

Community organisations, activists & the Coronavirus: Poverty Alliance briefing, 6th April 2020

About the Poverty Alliance

The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network. Together, we influence policy and practice, provide evidence through research, support communities to challenge poverty and build public support for the solutions to tackle poverty.

Our members include grassroots community groups, activists who are experiencing poverty, academics, large national NGOs, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups.

Background

In a short space of time, the Coronavirus has impacted our society in almost every possible way. With one million people in Scotland already living in the grip of poverty, the social and economic impact of the current crisis has the potential to sweep even more people into poverty in the coming months. It is essential that every step is taken to prevent that from happening, and to take action to help keep people afloat.

In response to the unfolding crisis, the Poverty Alliance has sought the perspectives of community organisations and activists from across the Poverty Alliance network. This briefing, while only providing an initial snapshot view, details some of the immediate impacts on community organisations, as well as some of the key perspectives and concerns of community organisations and activists.

Immediate impacts on community organisations

Community organisations are at the frontline in the work of tackling poverty in Scotland and are also now playing a critical role in supporting communities through Coronavirus. However, they face a number of significant challenges in continuing to deliver their work. Some of these include:

- Increased demand for services: The current crisis is exacerbating the existing needs of people living in poverty, while also pulling more people into poverty. As a result, community organisations and groups are reporting a significant rise in demand for their services. Food insecurity was said to be particularly increasing with, for example, one food bank reporting a 300% increase in demand in recent weeks.
- Closure or reconfiguration of services: A number of community organisations providing vital support to people living on low incomes have been forced to reconfigure – or in the case of at least two community organisations who are members of the Poverty Alliance, entirely suspend - their services in response to the crisis.

Some organisations providing face-to-face advice and support have moved to phone-based or digital advice and support services, including a number of community organisations providing welfare rights advice. Organisations providing food-based

support, such as community shops, have had to move to delivery services; a significant logistical and planning challenge. Other community organisations are adapting their services and their work to focus on the provision of food, in response to rising levels of food insecurity. One mental health-focused community organisation, for example, has engaged with all local food banks to support with food distribution; meaning less time to focus on their core work of supporting people through mental health issues.

- Depletion of staff and volunteer numbers: The necessary social distancing measures that have been put in place mean that many organisations are seeing their staff and volunteer bases significantly reduced. This is resulting in even greater challenges in terms of continuing to deliver services and meet the pressing needs of communities, particularly in the absence of testing for frontline community workers.

Perspectives on the immediate response to the crisis

Government at all levels have been responding to the crisis with a range of different measures. While many of these have been strongly welcomed, some issues have been raised by community organisations regarding local and national responses:

- Local coordination: A number of community organisations have reported a lack of clarity regarding which bodies are leading on coordinating local responses – particularly responses related to food insecurity - as well as a lack of clarity regarding how to engage with and support those coordinated local responses. In some local authority areas there is said to be a need for much greater joint working between the local authority and third sector/community organisations, rather than community organisations simply being used to ‘plug gaps’.
- Funding for third sector and community organisations: Some organisations have already reported severe cash flow issues due to the disruption to their income that has occurred, with at least one shutting down all operations as a result. The announcement of emergency Scottish Government funding to support third sector and community organisations through the crisis was therefore welcomed.

One organisation who has already engaged in the application process for Scottish Government funding reported a very positive experience. However, it was noted that at a time of significantly increased demand for services it may be challenging for many community organisations to devote the time to applying for these funds.

There was said, therefore, to be a need not only for the application process to be as streamlined as possible but also for Scottish Government grant officers to engage with organisations already in receipt of Scottish Government funding (and engage with organisations who may not be in receipt of funding but who may benefit from it) to identify any particular needs they may have and to support their funding applications to help meet these needs.

- Support for children on free school meals: Community organisations and activists have strongly welcomed the fact that local authorities across Scotland have recognised the need to maintain support to children entitled to free school meals. However, concerns have been expressed regarding the inconsistent approach being taken by local authorities, with some delivering cash payments to families, some

delivering food parcels to households, and others preparing food parcels for collection by families.

Concerns have been raised about the provision of pre-paid vouchers that can only be used in one retailer, given the lack of choice that this entails and the challenges some families may face in accessing that retailer. Similarly, concerns have been raised about requiring families to – at a time when all guidance is to stay at home – collect food parcels from schools or community hubs. There is strong consensus across community organisations and activists that a cash-based approach is the most dignified and impactful way of supporting families, and that this approach should be the expected one across each local authority.

- Job protection schemes: The measures brought forward by the UK Government to support employed and self-employed workers were broadly welcomed by community activists. However, in relation to self-employed workers there is concern that this support will not be available until June. For those without the savings to cover their needs until then and who have to apply for Universal Credit, there was concern that the five-week wait could pull them into income crisis.

Key trends and concerns identified by community organisations and activists

Community organisations and activists have already expressed a range of concerns about the immediate and longer-term impact of Coronavirus on them and their communities, and particularly on groups already more likely to be living in poverty such as disabled people, women (particularly women who are lone parents), and refugees and asylum seekers.

Organisations have already begun to identify trends that have emerged in the few weeks since the crisis began to unfold. These include:

- Digital exclusion issues: Many people living on low incomes already face barriers to digital access, with many households either having no or limited internet access. With the closure of schools and libraries, this digital exclusion issues is becoming even more pronounced.

For children, this may mean being unable to engage in online learning during the period of school closures. For adults, it may mean being unable to access relevant and up-to-date support and information or being unable make and manage social security applications (especially Universal Credit applications).

