



WELFARE TRACKERS

No Light at the End of the Tunnel:
Tracking the impact of Welfare Reform across Glasgow

*“While things like bereavement and addiction
are traumatic there is often light at the end of the tunnel.
With welfare reform there’s no light at the end of the tunnel.
It just seems to go on and on....”*

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This report is a result of a collaboration between
The Poverty Alliance, GCVS and SDF.

The Poverty Alliance is the national anti-poverty network in Scotland. It aims to combat poverty by working with others to empower individuals and communities to affect change in the distribution of power and resources. The Poverty Alliance's current priorities are to address low incomes in and out of work, to support the development of services that address poverty, to support the participation of people with experience of poverty in policy development and to address negative attitudes towards people in poverty. GCVS has been supporting Glasgow's voluntary and community sector for almost 40 years and has 600 member organisations across the city working in every field of voluntary sector activity.

GCVS provides services that help voluntary organisations to be sustainable and to grow and represents the views of our members to key public sector agencies and government. SDF are a national resource for expertise on drug issue and have been operating for 27 years. SDF have extensive experience in delivering projects and services which includes supporting drug users to change their lives, providing training to agencies and service providers, supporting volunteers and working with policy makers and services to help tackle problematic drug use in Scotland. SDF are a major resource of information, advice and research on drug issues in Scotland.

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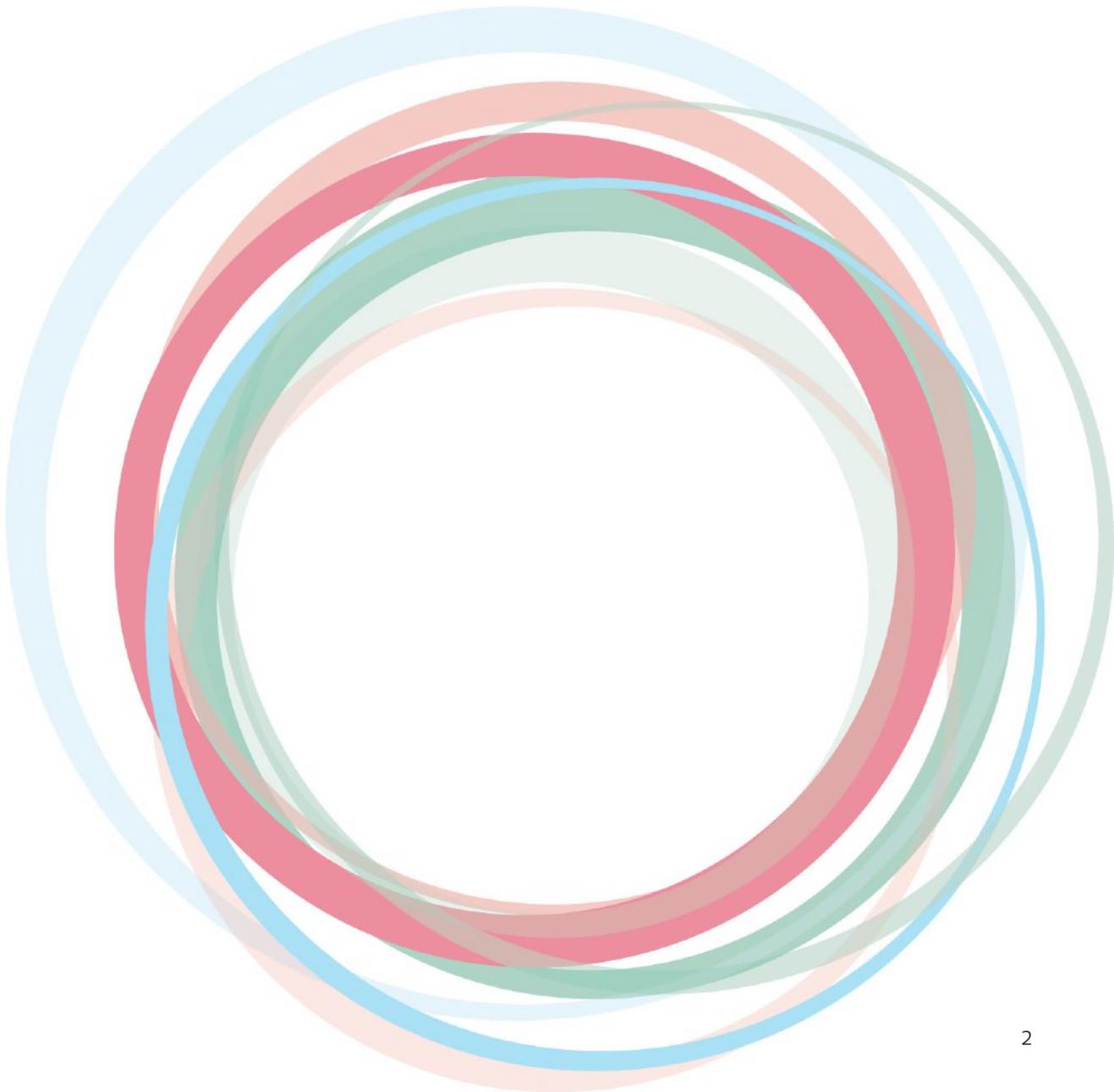
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1 – Introduction

This report sets out the findings of The Tracking Welfare Change in Glasgow (Welfare Trackers) Project funded by the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) Support and Connect Fund between April 2014 and November 2015.

The project was a collaboration between 3 prominent voluntary sector organisations, Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector (GCVS), Scottish Drugs Forum (SDF) and The Poverty Alliance and represented a partnership approach to researching and mitigating against the impacts of welfare reform & benefit changes.

The project was developed as a partnership in recognition of the expertise, specialisms and networks that each organisation could provide or access thereby increasing the reach and effectiveness of the project.

Over the last decade the UK welfare benefit system has undergone significant change. A number of changes were introduced by the Labour Government before the financial crisis in 2008, including changes to sickness benefits and the implementation of the Work Capability Assessment. However, under the coalition Government, which came to power in 2010, changes were implemented at a much greater speed and legislation, The Welfare Reform Bill 2012, which would radically change the way welfare benefits are paid, was introduced.

The main changes implemented between 2010 and 2015 included:

- The introduction of the Under Occupancy Charge (The Bedroom Tax);
- The Benefit Cap – a cap on the amount of money individuals and families can receive in benefits;
- The introduction of the mandatory reconsideration process; and
- The introduction of Universal Credit (UC)– one benefit to replace out of work benefits, housing benefit, child tax credit and working tax credit.

