

INSIGHTS

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The impact of welfare reform on the social services workforce

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Key points

- Welfare reform has increased demand on the social services workforce, especially those in third sector care and support
- Workers have been emotionally affected by the impact of welfare reform on clients lives and have felt angry, distressed, as well as disappointed and frustrated in their ability to help
- Workers have been diverted from other tasks to help reassure people affected by welfare reform and guide and signpost them through the system
- Additional workloads and emotional stresses come on top of an already difficult work-life balance, decreasing job security and pay and conditions with possible implications for recruitment and retention
- The sector is involved in awareness raising, evidence gathering, lobbying and campaigning to challenge aspects of welfare reform

Introduction

This evidence summary explores the impact of welfare reform – in a climate of austerity and cuts – on key client groups and its consequent effect on the social services workforce in Scotland. It draws on evidence from the UK where relevant or transferable, but focuses on the Scottish context, impact and response.

The context

BACKGROUND

The Welfare Reform Act of 2012 ushered in wide-ranging changes to the post-war welfare system in the UK. Measures introduced by the Conservative-led coalition government form part of a programme of austerity, with significant cuts to public services. The changes to UK law can be summarised as (White, 2014):

- Replacing the Disability Living Allowance (DLA) with point-based Personal Independence Payments (PIP)
- Replacing Incapacity Benefit (and related benefits) with Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) – largely completed after initial phase of testing across UK from 2011–14

- A withdrawal of Council Tax benefits and parts of the Social Fund (community care grants and crisis loans)
- The introduction of Universal Credit (UC), replacing a range of in- and out-of-work benefits incorporating housing costs, and changes to working tax credits
- The creation of new household caps and ‘under-occupancy’ penalties (known as the ‘bedroom tax’)

From April 2013, changes to the DWP Social Fund scheme meant that Crisis Loans and Community Care Grants stopped. These were replaced by the Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF), delivered by councils in Scotland. Changes to welfare have also been accompanied by a migration to digital applications and monthly payments. These changes have made the transition for claimants particularly difficult, especially those without the requisite skills to make the transition. A Citizens Advice Scotland report (2013) suggested that claimants in Scotland are less likely than in other parts of the UK to have access to the internet; poorer families are the most affected.

This can also be viewed in the broader context of public sector reform (Christie, 2011) and earlier debates, including the *Changing lives* (2006) report

of the 21st century social work review. The latter questioned the sustainability of pouring more money into welfare models. Nevertheless, the extent of the changes brought in by the UK government in 2012 could not have been predicted.

SCOTTISH CONTEXT

The Scottish experience of welfare reform has been different to the experiences of England, Wales and Northern Ireland. For example, unique responses have been made to both the bedroom tax, with Discretionary Housing Funds available, and introduction of the Scottish Welfare Fund to replace the loss of DWP crisis funds. In Scotland, the Welfare Reform (Further Provision) (Scotland) Act 2012 intended to shift some of the burden of the changes to social security and protect vulnerable individuals in Scotland. The *Social services in Scotland: a shared vision and strategy 2015–20* (2015) recognises the significant changes to the welfare system, and contends that ‘Scottish Government is working with stakeholders, partners and the UK Government to understand the impact of the welfare reforms and doing as much as possible to understand the impact on and support public services and vulnerable people in Scotland.’ As evidence of this, a committee

investigating the impact of welfare reform was established in January 2012, signifying that Scottish Government was less sympathetic to the changes being implemented by Westminster.¹

Following the ‘no vote’ in the Scottish independence referendum (Sept 2014), a further Westminster-Holyrood deal was struck to devolve more powers. Some of the detail is still being worked through, although, details on The Scotland Bill 2015-16 – in particular on welfare reform – have been formally released and include discretionary crisis and community care grants. The Welfare Funds (Scotland) Act 2015 places a duty on local authorities to provide a safety net for vulnerable people in an emergency situation, following abolition of the discretionary Social Fund by the DWP. While the Act comes into force in April 2016, it has been administered on an interim basis under a voluntary agreement between Scottish Government and COSLA since April 2013. The impact of these new powers on people receiving benefits, and the social services workforce supporting them, have yet to be realised.

