

PIW 11

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into: Poverty in Wales Strand 4

Response from: The Trussell Trust



**Submission to the Assembly Communities, Equality and
Local Government Committee (January 2015)**

**(Strand 4) Community based approaches to tackling
poverty**

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1. One of the most striking features during the recent 'austerity years' has been the responses of local communities to address particular needs that have affected the most vulnerable in our communities.

2. Whether this is through the winter night shelter programme that is a regular feature throughout our coldest months or the rise of community foodbanks across Wales – it is heartening to see many individuals, churches and community groups take a lead – apart from any government based or externally organised institution – to ensure that the most vulnerable in society are cared for.

3. It has been my privilege as the Wales Manager for the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network to see how many cities, towns and villages have established foodbanks and ensured that the issue of food poverty has risen up the agenda as well as feeding those who were going hungry in our country.

4. The committee will be aware that the Trussell Trust oversees the largest network of foodbanks in Wales. We have 35 foodbank hubs which between them operate 100 distribution centres in most of the main population centres in Wales. If there is an independent foodbank in a town (e.g. Newtown, Aberystwyth) we would tend not to work in that area unless requested to do so by local agencies or unless the need was shown to be so great that another foodbank was necessary.

5. The latest set of Trussell Trust figures for the six month period up to the end of September 2014 show that Welsh Foodbanks provided emergency food aid to 39,842 (including 13,462 children) which was just under a 20% increase on the same six month period the previous year.

6. The Trussell Trust has provided evidence to this committee during the first strand of this inquiry and as stated previously we will endeavour not to speak to areas beyond our knowledge or expertise. However we do believe it is important that we highlight our experience of how communities – having identified significant and genuine need – have sought to address that need with very little external funding or support.

7. We trust the committee has had the opportunity to read the recommendations of the All Party Parliamentary Group's Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty in Britain (www.foodpovertyinquiry.org) This inquiry having taken evidence (including from the Trussell Trust) for nearly a year has set some aims that could be achieved in Wales as all parties work towards addressing food poverty. The recommendations validate many of our (and others) observations that addressing the issue of food poverty is a complex issue and needs much sustained and informed collaboration between the various agencies involved in this area. We trust the committee will do all in its power to encourage Welsh Government to address this vital issue.

Geographical consistency of anti-poverty initiatives

8. It is noted that there are a limited number of Wales-wide anti-poverty initiatives. Even the Welsh Government's flagship 'Communities First' programme is focussed into those areas considered to be in greatest need. There are obvious reasons for this – finance, personnel and other resource issues.

9. Organisations such as Citizens Advice Cymru which have historically had a wide geographical spread are finding it increasingly difficult to secure the funding to be available as widely and as often as they would like. Funding for many schemes and initiatives are under pressure and many organisations working to relieve and mitigate the effects of poverty are reporting increasing challenges and reductions in the services they are able to offer.

10. We have experienced similar challenges as our network has grown throughout Wales. We partner with nearly a thousand agencies across Wales and have a close view of their challenges in the current climate. Although we do not receive government or local authority funding (except in the odd case) we understand the problems of seeking to operate in an environment where funding for many services is being cut and we are actively seeking to expand and enhance our network of partnerships in many different areas. This does not mean we do not have our challenges – adequate storage space and funding for staff prove the greatest hurdles to being able to feed and support even more of those in need.

11. The network in Wales continues to grow with the need and our foodbanks are responding to the increasing demand by opening new distribution centres – in fact our 100th centre will open in Cardiff on 2nd February. The Trussell Trust foodbank network operates in those areas that would be traditionally considered to be 'impoverished' such as the South Wales Valleys or parts of our cities. A noticeable feature of the growth of foodbanks has been their proliferation in areas often seen as more affluent. We now have foodbanks operating in the Vale of Glamorgan, Monmouth and Brecon. Although these areas may not benefit from support provided by projects such as Communities First they still have significant areas of deprivation and therefore suffer the consequences of welfare change, benefit problems and low incomes in the same way as more traditionally deprived areas.

12. Following the opening of our Pembrokeshire Foodbank (based in Narberth) we now have foodbanks operating in all 22 unitary authorities across Wales.

13. In response to the increasing demand for additional services at our foodbanks including debt, housing and welfare advice we are about to pilot the first 'More than Food' project at our Cardiff Foodbank. This pilot involves placing debt advisors into our foodbanks and for those users presenting with debt as a major referral reason we are able to offer further advice and signposting and in certain cases provide detailed and ongoing financial advice to the user. These pilots are being funded by Martin Lewis (money saving expert) and commence on 1st February for a six month period. If successful they will be rolled out across the network.