During this time sanctions for Jobseekers Allowance (JSA), which had always played some part in the benefits system, were made more severe, both in the amount of money that could be sanctioned (100%) and the length of time the sanction could be applied (between 4 and 152 weeks). Additionally sanctions were introduced for those receiving Work Related Activity Employment & Support Allowance. The policies of the current UK government, who came to power in May 2015, will see a continuation of these changes with groups previously protected e.g. those in receipt of Working Tax Credit now facing cuts to their household income as a result of the Welfare and Work Bill 2015. Glasgow, in particular, has been hit hard by the changes.

For example the Calton ward in Glasgow will be impacted the most, losing £880 per adult of working age per year, whereas for the least affected ward, St Andrews in Fife, the figure is £180. In addition, a dozen Glasgow wards figure prominently among the list of worst affected places in Scotland.¹

Welfare Trackers sought to ensure that individuals and organisations, in particular smaller 3rd Sector organisations, across Glasgow were pro-actively informed about the changes to welfare in order that they could respond more effectively, and that policy making at the local and national level could be informed by experience on the ground.

The project provided relevant information to a wide range of groups and organisations in the city, through the networks of GCVS, SDF and the Poverty Alliance. The purpose was to ensure that information was delivered to those who needed it, rather than waiting for individuals to seek advice. It was hoped that this would help prevent some problems developing, and would also build the capacity of groups and organisations throughout the city to respond more effectively to welfare changes.

The project also tried to address the information gap experienced by community and voluntary organisations, and policy makers at the local and national levels. We hope that the information in this report and the methods used will provide a model of good practice which will help:

- Others engage communities and organisations across the welfare reform agenda;
- Track the impact of welfare reform on individuals and organisations; and
- Individuals, communities and organisations find solutions to mitigate against the negative impacts of welfare reform and benefit changes.

2 – What We Did

Introduction

Welfare Trackers aimed to increase the capacity both of people directly affected by welfare reform and the organisations and agencies supporting them to better understand and deal with its impacts. Together the Poverty Alliance, SDF and GCVS worked directly with community members and their support organisations to ensure that they were aware of changes to the welfare system. We collected evidence on the impact of welfare reform at local level and have used, and will continue to use the evidence gathered to ensure that local and national policy reflects the needs of those affected by welfare changes.

We used two methods to engage with individuals, organisations and agencies including:

- Awareness Raising Workshops
- City-wide Network Events

In addition to raising awareness and building capacity around the welfare reform agenda we wanted to track the impacts of welfare reform & benefit changes over time, in relation to their impacts on people and on services. We used a number of research methods, including qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys, which allowed us to get a real sense of the challenges being experienced across Glasgow. Early on in our project we built relationships with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), each partner acknowledged the importance of developing positive relationships to ensure that we could address any challenges directly, and also suggest improvements and solutions to the issues being experienced at local level.

The remainder of this section sets out in more detail the methods we employed to deliver the project.

Footnotes

1 Welfare Reform Committee, Scottish Parliament (2014) Report on Local Impact of Welfare Reform 5th Report, 2014 (Session 4)

Awareness raising workshops

A total of 95 workshops were delivered over the course of the project and were central to achieving our aims of informing and building capacity of individuals and organisations. We engaged, on average, between 6 to 10 people, at each Workshop, however in some cases as many as 25 people participated.

Through this method we engaged with a large number of 3rd sector organisations and those using their services.

We engaged with organisations working across the spectrum of inequalities and vulnerability including:

- Mental Health
- Homelessness & Housing
- Addiction & Recovery
- Kinship Carers
- Physical Health & Disability
- Refugee & Asylum Seekers
- Black and Minority Ethnic Groups
- Lone Parents

Through these workshops we were able to:

- Provide information on the most recent changes, or those about to come;
- Help individuals and staff prepare for the changes, supporting 3rd sector services to identify any changes they would have to implement as a result of the change;
- Provide an opportunity for people to share their experiences and find support and help through their peers.

2 – What we did

City Wide Networking Sessions

18 City Wide Networking Sessions were delivered over the life of the project. We engaged around 100 organisations and 700 individuals. These sessions aimed to help organisations from across Glasgow build links and partnership and share learning and best practice.

The sessions provided an overview of welfare reform issues with protected space for participants to discuss particular issues e.g. sanctions, the introduction of Personal Independence Payments (PIP) and the impact on staff wellbeing and volunteering.

At these sessions we ensured that an expert was present, to answer any immediate questions or points of clarification needed. We also tried to ensure a representative from the DWP was in attendance, to help services build links and to help the DWP understand the challenges and issues being experienced by services and citizens across Glasgow.

“The welfare trackers meetings have been great and a real eye opener. I enjoyed these meetings and think they provided a very informative outlook on the changes in reform. I knew quite a lot about PIP and UC before the meeting but I still managed to learn new things about the reforms. It is always good to keep the information up to date and look at how everyone else is coping with the reforms.”

(Participant, World Café networking event)

Research and Tracking

The research element of the project was designed to access more in depth information about the impact of welfare reform. From this we were able to publish reports and briefings. These are the impact on support agencies in Glasgow, Universal Credit, staff wellbeing, Welfare Reform and families and Personal Independence Payment. We also collected case study materials from individuals which highlighted the, often severe, impact that welfare changes were causing to people across Glasgow. The findings of the research and tracking are published in separate reports.

Learning and Application

The analysis from the information and experience gathered over the course of the project is used throughout this report and has been used to make the policy and practice recommendations at the end of this report.

Each partner organisation has used, and will continue to use the evidence gathered to try to influence and inform policy at local and national level and we invite others to do the same.

3 – Project Findings

The Impact of Welfare Change in Glasgow

Introduction

There were a number of clear themes that have emerged from the project. They emerged from the workshops, the research and tracking activities and the networking sessions. They were not confined solely to welfare reform but instead reflected the impact that welfare reform has brought in its wake. The remainder of this section examines these themes.

Hardship

The most significant theme that arose across all the strands of the project was the scale of the hardship being caused by welfare changes. People were having their incomes severely reduced and in some instances people were being left without any money and yet still expected to comply with the requirements attached to their benefit entitlement.

