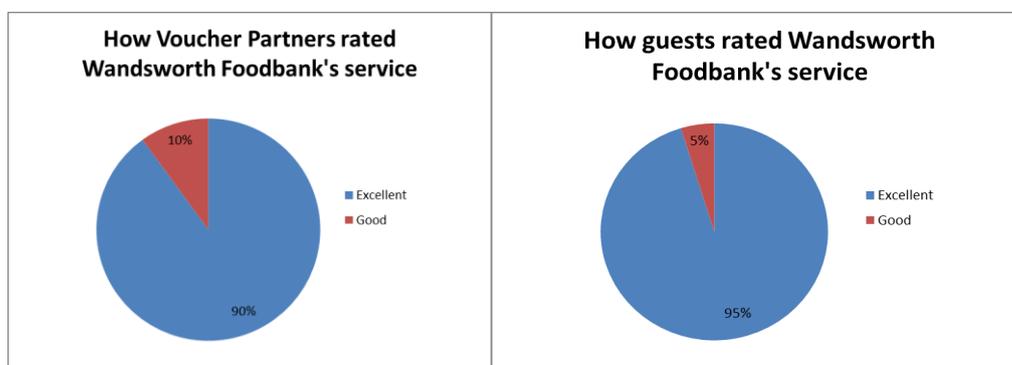
*“Re-think disability benefits and ensure there’s weighting for people in the inner city areas.”* VP13

*“Stop finding people fit for work when they are obviously unwell and not fit for work. It causes stress, worry and anxiety.”* VP15

*“Connect all patients to a holistic system. This should include debt advice, budgeting skills, cooking skills, food bank and psychological support. Don’t penalise those with mental health problems. Support them.”* VP17

## RATING WANDSWORTH FOODBANK SERVICE

Guests and Voucher Partners were overwhelmingly positive in their comments about Wandsworth Foodbank, with 100% of those surveyed rating its service as 'excellent' or 'good'.



Several guests said they appreciated the warm welcome they received and the friendliness of the volunteers and staff; that this helped them overcome any feelings of shame, embarrassment and nervousness they initially had.

*"When you come in to a place to ask for food, your self-esteem goes because you're asking other people to provide for you, so that's a big thing. But as soon as I came in everyone was really friendly, it's nice." G3*

*"I was welcomed when I came in, asked my name, offered a cup of coffee, excellent." G17*

*"It's made to be a pleasant experience. Not humbling or patronising. Things are hard enough; you make it that bit easier." G12*

Guests also commented on the support they received, in terms of feeling they could talk and be listened to, and that volunteers genuinely cared about them and their situation.

*"Without you lot, we'd have nothing. Once I'm in here, then I feel fine, because the thing is you can talk to people and all. I like talking to people; it cheers you up a bit." G6*

*"The support that's here, the people that are here, that makes the difference and gives you the reassurance to know that everything is going to be OK. They take the time out to listen: that does a lot for someone, just taking that time out and actually caring, not just 'here you go, here is some food', but no, they actually care." G14*

A key role of volunteers at each foodbank centre is to offer signposting support, helping guests access further help and advice so they can find resolution to their crisis as quickly as possible, and several guests said they appreciated this help.

*"You've given me some food and you've opened my mind to accessing other things, other help from other people." G5*

*"I found it very welcoming, and you've got the Job Club here I'm coming to, so, baby steps... It makes me happy, it makes me very grateful." G7*

Voucher Partners viewed Wandsworth Foodbank as now an essential part of the safety net, and a valuable resource to help them support their clients in crisis.

