

2019 GENERAL ELECTION MANIFESTO ASKS



We can reach a future where no one needs a food bank. We're seeing more and more people being pushed to food banks than ever before, but we know what needs to change.

Nine in 10 of us believe hunger in the UK is a problem.

This General Election, candidates from all political parties must pledge to protect people from hunger by ensuring everyone has enough money for the basics.

As a priority, we want our next government to start working towards a future where no one needs a food bank by:

1. Ending the five week wait for Universal Credit as a first step towards making sure people are paid their benefits more quickly

Universal Credit is the future of our benefits system, and should be pulling people out of poverty. However, Trussell Trust evidence shows how the move to Universal Credit - specifically the five week wait for the first payment - locks many people into hardship:

- The wait leads to acute and immediate financial hardship, pushing people into destitution, housing insecurity, and indebtedness, and worsening households' longer-term financial resilience.
- Support services like food banks are dealing with the fall-out from the minimum five week wait. Food banks in the Trussell Trust network have seen an average 30% increase in referrals 12 months after Universal Credit is rolled out in their local authority, rising to 48% 18 months after roll-out.
- Current DWP support during the wait does not mitigate the wait – in particular, Advance Payments, a loan repaid through automatic deductions, have left claimants deciding between hardship now or hardship later.

Jasmin* is a single parent with four children, who had to make a Universal Credit claim after leaving her abusive ex-partner, and had already been waiting three weeks so far for her first payment. She is living in council housing, and has received an eviction notice. She said that she felt her only option to be able to put a roof over their heads, and pay the bills, would be to go back to her abusive ex-partner. "It's not only feeding my kids but struggling with no hope. [It's] forcing me to go back and live with my abuser because I don't have choices - at least he can support his kids and pay for rent, clothes, bills, school trips and school uniforms. If Universal Credit paid me earlier I would not face all these problems by myself."

(5 Weeks Too Long, 2019)

**name changed to protect identity*

The next government needs to act to prevent more people turning to food banks for help during the wait:

- In the short term, provide much-needed support to people going through 'natural migration':
 - Provide non-repayable grants to new claimants, rather than loans – in line with similar grants introduced to mitigate other welfare reforms.
 - Improve benefit run-ons to support all legacy benefit claimants by extending to people moving from tax credits, and to cover the first three weeks of the wait, bringing the wait in line with legacy benefits.
- In the long term, pilot alternatives to the current assessment cycle, such as more frequent payments, a shorter assessment period, and backdating claims, to remove the need for bridging payments.

2. Ensuring benefit payments cover the cost of living – the value of benefits must be restored to make up for the losses experienced under the benefits freeze

The value of working age benefits has been frozen since 2016, and not increased with the real cost of living since 2013 – as a consequence, people on the lowest incomes have seen a real-terms decline in the value of their benefits. This is an important driver pushing more people to food banks. The highest, and fast-growing, reason for referral to a food bank is having a low income on benefits.

Beyond the benefits freeze, the incomes of some of the most vulnerable in our society have also seen cuts – disabled people and single parent families have seen some of the biggest cuts to benefit entitlements.

We need the next government to:

- Make up for losses caused by the benefits freeze by increasing the real value of working-age benefits in line with the cost of living; as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) plus 2%
- Reverse cuts to disability benefits to reflect the higher cost of living with a disability
- End the two child limit which risks pushing hundreds of thousands of children into poverty.

Oh gosh, [I've used the food bank] quite a few times because I was on such a low income before I got my PIP. I was getting £141 a fortnight. [...] I had a mental breakdown because basically, the amount they give me doesn't cover the costs of when I went in the flat.

(State of Hunger, 2019)

3. Investing in local support by ring-fencing and increasing the money our councils have to provide emergency support when people face a crisis like eviction or a job loss

We know food banks are seeing increased demand because there is nowhere else to turn locally - people have exhausted formal and informal support. Since the devolution of the Social Fund in 2013 and removal of ring-fenced spending for local welfare provision, council-led support has been piecemeal and a postcode lottery. In some areas voluntary organisations like food banks are having to step in – but we know volunteers and emergency food can't replace a proper local safety net.

We need action on the national and local level:

- National: Central government must adequately fund and ring-fence local welfare support, with national guidelines for delivery.
- Local: Councils should commit to continue to fund or restore local crisis provision, and ensure this support is easy to access and in the form of cash grants.

'If it wasn't for using the food bank, I don't know what I would have done, to be honest with you. I would have been in a really bad situation if I hadn't have been able to access any help from the food bank. Probably just gone without, I suppose, because you can't really get any help from the DWP or anything now. They don't do, like, Crisis Loans or anything like that any more, so if it wasn't for the food bank, then I would have to just wait it out 'till I got paid really.'

(State of Hunger, 2019)

These three changes will put money back into the pockets of people who most need our country's support. It's not right that anyone has to walk through the doors of a food bank in the UK. But it's in our power to end the need for food banks - this can change.