



## **Visit by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights to the UK November 2018**

### **Written evidence from *A Menu for Change: Cash, Rights, Food***

#### **Introduction**

*A Menu for Change: Cash, Rights, Food* is a three-year project, funded by the Big Lottery Fund, and managed by key anti-poverty organisations in Scotland: Oxfam Scotland, Poverty Alliance, Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland and Nourish Scotland. The project emerged from deep concern among these organisations about the growth of emergency food aid and the extent of its use as an indication of the levels of hunger and extreme poverty in this country. Our aim is to reduce the need for emergency food aid by ensuring people across Scotland get the cash, rights and food they are entitled to before they are in crisis.

In the context of recently devolved social security powers, Scotland has a unique window of opportunity to reduce the need for emergency food aid and prevent food insecurity. *A Menu for Change: cash, rights, food* was developed to make the most of this opportunity through working closely with local services to improve their responses; carrying out in-depth research with people experiencing food insecurity; and advocating for policy change.

We welcome the UN Special Rapporteur's visit to the UK and would be keen to meet with him to discuss our learning about poverty and food insecurity in Scotland and the policy and practice changes needed to reduce it. We would also be able to arrange meetings with people with lived experience of poverty, as well as visits to local initiatives we are supporting across Scotland to develop innovative ways to respond to need in their areas.

#### **Human rights violations of people living in poverty**

Living in poverty impacts on multiple aspects of people's human rights. *A Menu for Change* is focused on the recent rise in food insecurity in Scotland, and this experience as a violation of the right to be free from hunger.

Food bank use grew by 17% in Scotland last year, a higher rate than was seen elsewhere in the UK<sup>i</sup>. Evidence shows that people turn to food aid as a last resort, facing acute income crisis caused by problems with the benefits system (including benefit changes, delayed payments, sanctions and administrative errors), as well as

low pay and insecure work<sup>ii</sup>. Our research has identified the experiences of shame and social isolation associated with food insecurity and having to turn to food aid, as well as its impacts on physical and mental health.

It is recognised that the numbers experiencing food insecurity in Scotland is likely to be much higher than is indicated by food bank use data. On 25<sup>th</sup> September 2018, the Scottish Government will publish the first national data on food insecurity, having included questions from the FAO's Food Insecurity Experience Scale in the 2017/18 Scottish Health Survey. We would encourage the Special Rapporteur to consider the implications of these figures for understanding the extent of hunger and material deprivation in Scotland.

Food insecurity is an issue which the Scottish Government has committed to tackling, recognising the need to invest in measures which can prevent individuals from facing an income crisis<sup>iii</sup>. The Scottish Government has limited powers to raise incomes, however it has taken some measures to mitigate the impacts of recent UK Government welfare reforms, for example through the Scottish Welfare Fund. The work of *A Menu for Change* has identified important ways in which this locally administered crisis fund could be improved to better prevent the need for emergency food aid, and this can be found at Appendix 1.

Insecure work and low pay are also key drivers of food insecurity<sup>iv</sup>. Scotland has seen long-term growth in levels of in-work poverty, with 2017 figures indicating two thirds of children in poverty live in households with at least one adult in paid work<sup>v</sup>. We highlight our evidence on in-work poverty and recommendations to the Scottish Government to address this in a briefing which can be found at Appendix 2.

The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 and the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 are two key examples of recent steps taken by the Scottish Government to address poverty. While broadly welcomed, there has been concern raised among civil society organisations that there are further measures which could have been taken, such as topping up Child Benefit, to have a bigger impact on poverty in Scotland.

**We encourage the Special Rapporteur to consider how the Scottish Government could best use its devolved powers to tackle poverty, and specifically to reduce the need for emergency food aid, in Scotland.**

## **Universal Credit**

The roll out of Universal Credit is having a significant impact on people's ability to afford food and on the capacity of local services to provide preventative responses to food insecurity.

Universal Credit applicants we have interviewed report: difficulty budgeting on reduced and unpredictable income; increased reliance on family and friends for food; skipping meals; and having to use food banks and other emergency food aid. The Trussell Trust has also reported increased demand on their food banks in Universal Credit roll out areas<sup>vi</sup>.