¹ The Scottish Parliament Welfare Reform Committee (WRC) recently published its annual report (2016) for the period 2015-16 in March: <http://s.iriss.org.uk/1to1pTJ>

Groups most affected by welfare reform

According to Beatty and Fothergill (2013), the poorest local authorities have been impacted the most by welfare reform. White's review of the literature (2014) identified the following groups as most affected: unemployed and low-income groups; disabled people; vulnerable women; homeless people (Crisis, 2015); and prison leavers. The Scottish Human Rights Commission (SHRC, 2013:1) highlights the disproportionate impact on women; children; migrants and refugees; and disabled people. Dryburgh and Lancashire (2011) reported that disabled people are facing the greatest challenge. The WR Committee (2013) reported that the greatest impact is on working age people, with people of pensionable age, largely unaffected.

It should be noted that the reforms to welfare impact more on women with a link to child poverty and larger families bearing the brunt (Beatty and Fothergill, 2013). 'The explanation for this disproportionate impact on women lies in women's pre-existing inequality' (Engender, 2015: 4). The same may also be true of some of the other groups identified. The

impact on unpaid carers – part client group, part unwaged member of the social services workforce – is not well known. However, Carers Scotland (2012) published a review, and CPAG (2014) a factsheet examining some of the possible outcomes of welfare reform on the incomes of carers.

Evidence of increased demand on services

Previous sections have identified which groups are most affected, with rolling and shifting timescales for implementation and patchy information adding to already complex cases with vulnerable clients. This has created an increase in demand for services, with most evidence for this from third sector surveys (CCPS 2014, 2013; SCVO, 2013); and White's qualitative research (2014) based on 17 interviews from five organisations specialising in housing, care and support services from the third sector.

The SCVO (2013) report highlighted that 72% of surveyed organisations had experienced a significant increase in demand for services, with 88% expecting further increases as welfare reform is rolled out. CCPS's Provider Optimism Survey (2014) found

that two-thirds expected a change in demand and 76% were concerned about the impact of welfare reform on services. White's (2014) study also evidences increased demands – extra caseloads and additional tasks – on third sector care and support workers. Tennant's report (2015) adds further weight concluding that: 'welfare reform is causing considerable hardship across Glasgow and stretching the resources and resilience of both people and organisations to breaking point'. Increased stigmatisation of people on benefits has also led to people being more reluctant to seek help and delaying or not making claims (Baumberg and colleagues, 2016; 2012).

There are other indicators of increased demand, which help explain survey headlines. One of the most commonly reported is increased use of food banks: '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' (Tennant, 2015: 6). In Scotland, the rise in the use of food banks

– particularly in Glasgow – has drawn attention: 'current estimates suggest that around 35 organisations in Glasgow are providing food aid of one form or another' (Tennant, 2015: 6).

Increases in sanctions also increases client's need for support, often from third sector organisations. In 2014, a total of 55,864 JSA sanctions were recorded (Tennant, 2015), with people penalised for missing or being late for Job Centre appointments. JRF research reports that this has become the new 'normal' (JRF, 2015). A Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) survey concluded that 23% of Job Centre workers had an explicit target for sanction referrals, and 81% had a level of 'expectation' imposed on them (PCS, 2014). Tinson (2015) reports a significant increase in the use of sanctions between 2010-15, and since 2012, an increase in severity.

Participants in the Welfare Trackers project also described a general lack of DWP and Job Centre

“Welfare reform is causing considerable hardship across Glasgow and stretching the resources ... to breaking point.”

Plus (JCP) structures to understand and support service users before, during and after a sanction, with few exceptions (Tennant, 2015). The same report highlights that people subject to sanctions often do not know about their entitlements to hardship grants (from JCP or the Scottish Welfare Fund), their right to request a ‘mandatory reconsideration’, or that they needed to continue to sign on while this is underway.

