

WELFARE

Charities 'the only safety net left' after Tories' benefit cuts

by Paul Donovan

BRUTAL Tory welfare cuts are dumping the responsibility to support Britain's poor and vulnerable onto charities, a new study showed yesterday.

Both benefit claimants and the charities set up to support them have been pushed over the edge by severe reforms, warned the Catholic Church organisation Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN) in its report *The Impact of Welfare Changes*.

"Many of CSAN's charities are racing to keep up with demand," said CSAN trustee chairman Bishop Terence Drainey.

"The stories included in this report ... all illustrate the very real human impact which recent changes to the welfare benefit system, and especially

the sanction regime, have had on the lives of people up and down our country."

The removal of free phone lines for benefit claimants has made resolving their problems much more difficult.

Caritas **Anchor House** director Keith Fernett said that the personal connection to the public has been removed, leaving claimants to struggle with government "decision-makers" operating from call centres, working from scripts.

And the removal of housing benefit from those aged 18 to 25 — in the belief that this will make them stay with their family — would just exacerbate an already dire situation, said Nugent Care New Beginnings service's Peter Boylan.

Instead, said Mr Boylan, people will just move around

more.

According to Teresa Clements, manager of Birmingham's Brushstrokes Centre, young people are often leaving home because of overcrowding.

"There can be family breakdown, domestic abuse all contributing to forcing people out," she said.

The report calls for an end to the use of financial sanctions for people with mental health problems and for the chance for claimants to provide an explanation, rather than be sanctioned for a first "offence."

It also calls for training for jobcentre employees on how to help and assist vulnerable people with some joint working with charities.

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