



The Scottish Welfare Fund: Evidence from A Menu for Change

A Menu for Change is a three-year project, funded by the Big Lottery, and managed by Oxfam Scotland, Poverty Alliance, Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland and Nourish Scotland. It aims to reduce the need for emergency food aid by ensuring people across Scotland get the cash, rights and food they need before they are in crisis. This briefing summarises our evidence, concerns and priorities regarding the Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF), focusing specifically on Crisis Grants:

- **The Scottish Welfare Fund budget should be protected and increased, both for awards and for staff to deliver it.**
- **The Fund should act as a gateway to other services, helping to prevent future crisis and reduce the need for food bank use.**
- **To ensure consistency and maximise the Fund's effectiveness, investment is needed in staff training and to improve IT infrastructure.**
- **Urgent action is needed to increase awareness of and referral to the Fund by local and national agencies.**

1. The Scottish Welfare Fund is a vital safety net for people facing crisis

The SWF is a unique source of support in the UK. The absence of local welfare assistance schemes outside Scotland is linked to increased pressure on food banks to help people in crisisⁱ. It is essential that the Scottish Welfare Fund can deliver the vital safety net and holistic support it was designed to provide.

SWF Crisis Grants are a vital form of support at times of crisis which enable you to buy exactly what is needed, whether that is food, toiletries or paying an energy bill. Most importantly it restores some dignity, giving you some power to make your own decisions in order to meet your own needs - just like everyone else in society.

Crisis grants have become increasingly important in the context of rising levels of insecure, low-paid work and the impact of UK Government welfare reforms on people's incomes. For example, recent data shows a 52 per cent increase in food parcels given out in Universal Credit full service areasⁱⁱ. Scottish Government data shows that food is the item which by far the most Crisis Grants are awarded for, highlighting the extent to which people accessing the Fund are struggling to meet their basic needsⁱⁱⁱ.

2. The Scottish Welfare Fund has an important role to play as a gateway to other support which can prevent future crisis

The Scottish Government's SWF guidance states that the Fund should take a holistic approach, consider all forms of support an individual might need and build connections with local services to be able to refer on effectively. Done well, this approach can help prevent future crisis by addressing the root causes of the problem.

From our research, we know people often turn to food banks having not been offered or had access to forms of financial support that should have been made available to them. Given that food bank help has limited impact beyond the immediate relief from hunger, it is essential that the SWF can provide timely and holistic support if we are to meet the Scottish Government's commitment to reduce the need for food banks and prevent food insecurity in Scotland.

There are examples of good practice in SWF delivery which can be learnt from. For example, North Lanarkshire Council's Food Poverty Referral Gateway ensures that all presentations of food crisis are referred to the SWF as the first port of call. This allows cash grants to be awarded before a food parcel is sought and referrals to be made to appropriate services such as welfare rights advice, housing support and debt advice, to help address the root cause of the problem and prevent future crises. This approach has seen a 22 per cent drop in food bank referrals locally.

We strongly recommend seeking evidence from North Lanarkshire Council on the operation of the Food Poverty Referral Gateway and the integral role of the SWF.

3. Protecting and increasing both the budget for awards, and for staff to administer the Scottish Welfare Fund, will improve the crisis response

Our project work suggests SWF staff often struggle to have adequate capacity to meet demand: *"we're taking approximately 1,600 calls a month. We're two staff. We are inundated with calls. Inundated."* (SWF team member).

If you are in crisis, and have no money to buy food, waiting more than a day for a crisis grant is inadequate. Importantly, the Scottish Government figures show that some local authorities are frequently able to make crisis grant decisions on the same day they receive all the information required to make a decision. For example, Perth and Kinross and Falkirk Councils made 99 per cent of decisions on the same day in the last quarter. However, in Glasgow only 3 per cent of decisions were made in that time. It is important that learning is gathered and shared on how councils can improve their decision-making times.

Our research and project work in Dundee, Levenmouth and East Ayrshire also indicates the significant pressure which the roll out of Universal Credit is placing on the SWF, welfare rights advice and other local services.

Changes to the benefits system, and Universal Credit in particular, are leaving people for increasingly extended periods of time with no income at all. In this context, the SWF will need to be able to provide larger grants for longer, and will therefore require an increase to the Fund's overall budget to ensure people are not being left destitute.

4. Investing in staff training and IT systems will improve consistency of support and reduce errors

Evidence has also been gathered of problems and inconsistencies with SWF delivery. For example, the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman's 2017 review highlighted examples of: poor communication with applicants; statutory guidance not being followed; and incorrectly interpretation of the available evidence^{iv}. We are also aware that problems with the IT systems in some areas are leading to errors in decision-making.

Our own research and work with local service providers has highlighted examples of people experiencing difficulties accessing the Fund and inconsistencies in the service received.

Scottish Government data also suggests inconsistencies in award size, success rate and onward referring between local authorities. Further research is needed into the reasons for these differences and to identify more examples of best practice.

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ⁱ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2017/07/04/local-welfare-provision-local-jigsaw/>

ⁱⁱ <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/trusselltrust-documents/Trussell-Trust-Left-Behind-2018.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Social-Welfare/swf/SWF31Dec2017>

^{iv} <https://www.spsa.org.uk/scottishwelfarefund/sites/scottishwelfarefund/files/Documents/SWFAnnualReport2016-17.pdf>