14. It is hoped that further projects including housing and welfare advice, Christmas Toy schemes (e.g. The Big Wrap), baby basics and other similar projects will be rolled out across foodbanks in the coming 12-24 months. These potential new projects form part of our 'More than Food' vision and are seen as crucial developments to enable foodbanks to serve their communities more effectively. In some cases it will mean foodbanks stepping in where other services are being cut back. We believe this presents many opportunities for Welsh Government and Local Authorities to work in a more collaborative fashion with third sector partners such as the Trussell Trust

15. It is clear that in many cities and towns foodbanks have become one of the most well supported, appreciated and community focused projects that take place in some areas. Their reputation as warm, friendly and welcoming places to visit (once the initial embarrassment and stigma has been overcome) is beginning to grow and often we find that those who have been helped out by foodbanks will return as supporters or volunteers further adding to their credibility in a community. It is this growing appreciation and affection that causes us to want to develop the 'More than Food' model and to provide more than just a 'sticking plaster' solution to peoples, often complex, challenges.

The effectiveness of area-based anti-poverty programmes such as Communities First

16. This is a difficult area for organisations like us to comment upon. Although we have made some comments above we do not have a lot of interaction with Communities First – this in itself raises some interesting questions. How responsive is a Lead Delivery Board to other organisations and projects within its cluster? How much support should be given to a 'non-communities first' project that is nonetheless helping to achieve the same aims/aspirations as a Communities First project? If a project such as a foodbank or similar that is within a cluster is helping to provide support and encouragement to local groups who are addressing the causes/effects of poverty is there a responsibility to support that organisation? How constrained are local cluster managers from working collaboratively with other external organisations?

17. We are pleased that a number of our foodbanks work with their local Communities First offices very effectively although this is not as common as we would like. We wonder what more could be done to encourage a wider strategic collaboration between the Public and Third Sectors?

18. Others will comment upon the change of direction/strategy of the latest formulation of Communities First and how effective it is in its current format. Clearly Welsh Government believes it to be an effective means of delivering the stated aims of the Tackling Poverty Action Plan. This is evidenced by the amount of money being poured into that programme.

19. Our hope is that there will be an honest evaluation of how intentional and collaborative this key programme has been on the ground in helping the government to tackle poverty in our communities.

Progress on the recommendations of the Assembly's former Rural Development Committee's 2008 Report into 'Poverty and deprivation in Rural Wales'.

20. Having had the opportunity to read the 2008 report it is evident that a number of the problems highlighted in that report still remain. We are confident the committee will hear from others more knowledgeable in this area. However, we would make two observations.

21. Firstly – food poverty is an issue that respects no boundary between urban and rural areas (however they may be defined). We have foodbanks that operate in each county of Wales that (according to this report) may fall under the classic definition of a rural area. Indeed one of the latest

foodbanks to begin operating last year was Pembrokeshire County Foodbank based in Narberth but with distribution centres already open across the county with more being discussed. This foodbank operates alongside the excellent work being undertaken by PATCH in the same county. We also have foodbanks operating in Flintshire, Carmarthenshire and 3 foodbanks in Powys. Of course the main concentration of food aid provision is in the major towns and cities along the M4 corridor and the Valleys which have the greatest population densities but there is high demand in our more rural areas also. The reason for referrals also tend not to be markedly different – welfare delays/change, low income and debt. Although there may be good levels of employment in some rural areas the level of wages tends to be relatively low and as a consequence once a crisis hits people in rural areas are often forced to need a foodbank because they may not have the levels of reserves available to withstand such crisis or financial shock. Long term financial pressures often squeeze income levels and this is especially true in rural areas leading to low resilience levels.

22. The second observation we would make on the 2008 report concerns recommendation 4:

“The Committee recommends that as part of the Financial Inclusion Strategy the Assembly Government recognises the importance of the voluntary sector, particularly the Citizens’ Advice Bureau, and local authorities in encouraging benefit take-up and ensures that both sectors are adequately resourced to continue providing these essential services.”

23. We would have an obvious question around this recommendation. Has the Welsh Government ensured that the importance of the voluntary sector has been recognised and have adequate resources been provided to ensure that essential services are maintained. We would further ask whether Welsh Government is able to adjust quickly to provide support to organisations like our own that develop from the ‘ground up’ and although not established by national government provide an essential part of the supportive framework in our society.