- Increased living costs: With people being forced to stay at home due to lockdown measures, their gas and electricity usage can be expected to increase significantly, with a resultant increase in bills. With 25% of households in Scotland already living in fuel poverty, this is a serious concern. Particularly for people with pre-paid meters, there are challenges both in covering the increased costs of fuel and in accessing pay points where they can top-up. One organisation – that manages a crisis fund for people experiencing fuel poverty – has reported that this fund has now been exhausted given the unprecedented demand.

Similarly, a number of community organisations have flagged as a concern the number of people they work with who use pay-as-you-go phones. Given the increasing need to rely on phone contact to stay socially connected and to be able to access support and information, this could also mean significantly increased costs.

- Lack of awareness of social security entitlements: With unemployment and underemployment expected to increase, more people will become entitled to social security support. But for people with no prior experience of the social security system, there is a clear risk that their lack of awareness and knowledge of the system may lead to them not accessing the support they are entitled to.

Indeed, some community organisations have already reported being contacted by people in this position, who have no knowledge of where to turn for advice. With welfare rights advice being more difficult to access during this period, this may result in people being left without the social security support they are entitled to.

It is therefore essential that the Scottish Government and local authorities undertake a substantial public awareness campaign to promote social security take-up, as well as to highlight the increased level of support now available via the Scottish Welfare Fund.

- Rising levels of food insecurity: Access to food for people on low incomes is a common concern across community organisations. Food banks are reporting significantly increased demand and – while they are reconfiguring services to deliver food to people’s homes – there are concerns that some of those in need (e.g. people living in more remote and rural areas) may be missed. With increasing numbers of people applying for Universal Credit and having to wait five weeks for their first payment, levels of food insecurity are expected to increase yet further.
- Mental health impact: While accepting of the measures, community organisations and activists reported concerns over the potential mental health impact of social distancing for people living on low incomes, given the physical isolation that people are necessarily having to experience at this time. One community organisation has reported a higher than normal number of calls being received from people with suicidal ideation.

With the ability of mental health and community services to support people during this period being reduced (exacerbated by factors such as the lack of personal protective equipment for frontline community workers as well as the challenges in coordinating peer support groups at this time) there is clearly a risk that enforced isolation will be seriously detrimental to people’s mental health and wellbeing.

- Impact of rurality: Several of the impacts being experienced by individuals across the country appear to be heightened and exacerbated by rurality. For people living in more rural areas that do not have good phone signal or internet access, it will now be even more challenging to access the support they need, as well as to claim social security entitlements. For people living on a low income in areas with limited access to shops, there may also be additional challenges in terms of accessing food and essential supplies.
- Lack of support available to people with No Recourse to Public Funds and/or in the asylum system: While measures have been put in place to support people in work and people accessing social security, a clear gap is additional support for people with No Recourse to Public Funds. Several organisations have expressed serious concern about the additional vulnerabilities that people with No Recourse to Public

Funds may experience during this time, given their already increased risk of homelessness and destitution.

Relatedly, concerns have been raised regarding the ability of community organisations to support asylum seekers at this time. One community organisation that supports asylum seekers in Glasgow has had to close, meaning it is now unable to fully support people making fresh asylum claims, for example.

- Rising unemployment and impact on low-paid workers: Rising levels of unemployment – both in the immediate and longer term – is a concern for many community organisations. One community organisation reported much higher levels of youth unemployment already being seen in the community in which they operate, with the number of people losing their jobs expected to increase further in the weeks and months to come. It was also expected that a large proportion of those losing their jobs may have never experienced unemployment before, and will therefore have different needs that community organisations and others will be tasked with meeting.

Relatedly, it was felt that low-paid workers (who are disproportionately women) would be most impacted by the current crisis; both in terms of often being at most risk (e.g. people working in the care sector) and in terms of the possible longer-term impact on the labour market.

- Challenges with accessing social security: Both community activists and organisations reported on the additional pressures that the current situation is placing on the Universal Credit system, with significant delays for people who are seeking to submit a Universal Credit claim. Community organisations who already see a significant number of referrals for people waiting for their first Universal Credit payment were clear that they expect this number to increase hugely in the weeks and months ahead, as more people are forced into making Universal Credit claims.

One welfare rights service – in addition to reporting real challenges in ensuring that people's claims are being submitted – also reported that some of their clients are still receiving Personal Independence Payment reminders from the DWP.

- Education issues: Some community activists spoke of their worries about home schooling children during the period of school closures. Many families do not have internet access in the home (or at least this access is limited), and it can also be additionally challenging for some parents who speak English as an additional language to support their children's schooling at home.
- Lack of clarity on social distancing measures: Some community activists feel there is still a lack of clarity from government regarding whether or how to 'shield' certain groups. For example, there was a belief that families with disabled children – who are more likely to experience poverty - have not received clear information from the Scottish Government or their local health board regarding what the 12-week shielding process actually entails.

Summary

It is clear that community organisations across Scotland are stepping up to protect people living on low incomes from the worst impacts of the Coronavirus crisis. But despite their

efforts, the social and economic impact is already being felt by people living in the grip of poverty across our communities. Those who are already at greater risk of experiencing poverty – like disabled people, lone parents (who are disproportionately women), and refugees and asylum seekers – are seeing the grip of poverty tighten, while many more people are at risk of being pulled into poverty.

In the weeks and months to come, it is essential not only to ensure that community organisations are fully-supported to carry out their vital work, but also to listen to their voices and the voices of community activists and ensure that their voices help to inform all local and national responses.

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