

Universal Credit and Hunger:

Moving the conversation on



Dear friend

I was really delighted to spent time with you last April at the Methodist Women in Britain weekend in Swanwick talking about *Oceans of Justice, Rivers of Fairness* and exploring craftivism and hunger.

At conference, many women hand-crafted napkins for their MPs and wrote to them about Universal Credit and hunger. We have heard how your MPs appreciated the gifts and have engaged positively and constructively with the letters.

The napkins and the letters have started a relationship and a conversation in many cases. How can this be taken forward? Perhaps you received a letter but you're not sure how to respond. This resource suggests what you can do next.

Why it's important to keep talking about hunger

Recent reports from the National Audit Office and the Trussell Trust amongst others indicate that Universal Credit continues to cause hunger and hardship. Foodbank use has risen by 13% across the country over last year. But in areas where Universal Credit has been rolled out, foodbank use has risen by a staggering 51%.

Key reasons why Universal Credit causes hunger are that the administration is error prone and difficult to navigate, the design includes a number of long waits and the levels of benefit are very low – especially for families with children. Keeping this issue in the forefront of MPs' minds is vital if the changes needed to prevent hunger are to be put in place.

How have MPs responded to letter from members of Methodist Women in Britain about hunger?

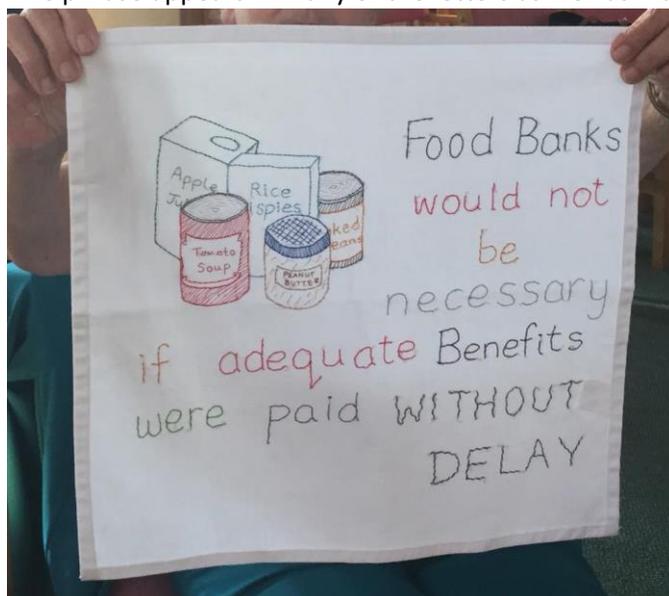
MWiB members have kindly sent the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) copies of their replies from MPs. We have analysed these and found a number of themes emerging. This is partly because many contained sections from centrally produced standard letters.

This resource aims to help you to engage with messages contained in a letter from your MP – and to reply to it in order to reinforce the important message that we must measure hunger if we are to improve UC.

Themes

“People visit foodbanks for a variety of reasons”

This phrase appears in many of the letters as well as many other Government communications.



It is absolutely true that there are other reasons for visiting a foodbank but **Universal Credit is a large and growing cause of foodbank use.** The Trussell Trust has shown that Foodbank use has grown by 13% over the last year. But in Universal Credit full service areas (areas where Universal Credit is rolled out to all claimants) there has been a rise in foodbank use of 51%). Independent experts including charities and now the Government's own auditors agree that UC leads to hardship. Improving UC will not empty foodbanks – but it would make a substantial start.

“Work is the best route out of poverty”

This statement occurs frequently and is more a statement of belief than evidence. It is important to recognise that foodbank use, relative child poverty and even destitution have increased despite increases in employment.

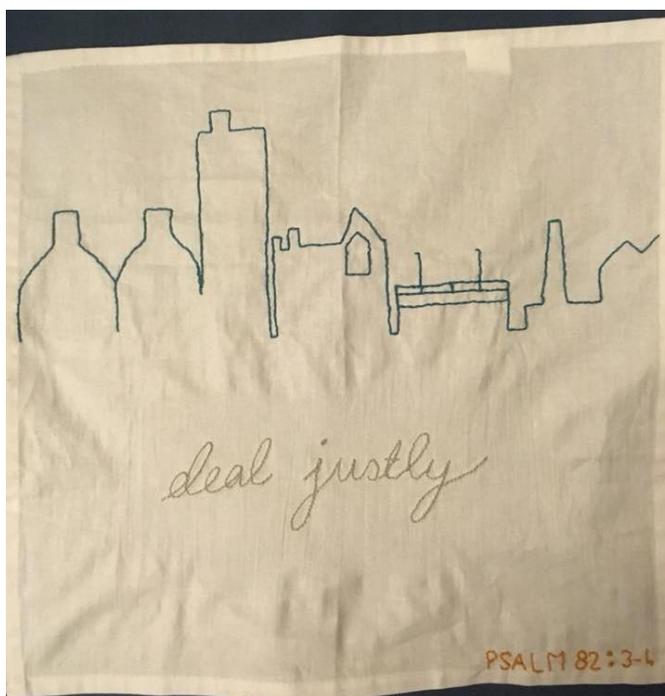
The relationship between work and poverty is increasingly complex, with low pay alongside variable and insecure work blurring the distinction between “in-work” and out-of-work”. While work reduces the risk of poverty, the levels of in-work poverty are at an all-time high. 3.7 million workers – 1 in 8 - live in poverty despite employment. Two out of three of the 4.1 million children in poverty in the UK live in working families.

