

Mum forced to go to a foodbank weeks after giving birth

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Leanne Keating has worked since the age of 16. But she was left penniless and with a tiny baby after the company that employed her closed.

So just weeks after giving birth to Harley, her second child, Leanne was forced to go to a local foodbank for a three-day emergency food parcel.

Her visit was one of 26,937 made to Greater Manchester's foodbanks between April and September this year. This is the highest figure in the north west according to the Trussell Trust which campaigns against poverty.

For Leanne, 34, accepting food from a charity was something she never thought she would have to do.

She said: "I was working full time until February but I had pre-eclampsia and the doctor said I should start maternity early.

"I had just had my baby and the manager closed the company down. I ended up in a dispute over my maternity leave pay.

"I had to wait five months before it was sorted out as there was an investigation carried out into the company. My tax credits were also stopped during that time. I had to use the foodbank five times."

Mum relied on **foodbank** after giving birth

Unable to pay the rent she was also forced to move into council accommodation with her boys. After speaking with a healthcare visitor she was referred to [Oldham](#) foodbank.

The borough's food banks handed out emergency supplies on 2,693 occasions between April and September.

Leanne - who also has a seven-year-old autistic son Aiden - says she burst into tears on her first visit. "I was scared because I felt like I was not doing my job as a mum. It was hard asking for help because I have always worked and I've always been so careful with money.

"It was just a complete shock. I thought 'how am I supposed to put food on the table?' I was even struggling to buy baby milk.

"At the foodbank they made me feel so welcome - they were absolutely lovely. I was really scared when I first went in. But I took all my paperwork with me and the volunteers put me in touch with the MP and really helped me."

Leanne Keating (Photo: Steve Allen)

After Leanne's tax credits were stopped she was forced to turn to the foodbank another four times while she proved to the DWP that she really was a single parent.

"It was very stressful. I was managing on just £34 a week," she said. "My baby was in special care for two weeks after he was born and I didn't have two pennies to rub together.

"I have worked every day since I was 16 but this can happen to anyone. We've been through six months of hell but I can't wait to go back to work now."

Trussell Trust volunteers say people in traditionally affluent areas have also been forced to use their services. Experts say hunger and poverty are 'classless' problems which affect people from all walks of life. They are now

calling for a direct hotline between foodbank volunteers and local job centres to support people in crisis more quickly and efficiently.

At the Chorlton and Didsbury foodbank there has been a 17 per cent increase in the number of food parcels handed out over the last six months.

Volunteer Michelle Hodges says most clients are struggling with low income and debt problems as well as benefit sanctions.

She said: "We have had people who have had children at local schools but they have been made homeless. So they are living in a hotel outside the area, come in to drop the kids off, go to the food bank and then walk miles back.

"We had one lady who broke down and cried over a bottle of Heinz tomato soup as it was her children's favourite and she couldn't afford it. Another got upset over some kitchen roll because she never realised it would become such a luxury."



Volunteers Matthew Brazzolotto, Dan O'Brien , Eleanor Hammerton and Amy Wisenfeld at the Manchester Central foodbank (Photo: Andy Lambert)

Over in Stockport, volunteers have provided help to people in crisis of 4,009 occasions - a huge increase on last year's figures.

Project manager Nigel Tedford says this reflects a change in the type of people arriving at foodbanks. He has seen more requests for help from large families struggling to make ends meet, single people and the most vulnerable in society such as the elderly and disabled.

He added: "I had a client a few days ago who was completely and utterly housebound and had no family nearby. Nobody had knocked on their door to ask if they needed help.

"We get people coming to the food bank from all postcodes and all walks of life. Poverty can affect everybody whether they are upper class, middle class or working class.

“We are finding an increasing number of people who have part time jobs on zero hours contracts and find it difficult to make ends meet. Such as single mums limited in the hours they can work because of childcare and struggling with the cost of living increasing.”

The Trussell Trust is now calling on the Department of Work and Pensions to set up a direct telephone ‘hotline’ between foodbanks and local job centres.

Benefit delays and changes account for 44 per cent of referrals to Trussell Trust foodbanks. Volunteers say a significant amount of time is spent on hold to DWP phone lines on behalf of those in need.

Chief executive David McAuley welcomed recent moves by the DWP to look again at disability benefits and Work Capability Assessments and said a telephone hotline could build on this.

He said: “To stop UK hunger we must make sure the welfare system works fairly and compassionately, stopping people getting to a point where they have no money to eat.”

Across the country the charity has issued 519,342 emergency food parcels over half a year, putting it on course to distribute the highest number in its 12-year history.