Across the UK, the most visible impact has been the rise in the number of foodbanks since 2010. During 2008/09 across the UK, the Trussell Trust handed out 25,899 emergency 'three-day' food parcels. By 2014/15 this had risen to almost 1.1 million.² 'Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty calculated that 20,247,042 meals were given to people in food poverty in 2013/14 by the three main food aid providers (Trussell Trust, Fareshare and Food Cycle). This is a 54 percent increase on 2012/13.'³

Current estimates suggest that around 35 organisations in Glasgow are providing food aid of one form or another.⁴ Although as one workshop participant noted 'those who arrive at foodbanks etc. may only be the tip of the iceberg. It's a bigger problem than we are seeing.' Evidence from our workshops and through visits to community based organisations suggests that acceptance of benefit sanctions is common with people just getting on as best they can. Many of the groups that we engaged in the project to also run a voucher referral scheme to help their clients access emergency food aid in the area.

Footnotes

2 <http://www.trusselltrust.org/stats>

3 Cooper N, Purcell S and Jackson R (2014) Below the Breadline: The Relentless Rise of Food Poverty in Britain

4 http://www.understandingglasgow.com/indicators/poverty/food_banks

This is also supported by evidence from community organisations across Glasgow through Welfare Trackers research. Drawing on family and other support networks was the most common coping mechanism amongst their clients when faced with severe hardship.

For most people, going to the food bank was the last resort after exhausting options with friends and family support networks. Project participants were very worried about people facing hardship due to sanctions, and about going without basic necessities including food, housing costs and heating. They also expressed concern about the number of people who would not qualify for emergency support during the first two weeks of their sanction, but who may be vulnerable and without access to any support during this period.

As benefits are paid into bank accounts, financial exclusion was an issue for a wide range of individuals. However this was especially the case for people recovering from experiencing problematic substance use and some migrants. An agency spoke of clients needing to visit up to six financial institutions before being accepted, despite high street banks having basic bank account facilities. Proof of address for those in emergency temporary accommodation proved problematic with high street banks. This also meant an additional burden for key workers, who had to spend time negotiating with the banks as well as increased stress and fear amongst their clients.

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The Impact of Welfare Change in Glasgow

Welfare Reform Case Study: Hardship

Megan (real name withheld) is a single parent in her 50's with a 16 year old dependant still at school. She was a volunteer at her local community project.. After job searching for a while, she got a job working 10 hours a week on a zero hour contract. Megan was not informed by JCP that she still needed to actively look for work, log on and sign on in the run up to her start date. Job Centre Plus told her that she needed to find more work as working 10 hours a week was not enough. Following this, she was given a 13 week JSA sanction which meant that she did not have any money to cater for household needs and her son's bus fares to school. This was a very painful experience which in a way spoiled her joys of finding a new job.

Megan thought that since she had found a job, there was no need to continue her JSA Claimant Commitment requirements. When she was sanctioned, she felt stressed, anxious fearful and let down by the system. Over this period, she encountered a lot of problems trying to survive on a zero hour contract income and as a result spent a lot of time (and money) on the phone dealing with JCP, housing, tax credits and DWP. She was given help through the Scottish Welfare Fund and Discretionary Housing Payments. However, she still had to borrow money from friends and family just to survive. She felt a complete lack of control of all aspects of her life despite having secured work.

Megan was unable to pay essential bills such as phone and television licence. Her local project helped her to cope with her stress and anger. The project also helped her with form filling and phone calls to all relevant agencies. Although there were occasions when her family was without food they had access to the project's foodbank during the sanction period.

Megan has now secured a permanent 16 hours a week contract with a different employer and is happy and doing well. However although she is still making regular phone calls addressing housing related issues, rent arrears and other debt issues that arose as a result of the sanction.

Health and Disability Benefit changes

“While things like bereavement and addiction are traumatic there is often light at the end of the tunnel. With welfare reform there's no light at the end of the tunnel. It just seems to go on and on....”

(Participant; Awareness Workshop)

Although many health and disability benefit changes started in 2006/07, the Coalition Government of 2010-15 saw a step change in how they operated in addition to new measures being introduced. For example, the change from Incapacity Benefit (ICP) to the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) was already in place by 2010, as was the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) for ESA. However, a range of new changes and speeding up of pre-existing policies took place after 2010.

People being migrated from DLA to PIP are assessed under the new process, even those who had previous DLA 'Lifetime Awards'. Concerns were raised by service users and staff who felt the timescale for responding to invitation letters was unrealistic. On a number of occasions this resulted in people losing money and support as their DLA entitlement had run out before they had applied and/or been assessed for PIP.

We identified two trends which seemed to be emerging in relation to PIP:

- Appeals submitted with support from information and advice agencies were yielding high success rates;
- People with mental health issues were losing the mobility component of PIP which they had previously been awarded through DLA.

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The Impact of Welfare Change in Glasgow

Throughout the project we witnessed increased frustration regarding the complexity and challenges of applying for health and disability benefits. Many people who participated in the Welfare Trackers project were very vulnerable people with sensory impairments, accessibility issues, literacy issues, mental health difficulties and/or diagnosed or undiagnosed medical conditions. For many of these people dealing with, what for many, is a simple task e.g. opening & responding to letters, completing an application or making a phone call, is difficult and so they require additional support. Without the right support, claimants and services in Glasgow will struggle to manage the transition from DLA to PIP.

“People with us have 29 hours of support a week. Staff are there all the time. People have their own tenancies. The problem we have is people not opening their mail. We don’t know when their DLA stops and PIP begins. We’re not allowed to open their mail. When we phone the benefit agency our clients fail the security questions constantly. Even though I have a mandate to support the person, they [DWP] still won’t accept this. Sometimes they help but it depends who you’re speaking with – some are really nice and understanding. But because the client group I support can sometimes get abusive, and the minute they get like that the phone goes down.”

(3rd sector employee)

Many participants spoke about their clients’ stress worrying about the loss of DLA as well as managing the impact of losing their DLA. While this impacts most profoundly upon the individuals affected, it also affects the services and staff who support them. They too experience stress and frustration.

Services were aware of people who had committed suicide as a result of benefits changes, and were worried that this will continue – and worsen – with new changes. One service noted that they had seen a significant increase in their suicide intervention work since 2010.

“We have seen an observable increase in alcohol consumption in our client group due to the despondency and fear created by the changes and difficulties of navigating the benefit and accommodation systems.”

(Homelessness and housing support organisation)

For those on Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) the changes were also proving to be extremely stressing. This was especially the case when it came to their Work Capability Assessments (WCA). When claimants first get ESA they are put on the Assessment Rate until their condition is assessed by the DWP. The Assessment Rate is lower and some people participating in the workshops were waiting 10 months before being assessed. If someone is found fit for work at a WCA they immediately lose entitlement to ESA even while they seek a Mandatory Reconsideration. Their ESA is however restored if they go on to Appeal the decision.

