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# HUNGER & POVERTY IN WANDSWORTH

This report measures foodbank use in the London Borough of Wandsworth in 2016-17. It looks at the causes of hunger and poverty, and its impact on people who experience it.





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## SUMMARY

- In 2016-17 the number of people receiving emergency food from Wandsworth Foodbank increased by 16% – nearly three times higher than the annual increase reported by Trussell Trust nationally (6%).
- During 2016-17 Wandsworth Foodbank provided enough emergency food to feed 4712 people for 3 days, one-third (1732) of whom were children.
- As in each of the previous 4 years, problems with benefits remained the most common cause of crisis referral – accounting for 39% of all referrals, and equating to enough emergency food to feed 1781 people for 3 days.
- More people were referred because of low income than ever before. Low income accounted for 28% of all crisis referrals, and the provision of 3 days' emergency food for 1324 people – indicating that income from benefits or employment, or both, are falling short of what is needed to meet essential living costs in London in 2016-17.
- The number of unique people<sup>1</sup> fed at least once also increased, by 15% on the previous year to 2546 people (from 2252 in 2015-16). The number of unique households fed rose to 1171 in 2016-17 from 1011 in 2015-16 to – an increase of 16%.
- Seventy-six households were referred to the foodbank five times or more in 2016-17, compared to 49 in the previous year – an increase of 34%, indicating that more people are struggling in food poverty for longer periods of time.
- The average number of vouchers per household remained constant at 1.8, demonstrating that the foodbank still is used primarily as a crisis intervention rather than long-term provision.
- Three-quarters of children receiving emergency food were of primary school age (74%), suggesting that achieving a sufficient income from benefits to meet basic needs, or finding suitable well-paid employment, is a particular challenge for parents caring for primary school-age children.
- Food insecurity as demonstrated by foodbank use is clearly higher in wards experiencing high levels of deprivation, with Latchmere Ward and Roehampton and Putney Heath Ward seeing the most people referred for 3 days' emergency food (24% of total people fed).
- 168 Voucher Partners referred one or more clients to Wandsworth Foodbank in 2016-17, a 5% increase on the number of active referrers in the previous year (160 in 2015-16). Voucher Partners made 2167 referrals, a 19% increase in number of referrals compared to 2015-16, indicating that Voucher Partners are referring more clients, more often, in crisis to the Foodbank.
- The majority of referrals were made by the voluntary sector (35%), with the highest referrer being Citizens Advice Wandsworth who made 429 referrals (accounting for 1 in 5 referrals to the Foodbank in 2016-17)

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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 by looking more closely at local data collected, we can determine numbers of unique users of the foodbank.

- 1 in 5 referrals came from Wandsworth Borough Council teams in 2016-17, equating to enough emergency food to feed 872 people for 3 days. Highest referring teams included Adult and Family Social Services, homeless services, Financial Inclusion team and Welfare Reform team.
- Three-quarters (76%) of Voucher Partners said benefits sanctions were 'often' or 'sometimes' a reason for Foodbank referral in 2016-17, however the majority (59%) said in their experience sanctions were 'rarely used fairly and proportionately' and raised concern that sanctions caused hunger and poverty, and adversely affected the mental and physical health of their clients.
- Guests and Voucher Partners cited delays and changes to Employment Support Allowance, including the quality of Work Capability Assessments, as being particularly problematic in the previous 12 months; leading to poverty, hunger and foodbank referral. Only 3 out of 10 guests who had been in receipt of ESA in the previous 12 months were still receiving it at time of interview.
- Debt accounted for 1 in 10 crisis referrals to the Foodbank in 2016-17, resonating with Voucher Partner and guest reports of increased unmanageable debt in the previous 12 months, resulting from persistent low income, sudden crisis or the impact of welfare reform (eg the benefit cap), leaving people with less money for food and other essentials.
- The financial cost of sickness and ill-health, and the hardship it causes, was visible in the fact that 16% (349) of all referrals to the foodbank in 2016-17 were directly from health professionals – equating to emergency food for more than 650 people. One-third of these referrals were from GPs and hospitals, and two-thirds were from mental health services.
- Two-thirds of British adults experience mental health problems according to the Mental Health foundation, and for people forced to use foodbanks, the figures appear even higher. Of 20 foodbank guests interviewed, 18 said they had experienced poor mental health – stress, anxiety and depression – in the last 12 months. Six said they had considered or attempted suicide in the past year.
- Poorer mental health was the most commonly cited impact of hunger and poverty seen in clients, cited by 85% of Voucher Partners. One-quarter (24%) of Voucher Partners said they had clients displaying 'suicidal tendencies' in 2016-17.
- Three-quarters of Voucher Partners said in their experience the current benefits system catered badly (40%) or very badly (36%) for their clients with mental health problems, leading to hardship and food poverty. Just one Voucher Partner believed the benefits system catered well for people with poor mental health in 2016-17.
- While homelessness as a reason for referral remained at 4% (as in 2015-16), 10 out of 20 guests were homeless at time of interview. Only one referrer however cited homelessness as the primary crisis reason, indicating that while issues around homelessness and insecure housing are common for foodbank guests, they may be under-represented in voucher data.
- Guests and Voucher Partners reported limited success in accessing emergency financial support in 2016-17 – suggesting that access to Discretionary Social Fund, Short Term Benefit Allowance and Hardship Payments for people in crisis needs to be quickly improved if there is any chance of foodbank use decreasing in the year ahead.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

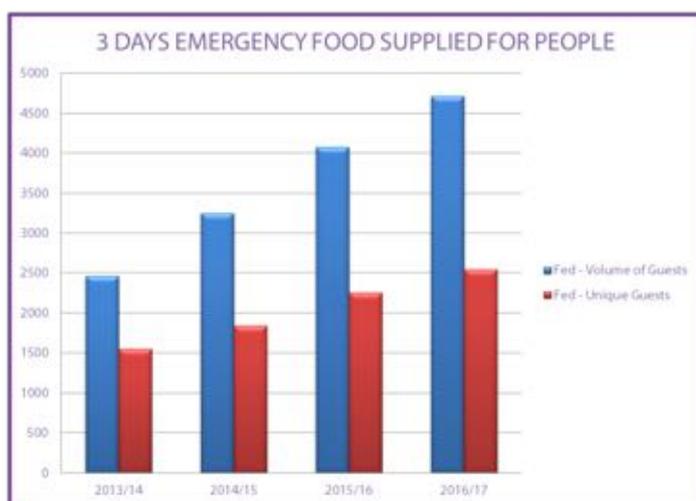
Hunger and poverty severely impacts the lives of those who experience it. The number of people referred to Wandsworth Foodbank in 2016-17 has increased for the 4<sup>th</sup> year running. We think the following recommendations could help.

1. Problems with benefits accounted for 39% of all referrals to the Foodbank. We ask the government to urgently improve the benefits system to fix the gaps that cause hunger. We particularly ask for urgent improvements to the quality and implementation of health assessments, and for better support for people – particularly those with poorer mental health and/or learning disabilities.
2. We ask that the government urgently reconsiders its policy on paying Universal Credit in arrears, with a built-in waiting period for the benefit claim to begin, which means that people can be waiting without income for 6 weeks until first payment, causing unnecessary hardship.
3. We ask local Jobcentre Plus and the DWP to improve access to Short Term Benefit Advance and Hardship Payments, proactively offering this emergency financial resource to people affected by benefit delay, change or sanction, rather than waiting for people to ask for it.
4. We ask that Wandsworth Council reconsiders its policies, widens its criteria and increases resources for its Discretionary Social Fund, to ensure that more Wandsworth residents have access more quickly to this emergency financial resource in the year ahead.
5. Guests and Voucher Partners see a need for greater support for people, particularly for those with mental health difficulties, learning disabilities or English as a second language, to successfully complete paperwork and online applications, particularly around benefits. We suggest local agencies come together to explore how to better meet this need (for instance regular form-filling clinics where trained volunteers work alongside professionals to help people complete essential paperwork).

## FINDINGS: THE NUMBERS

During 2016-17 Wandsworth Foodbank provided enough emergency food to feed 4712 people for 3 days, one-third (1732) of whom were children.

This was 16% more in terms of people receiving food compared to 2015-16 – and nearly twice as many people as received food during the first year Wandsworth Foodbank opened in 2013-14 (2461 people).



While this year's local increase in terms of volume of people receiving food rose at a slightly lower rate than last year (when the increase was 25%), this increase was nearly three times that of the average increase of 6% recorded by Trussell Trust foodbanks nationally in the same time period. This likely represents some of the complex and financial challenges facing people living in London (for instance, the potentially greater impact of benefit caps where rent is highest).

The number of unique people<sup>2</sup> helped at least once also increased, by 13% on the previous year to 2546 people (from 2252 in 2015-16). The number of unique households referred rose to 1171 in 2016-17, and increase of 16% from 1011 in 2015-16.

Seventy-six households were referred to the Foodbank five times or more in 2016-17, compared to 49 in the previous year – an increase of 34% – indicating that more people were struggling in food poverty for longer periods of time. Voucher Partners contact the Foodbank office when referring clients more than three times in a short period to discuss and agree continuing support.

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.

The majority of people referred to the Foodbank were Wandsworth residents (89%/ 1937 referrals), but the foodbank also supported residents from other boroughs: for instance Lambeth (93 referrals), Croydon (25 referrals), Merton (12 referrals), Greenwich (6 referrals). Figures for referrals from other boroughs also include Wandsworth residents who have been housed in temporary accommodation in other boroughs who still use Wandsworth Foodbank, for instance when they are bringing their children back to school in the borough each day.

## TONS OF FOOD

The foodbank distributed 42 tonnes of emergency food and goods from its five foodbank centres in 2016-17 – an increase of 31% on the previous year (32 tonnes distributed in 2015-16).

<sup>2</sup> Trussell Trust online data collection system records the number of adults and children given three days' emergency food; not unique users. However by looking more closely at local data collected, we can determine numbers of unique users of the foodbank.

This increase can be accounted for by the increase in people using the foodbank, as well as the foodbank responding to the need to supply essential toiletries (eg toilet roll, deodorant, sanitary products, nappies) alongside food parcels, by actively keeping all five centres stocked with essentials (weighed out with food).

It also includes the weight of stocking filler gifts for children and other seasonal goods, which the foodbank was able to supply at Christmas thanks to the generosity of local people and businesses.

## CRISIS REASONS FOR FOODBANK REFERRAL

Looking solely at voucher data we can see that, for the fourth year running, problems with benefits are the most common reason for crisis referral, accounting for 39% of all referrals – an increase of 3% on the year before – and equating to enough food to feed 1781 people for 3 days. This is followed by low income (28%), debt (10%), sickness (6%) and having No Recourse to Public Funds (4%).

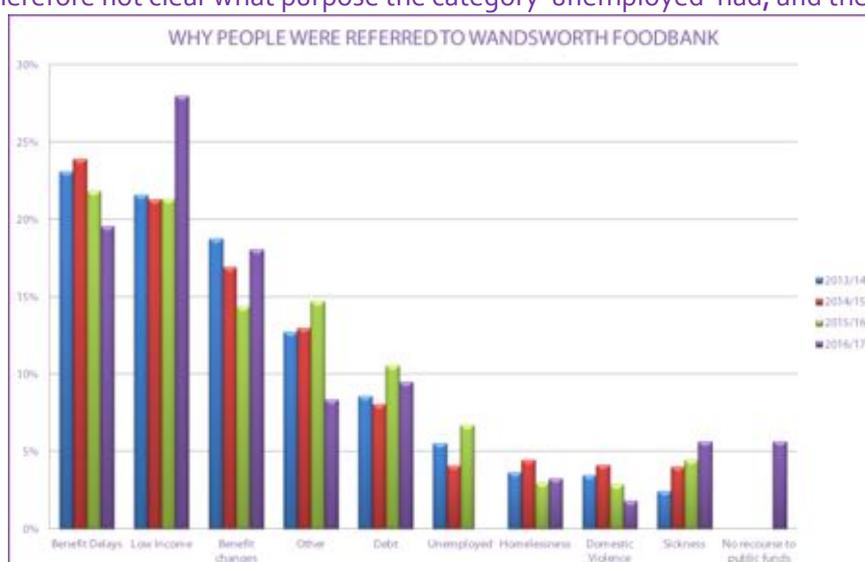


As the case-studies throughout this report show, in reality most guests are experiencing more than one 'crisis' at the same time – for instance sickness and benefit delays, or domestic abuse and homelessness and benefit changes. However, when referring clients, Voucher Partners are asked to select one primary reason for crisis referral on the foodbank voucher; the one they consider the most relevant cause of the immediate crisis their client is facing.

In April 2016, Trussell Trust removed the crisis category 'unemployed' from referral vouchers because, almost without exception, someone in this category would either be waiting for their benefit payments ('benefit delay') or receiving benefit payments that were insufficient ('low income'). It was therefore not clear what purpose the category 'unemployed' had, and the information that it generated was unclear.

