



Ending the need for food banks

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Next page: Emergency support should cover short-term cost increases to do with raising children, one-off costs (eg, essential white goods), transitional payments at times of life shocks (eg, relationship breakdown) and emergency payments after an unexpected crisis (eg, redundancy or bereavement).

Emergency support is financial and in-kind support provided by local authorities in England and Scotland, and by the Welsh government. What role can it play in reducing demand for food banks and food aid in Britain? CPAG has just concluded a two-year research project, Ending the Need for Food Banks, to examine how emergency support could be redesigned so it does just that. What could this new system look like?

Emergency support can play a crucial role in reducing demand for food banks. It can step in to help families and individuals through one-off shocks that cause a sudden drop in income or increase in costs, such as the onset of a health problem or the washing machine breaking down. But, in practice, many families are not getting the support they need when they need it, and this is contributing to the rising demand for food banks.

Since the abolition of the discretionary social fund in 2013, the type and level of support provided to

people in need across the UK has varied across nations and local authorities.¹ Delivering emergency support became the responsibility of English local authorities and the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales, but there was no specific duty to provide it. While the Scottish and Welsh governments created the centrally-funded Scottish welfare fund (SWF) and discretionary assistance fund (DAF) respectively, the provision of emergency support (called local welfare assistance schemes) in England has collapsed, leaving people in vulnerable situations without anywhere to turn in a crisis.

In England in 2010/11, £218 million was allocated to help families with emergency costs² (£283 million in 2019/20 prices), compared to less than £41 million spent on local welfare assistance (LWA) in 2018/19. Freedom of Information requests by End Furniture Poverty found that at least 32 local authorities now have no scheme.³ They estimate that at least one in five local authorities no longer operate a LWA scheme, an increase on previous research by The Children's Society, which found one in seven did not have a scheme in 2018/19.⁴



To identify what needs to change to ensure that emergency support best meets people’s needs, we gathered insights from experts on emergency support, a representative cross-section of the public, and low-income families. We held four policy workshops, two citizens’ juries in England and Scotland, and three in-depth interviews with people who had applied for emergency support. We drew on the lived experience of low-income families by engaging participants in other projects including CPAG’s London Calling BAME family panel and Your Work, Your Way project, and the Covid Realities project.

Our vision for emergency support

Emergency support should step in to provide families with support for recurring or short-term events that bring additional costs, and act as a stabiliser when unpredictable life events lead to income shocks. It should be regulated and demanded so that families can know what they are entitled to and in which circumstances.

A member of our London Calling family panel told us:

‘Sudden expenses or challenges can happen to anyone – so we need to make sure there is help out there. It’s not just about making poor decisions or being irresponsible, it’s for emergencies. The

death of a spouse, loss of a job, losing your home; all of these can happen to anyone and we need to make sure there is the right support there.’

We are calling for emergency support to include four types of payment.

- 1) **Key stage development payments** for short-term cost increases associated with raising children that can push families into financial crises. These include costs related to the birth of a child, school transitions and meals during the school holidays. These would complement and learn from already existing payments such as Sure Start maternity grants in England⁵ and Best Start grants in Scotland.⁶
- 2) **Lumpy-cost payments** to cover one-off costs that are difficult to save up for if you are on a persistently low income. They would cover things such as purchasing and replacing essential household white goods, advance rent payments and childcare deposits.
- 3) **Transitional payments** to cover the costs associated with a life shock or transitional phase that can cause a sudden income drop or increase in costs such as homelessness, relationship breakdown, or leaving care or prison. Payments might include, for example, help with furniture once rehoused in a part-furnished or empty property.

- 4) **Emergency payments** to cover the cost of essentials following an unexpected crisis that can cause a sudden drop in, or loss of, income or an increase in costs. Circumstances that qualify someone for an emergency grant would include, for example, redundancy, the onset of a health condition, bereavement, separation or divorce.



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How do we move towards a better system?

Review emergency support provision

The UK government should commit to a review of LWA and the Welsh government should include the DAF in its review of the Welsh benefits system. The Scottish government has already commissioned a review of the SWF.