Yet this can mean that people are left without any income and lose entitlement to passported benefits. Participants spoke about people being unwilling to claim JSA when found fit for work as they felt conditionality and job seeking activities attached to JSA to be too intimidating and stressful for them. This was especially the case for those with mental health problems.

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The Impact of Welfare Change in Glasgow

Welfare Reform Case Study: ESA

Joanna (real name withheld) is a mother in her mid-fifties who lives on her own. She was a full time carer for her parents for almost 20 years. During that time she got Income Support and Carer's Allowance. Both her parents passed away within the last five years. After this Joanna suffered from depression and was put on ESA. A review of her entitlement to ESA in 2014 declared her fit for work.

She was then put on a work programme run by a private company. While on this work programme, she was advised by the company to become self-employed. The programme gave her £70 for start-up equipment and materials and £30 for survival.

For two months she had no customers and no other support from the programme. For that period, she was penniless and survived on food vouchers provided by a community support group. The support group saw clearly that Joanna was not well enough to run her own business let alone raise enough income to survive on it.

She went back to her doctor who advised that she should go back onto ESA full time. With the support of her doctor and a welfare rights officer, her payments were backdated for the period she was purportedly self-employed. Joanna has been left severely disturbed by this experience. It has taken her a while to get back her confidence. She said

"It has taken me time to open up and talk to people about this. When I think about how I was treated when I was not well, I just want to cry".

Access to benefits

Access to benefits was a common concern raised throughout the project. For example, claimants being unable to access fully the benefits to which they are entitled. These ranged from access (or lack of access) to online resources to language barriers, especially for migrant and asylum communities, through to literacy problems. Some groups, such as people recovering from problematic substance use, faced a combination of problems.

The DWP's 'digital first' position for claiming JSA and especially for UC, came in for much criticism. As one workshop participants stated:

"The DWP digital security system is not a good fit for people who find themselves homeless and it is too protracted. Too many clients have changed address during a live claim and losing security information, addresses etc. cause further delays and stress and frustration."

(Support Worker)

Example: an individual with an eye problem was told he was only able to search for and apply for jobs online. Looking at paper copies, for example, would not count towards his time spent looking for work. His GP wrote a letter noting that the individual cannot be on the computer for that length of time, but the Jobcentre still refused to accept that he was looking for work.

"Security questions are a barrier, and call centre staff often don't know the answers."

Some participants highlighted what they felt was a lack of JCP experience and understanding when dealing with claimants who have a wide range of numeracy and literacy difficulties. There is a spectrum of difficulties and complicating issues associated with them. These can include feelings of embarrassment and shame, or some claimants simply being unaware of the extent to which their difficulties could affect work related responsibilities.

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The Impact of Welfare Change in Glasgow

Participants felt that the DWP needs to be aware that these difficulties could affect a claimant's ability to fulfil their Claimant Commitment. Evidence from the project suggests that people are going on the Work Programme despite having literacy difficulties that highlight their need for substantial extra support and therefore their lack of readiness for the Work Programme. In addition participants highlighted instances of clients concealing their difficulties for fear of being sanctioned.

Other access barriers included language and literacy. For asylum, migrant and refugee communities, language barriers make it difficult to navigate the benefits system. There are challenges in accessing information due to language barriers. Migrants and refugees have even more limited access to information and advice to enable them to fully understand for example, the conditionality attached to benefits or their responsibilities under the Claimant Commitment.

Language issues were also seen as a barrier to getting employment. People who do not speak English as their first language, or lack IT skills means that they can be limited to low paid employment. Learning English is now a part of the Claimant Commitment for migrants and refugees. However there is limited provision across the city to enable them to do this.

Sanctions

In Scotland in 2014, a total of 55,864 JSA sanctions were applied, affecting 38,216 individuals. Like the UK picture, over the last five years in Scotland, young people aged 16 to 24 have been disproportionately affected by JSA sanctions. For example, in November 2014, despite being 23 per cent of JSA claimants they accounted for more than 40 per cent of all JSA sanctions.⁵

In terms of gender, men accounted for 75% of all sanctions in 2014. However, the proportion of affected women has also been increasing. Lone parents have also experienced a continuous increase in their share of JSA sanctions over the last five years. Disabled people accounted for just over 25% of sanctions in 2014.⁶

The use of sanctions for even minor infringements of benefit conditions has become increasingly common.

Claimants can face a partial reduction in payments (JSA, ESA, IS) or complete removal of payments (JSA) for fixed periods of time.

Between 2010-15 there was a significant increase in the use of sanctions and especially since 2012, an increase in the severity of sanctions.⁷

The impact of sanctions, either partial or whole, can be significant for the individuals or families concerned. For example a person who has been sanctioned can also have their housing benefit payments suspended as they are considered as having 'nil-income'. This leads to rent arrears and can result in threat of eviction.

Throughout the project we gathered evidence on sanctions from city-wide networking sessions, local workshops and through case studies. Participants provided examples of service users who (in their view) had received a sanction unfairly. Services frequently described their shock in hearing the reasons why people are being sanctioned.,

Services are therefore struggling with the results of a system that at times appears to lack the necessary support structures for vulnerable people. Participants also emphasised the varying levels of service user vulnerability, and the lack of DWP/JCP structures to understand and support these service users before, during and after a sanction. Participants made some positive comments about DWP and JCP support, but sanction-specific positive comments were generally limited to individual DWP or JCP staff members.

Footnotes

5 Scottish Government (2015) Communities Analytical Services. JSA Sanctions in Scotland – July 2015

6 Scottish Government (2015) Communities Analytical Services. JSA Sanctions in Scotland – July 2015

7 Tinson A. (2015) New Policy Institute, The rise of sanctioning in Great Britain.

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It was noted in many of the workshops that people who were subject to sanctions often did not know of their entitlement to hardship grants either from JCP as part of JSA10 or from the Scottish Welfare Fund administered by the Local Authority. Most of the people we spoke to in the workshops also said they had received no warning that they should continue to sign on even if they were sanctioned. In most cases those sanctioned did not know that they had a right to request for a mandatory reconsideration if they felt they had been sanctioned unfairly.

According to one of the project participants, a law centre, sanctions are making people who are already on low incomes poorer, resulting in some people becoming destitute.

They also said that, in their experience, people who are vulnerable are more likely to be receiving sanctions, many of whom have responsibilities for other vulnerable people such as children or ill relatives, and many who also will encounter greater skills barriers.

