

Crisis support schemes run by local authorities are failing to operate effectively with increasing numbers of destitute people turning instead to food banks and other voluntary agencies for help, according to a report published today.

Local authority-run schemes to provide food, fuel and furniture to people in crisis (Local Welfare Assistance) are helping relatively few people compared to the former Social Fund, leaving voluntary and other statutory agencies trying to fill the gap, the report from The Children's Society and the Church of England warns.

The report, *Not Making Ends Meet*, concludes that a lack of publicity, bureaucratic hurdles, and restrictive eligibility criteria appear to be deterring people from applying to Local Welfare Assistance schemes.

People in desperate need are instead relying on a patchwork of crisis support networks including food banks, with effective and consistent provision varying from one area to another, the report finds.

Report authors interviewed a number of families who had both good and bad experiences of local crisis support. One mother fleeing domestic violence with her children barely ate for five weeks while she waited for her new benefit claim to be processed and says if it hadn't been for financial help from friends and family she probably would have returned to her abuser.

Another mother and her three children, who were made homeless after a fire, endured months of bureaucracy to access the help they needed.

The number of awards under the Local Welfare Assistance scheme in the report's seven case study areas in 2016/17 ranged between 3% and 29% of the level of equivalent awards in 2009/10 made under the Social Fund.

The report calls for stronger leadership from local authorities in developing effective crisis support for people in need and for the Government to provide more funding and set minimum standards for these schemes.

The Children's Society Chief Executive Matthew Reed said: "Families in need of financial crisis support are often experiencing one of the hardest times of their life, such as fleeing domestic violence or experiencing a serious mental or physical health problem.

"It's vital that when they need help to buy food or nappies, put money on the electricity meter or replace a broken fridge that they can access this help quickly and easily. Instead, families who are in desperate need may find there is nowhere to turn.

"Local charities are having to step in to provide the safety net that the government and councils used to, relying on donations and volunteers to do so.

"Sadly with more and more people facing crisis, particularly as Universal Credit rollout continues apace, it's becoming increasingly urgent for local crisis support to be coordinated and more consistent so that vulnerable people don't fall through the gaps."

The Bishop of Durham, Paul Butler, said: "A financial crisis can affect anyone, at any time in their lives, and as a country, both state and civil society, we have a moral duty to care for people at the hardest times of their lives.

Voluntary and community organisations show compassion as they support individuals and families in crisis and attempt to make up for current shortcomings in state support.

But all too often, the support is fragmented, and the experience is bewildering to those seeking help, who frequently find themselves in a cycle of repeated crisis.

That is why strong leadership from local authorities is desperately needed, as well as a proper debate on how to fulfil the original vision for local welfare reform. We need holistic, joined-up support that meets people's underlying needs, as well as responding to an immediate financial crisis.

Notes to editors

The report can be read [here](#)

- Key parts of the nationally administered Social Fund were abolished in 2013 with funds devolved to local authorities to provide Local Welfare Assistance but with little guidance as to how the schemes should operate.
- While there is no complete picture of the levels of need, in 2009-10 there were 3.6 million applications for crisis loans from the Social Fund. In 2015, the Joseph Rowntree Trust estimated that 1.2 million people were destitute and in touch with voluntary sector crisis support services that year and in 2017/18 The Trussell Trust reported providing 1.3 million three-day food packages.
- The report authors interviewed front-line staff working with people in financial crisis in charities, such as foodbanks, children's centres and local authorities in seven areas of England. They uncovered some good local practice where charities and local authorities worked together, and those in crisis not only got the financial help they needed, but also support and advice to help prevent them reaching crisis point again.
- The Children's Society is a national charity that works with the most vulnerable children and young people in Britain today.
- The Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs Council is the body responsible for overseeing research and commenting on social and political issues on behalf of the Church. The Council comprises a representative group of bishops, clergy and lay people with interest and expertise in the relevant areas.

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