We need to know how effective emergency support providers are at identifying and measuring residents' needs, who is applying for support and why, whether or not they receive that support (and if not, why), and what is the impact of the support.

Deliver emergency support in line with best practice

We are calling for emergency support providers to:

- provide awards that reflect each family's circumstances, including how long the financial crisis will last and family size;
- inform applicants about the reason for the award decision, and provide them with information on subsequent support;
- advertise emergency support in places people go regularly – eg, supermarkets and schools;
- improve relationships between emergency support staff, third sector organisations and advice agencies to create strong referral pathways and divert those eligible for financial support away from food aid;
- reduce the time between an application for emergency support being made and awarded;
- work towards a cash-first approach for crisis payments (where this is not already happening) so that people have the dignity of making their own choices.

One citizens' jury participant said:

'People asking for emergency help have been through enough without being made to feel like we don't trust them to choose the right baked beans.'

Improve consistency across local authorities in England

Currently, emergency support in England is a postcode lottery. Different local authorities have different names, eligibility criteria and per capita spend for LWA, and some do not have a scheme at all. For LWA to work effectively in England, the system must be better coordinated and more consistent. The UK government should introduce a statutory duty on local authorities to offer a LWA scheme alongside a national strategy for local welfare in England.

In the short term, the Department for Work and Pensions should work with the Local Government Association and local authorities to produce a shared outcomes framework for LWA. A nationally-set framework would improve consistency across England while allowing local authorities to determine how best to achieve it.

One interviewee who had applied for emergency support in a time of crisis felt the rationale behind the eligibility criteria was opaque and the application process onerous. She said:

'I was on the point of giving up, I really was, despite being on everyone's system and classed as vulnerable. It was only when my police case worker got involved that I felt I was getting anywhere.'

Deliver a long-term funding settlement for emergency support

Local authorities in England must have long-term funding settlements to provide LWA. In 2018/19, the per capita spend on emergency support in England was just 73p, compared to £6.49 in Scotland and £3.37 in Wales.⁷ Funding allocation for LWA should align with need to ensure any claimant who satisfies the conditions for an award can access a payment. At the same time, the SWF and DAF would benefit from investment in administration and delivery.



'My partner changed jobs earlier in the month and without [emergency support] we would have had to rely on family/ friends or would have needed to go to a food bank which I don't like doing. My partner works full time and more often than not we have to rely on family and friends to help out with food. I don't like relying on them and I am planning to work once I have passed my driving test with the help of Your Work, Your Way. We cannot live off my partner's working wage and UC for much longer due to the cost of living increases – it isn't working.'

CPAG Your Work, Your Way client, Taunton, two children

It is vital to highlight that emergency support cannot, and should not, stand in for a well-functioning and well-funded social security system. But emergency support plays an important role when people face financial shocks. It needs reform and investment to ensure that people do not need to turn to food banks.



Emergency support should act as a stabiliser when unpredictable life events lead to income shocks.

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Zhané Edwards is CPAG’s parliamentary assistant and also worked on the project.

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Read the full report of the project: ‘You have to take it back to the bricks’: Reforming emergency support to reduce demand for food banks at cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/report/you-have-to-take-it-back-bricks.

Footnotes

1. We did not include Northern Ireland in the study as CPAG does not currently have an office or staff based there
2. Equivalent parts of the discretionary social fund
3. A Nichols, *The State of Crisis Support: Local welfare assistance through Covid and beyond*, End Furniture Poverty, February 2022
4. The Children’s Society, *Leave No Family Behind: Strengthening local welfare assistance during Covid-19*, October 2020
5. A one-off payment to help towards the costs of having a child if you meet certain criteria, including receiving certain benefits
6. A set of one-off payments introduced by the Scottish government in 2018 to help towards the costs of being pregnant or looking after a child, available to those on certain benefits (or whose partner claims those benefits)
7. The Children’s Society, *Leave No Family Behind: Strengthening local welfare assistance during Covid-19*, October 2020



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