As a response to welfare changes they are increasing their partnership working, especially with CABs and housing associations and investigating setting up a welfare rights forum with advisors and welfare rights officers.

“The Claimant Commitment has to be reasonable. People shouldn’t feel bullied into signing something that isn’t right. They need to challenge this.”

(Preventing Sanctions Networking Session)

Challenging Decisions

People are able to challenge a decision with which they disagree and statistics show that challenging a decision can be worthwhile, with around 50% of those who challenge sanctions doing so successfully.

Unfortunately the process to challenge decisions has become more complex since 2012, with the introduction of the Mandatory Reconsideration (MR) process. This requires the individual to submit a request to the DWP department responsible for the decision requesting a review. The window to engage in the process is time limited; a request must be submitted within 30 days of the decision being issued. There is no timescale for the DWP to make decisions on the MR; however it only after a decision is made that a traditional appeal can be submitted.

A number of issues were highlighted about the MR process, including the timescales for submission, access to support to engage in the process and clear information about the process being made available to people by the DWP.

Whilst challenging decisions is important, this often requires support to be able to do this effectively especially for vulnerable groups such as people with learning disabilities, or who have literacy problems, or who do not speak English as their first language.

“Most people are responsible and take their relationship with the Jobcentre seriously. They are aware of needing an interpreter and that they have to book one each time they go to the Jobcentre. But the Jobcentre is supposed to know this also, and they don’t always understand. The interpreter is not always there. We have had lots of complaints. The helpline is bad. I had a recent language mismatch (which wasn’t the first time) for a Romanian who got a Bulgarian interpreter.”

(Support worker)

3 – Project Findings

The Impact of Welfare Change in Glasgow

Welfare Reform Case Study: Sanctions

IMR (real name withheld) is a woman in her 30s. She currently works full time in retail. She is a single mother with three kids and finds the stress of juggling child care, full time work and financial hardships very stressful.

When she was still signing on, IMR was sanctioned for not turning up for an appointment despite having gone to the Job Centre offices a day before to advise them. She was unable to attend her normal appointment due to a hospital appointment for one of her children. She had been assured by the JCP person she spoke to that her reason for not signing on was reasonable and that she need not worry. However, the facts were not recorded by JCP on their system and IMR was sanctioned. She went back to the JCP office to find out what had happened and the sanction was reversed. However she was sanctioned again when she informed JCP that she was volunteering with a charity. JCP assumed that she was working there and stopped her money. It took the charity to intervene in writing to confirm that she was not an employee but rather a volunteer for the sanction to be reversed. This took weeks and it was a very hard time for the family.

IMR also had trouble receiving child tax credits for her children in the first months of her being granted permission to stay in the UK. During that time, she was living only on her JSA money with three kids. She had to borrow money from friends to survive and when the money finally came it all went to paying the debts. She was back to square one.

She has had problems with council tax and is now in arrears. She is repaying the debt on top of her current financial year council tax bills.

“The government needs to find ways of supporting families who struggle in low paid jobs by looking at increasing the threshold for housing benefit and other family demands like council tax and energy bills.”

“I could not do a job that involves standing or moving about; my health will not let me. I have tried to explain to JCP but they don't care. JCP should stop pushing people about when they know that there is no chance of finding a job. They need to have a good attitude towards us people on benefits, they look at us as if we are nothing. They keep asking why you can't do this and that. I tell them I cannae. They are wasting time because no one will give ever me a job.”

Margaret (not real name)—Glasgow

3 – Project Findings

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Universal Credit

Universal Credit (UC) is a new benefit that has been gradually introduced throughout the UK since October 2013. UC will replace all current means-tested benefits and tax credits for working-age people.⁸

As of June 2015, Universal Credit (UC) is available in 49 jobcentres across Scotland mainly to single jobseekers only. The most recent data, as at May 2015, show that there are currently 2,420 individuals in receipt of UC in Scotland. When fully rolled out, UC is expected to have both ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, although many are expected to see no change in the amount of benefit received. Much of the concern about UC relates to other issues, including direct payment of Housing Benefit to tenants; monthly payments; payments being made to one member of the household and the ‘digital first’ process for claiming.

Many concerns related to the fact that UC was to be applied for online, particularly as many people do not have home internet access, or the IT skills required to use a computer. Additionally there were concerns regarding budgeting implications, many people have no experiencing of budgeting monthly and participants in most workshops feared that UC would create more problems for families with relationships becoming strained as a result of financial pressure and disagreements.

Sanctions and hardship payments under UC were also raised as a concern; any hardship payment received under UC will cover only 60% of subsistence and will be required to be paid back to DWP when the individuals benefit is reinstated. Hardship payments will also be time-limited, so if someone receives a long-term sanction they will be required to reapply on a 4 weekly basis. Participants felt this could real difficulties for individuals, families and the services supporting them.

Volunteering and welfare reform

The project also highlighted issues being experienced by people carrying out voluntary work whilst claiming benefits. Although the DWP had guidance on volunteering while claiming benefits, this was published in 2010 (prior to many of the welfare changes taking place) and was ‘withdrawn as of 30th January 2015’.⁹

The absence of clear guidance has resulted in confusion and in some cases sanctions for people who volunteer whilst claiming benefits, in particular JSA. At one of the networking sessions it was pointed out by Volunteer Glasgow that they had experience of people coming from the Work Programme to see them, with a letter stating that the person could be subject to sanctions unless they go to Volunteer Glasgow to volunteer.

Example: an individual used the word “work” when speaking with her Jobcentre Adviser when referring to the voluntary work she did at a local organisation. As a result, the Jobcentre Plus adviser wrote to the manager of that organisation asking them to complete a form regarding this individual’s ‘employment’. Because the individual was not employed by the organisation, the manager was unable to fill in this form; she instead phoned the Jobcentre to explain and was told to write a letter explaining the situation. This process took a good deal of going back and forth between the two organisations.

Footnotes

8 <http://www.cpag.org.uk/universal-credit-factsheet>

9 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/volunteering-while-getting-benefits-leaflet>

10 <http://www.volunteerglasgow.org/downloads/Glasgow-PLP-call-to-DWP-re-Volunteering-Legacy-Feb-2015-update.pdf>

3 – Project Findings

The Impact of Welfare Change in Glasgow

“Welfare reform is having a huge impact on volunteering. We have a lot of young people wanting to volunteer but who can’t because they may have to go on placement instead. We do have a partnership agreement with the DWP for young people around their volunteer work experience, but we are now struggling to get young people through the doors to volunteer. The way of working with the DWP can be in conflict with our systems.”