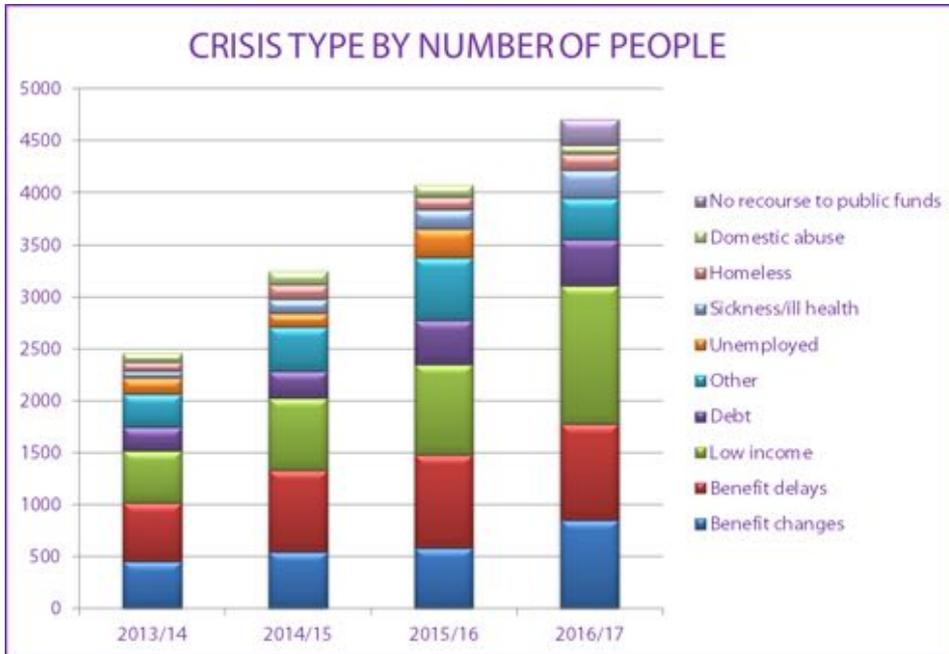
Trussell Trust also added the category 'No Recourse to Public Funds' to capture the number of people, for instance asylum seekers or some EU migrants, who are not entitled to claim benefits (and in many cases, to work or study).<sup>3</sup>

The graph (right) compares referrals per crisis reason during the four years since



<sup>3</sup> These changes apply only to vouchers issued to referrers after April 2016, and therefore during 2016-17 'old' vouchers were still being presented and fulfilled at the foodbank. The numbers of these however are not large enough to be statistically significant.

Wandsworth Foodbank opened in 2013. While increases in numbers of referrals obviously result in increase in numbers of people receiving food for any given crisis reason, the same is not true in reverse; that is, where crisis referral reasons appear to 'improve', this does not necessarily mean that less people were affected than the year before – as the graph (*below*) shows.



This graph shows that in terms of volume of people supported by the foodbank, more people have been helped in 2016-17 than in the previous year across every category of crisis referral reason except for domestic abuse (and excepting 'unemployed' which is no longer a crisis option on foodbank vouchers). For more information on number of people receiving food due to

problems with benefits, see p12.

## AGE, ETHNICITY AND HOUSEHOLD TYPE

Just over half of people receiving food from Wandsworth Foodbank were aged between 25-64 years (54%). More than one-third were children under 16 (37%). Young adults aged 17-24 (7%) and over-65s (2%) were least represented at the Foodbank. Three-quarters (74%) of children receiving emergency food were of primary school age or younger:

- 33% of children were aged 0-4 years
- 41% were aged 5-11 years
- 21% were aged 12-16 years
- 5% age not recorded

It is not clear from our data whether parents of primary school age children were more likely to be identified to be in crisis and referred, or whether food insecurity is a particular issue for households with children in that age group.

However changes in benefits when children reach 5 years old (eg when parents claiming benefits move from Income Support to Jobseekers Allowance) are regularly cited by guests as a cause of crisis, due to ensuing delays, reduced income or insecurity around complying with benefit conditionality – as well as the challenge of finding suitable employment at the same time as caring for primary school-age children. This may

account to some extent for 5-11 olds being the age group appearing to be most affected by food poverty in Wandsworth in 2016-17.

## ETHNICITY

The largest ethnic group accessing the foodbank was the total White population (35%), followed by the total Black population (25%), total Asian population (9%) and 'Mixed' (6%), all similar to the previous year. As last year Voucher Partners selecting 'Other' or 'Not disclosed' accounted for 25% of voucher referrals.

Such a finding is of concern when compared to the 2011 Census ethnicity profile of Wandsworth, which reports that 11% of residents classified themselves as Black<sup>4</sup>. This indicates a disproportionate need for foodbank support amongst the resident Black population in Wandsworth – nearly 2.5 times more than would be expected when using Census 2011 data.

## HOUSEHOLD TYPE

Half (50%) of people receiving emergency food in 2016-17 were single people – a 5% increase on the year before, but similar to 2014-15 (52%). Almost one-quarter (24%) were single parent households, as in the previous year (25% in 2015-16). Couple families with children accounted for 11% of referrals (down from 16% in 2015-16), followed by couples with no dependent children (9%)<sup>5</sup>.

## FOODBANK REFERRAL BY WARD

All 20 of the Borough's wards had residents referred to the Wandsworth Foodbank for emergency food in 2016-17.

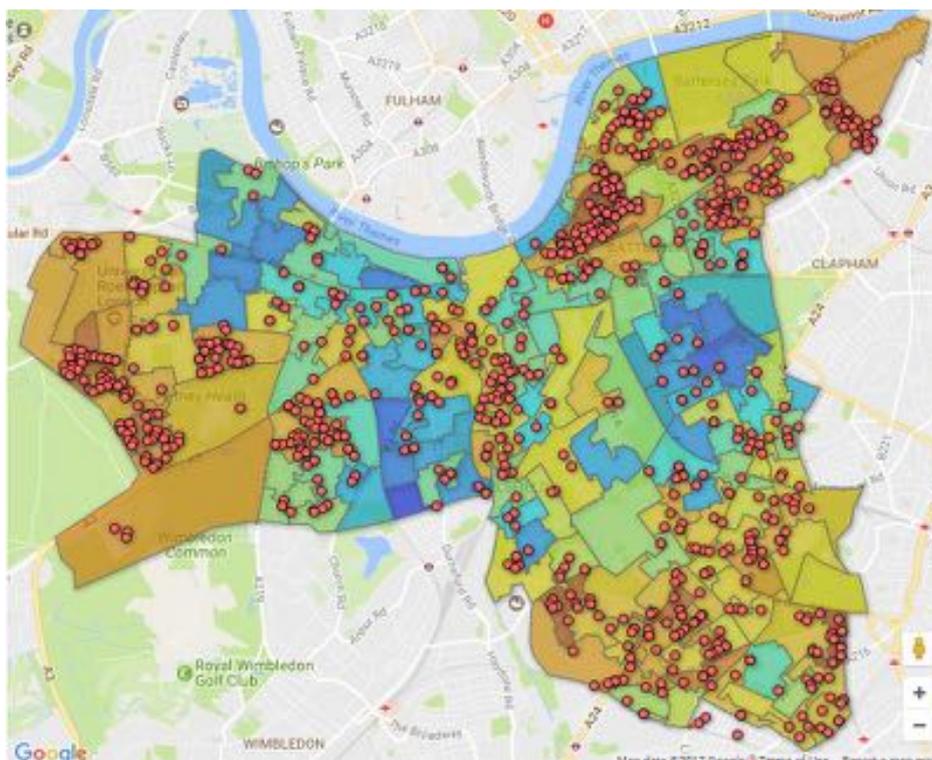
Latchmere Ward and Roehampton and Putney Heath Ward saw the most referrals (243 referrals; 211 referrals), followed by Queenstown (156), West Hill (150), Earlsfield (129) and St Mary's Park (102). Wards with the least referrals were Wandsworth Common, Balham and Northcote Wards (1.5% each).

The chart (right) shows the ten wards experiencing the highest number of foodbank referrals in 2016-17.



<sup>4</sup> 2011 Census Data, Crown Copyright

<sup>5</sup> 'Other' accounted for the remaining 6% of households referred and may well relate to some extent to incomplete referral information received (for instance from JCP referrals, which comprised 6% of all referrals).



Food insecurity as demonstrated by foodbank use is clearly higher in wards experiencing high levels of deprivation, as reflected in the map (left), which shows location of households referred to the foodbank in 2016-17 (red dots), against areas of highest deprivation (red) to lowest (blue).

## REFERRAL AGENCIES

Each household using the Foodbank is referred in crisis – without sufficient food or money to buy sufficient food – by one of our Voucher Partners, local organisations that have signed up to be able to refer their clients to Wandsworth Foodbank.

168 Voucher Partners referred one or more clients to Wandsworth Foodbank in 2016-17, a 5% increase on the number of active referrers in the previous year (160 in 2015-16).

Voucher Partners made 2167 referrals, a 19% increase in number of referrals compared to 2015-16:

- 35% of referrals were made by the voluntary sector (eg Citizens Advice, Age UK, charities supporting refugees and asylum seekers)
- 20% by Wandsworth Council teams (eg social services, homeless services, Financial Inclusion and Welfare Reform)
- 16% by health providers (ie GPs, hospitals, mental health services)
- 12% by the Borough's schools and children's centres
- 6% by JobCentre Plus (JCP) in Wandsworth, Streatham and Clapham Common
- 4% by church or faith groups
- 3% by social landlords (eg housing associations)
- 3% criminal justice sector (eg probation service, Youth Offending teams)

Voucher Partners can refer clients as many times as necessary to prevent food poverty, but are asked to contact the Wandsworth Foodbank office if a household needs to be referred more than three times in a short period of time. This is to try to ensure households are being supported as well as possible to help resolve the crisis they face, and that foodbank use remains a short-term solution only.

For crisis reasons such as No Recourse to Public Funds for instance, households will often need to be supported by the Foodbank for a relatively long period of time while they wait for a decision from the Home Office (during which time many people are unable to work, study or claim benefits). Similarly, guests and referrers of guests who are appealing decisions regarding sanctions or Work Capability Assessments, for example, also report waits of several weeks without payment of the benefit in dispute.

## JOBCENTRE PLUS

No JobCentre Plus is registered as a Voucher Partner with the foodbank, because DWP policy does not allow this. However in 2016-17, three JobCentres Plus made 130 referrals to Wandsworth Foodbank, using their own 'signposting' form (rather than standard Wandsworth Foodbank vouchers).

Since April 2013, DWP forms do not give a reason for crisis referral, or any data about the household apart from number of adults and children. Where possible, Foodbank volunteers capture information about reason for crisis in conversation with the guest, or by phoning the JCP afterwards.

In 2016-17, JobCentre Plus was the seventh most active referrer (130 referrals / 6%), after Citizens Advice Wandsworth (429 referrals / 20%); mental health services (187 referrals / 9%); children's centres (171 referrals 8%); children's and adult social services (143 referrals / 6%); GPs (135 referrals / 6%); and drug and alcohol recovery services (134 referrals / 6%).

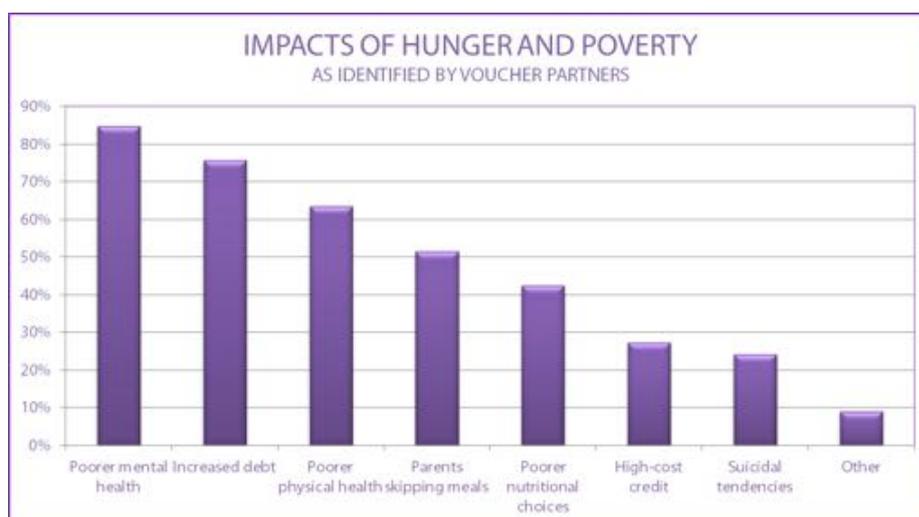
In 2016-17, Wandsworth Foodbank and Wandsworth JCP managers met to discuss issues around referral and benefits problems, and one outcome was the provision of a direct phone number to the local JCP which the Foodbank Manager and Centre Leaders can call on foodbank guests' behalf to try to resolve benefits problems as soon as possible. We welcome this provision and hope to use it more in the year ahead.