Statistics tell us that work is not a certain route out of poverty as, when a person receiving out-of-work benefits gets a job, around a third of the time they will remain in poverty.

“An economy that works for everyone”

This phrase appears in every letter from a Conservative MP, perhaps not surprising as it is the Conservative Parties current key economic message. It is placed next to statements around improving the incomes of the poorest eg: “record numbers of jobs”, “pay cheques rising faster than inflation”, “income tax cut” and Minimum Wage rises.

All of these points are true and their effect in directing money towards the poorest working families is to be welcomed. It should be noted however that the groups who most often need help from foodbanks – those with health conditions or caring responsibilities that prevent them from working – cannot benefit from jobs, wage rises or income tax cuts.



However even for those in work the list omits the largest factor influencing the incomes of the poorest – which is reductions to benefits. Both Government and independent experts recognise that benefit cuts dwarf the positive effects of tax cuts and pay rises¹.

¹ An Institute for Fiscal Studies slideshow on the distributional effects of policy <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/10190> and a more detailed report <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/8047>

“Benefit sanctions are justified”

A number of the letters mention benefit sanctions and make claims justifying the sanctions regime.

Benefit sanctions are a punishment which remove benefits from a person normally for one month (but it can be for up to 3 years). People are punished if they are judged not to be obeying Jobcentre instructions. These instructions specify 35 hours of activity a week aimed at improving the person’s earnings. This activity includes things like attending appointments, courses or applying for enough jobs each week. People can be sanctioned if they fail to do any of these things. Universal Credit for the first time introduces sanctioning, not only for people who are seeking work, but also for people in low-paid work.

Just as with Universal Credit, there has been no evaluation of the Sanctions regime to see if it drives people to hunger and foodbanks. The Government’s own auditors criticised the sanctions regime, saying that there was no evidence it helped people into work long term and that it harmed those with disabilities. Moreover their report agreed with churches and charities that sanctions are likely to cause hardship and foodbank use, and expressed concern that the Government had not investigated these effects itself.

“Universal Credit mirrors the world of work for people”

The claim is made that Universal Credit helps people get used to being in a working environment – eg being paid monthly in arrears.

Universal Credit is based around a monthly assessment cycle with each payment made 4-5 weeks in arrears – leading to a minimum 5 week wait for a first payment. Government figures indicate 1 in 5 claimants must wait longer. Many others are unable to start the process of claiming because of problems with the IT or documentation etc, but these waits are not included in the Government’s figures.



This monthly payment cycle mirrors the working patterns of more affluent people in regular salaried employment. For those paid weekly or fortnightly – who are the majority of working UC claimants – this is not their pattern and imposing it upon them causes big problems. For example different numbers of weeks in each month lead to different numbers of pay packets each month, which in turn lead to a different UC payment each month. With the two adults in the family being paid on different cycles the families monthly UC is virtually impossible to keep track of which makes things harder for the people Universal Credit is meant to help.

“Universal Credit is now on track”

This is not a direct quote but many of the letters highlight recent changes and indicate that they will fix the problems we are seeing. It is impossible to disprove this assertion but scepticism would not be unwarranted.

Firstly UC has faced repeated problems since 2013 and each time the claim was the latest set of changes was going to fix it. Secondly the main change is to offer already indebted people large loans to cover the 5-week wait for a first payment. The repayments on these loans can be 40% of the families’ living allowance and we are already hearing stories of these repayments driving people foodbanks.

The main point is how can you know if these changes (or any changes) are preventing hunger if you do not measure hunger?

“There is a comprehensive evaluation program”

This phrase appeared in a small number of responses, but is very important if we are to challenge how the success of the Universal Credit programme is to be judged.

The claim is correct. The DWP has a Universal Credit evaluation program focusing on employment outcomes, behaviour and attitude changes amongst claimants, as well as looking at administrative efficiency. There is however no real measure of hardship, hunger or well-being. Even if everyone got a job or changed their attitudes or if every payment was made on time, yet still more children were hungry, the *current* evaluation framework would judge Universal Credit a success. Many churches and Christians would take a very different view and would expect that the British public would agree.

What next?

Do you recognise some of these themes in the letter from your MP? Were there other messages – for example praise of the work churches are doing in running foodbanks – that you could respond to?

Please do write back to your MP

- Remind them that you gave them the handmade napkin!
- Thank them sincerely for writing back to you, and respond to any positive comments they made.
- Then pick up on a couple of the points they made using the material above.
- Conclude by making the point (again) that Universal Credit has to be evaluated on the basis of whether increases or decreases hunger.
- And ask them, if they have not already done so, to write to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions asking him to include a measure of food insecurity in the evaluation framework for Universal Credit.
- Say that you look forward to hearing back from them

- If you have not already done so, you could say you would love to meet with them or welcome them to a particular event at your church.
- And if you feel it's appropriate you could conclude by saying that you know that being an MP is a difficult role, but that you are grateful for all they do, and continue to hold them and their family in your prayers.

Thank you for continuing to build your relationship with your MP. Relationships need work and conversation. We hope it will be the start of something beautiful! Please do let us know how you get on.

Thank you

Rachel Lampard

Rachel Lampard and everyone at the Joint Public Issues Team