(Volunteer manager)

Concerns about volunteering while claiming benefits led the Glasgow PLP and Volunteer Glasgow to write to the DWP for clarification pointing out amongst other concerns that the ‘DWP guidance was now withdrawn from their website; sickness and disability related benefit claimants should not be required to talk to Job Centre Plus before they begin volunteering, and that DWP should state this clearly. Further that people claiming job-seeking benefits should continue to be encouraged to consider volunteering opportunities by DWP Job Centre Plus advisers; be able (as they are now) to include volunteering on their “claimant commitments” if they have agreed to it, as part of a reasonable, realistic and personalised approach, and count volunteering towards half of their required ‘work search’ hours per week and not be subject to DWP sanctions for their volunteering when it appears on their “claimant commitment” and that volunteering should remain voluntary.’¹⁰

Housing issues

The changes made to people’s benefit entitlement have had knock-on effects in terms of their housing. For example the Benefit Cap reducing the total amount of benefit a household can receive, the setting of Local Housing Rates (LHA) at the 30th percentile of local rents rather than the 50th percentile and uprating benefits by the Consumer Price Index rather than the more accurate Retail Price Index. These measures have seriously reduced people’s disposable incomes and resulted in rent arrears and people cutting back on food and heating.

This particularly affects some people with disabilities or long term illness as they may have to use more heating. It can be an especially acute problem for people who have been homeless.

As one participant stated

“If the occupant/tenant doesn’t have a pre-payment meter or their own energy account the DWP make a flat rate fuel deduction from the eligible rent thereby reducing their Housing Benefit. The current rate for one room is £17.22 per week and everyone in our Direct Access Services (emergency accommodation) regardless of income has to pay. This is a non-negotiable statutory deduction which cannot be covered by Housing Benefit and it accumulates as rent arrears which GCC may pursue for payment when people move on from our services. This is something that needs to be taken up with the DWP at a high level as it doesn’t only impact on our tenants but across many [housing] services and in private rented accommodation across the UK.”

(Manager, homelessness and housing support organisation Glasgow)

Building up rent arrears impacts on the relationship between key workers and clients increasing stress and worry for both.

3 – Project Findings

The Impact of Welfare Change in Glasgow

Welfare Reform Case Study: Homelessness

Gregor (real name withheld) is a single Scottish male in his 40s. He is currently in receipt of Employment Support Allowance and housing benefit following a period of crisis.

Prior to his crisis he had been working for over 20 years including, running his own business for three years. His business folded and he was declared bankrupt, and became homeless.

After he became homeless he stayed in a hostel for 9 months while waiting for his application for ESA to be heard. He was unsuccessful in his application. However after appeal the original decision was reversed. This was his first positive outcome that summer. He said it was a huge relief to get the support while he explored how to move on to the next stage of his mental health recovery.

After 9 months in the hostel, he decided to move on. He managed to get a private let property and a job to try and pay his way out of his situation although physically and mentally he felt he was really still not well.

Unfortunately he had to leave his job as he could not cope and became homeless for the second time. On a positive note, Gregor now has a secure tenancy in the West end of Glasgow. He is happy with it and feels safe and is now at a stage where he feels able to move on with the next stage of his life. When asked about whether he felt he was adequately supported during the transition from homelessness to housing,

Gregor said:

“I did not feel I got much support to prepare me to get my own tenancy, after 9 months in the hostel, I felt that the process was taking ages to materialise into something. I had never been in this position before and I lacked experience of how the housing system works. Being back in the community after the hostel experience was a huge change for me and I am not sure given what had gone on in my life I was ready for that. I wanted to find a job and work. My starting point was volunteering with the various organisations and now I feel I am ready to look for paid employment and hopefully I can get back on my feet”.

An important role for housing associations, beyond just providing homes, is to support tenants who get into difficulties, including those at risk of eviction and homelessness. Their ability to do this is now being undermined by welfare reform. One housing association who participated in the project had seen evictions increase since 2013 whereas previously there had been little variance year by year.

3 – Project Findings

The Impact of Welfare Change in Glasgow

In 2010, as part of preparing for welfare changes, one Housing Association carried out an assessment. It found that 90% of its tenants were going to be affected by welfare reform. They took steps to address the changes and their potential impact. Measures included:

- Keeping residents up to date, via a newsletter, with the changes and working with a range of partners to maximise available information and support for tenants.
- Visiting each of their tenants at evenings and weekends in order to explain what the changes were and what support would be available, as well as to capture information about each household.
- Increasing their advice provision including recruiting a welfare rights officer and an assistant.
- Looking at where residents were under-claiming, at carers' exemptions and at maximising household incomes. They also ensured that their property size was accurate, published options to downsize, and redeveloped properties (i.e. splitting one for two families).
- Ensuring that all tenants affected by the bedroom tax received DHP (Discretionary Housing Payment), and they continue to support tenants to mitigate the effects of the bedroom tax.

Getting support

Dealing with welfare changes also impacted negatively on the care and support that some organisations were able to give to their clients. This was a common issue raised by support organisations. A homelessness support organisation, pointed out that their staff work with people with complex needs. For example, just over 80% of their recent clients had been through the care system as children plus juvenile then adult prisons. They had co-morbid conditions that required long term intervention and these conditions were being made worse by the benefit changes. This meant the time spent on dealing with welfare issues meant less time was available for their clients' holistic support programme.

Many community support organisations had been hit by funding cuts in addition to the impact of welfare reform. This makes maintaining support and planning for the future increasingly difficult. Housing associations who engaged with the project pointed out that prior to welfare changes they had regular and secure income streams but that it was now becoming increasingly difficult to plan for the future.

A number of organisations expressed frustration at the speed of change to the welfare system. Many were struggling to 'keep up to date with legislative changes' as well as trying to ensure that staff and volunteer training was up to speed to enable them to offer support and/or signpost people effectively. Others commented that they were struggling to find skilled workers or volunteers who could commit the time to improving their standards.

Example: three individuals were told by their local JCP to go to the local 3rd sector service to get support for their literacy/computer needs. However the organisation found that their needs required long term support rather than the immediate 'fix' required by JCP (in order to maintain benefits). As the staff pointed out this puts undue pressure on 3rd sector organisations and unreasonable expectations amongst clients as to what can be achieved.

3 – Project Findings

The Impact of Welfare Change in Glasgow

Many participants discussed the increasing numbers of service users approaching services after receiving a sanction, and having reached crisis point. This resulted in increased hardship and distress for the individual, but it also has a knock on effect on that person's future health and wellbeing as they deal with increased pressure on their finances. Many services are also not designed to support people in crisis, and are struggling to offer the services they are funded to provide. This has an impact on service outcomes, but it also has an impact on staff wellbeing, levels of sickness and stress for example, and morale and motivation.