## FINDINGS: ISSUES OF HUNGER & POVERTY

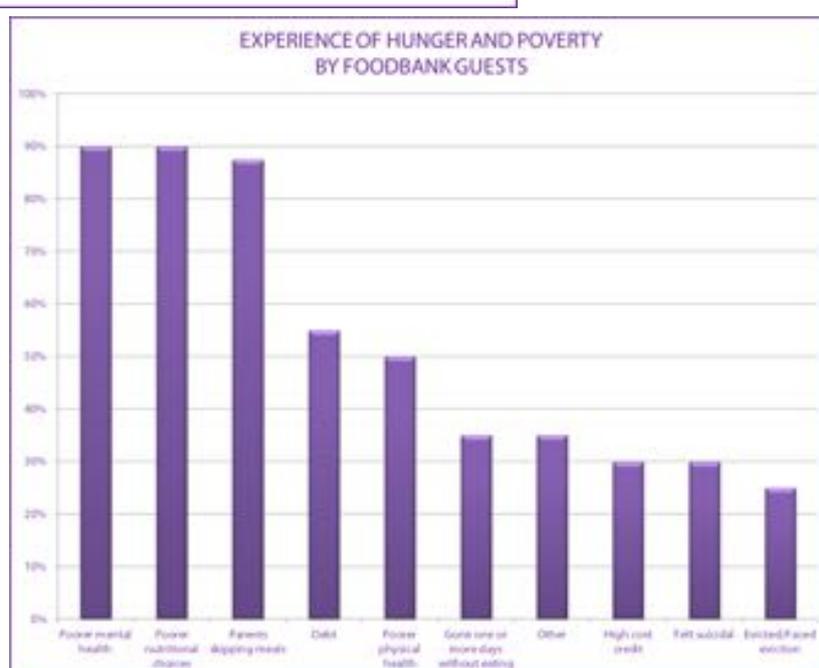
Looking at responses from guest interviews and Voucher Partners Survey, alongside voucher data, we can build a fuller picture of issues leading to foodbank use in Wandsworth Borough during 2016-17. These issues may be a *cause* of crisis, an *impact* of crisis, or sometimes both.

For instance, as some of the case studies in this report show, poor mental health can be both a cause of crisis (eg if you become too unwell with depression to work and lose your income); a consequence of crisis (eg when the pressure of money worries, insecure housing, problems with benefits etc lead to stress, anxiety and depression); and both a cause *and* a consequence (eg when pre-existing mental health difficulties are exacerbated by benefit payments being stopped when someone with poor mental health is unable to successfully navigate and comply with the requirements of the benefits system, primarily *because* they are experiencing poor mental health).

The charts below show the impacts and experiences (causes and/or impacts) of hunger and poverty seen or experienced in 2016-17, as cited by Voucher Partners and guests as part of this research.



Both guests and Voucher Partners cited 'poorer mental health' as the most common impact and experience of poverty and hunger – with 90% of guests saying they had or were experiencing poorer mental health and 84% of Voucher Partners witnessing poorer mental health in their clients in the previous 12 months.

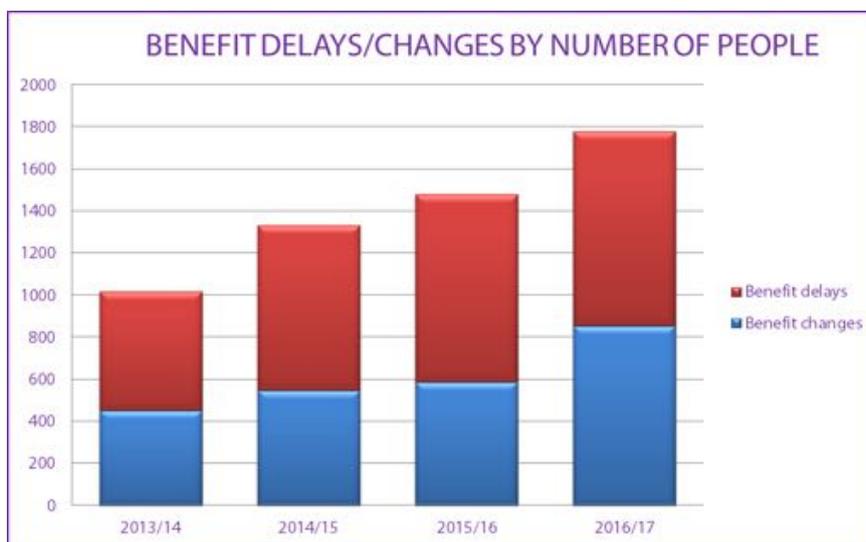


## BENEFIT PROBLEMS

Problems with benefits accounted for 39% of referrals, and the provision of 3 days' emergency food for 1781 people, in 2016-17

Problems with benefits – delays, changes, sanctions and stoppages – remained the most common reason for referral to the foodbank (up from 36% of referrals in 2015-16). The number of people receiving emergency food because of benefits problems also increased, by 20% to 1781 (from 1479 people in 2015-16).

Guest and Voucher Partners described a range of issues that had caused problems with benefits payments, and had led to food poverty and foodbank referral:



- Interruptions of payment of an existing benefit claim (eg waiting for re-assessment; result of an adverse decision from Work Capability Assessment, leading to stoppage of payment; system error)
- Delays in first payment of a new benefit claim (eg processing delays; built-in 'delay' of first payment of Universal Credit)
- Reduced payments of an existing benefit claim (eg benefit cap leading to reduced Housing Benefit; being moved from ESA support group to work-related activity group)
- Changes to benefit claim as a result of change of circumstance, leading to delay in payment (eg sudden illness; loss of employment; becoming homeless; family breakdown; impact of domestic violence)
- Deductions from an existing benefit claim leaving insufficient income (eg for historic overpayments of housing benefit; for repayments of budgeting loans)
- Benefit sanction or 'closed claim' (eg full or partial removal of benefit payment due to perceived lack of compliance with benefits conditionality, or complete closure of a claim, leading to insufficient income for food)
- No benefit claim or payment in place (eg a previous benefit claim has been closed and a new one not started; a sudden change in circumstance leading to the need for benefits for the first time)
- The impact of poor mental health on client/guest's ability to navigate the benefit system successfully, and a perceived lack of support within the benefits system for people with mental health difficulties or learning disabilities
- The quality of Work Capability Assessments in accurately assessing clients/guests' needs, particularly where the presenting issue was primarily poor mental health

Benefit payments are designed to give a basic income, and as such guests and Voucher Partners reported a struggle to meet the basic costs of living (eg food, heating, rent, utilities) when benefit problems occur.

The impact of benefit problems on clients was serious according to Voucher Partners, and was the most commonly cited criteria prompting foodbank referral (cited by nearly two-thirds of Voucher Partners):

*"Benefits have stopped meaning parents have no available money to feed their child or provide milk/nappies and cannot borrow money."*VP7

*"If there is an obvious need like waiting for Universal Credit payment to come in. No benefits in payment and no family support network to help."*VP25

*"Struggling financially either due to stopping or reducing of benefits, debt or change of circumstances, such as losing job or becoming ill."*VP6

Evidence from this research, and from many other sources, demonstrated that improving the benefits system so that it is more robust and responsive to people's needs, would be the single most effective way of reducing poverty and foodbank use in the UK.

## EMPLOYMENT AND BENEFITS

We do not have any relevant voucher data to show how many of the guests supported by Wandsworth Foodbank were in paid employment; or in paid employment and receiving benefits to top up low pay; or were out of work or unable to work and whose sole income is from benefit payments.

However, Voucher Partner responses contain several references to clients in work, who they have referred to the foodbank due to low income because of lack of work (eg zero-hours contracts), low pay, lack of sick pay, delayed wages.

*"Some of our members are on zero hours contracts, some have had their pay stopped due to long-term sickness absence, and some have got multiple debts. All these issues can lead to food poverty."*VP8

## BILL'S STORY

*Bill, in his early 60s, worked on a building site until a blister from new work boots led to an ulcerated leg and he was laid off in October last year. Soon afterwards he and his wife separated and he became homeless. He was referred to the Foodbank by Wandsworth Council.*

"Working on a building site, you're on your feet all day long. I was struggling to get about and the foreman said you basically can't do the job. So that was it, I got laid off.

Nearly all building staff now are agency, it's just hire and fire you as they want you, and get someone else in. You haven't got a leg to stand on – literally in my case. No holiday pay, no sick pay, nothing.

So I tried to sign on, but they said no, because of your time [working abroad] you haven't paid contribution for the right year, so I didn't get absolutely no money until this February.

When the lady at the council said the foodbank, not being funny, but that's a very humbling experience.

I feel a bit awkward coming here but everyone's been very nice, very friendly, very kind. All the volunteers giving up their free time to help other people – it's nice to see there's nice people about.'

*"More parents having to seek work in low paid jobs due to changes in benefits, and then struggling with having to pay for school meals." VP27*

Of the 20 guests interviewed, none were in paid employment at time of interview. One-quarter (5) were able to work, three of whom said they were actively seeking work. A fourth was receiving Jobseekers Allowance, was well-qualified in her field and would like to be employed, but her caring responsibilities for her two school-age children and ill partner meant it was very difficult to find suitable employment. A fifth had been found fit to work at an ESA health assessment, but did not regard herself as able to work due to arthritis, thyroid problems and depression.

The remaining three-quarters of guests (15) were not able to work at time of interview. Six were primary carers for young children, partners or relatives (two were receiving Carer's Allowance); one was a pensioner; and one was unable to work and had No Recourse to Public Funds as an immigrant without Indefinite Leave to Remain (although the British Red Cross was supporting her to re-apply for ILR).

The remaining seven guests cited mental and/or physical ill-health as the primary reason why they were unable to work. The majority (5) cited primarily poor mental health (schizophrenia, paranoid delusions, severe depression and suicidality – although one had also broken his ankle). Two cited primarily poor physical health (ulcerated leg; fibromyalgia), although both said they had also experienced depression as a result of being physically unwell and under financial stress.

Two of the seven had recently lost their job due to ill-health. Both cited being laid off without warning and without sick-pay:

*"Nearly all building staff now are agency, it's just hire and fire you as they want you, and get someone else in. You haven't got a leg to stand on – literally in my case. No holiday pay, no sick pay, nothing. I went in on the Monday, worked the day and then the foreman went, 'No work tomorrow mate'." G6*

*"I told my boss that the doctor said I'm not able to work until the 21<sup>st</sup> of next month, and the area manager phoned up and said 'Look mate, you lost the keys to the van last month and now you're off for another four weeks', sorry I'm not going to be putting any more work your way." G16*

Three-quarters (15) of guests interviewed had some benefits in place at time of interview, although all but one were either currently experiencing some disruption of benefit payments (delay, change or sanction), or had experienced disruption during the previous 12 months.

The remaining one-quarter (5) were receiving no income whatsoever from benefits or employment at time of interview.

## BENEFIT DELAY

Benefit delay was the crisis reason for one in five (21%) referrals to Wandsworth Foodbank in 2016-17, accounting for emergency food being provided for 926 people.

When asked how frequently benefit delay was a reason for referring a client to Wandsworth Foodbank, three-quarters (73%) of Voucher Partners surveyed said it was 'often' or 'sometimes' a reason for crisis referral.

Two-thirds (67%) of Voucher Partners believed that length of delays had increased during the past 12 months, with clients waiting longer for payments to reach them. Four Voucher Partners (12%) thought length of delays had 'stayed the same'. The rest said they didn't know.

Voucher partners were asked what, in their experience, were the most common causes of delay. Processing delays, paperwork going missing at benefits agencies, perceived flaws in benefits procedures, and lack of support (particularly for vulnerable people or those with English as a second language) were most commonly cited.

*"Benefits agency losing information and claims start again from afresh." VP7*

*"We have experienced a number of people claiming ESA and having to wait longer than before. They seem to get more requests for supporting evidence – they reply to one request and get another one in response. This all delays the claim process." VP8*

*"No ability to apply for benefits whilst in prison, then being released with no money." VP16*

*"Sometimes there is a gap between someone's job ending and the information going through, so for example they don't show up as eligible for free school meals for several weeks." VP13*

Of the guests interviewed, one-quarter (5) said they had experienced benefit delay in the previous 12 months, with half (10) saying they had not. (However, nearly every guest had experienced periods of time without payment of benefit but attributed this to benefit 'change' rather than 'delay').

Guest experience of causes of delay reflected Voucher Partner responses, and particularly related to sudden changes of circumstance – for instance, a new claim for Income Support for a mum fleeing domestic abuse; a carer whose relative was in hospital and whose benefits were delayed causing difficulties in paying household bills; a mum who needed to apply for ESA just before her Income Support claim stopped when her daughter turned five.

