Urgent action needs to be taken to provide more support for people applying for Universal Credit amid evidence of an increase in demand at food banks in areas where the benefit has been introduced, Church of England bishops say.

More than 30 bishops are backing a petition brought by the End Hunger UK campaign calling for the Government to ‘fix’ Universal Credit, including providing more help and a more flexible system for claimants applying and for those already receiving the benefit.

The campaign is also calling for improvements to the design of Universal Credit and a long-term commitment to ensuring the social security system provides people with an adequate income to afford good food on a regular basis.

The Trussell Trust reports an average increase of 52% in food bank use in areas where Universal Credit has been rolled out for more than a year, as well as rising debt, destitution and hunger.

The call by the bishops comes amid reports that ministers are planning to slow the roll out of Universal Credit.

The Bishop of Durham, Paul Butler, the Church’s lead bishop on welfare issues, said: “We need urgent action to improve the flexibility and support for people on Universal Credit, and a long-term commitment that the social security system will provide enough income for them to afford to feed themselves and their families properly.

"Without such action, we can expect to see more and more people turning to food banks and becoming trapped in poverty.

"The problems we are seeing with Universal Credit at church-run food banks across the country must be resolved before many more people are moved on to the new benefit.”
Notes to editors:

The End Hunger UK campaign believes everyone should have access to good food and nobody should have to go to bed hungry. It aims to end food poverty in the UK by tackling its root causes. It is a campaign jointly supported by many national organisations, including the Church of England; Baptists Together; Caritas Social Action Network; Child Poverty Action Group; Church Action on Poverty; the Church of Scotland; FareShare; First Steps Nutrition; Food Bank As It Is; Food Ethics Council; The Food Foundation; the Independent Food Aid Network; Food Matters; Magic Breakfast; the Methodist Church; Nourish Scotland; Oxfam; Quaker Peace and Social Witness; Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming; The Trussell Trust; and the United Reformed Church.

The petition can be found at http://endhungeruk.org/ucpetition/

Nearly one in five Church of England churches (19%) runs a food bank, either alone or in partnership. Nearly all churches (93%) support food banks in some way, including providing a venue, volunteers, and donations. (According to Church Urban Fund and Church of England research published earlier this year).