Tennant’s (2015) Glasgow study highlights demand for support caused by an increasing number of appeals – many successful, albeit, with people experiencing long delays and time spent on lower interim rates of pay. It has also forced people with physical or mental impairments to re-join the workforce, in some cases resulting in suicides. Furthermore, research conducted (Shelter Scotland, 2013; Fitzpatrick, 2012) indicated that between 90,000 and 105,000 social tenants would be affected by the spare room subsidy or ‘bedroom tax.’ As discussed, however, measures have been undertaken by the Scottish government to limit the impact of, and abolish, the tax.²

² The following news report in the Independent indicates that the Scottish government would move to use devolved powers to abolish the bedroom tax: <http://s.iriss.org.uk/1PqMEo2>

Information challenges

The timeline for the implementation of welfare changes has, in itself, brought challenges – owing in large part to the slow roll-out of the Universal Credit (UC) system. White (2014) outlined the planned timetable for change – from January 2013 to October 2017 – however, key milestones for this have not been met. The Jobcentre and the DWP’s website and telephone line were generally considered to be a poor source of information for clients (Lister and colleagues, 2014; White, 2014). As a response to these challenges, some organisations continue to update people about key dates and implementation of PiP and ESA, including Disability Rights UK.³

‘Knowledge of welfare reform’ is regularly cited as a skills need and issue for social services staff (SSSC, 2014), particularly for third sector care and support workers (CCPS, 2013). In White’s (2014) study of this group, respondents spoke about feeling uncertain about the accuracy of advice that they could offer, and being asked to provide advice that was outwith their job remit, expertise or powers.

³ Disability Rights UK is updating information regularly on the implementation of welfare reform: <http://s.iriss.org.uk/262lmxU>

One response to this need has been to set up SCOTWRAS (Scottish Welfare Reform Advisory Service). The service is a joint venture between Shelter Scotland and CPAG (Child Poverty Action Group), which aims to help disseminate information to frontline workers on changes to the benefits system. While such services are available, there is also evidence that workers in third sector care and support services have taken it upon themselves to find out information as needs arise (White, 2014). This can be linked to service worker's codes of practice where they are expected to take responsibility for improving and maintaining their knowledge.⁴ Nevertheless, this remains a real challenge, particularly for an already stretched workforce without additional support and resource to up-skill. Changing timescales makes training and staff development difficult for organisations to plan for. White (2014) and Tennant (2015) both conclude that there is a need to forge better relationships and communication with DWP and Job Centres.

Lister and colleagues (2014) also highlight the need for more joined-up approaches across health, social

care and advice services. They view GPs as having an important role in coordinating information with regards to disability benefit applications. Similarly, Tennant (2015) highlights the need for increased partnership working with citizen advice bureaux and housing associations. The latter are affected by rising rent arrears and their tenants are affected by changes to the benefits system.

Changes to staff roles

Workers have also been developing relationships with the volunteer workforce that has emerged to man the growing number of foodbanks providing emergency aid. White's study (2014) identified a lack of information surrounding food aid. There are discrepancies in how clients are treated – some being refused food parcels unless challenged or accompanied by a support worker. Workers recognise, however, that decisions around allocating food aid should not depend on relationships developed with individual foodbank workers.

In terms of workers' focus, there is also evidence that third sector care and support workers are being diverted from key tasks due to demands on them

⁴ The General Social Care Council's code of practice can be found here: <http://s.iriss.org.uk/1WMs3Cf>

to respond to benefit changes or deal with crisis.

This was, reportedly, to the detriment of supporting holistic programmes for those, for example, who have complex needs or who had come through the care or criminal justice system to develop skills for independent living (Tennant, 2015; White, 2015).

Workers felt angry, distressed, disappointed and frustrated as they witnessed people losing benefits and receiving reduced funding.

White's study (2014) also found that funds intended to support transition were being used more frequently in crisis situations, and that deciding how these were to be allocated was an additional concern to staff.

Interestingly, there are some examples of organisations providing computers and space for clients to complete online applications for benefits or job applications in order to prevent them being sanctioned (White, 2014).