None of the guests affected had financial reserves in case of emergency – their low income made saving difficult, and so the impact of benefit delay had led, or was expected to lead, to hardship and food poverty.

*"I tried to sign on, but they said no, because of your time [abroad] you haven't paid contribution for the right year, so I didn't get absolutely no money until this February." G6*

*"Next month Income Support is stopping because my child is going to be 5, and I can only apply in the last two weeks of income support for ESA. The GP gave me sickness certificate but someone said there would be 4-6 weeks wait. I'm very stressed." G5*

## BENEFIT CHANGE

Benefit change was the crisis reason for just under one in five (18%) referrals to Wandsworth Foodbank in 2016-17, accounting for emergency food being provided for 855 people.

Two-thirds (13/20) of guests interviewed reported experiencing changes to existing benefits payments which had caused hardship in the previous 12 months. Ten guests had experienced their main benefit payment(s) being stopped during the previous year, with the majority (7) saying the benefit was 'stopped now' at time of interview and was the reason for foodbank referral.

As with benefit delay, a lack of responsiveness to changes in client/guest circumstance, and a system which is viewed as too quick to stop one benefit and less quick to reinstate another, were cited as key causes of concern by guests and Voucher Partners, as were the impact of Work Capability Assessments (particularly for ESA claims) and benefit sanctions.

Voucher Partners recognised that information was not always submitted correctly or on time by clients, but this was predominantly in the context of clients with learning disabilities, mental health issues or English as a second language and was viewed as a need for more support being offered rather than deliberate failure on behalf of clients.

*"Increase in ESOL – families need support to complete the forms, especially when they are online." VP31*

*"Parents not understanding when submissions should be sent in, or trying but having system failure in online access." VP27*

*"Short submission deadlines not giving applicants long enough to complete the form." VP1*

Two Voucher Partners cited the impact of relationship changes and/or domestic abuse, for instance where benefit payments need to be moved from one parent to another (where one parent may not be willing to co-operate).

*"Domestic violence – the delay of stopping dad's child benefit and mum reapplying." VP17*

*"Partner leaving and refusing to cooperate and confirm they no longer live in the household." VP31*

## LEE'S STORY

*Lee was referred to the Foodbank by his supported housing keyworker after his Employment Support Allowance benefit was stopped, leaving him with no income.*

"I've had no money or food for the past two weeks, I've basically been starving. I have no family support, so I've had to come to this source for help. I was managing with the ESA up to the point where it all stopped.

I had to speak to them about my situation, explain the current issues with my mental health, get a sick note from my GP and also prove that I've not been in receipt of any other payments. The whole issue was to reinstate them, to make a fresh start basically. I started a new claim this month, so I'm basically waiting for that.

Hopefully the Foodbank doesn't shut down for any reason as it's a God-send. You offer people the sense of well-being. You offer them various things for free. It's easily accessible and I know I can call you. It doesn't have to be a long-term situation. It's in a nice peaceful place."

## EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT ALLOWANCE

While referral voucher data does not specify which benefits are affected, both guest and Voucher Partner responses suggested that issues around delays and changes to Employment Support Allowance appeared particularly problematic in the past year, leading to poverty, hunger and foodbank referral.

Key issues cited were:

- Accuracy of Work Capability Assessments (WCA), particularly where mental health is being assessed, leading to ESA claims being wrongly stopped
- Delays in processing new ESA claims
- The length of time, and the complexity of, appealing a WCA decision, during which people are encouraged to claim Jobseekers Allowance (in order to have some income, and to allow Housing Benefit payments to continue)
- The higher risk of people who are unwell (particularly with poor mental health) being unable to meet the conditionality of Jobseekers' Allowance, leading to that benefit being sanctioned or the claim closed.

The insecurity of claiming Employment Support Allowance cited by guests and Voucher Partners appears to be borne out by the fact that only 3 out of 10 guests<sup>6</sup> who had received ESA in the previous 12 months were still receiving it at time of interview.

Of the three claims in place, two concerned primarily physical health issues, and one concerned severe mental illness. Two of the guests had received ESA consistently during the past year; the third had experienced a 4-month delay in accessing a new claim after becoming suddenly unable to work (see Bill's Story, p13).

Of the remaining seven guests, almost all (6) had previously received ESA due to moderate to severe mental health conditions (schizophrenia, depression, suicidality) rather than physical health issues. Two had been hospitalised in the previous few months; one of whom had been sectioned the week prior to interview.

Of these six, three appeared to have been unable to comply with the requirements necessary to continuing to receive ESA (ie missing appointments; being unable to keep up with benefits conditionality, paperwork and phone calls) – primarily *because* they were mentally unwell.

*"I turned up where you go for the employment assessment and said I've got an appointment, and she said it's tomorrow. I turned up then and they said no sorry it was this morning. They sanctioned me and left me without a penny, and then all the debts just built up and built up. Everything spiralled out of control." G16*

*"My benefits were stopped in December. I get angry, get frustrated, and it kind of stops people from helping me. Sometimes I need professional help and there's just not enough available. I've had no food for the past two weeks, I've basically been starving." G17*

Two guests had been moved from ESA to Jobseekers Allowance, but had also been unable to comply with stricter JSA benefits conditionality. Both had seen their claims 'closed' a few weeks before interview, and the resulting lack of income had led to hunger and foodbank referral.

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<sup>6</sup> This includes the partner of a guest who shared a joint ESA claim that was stopped one month earlier after the partner was found fit to work. (See Asha's Story, overleaf)

## ASHA'S STORY

*Asha is a mum of three whose partner worked as a delivery driver until he became unwell, with back problems and severe depression. His employer paid £80 per week sick pay for six months. They then received Employment Support Allowance until, after a medical assessment, he was found fit to work and ESA payments stopped. Asha was referred to the Foodbank by Jobcentre Plus.*

"The Jobcentre told him he needed to do his job in a wheelchair. His job? It doesn't make sense. But even to work, he needs to get out of depression first. The problem is when he starts to feel better, all this stuff is coming to us, and it makes him feel more down. Just last week he took an overdose.

It's like a nightmare. The system makes it worse for you and in the end they just leave you in the problems. You really have to be in the same situation, no changes, to be safe. Any small problem and you can lose everything.

The Foodbank is great, because I came to take just food, and I received a voucher for electricity so another stress will go out, because we only had £6 left on our prepayment meter. You've given me an appointment to see the Foodbank advisor, to discuss my situation. Just talking to you I feel less stressed."

Because their claims were stopped rather than sanctioned, there was no option to appeal the decision, and they were told they would have to make a new claim for Universal Credit – neither had at time of interview.

*"I missed appointments, then my benefits completely shut down. Without any support I've had to try and claim them myself, which has led me to move from ESA to JSA (which is a benefit I shouldn't be on), and then because I can't do the things they are asking me to, filling in the forms and stuff, [my JSA was sanctioned]." G18*

The third had been helped by his support worker to make a new claim for ESA, but was waiting for the outcome at time of foodbank visit.

The remaining three guests (or in one case, the partner of the guest) had recently been found fit to work after a Work Capability Assessment, but all felt their mental health difficulties had not been taken into account and disagreed with the decision:

*"You get put onto ESA; then they send you for a medical. Because I've got two arms, two legs, two eyes and I can get about – no matter how long it will take me and no matter what's wrong with me – the points didn't add up and I got taken off it." G7*

*"To work, [my partner] needs to get out of depression first. The problem is when he starts to feel better, all this stuff is coming to us, and it makes him feel more down. Just last week he took an overdose." G8*

For one guest, a single mum, this was the second time her ESA claim had been stopped in the past year:

*"The same thing happened last year – benefits stopped, I appealed, appeal was unsuccessful, and that's why I came to the Foodbank the first time. I hope the appeal works this time; I've included a lot more information." G20*

Guests' experiences of ESA resonate with Voucher Partner responses. When asked if they had seen any new, different or increased triggers of crisis in their clients, four Voucher Partners spontaneously cited the impact of clients previously in receipt of ESA being found fit to work, in their view erroneously, and suggested that Work Capability Assessments

were not fit for purpose, particularly for those with poor mental health:

*“Lots more people are having their ESA stopped. ESA health assessment is woefully inadequate when dealing with people with mental health issues.” VP6*

*“There is a bias against mental health when doing ESA assessments. If the claimant has learning difficulties but can count to 20 then they are deemed capable, if the claimant needs a home visit due to agoraphobia they need the GP to fax a request which will then be “considered” with no certainty it would be approved. There is a sense that Health Care Professionals do not accept mental health to be anything other than a fraudulent claim.” VP9*

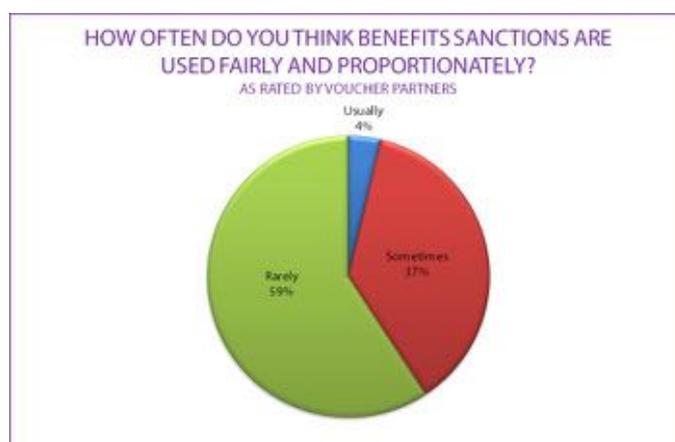
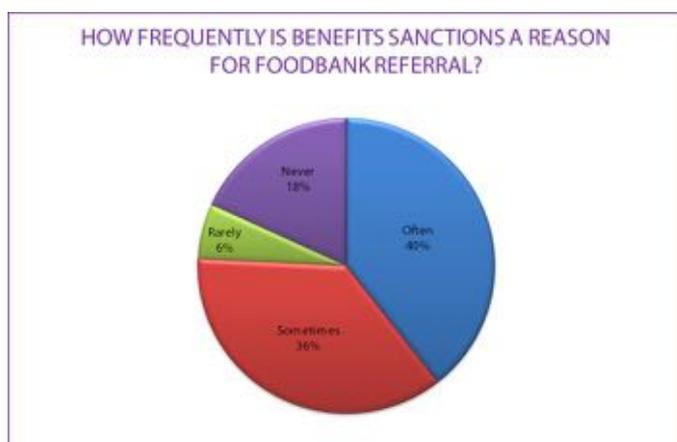
*“People are forced to come off ESA to JSA as they fail their Work Capability Test and always score zero points, even when it is so obvious and clear the person is unwell and needs to be on ESA. We need a fairer system when assessing disabled clients for ESA and PIP.” VP4*

A Freedom of Information request for data relating to Work Capability Assessment decisions affecting Wandsworth residents was refused on the grounds that, although the DWP had this information, it would take too long to access – so it has not been possible to determine whether there was an increase in Wandsworth residents receiving adverse WCA decisions in 2016-17. However both guest and Voucher Partner responses suggest that improvements to ESA delivery, as well as more support for people receiving or trying to access ESA (whether from DWP/JCP, Wandsworth Council and voluntary agencies), would reduce the need for foodbank referral for this client group.

## BENEFITS SANCTIONS AND ‘CLOSED’ CLAIMS

As there is no ‘benefit sanction’ box on the foodbank voucher (sanctions are usually recorded as ‘delay’, ‘change’ or ‘other’), it is not possible to determine from voucher data how commonly benefits sanctions are a trigger for referral.

We therefore asked Voucher Partners and guests about their experience of benefits sanction<sup>7</sup> in the previous 12 months. Three-quarters (76%) of Voucher Partners said benefits sanctions were ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ a reason for referral in 2016-17, slightly more than the year before (70%).



<sup>7</sup> Benefits sanctions are when payments of job seekers allowance, employment support allowance (work-related activity group) or universal credit are completely or partially stopped for between four and 52 weeks, due to perceived lack of compliance to benefits conditionality.

The remaining one-quarter (24%) said sanctions were 'rarely' or 'never' a reason for referral, although it is not clear whether this is because their client group mostly receives benefits not liable to sanction (eg parents of young children on Income Support) or whether it is a more positive sign that their clients managed to avoid sanctions.

When asked to comment on use of sanctions in their experience, the majority (59%) of Voucher Partners said sanctions were 'rarely used fairly and proportionately'. 38% said they believed sanctions were 'sometimes used fairly and proportionately' and just one Voucher Partner selected 'usually used fairly and proportionately'.

Voucher Partners were invited to make any other comments about their experience of benefit sanctions. All except one responded negatively.