Our research and project work in local areas also indicate the significant pressure which Universal Credit is placing on the Scottish Welfare Fund, welfare rights advice and other local services.

Freedom of Information request responses from nine local authorities in Scotland found they had together set aside £8.7 million to mitigate the impact of Universal Credit<sup>vii</sup>.

While Universal Credit was intended to improve how in-work benefits operate alongside work, people in insecure work, who are claiming the new benefit, are often facing payment delays and administrative errors<sup>viii</sup>. This can be because where people have fluctuating incomes, for example because of short-term or zero-hours contracts, their earnings can take them over the threshold after which a Universal Credit claim would automatically close. If their hours then decrease or work ends, they would have to reapply, potentially leaving them with a gap in income while a new claim is processed.

In addition to built-in challenges, such as the five-week wait before initial payment for a new Universal Credit claim, our research shows mistakes and lack of communication are compounding problems for Universal Credit claimants. Other research has had similar findings<sup>ix</sup>. For example, some people report waiting for over two months without a payment. Such experiences leave households without income for necessities, often forcing them into debt and causing significant hardship and distress.

As our interviewees have described, lack of clarity about when and how much Universal Credit payments will be made also makes it very difficult to plan and causes considerable anxiety.

*“I’ve been on Universal Credit for two years and I’ve had three breaks in work and I’ve had nothing. Oh, I was sent a cheque for one pence and that was to do me a month.”*

(Tam, A Menu for Change participant, Dundee)

Our research suggests that the requirements to search for employment for people already in work are unrealistic, particularly in the context of zero-hours contracts. The pressure and cost of having to look for additional work mean those who are entitled may choose not to claim Universal Credit.

*“I came off Universal Credit because I was still expected to go look for work up to a certain amount of hours...I didn’t see the point because that meant I had to spend the money to get data for the internet which wasn’t worth it”.*

(Robbie, A Menu for Change participant, Fife)

Universal Credit is an entirely online system, which is causing significant challenges for many facing digital exclusion<sup>x</sup>. Our research indicates that services which provide space for online access, as well as peer support, advice and advocacy can be a lifeline for people having to use this new system. Improving the availability of such services will help ensure people are accessing their full entitlements and are being supported to address problems they are experiencing with Universal Credit.

*A Menu for Change* is calling for the UK Government to pause the roll out of Universal Credit until the many practical problems identified with its implementation can be resolved.

### Further information:

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<sup>i</sup> The Trussell Trust, 2017. Available from: <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Loopstra & Laydor (2017) *Financial insecurity, food insecurity, and disability: The profile of people receiving emergency food assistance from The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network in Britain*.

[https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/07/OU\\_Report\\_final\\_01\\_08\\_online2.pdf](https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/07/OU_Report_final_01_08_online2.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> Cabinet Secretary's response to the report of the Short Life Working Group on Food Poverty. Available here: <https://beta.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/correspondence/2016/11/food-poverty-response-to-working-group/documents/d522c6bf-f552-4a5f-a8ca-ac7416535713/d522c6bf-f552-4a5f-a8ca-ac7416535713/govscot:document/?inline=true>.

<sup>iv</sup> Loopstra & Tarasuk (2013) Severity of Household Food Insecurity is Sensitive to Change in Household Income and Employment Status among Low-Income Families. *Journal of Nutrition Science*.

<sup>v</sup> Scottish Government, 2017. *Poverty in Scotland*. Available from: <https://beta.gov.scot/news/poverty-in-scotland/>

<sup>vi</sup> Trussell Trust (2017) Early Warnings Universal Credit and Food Banks: <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/04/Early-Warnings-Universal-Credit-and-Foodbanks.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/nine-scottish-councils-spend-8million-11410408>

<sup>viii</sup> Citizens Advice, *Universal Credit and Modern Employment: Non-traditional work*.

<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/Global/CitizensAdvice/welfare%20publications/Universal%20Credit%20and%20non-traditional%20employment.pdf>

<sup>ix</sup> Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change project (2017):

<http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/WP-UCInq-WelCond-submn-Oct17.pdf>

<sup>x</sup> Citizens Advice Scotland (2018):

[https://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/cas\\_disconnected\\_report.pdf](https://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/cas_disconnected_report.pdf)