



## Insights into the Impact of Universal Credit on Food Insecurity

**A Menu for Change is a three-year project, funded by the Big Lottery, and managed by Oxfam Scotland, Poverty Alliance, Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland and Nourish Scotland. It aims to reduce the need for emergency food aid by ensuring people across Scotland get the cash, rights and food they need before they are in crisis.**

We are conducting a range of activities to better understand food insecurity and how the need for emergency food aid can be reduced. This briefing is based on interim analysis from our qualitative research with people experiencing food crisis and from our work with local services in Dundee, Fife and East Ayrshire. 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. This evidence strengthens existing calls for an urgent and thorough policy review<sup>i</sup>. It also suggests key areas for action in the short-term, including the need to:

- Improve communication between claimants, local Job Centre staff and central Universal Credit administration to reduce errors and payment delays
- Ensure awareness of *Scottish flexibilities* and support people to make informed decisions on making use of them to help with budgeting and reduce rent arrears
- Engage with employers to increase their understanding of Universal Credit requirements for people in work
- Tackle digital exclusion and invest in advice and advocacy services
- Build trust relationships between claimants, Job Centre staff and wider services.

### **1. The roll out of Universal Credit is increasing food insecurity and local services are struggling to respond**

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>ii</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>iii</sup>.

### **2. Poor communication and administrative errors have both financial and psychological impacts on people claiming Universal Credit**

In addition to built-in challenges, such as the five-week wait before initial payment, our research shows mistakes and lack of communication are compounding problems for Universal Credit claimants. Other research has had similar findings<sup>iv</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. 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.

The Scottish government has introduced *Scottish flexibilities* for Universal Credit to provide claimants the choice of having their rent paid directly to their landlords and to be paid twice rather

than once a month. Ensuring awareness of these options and supporting people to make informed decisions on making use of them is likely to reduce problems of rent arrears and help with budgeting.

### **3. In-work conditionality of Universal Credit can be incompatible with the realities of the labour market**

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. Other evidence indicates that in-work conditionality is currently unrealistic in many cases, and undermining work incentives rather than reinforcing them<sup>v</sup>.

*“I was told that if I walked out my job I'd get sanctioned by the Job Centre. And I said, “How can you sanction me when I don't have any hours?””* Hilary, East Ayrshire

### **4. Investment in support services will help people navigate the system and better meet the requirements of Universal Credit**

Universal Credit is an entirely online system, which is causing significant challenges for many facing digital exclusion<sup>vi</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.

### **5. Building trust with Job Centre staff can help claimants feel better supported**

Our research has highlighted the need to build trust relationships between work coaches and claimants, and the importance of Job Centre staff working in a person-centred way. Ensuring people feel they can seek support from Job Centres and these are able to direct people to wider support services may improve engagement and help ensure people are accessing all they are entitled to.

*“There's a gentleman in the Job Centre who's worked with me in the past, and he knows that I'm computer illiterate... He says any time I go into the Job Centre I don't ask for anybody else, I just says “Can I speak to Allan?””* Brian, East Ayrshire

## **Further information**

Please visit [www.menuforchange.org.uk](http://www.menuforchange.org.uk), follow @MenuforChange or call 0141 285 8877.

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<sup>i</sup> Citizens Advice Scotland Calls for Halt to Universal Credit (2017): <https://www.cas.org.uk/news/press-release-citizens-advice-scotland-calls-halt-universal-credit>

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

<sup>iv</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>v</sup> See for example: <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/An-impossible-bind-requirements-to-work-under-Universal-Credit.pdf>; and <http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Commons-Work-Pensions-Cttee-UC-Inquiry.pdf>

<sup>vi</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)