EMOTIONAL IMPACT ON STAFF

A key finding from both Tennant (2015) and White's (2015) studies reveals that the impact of welfare reform on clients' everyday lives was impacting emotionally on workers. Many workers felt angry, distressed, disappointed and frustrated as they witnessed people

losing benefits and receiving reduced funding. This is especially true when considering the heavy stigmatisation of claiming benefits (Baumberg, 2016). Workers were empathetic, but also worried that they were letting vulnerable people down, especially those on their own, and those in recovery,

with sensory impairments, accessibility issues and diagnosed/undiagnosed health needs. Lack of literacy or digital skills (or access to a computer), not having English as a first language, or having a learning disability added to the stress. There is also evidence that while workers had mandates to support clients, individual DWP staff did not always accept their involvement (Tennant, 2015).

The fragile mental health of individual clients, in particular, has been flagged by many organisations

as an indication of how the reforms have had a very personal impact on both service users and the workforce (Tennant, 2015; White, 2014). Reports of suicide (Stockdale, 2014; Straightforward, 2013) and need for greater suicide intervention (Tennant, 2015) have been linked to welfare reform, albeit, two of them are English studies. That this impacts emotionally on workers is not surprising considering that a survey of the Scottish social services workforce (2,167 respondents) found that 75% were driven by a desire to make a difference; 70% said good outcomes for those they supported made them feel valued; and 64% said positive feedback from those they supported made them feel valued (Iriss, 2015).

STAFF TERMS AND CONDITIONS

White's study (2014) highlights the issue of workplace turnover and retention. This is a larger issue facing this part of the sector as a consequence of wider funding cuts and pressures to tender for, and win, competitive contracts that have driven down hourly rates and affected conditions in recent years (Cunningham, 2011). In Cunningham, Lindsay and Roy's (2015) report, the vast majority of employees worked more hours than they were contracted for, with 'staff shortages' being the most commonly

cited explanation. Others spoke of taking work home with them and how this could impact negatively on home life and personal relationships. The same report provides evidence that while many had benefited from good learning and development opportunities, these had been reduced with budgetary constraints and, that for a minority, supervision needs were not met.

In White's study (2014) staff interviewed also spoke about being recipients of benefits themselves and how welfare reform was impacting on their take home pay. Many research participants spoke about their own financial worries, resentment at having their wages and hours cut, impermanent contracts and fears around job security. Cunningham's research (2015) also highlights that the majority of respondents were dissatisfied with their pay and conditions, especially those in the private and third sectors. The rise of zero hour contracts was also seen to diminish the value attributed to care work. In addition, the Coalition for Care and Support Providers in Scotland (CCPS) – who regularly survey their member organisations – recently reported that: '40% of respondents [were] less optimistic about the general business situation [and] 36% experienced an increase in services running a deficit...' (CCPS, 2015).

Awareness raising, advocacy and campaigning models

There is evidence that organisations in the sector, along with relevant partners, have been active in challenging the reforms. Welfare Trackers (led by Poverty Alliance, Scottish Drugs Forum and Glasgow Council for Voluntary Sector), have organised awareness raising workshops, city-wide networking sessions and research tracking. They have joined up various organisations working across the spectrum of inequalities and vulnerabilities. Key recommendations for policy and practice have been made on the back of this.⁵

The Poverty Truth Commission also brought together some of Scotland's decision makers with people's stories about their lived experience of welfare reform. It advocates that it should be standard practice for organisations to conduct exit interviews. A number of organisations continue to campaign such as the Poverty Alliance, Scottish Campaign on Welfare Reform (SCoWR) and SCVO (Scottish Coalition for Voluntary Organisations).

Social workers have also posed questions about what this means for their code of ethics and professional identity. For example, the Highland branch of SASW has highlighted the need to advocate on behalf of people and challenge welfare reforms (Professional Social Work, 2014).

Conclusion

In summary, this *Insight* shows that there continues to be a number of challenges for the social services workforce – especially in Scotland – around the impact of welfare reform. Clearly there is much to be done in terms of reducing the anxieties of frontline workers, particularly where they are supporting clients through sanctions. The focus of the sector should not only be on the outcomes for clients, but on the needs of workers that deal with a number of daily stresses as part of increasingly pressurised conditions in third sector care and support services.

⁵ The latest Poverty Alliance tracking report can be found at: <http://s.iriss.org.uk/2370138>

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