It was pointed out to us that services were becoming less able to focus as consistently on their core outcomes because of increased concern about reforms and sanctions. They were also increasingly worried about the stability of future funding. Participants spoke about the gradual erosion of their roles as more time is spent supporting people with benefits changes than focusing on core service outcomes.

Services providing housing are directly affected, with housing associations, smaller housing providers and shelters expressing concerns about rising rent arrears. They were concerned about worsening rent arrears with the introduction of Universal Credit, and about increasing numbers of their service users being affected by sanctions.

Participants frequently highlighted the importance of developing and maintaining positive relationships with local people, service users and other services. Repeatedly, organisations mentioned the word "trust" as being especially significant when working with people affected by welfare reform and/or facing the prospect of sanctions or challenging a sanction. Claimants are expected to disclose increasing amounts of information about their personal lives at JCP and to the DWP, but they also have increasing levels of responsibility; for example through the claimant commitment, responding to DLA letters, attending more JCP meetings or challenging sanctions.

Some vulnerable service users are more likely to have a history of difficult relationships – personal and professional – where trust can be lacking.

This makes any strong relationship with service providers that much more significant at a time when service users are under increasing pressure to respond to benefit changes. But it also puts increasing pressure on services that are not necessarily funded to offer this additional support – but who do have trusting relationships with service users.

"More time on benefits, less time doing my job"

(Support worker)

Increasingly, workers are obliged to focus on benefits and crisis management rather than their actual job. This affects service users who previously used that service for very different and essential aims – aims which are becoming more difficult to meet. Although one response is that services should signpost and refer their service users to other benefit or employment specific services, including at points when service users are facing sanctions, the reality for 3rd sector staff is not so simple. This is partly about the trusting relationship many service users have with very specific services and staff in those services and the reality that signposting someone does not necessarily mean the person will go; and if they do go, they may require support.

"I'm spending more time doing benefits than supporting people and talking about the effects of abuse. My role is very specifically about support, and I am really struggling to do this now."

(Support worker)

"Quite often if [our client] is applying for ESA we as workers will also get called, and then receive a letter to go through to the medical. We can be sitting in a flat on the phone with the DWP for an hour. But at that point in that person's life, this is the number one thing, so of course we are going to do it."

(Housing support worker)

4 – How we use this information

One of the key aims of Welfare Trackers was to share the information and intelligence gathered with our various networks as well as local and national policy makers.

The Poverty Alliance will use the information to support our lobbying, campaigning and policy work. This will include local and national policy processes, such as the Scottish Governments Welfare Reform Scrutiny Group, the Scottish Parliament's Welfare Reform Committee, the Scottish Campaign on Welfare Reform (SCoWR), and Glasgow's Poverty Leadership Panel. The Poverty Alliance will also use it to highlight welfare reform issues to the media. We will also use it in our work to encourage debate and discussion around poverty. For example challenging the myths and stigma around welfare and poverty in general through our Poverty Awareness Training and Stick Your Labels campaign.

SDF will use the information to increase awareness of welfare reform issues within the substance use field in Scotland; to advocate for more understanding within DWP re: the challenges faced by this population; to formally engage with DWP regarding Universal Credit particularly the guidance on dealing with people who are dependent on drugs and alcohol, in principle looking at notion of six month structured treatment window versus evidence on timeline for recovery from substance dependency; and rights and capabilities.

GCVS will use the intelligence in the report to support the Welfare Reform work undertaken through our Building Connections Glasgow project and the Expert Group that informs this work. Through these mechanisms we will seek to ensure the work undertaken by Glasgow's Third Sector to mitigate the impact of Welfare Reform is visible and understood. The Welfare Tracker project contributes to this and leaves an important legacy, particularly in relation to the impact benefit changes are having on 3rd sector stakeholders and the people that use their services.

5 – Conclusions

The aim of this report was to highlight the impact that welfare reform was having on individuals, households and 3rd sector organisations across Glasgow. It has shown that the changes being made to the welfare system are affecting individuals, households and community and voluntary organisations. Sanctioning people for even minor infringements has had an impact beyond the individuals concerned.

Welfare reform is causing considerable hardship across Glasgow and is stretching the resources and resilience of both people and organisations to breaking point. It would also appear that there is still a lack of knowledge on the ground about crisis benefits such as the Scottish Welfare Fund.

Third sector organisations not set up to deal with welfare matters, have to support their service users to deal with issues arising from welfare reform. This is especially the case with disability benefits such as DLA and PIP and sanctions for JSA. This means they have less time to spend on their core services.

Although Universal Credit has only recently been rolled out to Glasgow for single claimants, the expected change to UC is causing considerable stress amongst those who are still to be transferred.

Glasgow has higher levels of disability than in Scotland as a whole. It also has the highest levels of disability amongst local authorities in Scotland. Compared to other Scottish cities, Glasgow has the highest level of reported disability among working age adults (24%).¹¹

There is therefore serious concern about the transfer from DLA to PIP and that many disabled people in Glasgow will lose all entitlement to benefit.

There is a need for clear and unambiguous guidelines to allow people to volunteer while claiming benefits. The lack of clear guidelines has resulted in people being wrongly sanctioned and is creating confusion and stress for both claimants and agency staff.

Footnotes

¹¹ http://www.understandingglasgow.com/indicators/health/comparisons/with_other_places/disability_scottish_cities/scottish_cities

6 – Recommendations

Recommendations for policy and practice

Hardship

- DWP staff should make people who have been sanctioned aware of the hardship grants that are available e.g. JSA10 and the Scottish Welfare Fund
- Housing Benefit should not be removed, even on a temporary basis, from those who have been sanctioned or had their benefits stopped for whatever reason. The ‘nil-income’ practice should be ended.

Benefit changes

- Changes to benefits must be introduced at a slower pace. This will allow people affected and their support organisations to be better prepared to deal with any changes.
- People with direct experience of using the benefits system must be consulted on any proposals and their voices must be reflected at all stages of the policy making process.
- The further roll outs of Universal Credit and PIP should be halted until the implementation of The Scotland Bill

Sanctions

- The practice of sanctioning people should be ended. Sanctions are punitive and evidence from the Employment Related Services Association shows that they hinder, not help, people seeking employment.¹²

Health and disability benefits

- The Work Capability Assessment should be radically reformed for ESA. Decisions should be based primarily on medical evidence.
- People who have been found fit for work should keep their entitlement to ESA when asking for a Mandatory Reconsideration.
- The assessment process for PIP should be changed and made more humane. It must take into account how people’s disabilities can fluctuate and affect their daily lives. Decisions should not be made on a snapshot of the day they attend the assessment as it may not accurately reflect their condition.