Voucher Partner responses fell broadly into four categories – that sanctions: were used too quickly and disproportionately (6); failed to take into account clients' vulnerabilities around mental health and learning disabilities and caused mental health conditions to worsen (3); had led to criminality and further Child Protection issues in families (2); and caused hunger and foodbank referral (4).

*"The sanctions cause further Child Protection difficulties as there is more stress in families and parents are sometimes committing criminal acts to ensure they can buy food." VP7*

*"These sanctions put our vulnerable clients at risk of relapse, food poverty and can deteriorate their mental health issues." VP29*

*"They are being used too often and therefore forcing people into further poverty." VP10*

*"The benefits sanctions are blighting people's lives. The government need to do something about this – several people are on the brink of committing suicide as a result of sanctions." VP12*

Of the 20 guests interviewed, two had been referred to the foodbank due to the impact of sanctions leaving them without sufficient income for food. One lady, referred by Jobcentre Plus, had been sanctioned for missing an appointment while preparing for a job interview the same day:

*"The problem was I went to the interview and missed the appointment. So this is why they sanctioned me until the end of April. I've never come to a foodbank before, never needed to." G3*

The second, a young man, who was homeless and housed by the council in bed and breakfast accommodation in a neighbouring borough, had been partially sanctioned (paid at 60%) for an unknown period of time for apparently attending a jobs fair without a current CV. The sanction meant he was receiving just £70 per fortnight, out of which he had to pay £30 per fortnight to the B&B, leaving him without sufficient income for essential travel, living costs and food:

*"I went to a Work Match event but I didn't take a CV, I didn't know I had to, and I was sanctioned. It's hard to find and keep a job when you're homeless." G1*

Only the first guest had appealed the sanction and applied for Hardship Payment (and was waiting to hear the outcome), although she says she initially wasn't given information by JCP about how to appeal:

*"No, I had to ask, and they were being difficult, but I said thank you – you can't shout because they've got control of you for the money. They can do what they want with you, unless you say please, thank you, and beg."* G3

## 'CLOSED' CLAIMS

Two further guests appeared to have fallen foul of Jobseekers Allowance conditionality but, instead of having their benefit sanctioned, appeared to have had their JSA claims closed completely.

Neither guest was clear why this had happened, and both had previously been receiving ESA for mental health conditions, before moving to JSA. As the claims were closed, not sanctioned, there was no possibility of appealing the decision or applying for Hardship Payment.

*"Six weeks ago they sent me a text to say the JSA claim is closed – closed not sanctioned – and they paid £10.45 into my account. That was it, see you later. I didn't get anything written from them, I wasn't notified of the reason why. I haven't been able to talk to [JCP Work Coach], I've called her a couple of times but she hasn't got back to me."* G15

*"I told [JCP Work Coach] that I needed help in the weeks in-between signing on. So she set up a support meeting in January, but then I got arrested because I got stressed out, so I didn't make the appointment and they shut it down saying it was a failure to sign on. Since then I haven't had any income at all."* G18

As the DWP does not publish 'destination data' (ie what happens to people whose benefit claims are closed), there does not appear to be a clear source of data to explore whether the closing of a claim rather than a sanction might achieve an aim of 'punishing' lack of compliance without it being reflected in sanctions data (which has increasingly attracted negative attention). Closing a JSA claim may also reflect positively on employment statistics. This would be an interesting area for further research.

## BEN'S STORY

*Ben, in his 30s, came to the foodbank to ask about a job advert, and for help. He was homeless and staying with a relative, and his Jobseeker's Allowance claim had been closed, leaving him with no income.*

*"I've come because of just not having any money at all. Being hungry. Same reason I would imagine that 99% of people have to use foodbanks.*

*My benefits have been stopped. I've been under JSA for a while after having my ESA stopped, even though my doctor is writing certificates saying I should be signed off. They didn't care about that. I used to suffer from depression and it doesn't help not having enough money and worrying about what's going to happen.*

*I've applied for over 350 jobs on Job Match. I've only had a couple of interviews. A lot of people, they want kids for these jobs. Rather than paying a man who's my age £7.70, they'd rather pay a kid £6.20. It's understandable.*

*But six weeks ago [DWP] sent me a text to say the JSA claim is closed – closed not sanctioned – and they paid £10.45 into my account. That was it, see you later.*

*That's why I'm here. Coming here is nice because you're surrounded by people who want to help."*

## UNIVERSAL CREDIT

In 2016-17, Universal Credit had only been rolled out to single people making new benefits claims in Wandsworth Borough. Full roll-out is due across the Borough in 2017-18, and Voucher Partners expressed concerns about how this would affect their clients— some already citing negative impacts on clients who were existing claimants.<sup>8</sup>

We asked Voucher Partners if Universal Credit roll out had affected their clients in 2016-17 and less than half (43%) said it had. However, of these, all expressed concerns about Universal Credit and its impact on clients. Responses were divided into concerns about: the length of time between applying for UC and receiving first payment, designed into UC, which was viewed as causing debt (5); clients' difficulty in managing a monthly budget, including ensuring Housing Benefit is passed on (3); clients being unable to afford to buy food and basic essentials (3); and perceived harsher sanctions under UC (2).

*“The length of time waiting for the claim to be awarded is too long, clients borrow from loan sharks as they can't survive and get themselves into further debt. Clients are also forced to stay by the bins and wait for people to throw food away. Children are hungry and parents go without to feed their kids.”* VP4

*“Many vulnerable members of society with experience of mental illness are unable to cope with the UC regime.”* VP12

*“As Universal Credit rolls out, many people are struggling to adjust to budgeting monthly as opposed to fortnightly, and this has prompted need. Housing costs may or may not get paid to the landlord, and often clients have accumulated overdraft fees [while waiting for UC to start], so much of the money is lost and a cycle of debt begins.”* VP9

*“Sanctions are worse and much more severe under Universal Credit.”* #25

No guests were receiving Universal Credit at time of interview, although one who had experienced both his ESA claim and his JSA claim being closed in the last 12 months said his only option was to make a new claim for UC. He chose not to as he understood this would ‘take too long’ and he hoped to find work sooner.

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<sup>8</sup> Across the UK, Trussell Trust foodbanks in areas of full Universal Credit roll out reported a 16% increase in foodbank use in 2016-17 – nearly three times the national average increase of 6%.

## LOW INCOME

Low income accounted for 28% of referrals, and the provision of 3 days' emergency food for 1324 people, in 2016-17

Low income as a referral reason showed the largest percentage increase in numbers of referrals in 2016-17 – up from 21% of referrals in 2015-16 to 28%.

The increase in low income as a referral reason is likely in part to reflect changes to foodbank referral vouchers, made by Trussell Trust in April 2016 (see p6) which saw 'unemployed' crisis category removed. However, the fact that more than one-quarter of all foodbank referrals were primarily due to 'low income' reflects Voucher Partner and guest responses that income from benefits, low-paid jobs, and insecure 'zero-hours' employment contracts (or a combination of these) are not providing sufficient income to meet the essential costs of living for many Wandsworth residents, and this has led to hunger and foodbank use.

This reflects research published by the Food Standards Agency in April 2017, which suggests that one in ten UK households struggles to eat regularly or healthily because of a lack of money; and revealed that 8% of respondents lived in 'low or very low food secure households' (equating to almost four million UK adults regularly struggling to put food on the table).<sup>9</sup>

After problems with benefits, low income was the issue most commonly cited by Voucher Partners (cited by half of respondents) when asked what criteria they used to identify that a client is in food poverty and needs a foodbank voucher.

*"Parents who tell us that they are struggling financially to feed their children. Children who are often ill and off school or do not have lunch so that we need to provide for them."* VP32

*"Clients explain their circumstances and difficulties they are facing – in daily living and buying food as they are on low income/ benefits. They might have to consider whether to eat or heat."* VP5

*"Parents known to school already on free school meals, or on low income facing additional financial situations eg parent who was working lost job, rent was increased, no money for food."* VP13

For guests, low income was cited as leading to having to make poorer nutritional choices, to greater social isolation (eg not being able to afford to socialise either outside or inside the home), to increased debt (including rent arrears) and to stress, anxiety, depression.

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<sup>9</sup> *The Food and You Survey Wave 4*, p5, Food Standards Agency, April 2017

## DEBT

Debt accounted for 10% of referrals, and the provision of 3 days' emergency food for 450 people, in 2016-17

Debt was the primary crisis reason for one in ten referrals (almost identical to last year/11% of referrals in 2015-16). It resonates with Voucher Partner and guest reports of increased unmanageable debt in the previous 12 months, resulting from issues such as persistent low income, sudden crisis or the impact of the benefit cap particularly on Housing Benefit (leading to a shortfall in rent that households need to meet from their already low income, leaving them with less money for food and other essentials).

Three-quarters (76%) of Voucher Partners cited 'increased unmanageable debt' as an impact of hunger and poverty they had seen in clients in the previous 12 months.

*"People end up robbing Peter to pay Paul, taking out payday loans and other credit, not to pay for luxuries but just to cover essential day-to-day living expenses." G8*

*"Rent arrears, deterioration of mental health. Debts due to Housing Benefit changes (benefit cap)." VP16*

Two-thirds (11/20) of guests interviewed said they currently had unmanageable debt, with most relating to utilities (4), overdue rent (3), historical Housing Benefit overpayments recently asked for (2), and unsecured credit such as Provident loans and credit cards (4).

For three guests, payments that had been manageable when working had become problematic when they became ill and/or lost their job:

*"Mobile phone, catalogues, rent arrears, council tax arrears. Littlewoods, I was unable to pay all these bills, spiralled out of control, and I'm blacklisted again." G16*

One single mum of a one-year old said she had got into debt after being placed in temporary accommodation by Wandsworth Council. The Council supplied electric heaters during the winter, but the running costs were expensive and resulted in large utility bills, which in trying to pay them had left the family with no money

## DEBBIE'S STORY

*Debbie is a grandmother referred to the foodbank by Jobcentre Plus after deductions for repayments of Housing Benefit and a Budgeting Loan left her without enough money for food.*

'Basically I get £110 Jobseekers every two weeks. I'm staying at my friends' houses as I'm homeless, but I still put towards like gas and electric and food, so £55 a week doesn't leave much.

Then I received a letter saying I had a housing benefit overpayment of £1700 and they got the job centre to take it from my benefits – £11 a week. No means test of what I can afford to pay, nothing. For a single person, £25 is a week's shopping – and they've just taken it, wallop. That's one of the things that messes you up.

I didn't have any money, didn't have any food, and the people I was staying with, they didn't have it either. Everybody's stretched.

It's had a big impact, because when you're depressed, I will tell you the truth, I still feel that my kids and everyone would be better off without me. I've had suicidal thoughts, but it's only because of my grandchildren that I don't. But sometimes I do feel it is the answer."

for food (p31). She had asked the council for help with the bills, but instead she said she had been offered only a foodbank voucher.

*"It's only when I moved into this temporary accommodation last summer and got into debt that's it's been really hard for me and my daughter. I've been putting the money I'd usually use for shopping to trying to pay off the electricity debt." G20*

One-quarter (6) of guests said they had accessed high-cost credit in the last 12 months in order to pay for food – for instance pawning belongings to pay for essentials like food and rent:

*"I've even pawned a couple of rings; the problem is finding the money to get them back. A ring of my mum's, ring of my dad's – they're long gone so it's sentimental – but it's going to be difficult getting them back." G7*

## SICKNESS AND ILL-HEALTH

Sickness and ill-health accounted for 6% of referrals, and the provision of 3 days' emergency food for 268 people, in 2016-17

Sickness as the primary crisis referral reason increased to 6% of referrals (up from 4% of referrals in each of the two years previously). Other sections of this research demonstrate that while poor mental or physical health often contribute to crisis referral, these are often recorded under other categories (eg benefit delay or change). It suggests therefore that that this 6% referrals figure is a low representation of ill-health across all people who used Wandsworth Foodbank in 2016-17.

This is supported by a closer look at voucher referrals, which shows that 16% (349) of all referrals to the foodbank in 2016-17 were directly from health professionals – equating to emergency food for more than 650 people. Of these referrals, one-third was from GPs and hospitals (141 referrals) and two-thirds were from mental health services (187 referrals).

Additionally, three-quarters of guests interviewed (15/20) said they had one or more long-term health conditions and one-third (7/20) said someone in their household had a disability.

This is consistent with guest and Voucher Partner findings which show poverty as both a cause and effect of poorer physical and mental health; and of the particular difficulty people experiencing poor health – especially mental health – appear to have in successfully navigating the current benefits system.

## POORER MENTAL HEALTH

Findings from this research highlight that poor mental health in particular is both a cause of and a consequence of poverty: of the 20 guests interviewed, 18 said they had experienced poorer mental health – stress, anxiety and depression – in the previous 12 months.

