

Catholicism

# Catholic church labels UK welfare policy heartless and cold

Report by Caritas Social Action Network blames years of 'computer says no' culture of lacking compassion as country returns to 'Victorian levels of poverty'

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Charities and churches say the coldhearted remoteness of decision making has seen an increase in the use of foodbanks and shelters. Photograph: Mimi Mollica

Five years of welfare reform have turned the UK's social security system into a remote, punitive and bureaucratic process lacking human judgment and compassion, the Catholic church's charity arm has said.

Caritas Social Action Network says jobcentre and Department for Work and Pensions operations are characterised by a "computer says no" culture that has made many of its clients' lives increasingly desperate.

Key DWP decisions about whether to give or remove support to vulnerable claimants were often taken in distant call centres, with little understanding of local circumstances or the complexity of their clients' lives, it said.

A cold, one-size-fits-all approach focused on process and efficiency rather than human connection had replaced a system supposedly based on a culture of compassion and support, it added.

Charity workers warned that the culture change it made it "increasingly difficult for clients to survive, let alone flourish". Many social security recipients found dealing with the DWP had helped trigger negative physical and mental effects.

The report concludes: "One of the most devastating impacts of welfare reform and change in welfare culture is the erosion of human dignity and self worth".

The report is the latest in a series of interventions on welfare by the Catholic church. Last year, the leader of the Roman Catholic church in England and Wales, archbishop Vincent Nichols, called the government's austerity programme a [disgrace](#) for leaving so many people in destitution.

A group of leading Catholics recently wrote an [open letter](#) to the work and pensions secretary, and prominent Catholic, Iain Duncan Smith, criticising his reforms as incompatible with Christian and Catholic values.

The bishop of Middlesborough, Terence Drainey, introduced the Csan report as a “coherent and genuine picture of the impact of poverty in the UK”. Csan reserves special criticism for what it calls the the DWP’s rigid and severe [sanctions regime](#), which it argues too often stops claimants’ benefits payments for minor infringements of jobcentre rules, even when they have valid excuses.

It calls for a ban on the “inappropriate” practice of sanctioning people with mental health problems or a learning disability, one which it says typifies the shift at the DWP from “compassion to coldness”.

Csan set out a series of recommendations to make the social security system more “person centred and able to respond to the real needs of the individual,” including specialist training for jobcentre staff on dealing with vulnerable clients.

Helen O’Brien, chief executive of Csan, said the welfare system was characterised by a tick-box approach which lacked local connection.

The report is based on interviews with staff and clients at three Csan member organisations: [Nugent Care](#) in Liverpool; [Brushstrokes](#) in Sandwell, Birmingham, and [Caritas Anchor House](#) in Newham, east London.

The charities said they had experienced a 100% increase in demand for services such as foodbanks and debt advice as they responded to what they saw as a “return to Victorian poverty”.

A DWP spokesperson said: “This report is based on a very small sample size and therefore isn’t a representative analysis. The benefits system we inherited in 2010 was broken, frequently trapping the very people it was meant to help in a state of welfare dependency. Our reforms are making it easier for people to move from benefits to work, gaining independence from the welfare state.

“We have maintained a valuable safety net for those that need it, while also ensuring that people who can work are given the skills and opportunities to get a job.”

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