Footnotes

¹² Response from the Employment Related Services Association (ERSA) to the Work and Pensions Select Committee inquiry into benefit sanctions policy beyond the Oakley review, December 2014

6 – Recommendations

Universal Credit

- Further consideration should be given as to how we support people moving over to Universal Credit.

Volunteering and welfare reform

- The DWP must publish clear guidelines on volunteering while claiming benefits, and must recognise the value of volunteering both to the individual and wider society.
- In drafting new volunteering guidelines the DWP should consult with local authorities, local Volunteer Centres, and other organisations that regularly employ volunteers and claimants' support organisations.

Housing issues

- The Discretionary Housing Payment scheme must be kept in place to mitigate the effects of the Bedroom Tax until the policy is abolished.
- The Benefit Cap should be lifted. This is especially important for larger families.
- Local Housing Allowance rates should be raised to accurately reflect rent levels.

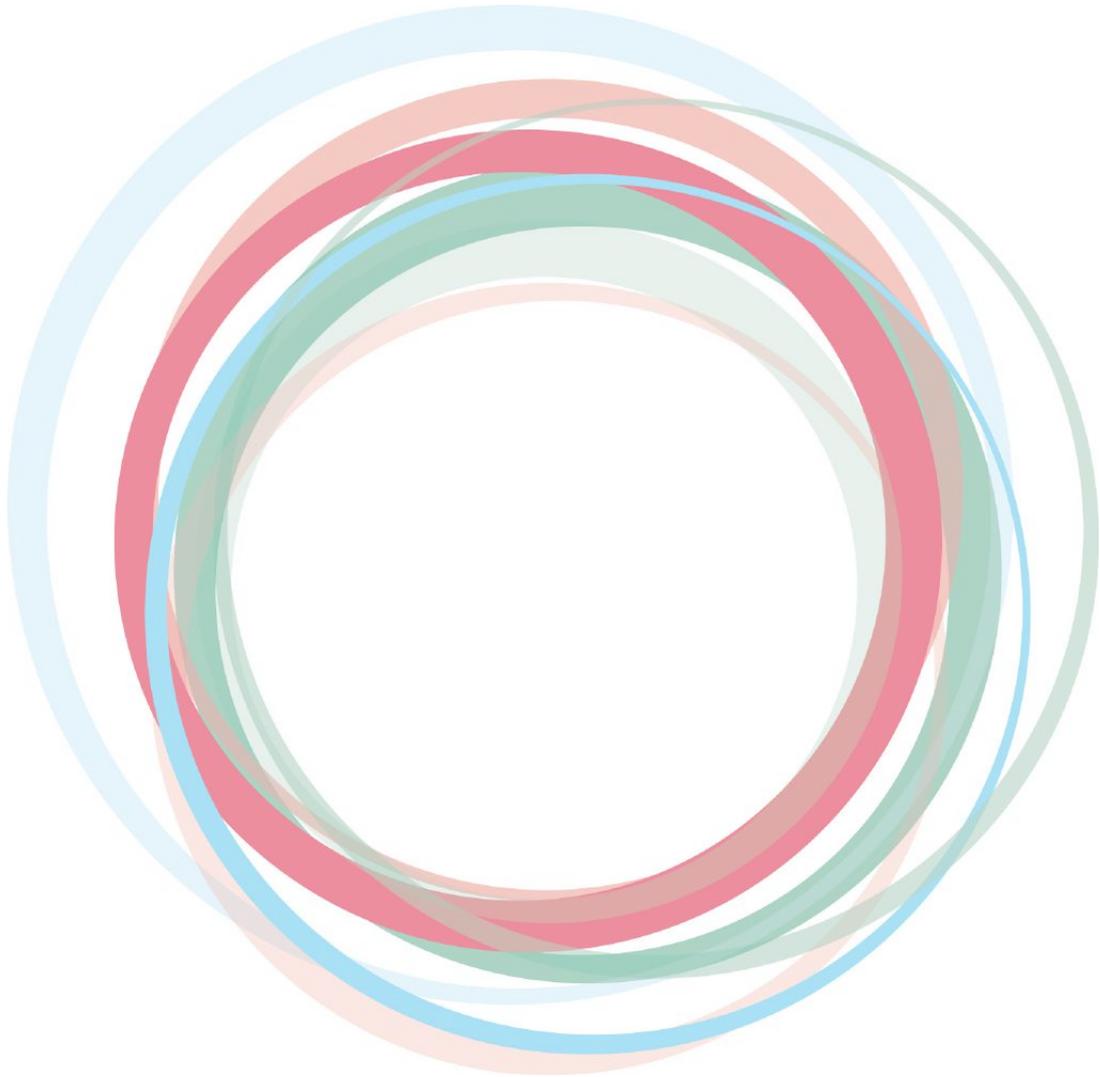
Access to benefits

- People should be given a choice in how they apply for benefits such as online, paper form or telephone.
- People should be offered practical support with benefits applications within Job Centre Plus.
- Job Centre Plus, Local Authorities and the Scottish Government should run an income maximisation scheme encouraging people to claim all the benefits to which they are entitled.

6 – Recommendations

Support

- Local authorities, community planning partnerships and the Scottish Government must recognise and support the valuable role of community based services when supporting people negatively affected by welfare reform
- The Scottish Government and local authorities must ensure that more resources are provided to expand the provision of dedicated welfare advice services. This would reduce the pressure on other support services and enable them to concentrate on their primary roles.
- The Scottish Government, local authorities and educational bodies need to increase the provision of ESOL classes to enable migrants and refugees to better understand and navigate the benefits system. This will also have the effect of increasing their chances of employment and further education and training.
- This work has shown a clear benefit of networking and joint training to third sector organisations and their staff and volunteers who are working with people affected by negative impacts of welfare reform. The benefits of networking include: well informed staff; the ability to share good practice, solutions and information; improved staff mental health and well-being through peer support and shared problems; the sharing of stories and experiences to inform research and promote understanding of the impact of welfare changes and poverty in Glasgow. As a result the sector is better able to meet the needs of third sector clients/service users.
- Consideration should be given to how support for this type of networking with the third sector could continue in Glasgow.



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