Additionally, six guests said they had considered or attempted suicide in the past year. One guest, a man in his 40s, was referred to the Foodbank by his mental health support worker, having been hospitalised for six weeks due to being at high risk of suicide. Another guest, a grandmother in her 50s, told us: *'I've had suicidal thoughts. Sometimes I do feel it is the answer. I constantly think of different ways, you know – that can take up a whole evening'*.

As in the last two years' research, poorer mental health was the most commonly cited impact of hunger and poverty witnessed by Voucher Partners, cited by 85% of Voucher Partners. One-quarter (24%) of Voucher Partners said they had experienced clients displaying 'suicidal tendencies' in 2016-17 (the same proportion as in 2015-16).

Every guest affected attributed the worsening of their mental health (including pre-existing mental health conditions) to the stress of their situation, and Voucher Partners similarly expressed concern about the toll that hardship and crisis took on their clients.

*"My mental health has deteriorated as a result. I've been in and out of hospital and had all sorts of problems. Because of the frustration, I get angry and it kind of stops people from helping me. Often these things overwhelm me and I will leave instead of getting the help." G18*

*"I feel lonely, hopeless. You just don't want to face the world. It's like a rollercoaster going up and down; you've got thousands of questions coming, bad things coming in your mind." G10*

Concern was voiced by Voucher Partners and guests that it was not always easy to get help for poor mental health, whether as part of the social security system or more widely in the borough.

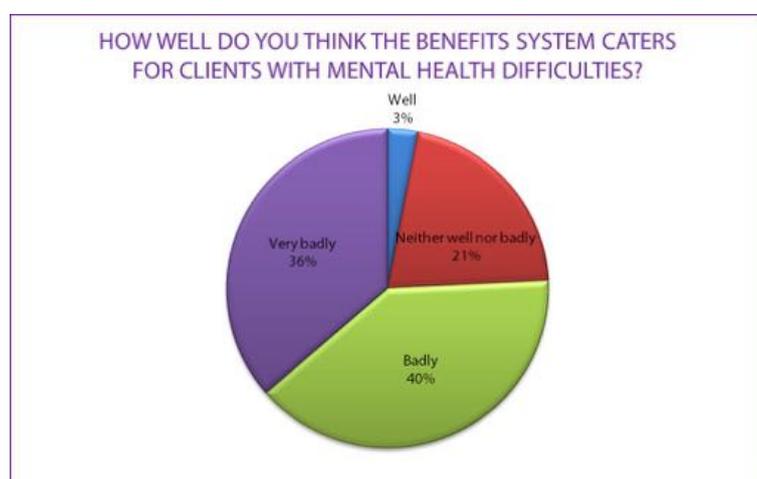
*"Parents experiencing these difficulties do not report receiving help as they might do with physical health difficulties." VP32*

*"We see many people suffering from mental health issues that are receiving no care at all." VP19*

## MENTAL HEALTH AND THE BENEFITS SYSTEM

As last year, we 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'.

Three-quarters of Voucher Partners said in their experience the current benefits system catered badly (40%) or very badly (36%) for their clients with mental health problems. Just one Voucher Partner believed the benefits system catered well for people with poor mental health.



## MARK'S STORY

"My benefits were stopped last summer. Without any support I've had to try and claim them myself, which led me to move from ESA to JSA, a benefit I shouldn't be on.

When I spoke to the lady on the phone she was more understanding than most of them. She said if you're genuinely worried about your rent, the only option you have is to claim JSA and that way at least you know your rent is going to be paid. I told her 'Look, that's just setting me up to fail. I've been on JSA before and the reasons why it didn't work are still the same now: I can't do it on my own, I can't fill in the forms they give you, I can't do the things they ask me to do'.

I got arrested because I got stressed out, so I didn't make an appointment. They shut my JSA down saying it was a failure to sign on. Since then I haven't had any income at all.

I've always had mental health issues but they've deteriorated a lot because of it. I've been in hospital several times now.

Foodbank and the work of the church is invaluable to people like me. You just can't underestimate how much it means, this type of help. I don't think I would have made it through the last year without you."

This is a higher level of dissatisfaction than expressed in last year's research (when 60% of respondents selected 'badly' or 'very badly'), indicating there appears to have been little or no improvement in how the benefits system supports people with poor mental health in the past 12 months.

As last year, Voucher Partners 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 successfully attending appointments or meetings.

*"People with mental health or learning difficulties are less able to understand the process and may not supply information in a timely manner or have the resources to be able to access documents. They may be overwhelmed by large forms that they cannot read or understand and may not have a support network to help them with this."* VP7

*"There is very little flexibility in the way clients must get things done. Even for those unable to work, claiming ESA, there are now compulsory meetings to attend, which some of my clients (who suffer with social anxiety and depression) have found very hard."* VP28

*"The DWP do not have an understanding of mental health issues. I was party to an interview with a client with mental health needs and a disability job coach who I was assured was specially trained. The job coach was absolutely poorly behaved and extremely non-supportive – dismissive, judgemental and uncooperative."* VP4

Both Voucher Partners and guests raised specific concerns around the procedure and quality of Work Capability Assessments, particularly for people with mental health difficulties, which led to hardship if benefits stopped (p17).

## POORER PHYSICAL HEALTH

Food poverty is very strongly associated by both guests and Voucher Partners with having a negative impact on nutrition and physical health.

As last year, half of guests (10/20) reported experiencing poorer physical health in the previous 12 months, although for some this was, at least initially, a cause of food poverty rather than a consequence of it.

Poorer physical health was the third most commonly cited impact of hunger and poverty that Voucher Partners saw in clients in 2016-17, cited by almost two-thirds of respondents (64%).

*"For some of our families [the Foodbank] is a serious lifeline, financially, enabling the children to have basic food. [Without it] we would see more children and adults going without proper food, and this directly impacts on physical health, emotional well-being, and the self-esteem of the whole family."* VP27

## POORER NUTRITION

The second most common experience cited by guests (after poorer mental health) was poorer nutrition, with 90% of guests saying they had made poorer nutritional choices than they'd like, for instance choosing

cheaper, filling foods over fresh fruit and vegetables.) This was higher than in the previous year (71% of guests interviewed). Guests reported trying to shop in 'cheaper' stores; trying to make food stretch over more meals than previously; timing their shopping for when supermarkets mark down food that is going out of date; and sharing food with friends or relatives.

*"I shop around; I'll go at certain times and get the food that's going out of date basically. I've made myself ill a couple of times; you know, eating stuff that's gone past its sell-by date, because there's nothing else." G7*

Just under half (42%) of Voucher Partners also reported clients experiencing poorer nutrition, and several reported concern about the impact of poor nutrition on clients, especially children.

One-third of guests said they had gone one or more days without eating in the previous 12 months (7/20). Every parent except one said they had regularly skipped meals so that their children would have enough to eat, accounting for 87% of parents interviewed (an increase from 71% in 2015-16).

*"Sometimes I don't eat once a day, like I don't eat my lunch and then I prepare to have dinner and it's happier to have it with my kids when they come back. I stay on the coffee." G10*

*"I go back to the tins more than fresh stuff. You give the children food and you eat last so you can know your children can have enough." G8*

One guest, a pensioner whose Pension Credit had been reduced to standard state pension during the previous 12 months, was referred by Adult Social Services who were concerned about his rapid weight loss. Once medical causes were ruled out, he was referred to the foodbank for the first time in his life, in order to stretch his limited income and allow him to buy more fresh fruit and vegetables (Frank's story, *right*).

For one guest, a single mum with a young child, being placed in temporary accommodation (after being evicted by her private landlord), had had an unforeseen nutritional impact: the temporary accommodation didn't have a fridge and she had no money to buy one:

*"Sometimes we ate fruit, fish, milk, eggs, but these are fridge things and now I don't have a fridge." G5*

A second homeless guest was about to move into council accommodation, but was worried about being able to furnish it as he was on a very low income, having become too ill to work:

## FRANK'S STORY

*Frank is a pensioner who was referred by Adult Social Services, concerned he had lost a lot of weight and hoping that help from the foodbank would stretch his low income to be able to buy fresh fruit and vegetables.*

*"I've had loads of tests to make sure I haven't got cancer, that's all clear. But she's worried about me losing weight; she wants me to put weight back on.*

*I don't eat a lot of fruit because of the price of it. She gave me a list of foods to buy but I said there's foods on it that are quite expensive, and she said well if you try and get tinned stuff [from the foodbank], that will save you and you can spend it on fresh.*

*'It's not a case of not having enough food, it's not having the right food. I mean I budget my money pretty tight, so I'd say I'm buying the food that I can afford.*

*I very much like to be self-independent, but people here are friendly as soon as you walk in. They made me feel comfortable."*

*"I've got nothing there, no bed, no cooking facilities, fridge, nothing. I got a kettle though. Sausage rolls and cup-a-soups, it'll be that kind of thing." G6*

Foodbank volunteers carefully selected foods for this guest that didn't require cooking or heating, or ones that could be prepared using boiling water from a kettle only (as they do for other guests without cooking facilities, or enough gas and electricity to cook food).

## HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness accounted for 4% of referrals, and the provision of 3 days' emergency food for 155 people in 2016-17

While homelessness as a reason for referral remained at 4% (as in 2015-16), 10 out of 20 guests were homeless at time of interview. This is slightly higher than in the previous year's research, when 8/21 guests were homeless.

Only one of the guests' referral vouchers cited 'homelessness' as the primary reason of crisis, indicating that while issues around homelessness and insecure housing are common for Foodbank guests, they are under-represented in voucher data (with referrers perhaps viewing homelessness as a secondary rather than primary cause of crisis referral).

Of the ten homeless guests, one was rough-sleeping and 'sofa-surfing' where possible; four were 'sofa-surfing' with friends or family; four had been accepted as homeless by Wandsworth Council and housed in temporary accommodation (2 in a flat or bedsit; 2 in bed and breakfast accommodation); one was in a refuge with her child.

Of the ten homeless households, four were single parents with dependent children living in temporary accommodation or a refuge. One mum and child became homeless when they fled domestic violence and were staying in a refuge. Another single parent and her young child had been evicted from their private-rented home when the landlord wanted it back, and in the last three months had stayed in two bed and breakfasts before being allocated temporary accommodation within the borough. They had been initially offered temporary accommodation in east London away from their only support network, but the Council was eventually able to find nearer accommodation when the mum was supported to ask for this by her local church.

The remaining six homeless guests were single with no dependants (five male, one female); five of whom were Wandsworth residents (the sixth was a Merton resident). Of these, two had been accepted as homeless by Wandsworth Council: both were in bed and breakfast accommodation, and one of whom was about to move into temporary accommodation.

## ALEX'S STORY

*Alex and her one-year-old child became homeless and were placed in temporary accommodation in the private sector by Wandsworth Council, who also referred her to the foodbank. Alex has regularly skipped meals so her child can eat.*

'To be honest things were always fine. It's only when I moved into this temporary accommodation last summer and got into debt that's it's been really hard for me and my daughter.

The temporary accommodation doesn't have any central heating or radiators, so when it was cold in the winter the council gave me heaters which take a lot of electricity.

It's been my priority to stay on top of the bills, but it means I can't afford food for me and the baby. I've been putting the money I'd usually use for shopping to trying to pay off the electricity debt.

I'm on a low income as well so it's made it really hard. My Child Tax Credit got cut in half when I stopped working, I'm not sure why. Debt is a new thing though.

I feel depressed, stressed – really stressed. Just thinking about it is hard."

He had been referred to the Foodbank by Wandsworth Council after appearing to be misinformed about needing to pay his first week's rent up front, which had left him with just £5 in his bank account for the next week:

*'I was told by one branch of the council housing that I had to pay the first week's rent on the flat myself, which was £190.64. So I've paid that thinking that when I signed the tenancy agreement, I'd be able to claim that back. So now I go to the town hall and the lady says, no, you can't claim it back off us, who told you to pay it? You shouldn't have paid it. I said your colleagues round the corner told me to pay it.*

*'That £190 would have been more than enough to buy things like food and a microwave, and other things I need, but now I've got nothing, nothing to feed myself. So the lady at the council said the foodbank, and not being funny, that's a very humbling experience. To be perfectly honest, I was hoping I'd get the £190 rent money back, and this lady was like no, what do you need it for? And I said well, food – I'd like to eat sometime – and she gave me the voucher.'* G6

Of the five guests who were rough-sleeping or sofa-surfing with friends and family, none said they were hopeful about their prospects of obtaining more secure housing. One single man said he had had his homeless application rejected by the council as he didn't meet their criteria, despite experiencing apparently poor mental health. He had sought advice from Citizens Advice while trying to join the homeless queue, but had found the experience so difficult that he had given up:

*'I said to Citizens Advice, advice is a good thing but it's just advice. You need to have an action person, because people are scared.'* G2

## NO RECOURSE TO PUBLIC FUNDS

Having No Recourse to Public Funds accounted for 4% of referrals and the provision of 3 days' emergency food for 252 people in 2016-17

This is the first year that referrals to the Foodbank due to people having No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) <sup>10</sup> have been measured by Trussell Trust foodbanks.