*"I think the Wandsworth foodbank provides a lifeline for many families experiencing family breakdown, unemployment or illness. The families I have referred have taken advantage of all the services on offer and are currently in a stable place. I am really happy to be able to help those families in need with a voucher; it can make the difference between getting through and going under." VP7*

*"It is an invaluable service for families. Without it, there would be times when children will be going hungry and that is a huge worry and concern for our team." VP27*

*"The team do rely on the service and without it there would be no fall back." VP30*

*"I am so grateful for foodbanks now as I would not know how to assist my vulnerable clients without them to live more independently." VP38*

More than half of Voucher Partners cited the care, kindness and non-judgmental welcome their clients experienced while guests at foodbank centres, in line with guests' responses.

*"Clients have given positive feedback... not just regarding the food they received, but also the kindness, care, understanding and reassurance staff at the foodbank have given." VP15*

*"Families feedback that they are initially anxious when they are going to the Foodbank but that they are welcomed warmly and this reduces the stigma that they feel. I have been to the Foodbank with and for families and can verify this". VP27*

*"My patients report back that you are kind and non-judgemental. That they were fearful but they were made to feel welcome. One resident told me that he was given tea and debt advice as well as food, which helped him get a handle on his debt and consequently his depression. I would like you to know that he is now in employment and I have discharged him at a healthy weight. Thank you for helping me do my job and helping him." VP17*

One-fifth of Voucher Partners commented positively on the food provided, both in terms of amount given and the relief it brought to clients they referred.

*"The Wandsworth Foodbank provides excellent emergency food in the midst of crisis: the amount of food is generous and really meets the need of those seeking assistance." VP5*

*"It such a help for parents to know they can feed their children in the next few days." VP9*

*"It always seems to have enough to give." VP21*

*"The service is responsive and goes to great lengths to make clients feel that accepting assistance is not humiliating or a personal failing. Clients report feeling calmer, less stressed, and more optimistic after visiting the foodbank, and most proudly make donations to the foodbank once their own circumstances are improved and remain regular donors afterwards." VP41*

As with guests, Voucher Partners appreciated the signposting support clients received, as well as the opportunity for clients to access high-quality advice from the foodbank's dedicated Citizens Advice adviser and from *fuelbanks and families'* adviser.

*"Dedication of volunteers, their attention to the clients, and the signposting service they give."*  
VP26

*"They also provide clients with extra advice and assistance with other issues by making available a caseworker."* VP37

*"I am very supportive of the foodbank. They are now an essential service. It's great that they don't just hand out food but they provide help and support to help resolve the reason why a person needs to use the foodbank. The social policy evidencing and campaigning work is also very good helping to influence local and national government policy."* VP1

One in five Voucher Partners said they valued the friendly, efficient service they received from the Wandsworth Foodbank office.

*"When I have contacted them they are so quick in sending out the vouchers almost next day. Do a great job."* VP11

*"The dealings we have had in Wandsworth have been efficient, friendly and extremely reliable."*  
VP1

*"Great feedback from clients; good communication and speed in sending extra vouchers when we request them; great partner organisation."* VP23

Voucher Partners were invited to make any other comments about the foodbank, or foodbanks in general, and responses fell broadly into two categories: the recognition that foodbanks were now an essential part of the safety net; and a sadness and sense of injustice that this was the case.

*"Foodbanks are highly necessary to help people in crisis. Food support is highly needed due to continuous high rate of unemployment, stigma around mental illness and shame associated with vulnerability."* VP28

*"While it is sad that we need them, the foodbank service is an absolute godsend for so many people."* VP1

*"It is shameful we need them in this country, but while they are needed they do a good and necessary job."* V16

*"It's a sad reflection that we need foodbanks in the first place, but, clearly, they are now integral to our society's needs."* VP35

## NOTES



*“My patients report back that you are kind and non-judgemental. That they were fearful but were made to feel welcome. One man told me that he was given tea and debt advice as well as food, which helped him get a handle on it and consequently his depression. I would like you to know that he is now in employment and I have discharged him at a healthy weight. Thank you for helping me do my job, and for helping him.”*

Wandsworth Foodbank Voucher Partner

[wandsworth.foodbank.org.uk](http://wandsworth.foodbank.org.uk)

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