

# Britain: Soup kitchens become part of mainstream welfare provision

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28 November 2012

Since the outbreak of the economic crisis in 2008, there has been a huge expansion in the UK of soup kitchens, known euphemistically as food banks, as a result of growing poverty.

Some 13 million now live below the poverty line at a time of high unemployment and cuts to welfare. New legislation will for the first time make charities, rather than the welfare state, the main provider of emergency food supplies to those fallen on hard times.

From next April, the central government-administered Social Fund, which provides emergency loans and grants, will be abolished as a result of the 2012 Welfare Reform Act and the responsibility handed over to local authorities. The new funding is set at 2005 budget levels and not ring-fenced (protected), so local authorities will inevitably cut the number of emergency loans and refer those in trouble to food banks instead.

The largest charity involved in providing emergency food supplies, the Christian-based Trussell Trust, has seen the number of requests rise from 26,000 in 2008/2009 to nearly 130,000 last year and expects 500,000 by 2015. The Trust has 250 food banks nationwide. Access to food banks is more difficult than soup kitchens because applicants have to obtain a voucher entitling them to three days' worth of food provided from a care professional such as a doctor or social worker. From September 2011, job centres were also permitted to refer unemployed workers to food banks.

Last September, for the first time in its history, the international charity Save The Children, traditionally focused on providing relief and assistance to starving children in Africa and South America, launched a campaign to help British families struggling to feed themselves.

The Trussell Trust says 43 percent of all those referred to the food bank are there because benefits have been stopped or crisis loans refused. The number of people losing their Job Seekers Allowance has soared, and disability tests have led to thousands having their benefits cut by as much as £30 out of £100 a week.

A Trussell Trust spokesperson also explained, "You'd expect people on welfare payments to be the people who would find themselves in a crisis but what we are seeing is a rising amount of working families who are finding it very difficult to put food on the tables for their families and pay the bills each month."

To cite one example, the *Northern Echo* reported last month that "The north-east has seen an explosion in demand for soup kitchens" as a result of the "growing crisis among families who cannot afford to eat." The *Newcastle Journal* ran with the headline, "Dismay as new North East funding crisis takes shape," reporting that by 2014, "Newcastle will lose around £158 per head for essential services." The city's *Evening Chronicle* revealed that the Labour-controlled council "is on the verge of staging the deepest cuts in its history" as a result of losing around 60 percent of its spending power by 2016. In September, council bosses wrote to all of its 10,000 staff with a voluntary redundancy offer that will remain open for the next three years. One in nine adults are currently registered as unemployed. Some 27,000 families will suffer cuts to welfare payments.

In the neighbouring, relatively better-off city of Durham, the council is proposing similar cuts of around 40 percent by 2017. In 2011, Labour Party council leader Simon Henig set out plans for £123 million in cuts to include 1,950 job losses.

In Wales, where household incomes fell by an

average of £80 per month last year, the number of requests for food has reached a record 23,000. In Scotland, the manager of the Buttle Trust charity said that the need for food and other necessities “has been gradually increasing over the past five years, but in the past six months there has been a significant difference. There is an increasing need for basic items that people don’t have any means of getting, such as replacement clothing for children, or beds.”

Across Europe, recent data compiled by the European Commission shows that some 40 million people are suffering “severe material deprivation,” yet the €500 million food aid budget will be cut by a third in 2014. In October of this year, the Spanish Red Cross was forced to launch an appeal to support destitute Spaniards.

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat UK government sees the replacement of the right to social welfare by dependency on charity as part of its social counter-revolution against the working class. Environment and Food Minister Caroline Spelman described food banks as an “excellent example of the big society.” Prime Minister David Cameron invited Trussell Trust executive chairman Chris Mould to his Easter celebration at 10 Downing Street this year.

The Trussell Trust worries that “it could become a contractual arm of the welfare state,” but this is already happening. Labour-run council Lambeth is already proposing, while “holding its nose because it is unsure that food banks are a sustainable response to rising poverty,” to provide financial support to Brixton and Norwood food bank. Other councils have expressed the same intentions.

In the US, there are now more than 200 “mega food banks” and a network of about 63,000 food shelters in a country where 46 million Americans—15 percent of the population—are now classed as socially and economically deprived of a basic standard of living.

At a conference on household food security in July 2012, a food and social policy professor, Liz Dowler, described how “food banks conceal realities of poverty and hunger. They let the state off the hook from their obligation to ensure all have the means to live, and from showing political leadership to grapple creatively with poverty.”

American writer Jack London had the right idea in his eloquently written 1908 novel “*The Iron Heel*”. Speaking of her revolutionary socialist husband, Avis declares, “I had become convinced that Ernest was right when he sneered at charity as a poulticing of an ulcer. Remove the ulcer, was his remedy; give to the worker his product; pension as soldiers those who grow honourably old in their toil, and there will be no need for charity. Convinced of this, I toiled with him at the revolution, and did not exhaust my energy in alleviating the social ills that continuously arose from the injustice of the system.”



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