NRPF was added as a specific crisis reason to referral vouchers issued after April 2016. Until then, foodbank guests with NRPF would tend to have been referred under categories such as low income.

When asked what criteria they used when referring clients to the foodbank, 15% of Voucher Partners cited clients with No Recourse to Public Funds.

One guest who was interviewed, and the partner of a second guest interviewed, had No Recourse to Public Funds at time of interview.

One was an asylum seeker and mum of two young children, who had fled religious persecution and was being supported to re-apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain by the British Red Cross, after her first application was turned down. She had been referred to the foodbank by her GP, in order to supplement the small amount of emergency funding she and her children were receiving from Wandsworth Council<sup>11</sup> (see Aliyah's story, right).

The second guest had experienced her benefits being abruptly stopped when her husband (who had No Recourse to Public Funds) joined her and their children in the UK last year. Her benefits had since been re-instated but unmanageable repayments of debts that built up while they had no income – plus paying more rent after being affected by the benefit cap – led to them needing to be referred to the Foodbank for emergency food. The husband is in poor mental health and has been diagnosed with PTSD, and while this guest would like to work (and is well-qualified in her field), her responsibilities as primary carer for her children and husband mean she is unable to.

## ALIYAH'S STORY

*Aliyah is an asylum seeker who fled religious persecution in her home country. She currently has No Recourse to Public Funds while her application for Indefinite Leave to Remain is decided. She and her two young children were referred to the Foodbank by their GP.*

"I don't always have enough money to buy food. Sometimes for example if I've bought clothes for the children, it is difficult then.

God is with me, that's why I'm sometimes strong. But everything for me is very hard sometimes. I feel very bad when I'm thinking my children are with me alone, because I don't have any family here, I don't where the father is, I don't have anything. I don't want to lose myself because I have my children. My children don't have anyone only me, that's why I try to stay strong.

The Foodbank is very good and helpful, and it's nice people here. Sometimes if I don't have enough money, I come here and they are waiting for me and for my children. I always say God bless you, for helping people who don't have anything."

<sup>10</sup> Section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 (IAA) states that a person will have 'no recourse to public funds' if they are subject to immigration control. Public funds include welfare benefits and public housing.

<sup>11</sup> Section 17 funding: an emergency provision under the Children's Act for parents who have No Recourse to Public Funds

## SACHA'S STORY

*Sacha and her young daughter fled domestic violence and were referred to the Foodbank by a refuge support worker.*

"When I was with my ex – it was domestic violence – it was soul-destroying. You change how you think about yourself and for a long time you listen to 'you're stupid', and you think yes, really it's true, I'm stupid. You start to believe. But now it's different.

This foodbank is very important place for people like me. I was self-employed, but now I am on Income Support I have little money for me and my child. It's normal to pay £40 when you go shopping, but for me it is too much!

I never thought I'd be the person who used foodbank – I always think you have people in a worse situation than mine to use foodbank: homeless people. But I'm homeless now.

It's not like how I imagined it. It's people like me here, it's broken life. All your life you have a normal life, and don't think about it. You help people; you don't need people to help you.

But then things go wrong – and it's not bad that you come here and take something that is being offered to help."

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence accounted for 2% of referrals, and the provision of 3 days' emergency food for 87 people in 2016-17

Wandsworth Foodbank regularly supports people, particularly women and children, who have experienced domestic abuse and whose circumstances have abruptly changed, for instance when moving into a refuge or alternative emergency accommodation. These changes can often prompt benefit problems, as the benefits system is not always able to respond quickly to changes of circumstance, leaving people with low or no income for a period of time.

It is likely that the figure for referrals to the Foodbank due to domestic violence is understated, as we know that for confidentiality reasons Voucher Partners sometimes select an alternative crisis reason for referral, such as low income or 'other'.

Only one guest interviewed was referred due to the primary crisis reason being domestic violence (see Sacha's story, left), although several Voucher Partners cited it as a reason they referred clients to the Foodbank in 2016-17.

It has been great to be able to refer Foodbank guests affected by domestic abuse to the One Stop Shop drop-in, now located once a week in the same church as the Tuesday and Friday foodbank sessions (St Mark's Battersea Rise).

## ACCESS TO EMERGENCY FINANCIAL PROVISION

We asked Voucher Partners to select from a list of options any emergency financial support options they also considered when referring clients to the foodbank:

- Fuelbanks & Families charity
- Hardship Payment (DWP provision)
- Short Term Benefit Advance (DWP provision)
- Discretionary Social Fund (Wandsworth Borough Council Provision)
- From a team's 'own fund'
- From a referrer's 'own pocket'
- Other

More than half (54%) of Voucher Partners had referred clients to Fuelbanks & Families, whose volunteers are located at weekday Foodbank centres and who offer a one-off grant of £49 to families with children experiencing fuel poverty (as well as access to a dedicated advice worker and grants towards school uniforms, shoes and winter coats). Referral to Fuelbanks & Families was considered to be the most successful emergency financial provision, of the options given, with 100% of respondents saying the service had been 'extremely helpful' or 'helpful'.

One in five Voucher Partners (27%) said they had used emergency funds from their team's fund; and one in four (21%) said they had supported clients out of their 'own pocket'. Other options used included Carer's Trust grants, other local or relevant trusts, 'funds for released prisoners' and Acts435 applications (an online giving website).

*"Sometimes we will buy food for a new resident from our very limited petty cash."* VP30

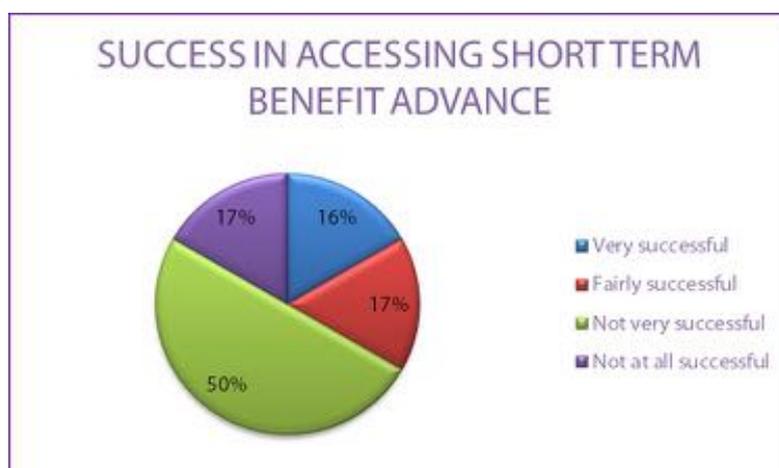
*"I can only give so much from my own pocket, and it's hopelessly inadequate to meet desperate need."* VP9

There were mixed responses from Voucher Partners who had tried to access emergency financial provisions for clients from Wandsworth Borough Council's Discretionary Social Fund (48% of respondents); Hardship Payment (24%); and Short Term Benefit Advance (27%) – which resonated with guest experience.

### 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. STBAs need to be paid back over time once benefit payment has started.

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. Just over one-quarter (27%) of Voucher Partners said they had tried to help clients access STBA. Of those that knew the outcome of the application (6), two-thirds (4) said applications had been 'not very' or 'not at all successful', while one-third (2) said applications had been 'fairly' or 'very successful' (compared to 40% last year).

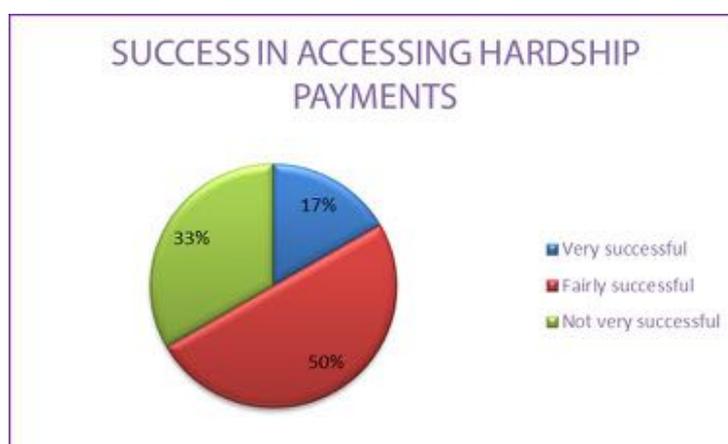
While these samples are small, the findings resonate with guest experience: only one guest who experienced benefit delay in the previous 12 months said they had been informed about STBA by the DWP, had applied and the application was successful. None of the other guests who had experienced benefit delay reported being told about STBA.

As in previous years, this finding suggests that improvements should be made as soon as possible to the accessibility and delivery of this vital emergency financial provision.

## 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 because their normal benefit is not being paid in specified circumstances, including benefit sanction.

Under Universal Credit (unlike other relevant benefits), these payments are loans rather than 'payments' and need to be paid back once benefit payment is in place.



When we asked Voucher Partners what emergency financial support options they referred clients to alongside offering a foodbank voucher, one-quarter (24%) cited Hardship Payments via JobCentre Plus – less than in the previous two years (36% of respondents).

Responses indicated some improvement from the previous year, when applications to Hardship Payments were the least successful emergency financial options – although the very small sample size needs to be taken into account. Of the 5 Voucher Partners who had applied and knew the outcome, 4 said applications had been 'fairly' or 'very successful' and 2 said they were 'not very successful'.

Of guests who had experienced benefit sanction in the previous 12 months, only one had been told about Hardship Payment by JCP, and only when she specifically asked about it. The outcome of the application was not known at time of interview/foodbank visit.

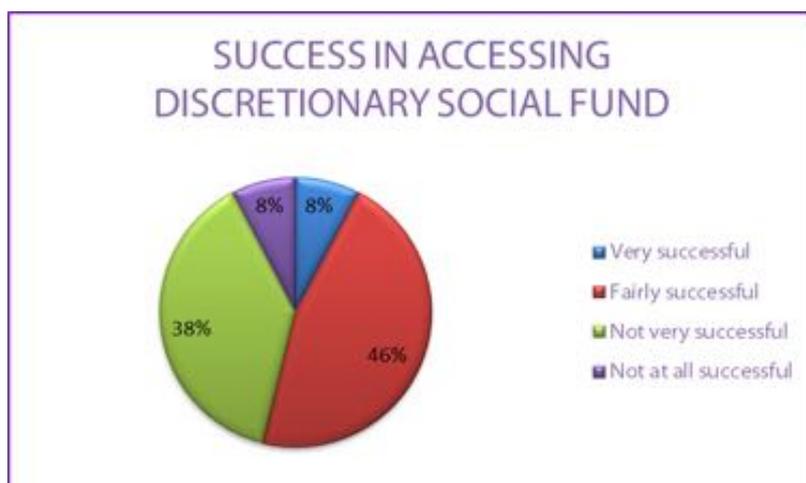
As with other deductions from benefits, there is concern about the impact on people who are already on very low incomes being expected to make repayments of emergency payments (such as for STBA, and HP under Universal Credit), and the risk of this leading to every greater hardship and debt.

## DISCRETIONARY SOCIAL FUND

Wandsworth Borough Council operates a Discretionary Social Fund (DSF) as an emergency financial provision for residents in crisis, using funding from central government under its local welfare assistance scheme.

Residents can apply for crisis help (eg Sainsbury's food vouchers and vouchers for gas and electricity pre-payment meters); discretionary housing payment (eg to help with bedroom tax and benefit cap changes); and

Community Care grants (eg for white goods, basic furniture etc). Residents can receive help up to twice a year and grants do not need to be re-paid.



We asked Voucher Partners to what emergency financial support options they referred clients, alongside offering a foodbank voucher. Nearly half (48%) cited the DSF in the previous 12 months. Of the Voucher Partners who had tried to access DSF for clients and knew the outcome, responses were mixed. Just fewer than half (46% or 6/13 respondents) said applications had been 'fairly successful'; with one Voucher Partner saying they had been 'very successful'. The remaining Voucher Partners (46%) said applications had been 'not very' or 'not at all successful'.

We asked guests if they knew that Wandsworth Council operated a Discretionary Social Fund and only one-third (35%/7 guests) said they did. Six guests said they had tried to apply to the DSF, but their applications had either been rejected (1 guest); they had been told they were ineligible to apply (3 guests); or they were still waiting to hear the outcome (2 guests).

Of the guests who were told they were ineligible, one was 'not in receipt of qualifying benefits' (having had her JSA sanctioned); one understood it was because she was housed by a housing association rather than the Council; and one – who had recently begun to receive benefits having fled domestic violence – had been told she had not been in receipt of qualifying benefits for long enough:

*"We phoned up and they said you have to be 26 weeks in benefits before you can do it. So it will be May before I can get one."* G4

One single mother had been allocated temporary accommodation having become homeless, but this had basic cooking facilities but no fridge or washing machine. This had increased the financial strain on her already tight budget as she could only buy enough fresh food for each day, rather than more economically.

The mother had applied to the DSF for a fridge and a washing machine, but at time of interview was still awaiting the outcome. Her application was eventually successful, although it took almost 8 weeks from the date she applied to when the application was processed and the goods supplied.

A second guest had been in contact with the DSF team to put an application in process, but was concerned about how long it would take:

*"I've enquired about a loan from the Social Fund to help get furniture, and I've got an appointment in three weeks' time. They said if you're lucky, which is not very likely, it'll be probably a month later you get it." G6*

Another guest had heard of the DSF, but hadn't applied because of what he understood to be the long time for claims to be processed:

*'That's that two vouchers for £40 each for Sainsbury's. It's only that my mate got one yesterday. You don't get that overnight though – you have to wait for 8 weeks.' G13*

Wandsworth Foodbank is able to make applications on behalf of Foodbank guests who do not meet the Council's eligibility criteria for the DSF, and we are grateful that these are usually processed quickly and result in positive outcomes for guests.

However we believe there are improvements that could be made in processing times for applications generally, and in widening of eligibility criteria, so that the Council provides as robust as possible emergency help for its residents in crisis.

## APPENDIX 1: ABOUT WANDSWORTH FOODBANK

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

As a Christian charity, we welcome people of all faiths or none at our foodbank centres in five churches across the borough: St Michael's, Southfields; St Mark's, Battersea Rise; St Paul's, Furzedown; Shaftesbury Christian Centre, Battersea; SW London Vineyard (at The Yard), Putney.

When people arrive at our centres, they are welcomed by trained volunteers and offered a drink and something to eat – many are hungry, tired or stressed, and embarrassed about having to use the foodbank, so we aim to greet people with kindness and respect. Any dietary requirements and preferences are noted (eg halal), as well as any additional needs (eg nappies and baby milk, or toilet rolls and sanitary products).

Foodbank volunteers also offer information on where people can find further help to resolve the crisis they're facing, and guests can quickly be referred for high-quality advice and case-work to our dedicated Foodbank Advisor (an advice service run in partnership with Citizens Advice Wandsworth, generously funded by City Bridge Trust).

Households with children can also be referred by Voucher Partners to Fuelbanks and Families, a charity whose volunteers are present at weekday foodbank sessions, for a one-off emergency grant of £49 towards gas and electricity (pre-payment meters only), help with school uniform costs, and further advice from their dedicated advice worker.

We want to say a huge thank you to each individual, school, church, business, community and faith group who donated food, toiletries and essential running costs to help their neighbours in crisis through Wandsworth Foodbank last year. We did not receive any government or local authority funding in 2016-17, so your support is vital. Thank you.

And to our 270 volunteers who gave more than 9700 hours to help – you're amazing. Your dedication, compassion and kindness have eased the burdens of many people this year. Thank you.

Wandsworth Foodbank is administered by Junction Community Trust (Registered charity no. 1149780).

## APPENDIX 2: ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

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 2016-17.

### 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 primary cause of crisis leading to food poverty: Benefit changes; benefit delays; homelessness; sickness/ill-health; debt; domestic violence; low income; child holiday meals; delayed wages; No Recourse to Public Funds; refused STBA; other.

In April 2016, Trussell Trust removed the crisis category 'unemployed' because, almost without exception, someone in this category would either be waiting for their benefit payments ('benefit delay') or receiving benefit payments that were insufficient ('low income'). It was therefore not clear what purpose the category 'unemployed' had, and the information that it generated was unclear. Trussell Trust also added the category 'No Recourse to Public Funds' to capture the number of people, for instance asylum seekers or EU migrants, who are not entitled to claim benefits (and in many cases, to work or study).<sup>12</sup>

### METHODOLOGY

An online questionnaire was emailed to all Voucher Partners in March 2017. 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. They were given one week to complete the questionnaire. We received 33 completed questionnaires within the timeframe. All responses were anonymous.

A second questionnaire was used with guests at the five foodbank centres during the last week in March 2017. 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. Not all guests were approached due to capacity of the research team at any one time, but of those that were asked, all but one guest agreed to be interviewed; 20 interviews were completed.

Of the guests interviewed, 10 were female, 10 were male. The majority (19/20) were Wandsworth residents, one of whom was housed by Wandsworth in a B&B in Streatham at the time. The remaining guest was a Merton resident who had attended without a voucher.

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<sup>12</sup> These changes apply only to vouchers issued to referrers after April 2016, and therefore during 2016-17 'old' vouchers were still being presented and fulfilled at the foodbank. The numbers of these however are not large enough to be statistically significant.

## APPENDIX 3: FEEDBACK ABOUT WANDSWORTH FOODBANK (VOUCHER PARTNERS)

Responses from Voucher Partners as part of this research show that the Foodbank is considered an essential source of emergency support for clients across Wandsworth Borough, and foodbank staff and volunteers are appreciated for their non-judgemental, kind welcome, and 'more than food' approach (eg being a listening ear, signposting to further help and ability to refer clients to a dedicated advisor).

However, responses also demonstrate that while referrers appreciate the foodbank's work, there is considerable discomfort that foodbanks should be needed in the UK in 2017.

100% of Voucher Partners responding rated the Foodbank's service as excellent (99%) or good (1%) in 2016-17. We asked 'Why did you give it this score?' and 'Is there any other comment you want to make about the Foodbank or foodbanks generally?'. Below is a list of responses:

- *"Staff have always been extremely helpful if we have ever called and very prompt in replying to us."*
- *"Essential service, you literally save people's lives!"*
- *"Available to people in crisis who have no alternative."*
- *"An excellent resource; great feedback from clients; great partner organisation."*
- *"Because it is excellent and supportive."*
- *"A fantastic service that is a lifeline for many of our clients – continue the good work!"*
- *"Clients have given good feedback. It is very sad in 2017 that we have to use food banks; however due to the age of austerity they are here and here to stay for the foreseeable future. The support that it offers families is great and feedback from families is positive. One family said there was a sense of community and she did not feel stigmatised, she would attend the foodbank again in time of need."*
- *"You save lives. I wish you didn't need to exist but I am so grateful that you do."*
- *"This service is a life line for some of the most vulnerable people in Wandsworth. It is a safe space where they feel human and not just a number to be processed or a potential scrounger to be sanctioned. Having a service where you are treated with dignity and compassion has a major effect in improving morale. Wandsworth Foodbank has been a great joined up service, because they can contact me for advice on benefits and I can contact them where there are special circumstances (eg there isn't time to access a voucher, so I can post one but send the client by telephone referral there and then)."*
- *"Great service; great values/ethos; great people. So, thank you."*
- *"Always helpful and responsive. They don't stigmatize clients. Really glad it exists and hope it will continue to provide such an essential service."*
- *"We are very happy with the empathy demonstrated by the manager and staff of Wandsworth Foodbank, especially as we have confidence that we receive support in cases of emergency. We had been allowed to issue vouchers to people in desperate need for support even when they may be exceeding the number of*

*vouchers normally expected per household. The Wandsworth Foodbank is playing a huge role in helping many people keep their heads above water in these trying times."*

- *"The parents who we have referred talk about the kindness and discretion of the staff and have been comfortable with the system at a difficult time in their life."*
- *"Very efficient."*
- *"You are always happy to send us food vouchers and in good time. It has been very helpful and made our work much easier, although it's unfortunate there have to be food banks at all."*
- *"It's extremely efficient and respectful to clients. Thank you for your existence and I wish we didn't need it."*
- *"Just invaluable to parents."*
- *"This is because it is providing a highly valuable service to others, unable to help themselves."*
- *"Wandsworth Foodbank provides so much more than just food and the addition of Sylwia in her role as CAB advisor is invaluable. The team at WFB HQ are amazing and very helpful in the support they provide."*
- *"Because for many people who are in poverty, Foodbank is the only support they have."*
- *"We've had no problems."*
- *"Always get excellent feedback re Wandsworth Foodbank – clients feel listened to and can have a chat."*
- *"The service is very helpful to our service users who are in crisis."*
- *"The service and help I received was impeccable. Brilliant service, people very approachable and helpful."*
- *"They are great at communicating. We will be having a lot more properties when merging with [housing association]."*
- *"Good feedback from clients who use the service. In an ideal world they should not exist."*
- *"Replacement vouchers are sent in a timely manner, and I have never had a problem reaching staff to discuss a case. Wandsworth Foodbank is so supportive; it helps families in a non-judgemental way. I still have clients who feel they are making a fuss, or feel embarrassed to go to a food bank. I always tell them how nice staff and volunteers are at Wandsworth Foodbank centres, and how no-one will judge them, and they will be offered support, and kindness. The feedback I get is that this is the case for my parents who use this service."*
- *"Very kind and welcoming. Can be scary for clients to attend the first time, but it helps in a time of crisis. It's crucial that a family can go to the foodbank any day of the week."*
- *"We receive excellent feedback from our residents who have used the services to obtain food. We are very grateful that we can access this service for our residents as it helps enormously."*
- *"I have good feedback on what's provided, the staff, the locations over the borough and the support to us from staff."*

- *"Family feedback good. Invaluable service, normally run by volunteers. Thank you on behalf of the centre and all the families who have accessed your services. We all need help at sometimes in our lives and the foodbank is invaluable to our families living on the poverty line."*
- *"Parents don't often come back, presumably because they have been supported and signposted to other support groups."*
- *"Feedback from clients is always highly recommended. You do a great job."*

## APPENDIX 4: “IF WANDSWORTH FOODBANK DIDN’T EXIST...”

While many people view foodbanks as currently an essential service supporting people experiencing hardship in the UK (however uncomfortable they are about this being necessary), there is an opposite view sometimes voiced by politicians, sections of the media, and ‘ordinary’ people – that foodbanks are unnecessary and food poverty is not a real issue in the UK in 2017.

To explore this, we asked Voucher Partners ‘If Wandsworth Foodbank did not exist, what would be the impact on your clients?’ 32 out of 33 Voucher Partners answered, and this is what they said:

- “It would severely impact on their food options when they were in a crisis and would have a detrimental impact on them.”
- “Impact on physical and mental health.”
- “There would be even more destitution; many families and children would struggle to put any food on the table.”
- “Huge, I would not know how to help the residents.”
- “Uncertain – however I feel that generally when they have received a voucher they appear to be happy that there is an option for them.”
- “Many would not have anything to eat for long periods or get more into debt.”
- “Children would go hungry and be exposed to more family stress as the parents worry about how to feed the children. There would be an increase in families asking for s.17 monies from social workers which is not an appropriate use of this money.”
- “I believe that we would see more people having to give up work and claim benefits (with all the problems that implies). I also believe that we would see more people taking their own lives. People are pushed to the extreme – you pull them back from the edge so if you're not there, there is nowhere for them to go except over the edge.”
- “I dread to think. I can only give so much from my own pocket, and it’s hopelessly inadequate to meet desperate need. I think I would see clients’ mental health suffer terribly without the foodbank.”
- “We'd have to provide something like this instead, but couldn't do it on the scale you do.”
- “Devastating.”
- “Many people will go starving, watch out for suicide ideations and potential of people carrying out suicides – out of frustration.”
- “Difficult to know how we would be able to find that support for them.”
- “More hospital admissions.”
- “It’s been invaluable given reduction in benefit entitlements and harder conditions for staying on benefits.”

- "Tragic."
- "Homelessness and true poverty."
- "I believe it would have a negative impact on clients in need."
- "Increased debt; increased anxiety; lack of food; lack of support; homelessness."
- "Definitely a really bad impact."
- "The physical health of people without access to food would significantly suffer."
- "Put added stress on people when at their lowest ebb."
- "There would be an increase in mental relapse and suicides."
- "They would have struggled."
- "They would be extremely destitute."
- "They would have nowhere to turn."
- "For some of our families this is a serious lifeline, financially, enabling the children to have basic food. We would see more children and adults going without proper food, and this directly impacts on physical health, emotional well-being, and the self-esteem of the whole family."
- "Food poverty would be more extreme. Children would be going hungry when their families are struggling. We often see parents getting unwell, as they are not eating properly in order to provide for their children. Unwell parents then struggle even more."
- "A detrimental effect, no food to eat impacting on health and wellbeing."
- "Likely to be increase in the children in need, potential increase in crime"
- "Our students would continue to go hungry, feel the emotional strain of their parents' financial difficulties and miss school due to stress and illness."
- "Poverty and starvation."

*“Wandsworth Foodbank is so supportive; it helps families in a non-judgemental way. I still have clients who feel they are making a fuss, or feel embarrassed to go to a food bank. I always tell them how nice staff and volunteers are at Wandsworth Foodbank centres, and how no-one will judge them, and they will be offered support, and kindness. The feedback I get is that this is the case for my parents who use this service.”*

Referrer to Wandsworth Foodbank, March 2017



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