



Welfare Reform Summit

Staffordshire University 20 April 2018, funded by [the Social Policy Association](#)

Format of the summit

Staffordshire University hosted a Social Policy Association funded Welfare Reform Summit on 20 April 2018 in partnership with [Child Poverty Action Group](#) and the [Centre for Health and Development \(CHAD\)](#).

Over 80 delegates attended the summit from a wide range of backgrounds including social policy academics/students, and welfare rights and housing professionals. The overall aim of the summit was to explore the impact of welfare reform on claimants, to reflect on the professional and organisational impact of welfare reform and to capture evidence to inform policy.

The summit was split into two main parts: keynote speeches and workshops.

Keynote speeches

Professor Martin Jones, Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Staffordshire University opened the summit welcoming delegates to the event and reflected on his extensive research on employment, skills and welfare policies. Ruth Smeeth, MP for Stoke-on-Trent North focused on the impact of welfare reform in her constituency, with a particular emphasis on how the roll-out of universal credit has affected families and children. Dan Norris from Child Poverty Action Group reflected on the complex and changing role of welfare rights advice and highlighted the importance of capturing evidence where there are clear problems and inequalities in the system. Richard Machin, senior lecturer in [Social Welfare Law, Policy and Advice Practice](#) at Staffordshire University reflected on the notion of welfare reform as a 'delusion' and presented findings from his research on the impact of the 'bedroom tax' in North Staffordshire and ways in which claimants with mental health problems have been impacted by the transition from Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independence Payment.

Workshops

The workshops were an opportunity for professional and personal reflections on welfare reform. Evidence and observations from the workshops was captured by Child Poverty Action Group's [Early Warning System](#). This project gathers information and case-studies about the impact of welfare reform which are analysed and disseminated to inform decision makers, service planners, politicians and third sector parties about the impact of benefit changes.

Key findings from the workshops

Six main themes were identified and shared by delegates in the workshops:

- 1. The scale, timing and extent of benefit changes:** the impact of welfare reform was discussed in the context of the broader economic position and alongside other equally significant policy changes. Reservations were expressed about the wisdom in making radical reforms to the benefit system when many people are experiencing vulnerabilities in relation to employment (e.g. zero hours contracts, wage caps) and housing (e.g. instability and rising costs in the private rented sector, changes to allocation policies in the social rented sector). The philosophy that underpins welfare reform was discussed and questions were raised about alternative ways of reforming the benefit system that may save money but be less damaging to the most vulnerable in society. Many delegates expressed concerns about the insecurity that people claiming benefits often feel. These increasing gaps in the 'welfare safety net' can often be linked to awards of benefits being time limited and the removal of life-time awards for many disability benefit claimants. Many delegates felt that the recent programme of welfare reform has been accompanied by a change in the relationship between advisers/advocates and the DWP. Historically professionals had often built up good local relationships with decision-makers/DWP staff but the channel shift to a more automated, call-centre system has damaged this and had a detrimental impact on the appropriate and timely resolution of benefit issues.
- 2. Significant amounts of time spent 'correcting' poor decisions in relation to employment support allowance and personal independence payment:** Delegates explored the impact of changes to employment support allowance and the move from disability living allowance to personal independence payment for working-age claimants. The poor standard of decision making was emphasised with professionals needing to spend significant amounts of time challenging decisions that were clearly inappropriate. This raised queries about whether there are fundamental issues with the assessment process for disability benefits and whether the revised criteria are asking the right questions to allow robust and appropriate decisions to be made. Some delegates discussed changes in the way that social security appeal tribunals are heard. In some parts of the country tribunals are now heard in court buildings and it was felt that this created a very different judicial environment where an appellant can easily feel that they are in a formal court setting and there may be a blurring of the line between the inquisitorial and adversarial nature of hearings.
- 3. Concerns about universal credit:** concerns were raised about a lack of understanding by claimants about who is entitled to universal credit and when claims should be submitted. Many delegates felt that the Department for Work Pensions were overly optimistic about the access claimants have to online facilities and the skills that are needed to make and manage a claim. This often results in support being provided which is completely inadequate. Whilst universal credit ostensibly creates a simpler system it fails to recognise the diversity and complexity of peoples' lives and this creates administrative problems. The system was felt to be too inflexible and the default monthly payments are creating challenges and hardship for many claimants.
- 4. A lack of preparedness for universal credit:** concerns were raised that the DWP and claimants are ill prepared for the continuing roll-out of universal credit. Wi-Fi access was highlighted as a problem as well as travel time to jobcentres and a lack of appropriate support for many claimants, especially those with complex needs. Many delegates from the advice sector voiced concerns about the capacity of advice services to be able to respond to the increasing and changing demands that will be placed on them as universal credit goes 'full service'.
- 5. Universal credit and the move from implicit to explicit consent:** currently a system of 'implicit consent' operates for most DWP benefits. This allows a claimant's representative to make enquiries on their behalf if the claimant has given verbal or written consent, or if consent can be implied – essentially allowing the DWP to use their discretion to decide if a representative is 'genuine'. Under universal credit a system of 'explicit consent' has been adopted. As universal credit is managed through an online digital account holding personal, financial and medical data the DWP have stipulated that a claimant must give consent through their online account, on the phone (with both the claimant and representative being present) or in person in a job centre. Explicit consent does not last indefinitely and only covers a particular query. Delegates appreciated the importance of data protection but raised concerns about the limits placed on professionals to make enquiries on behalf of a claimant and how this may impede the resolution of both reasonably straightforward and also more complex queries.
- 6. Sanctions and conditionality:** delegates expressed concerns about the sanctions regime that has become a key feature of the benefit system in recent years. There were clear geographic differences in the administration of sanctions with some advisers stating that they had a good track record in challenging sanction decisions while

others stated that mandatory reconsiderations and appeals rarely succeeded. Concerns were raised that the average length of a sanction for universal credit claims is often longer than for people claiming job seekers allowance or employment support allowance. Delegates stated that they had rarely seen claimants who had been sanctioned move into work and that disabled people and the homeless were particularly badly hit by sanctions. It was felt that many homeless claimants were in an impossible situation as their circumstances mean they are unable to comply with the conditions of a claim and, therefore, sanctions for this vulnerable group were often inevitable. There were calls for better communication from the DWP so that claimants have a clearer understanding of the conditions that are attached to their claim.

Next steps

The case studies gathered at the welfare reform summit have been recorded on CPAG's early warning system. Several of these case studies informed CPAG's forthcoming report on the problems which working UC claimants face and arise from the approach to assessment entitlement based on strict assessment periods.

Many of the issues raised at the summit were presented at CPAG's meeting with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and UC Director General Neil Couling in June 2018 and subsequent report (sent to both Secretary of State and UC Director General) which can be found [here](#). The latest edition for the EWS e-bulletin features an in-depth look at one of the issues raised by an attendee at the summit: housing costs contributions (UC)/ non dependant deductions.

In August 2018 CPAG will be examining the case studies raised at the welfare reform summit, as well as those raised by other EWS correspondents, in order to decide which areas of welfare reform pose the greatest issues for claimants and on which we should campaign in the future.

The discussion around benefit sanctions at the summit have inspired CPAG to take problems with Universal Credit sanctions as the subject of a workshop for advisers at [CPAG's welfare rights conference](#). It is highly likely that the sanctions workshop will be delivered as standalone training provided to promote the EWS at adviser events such as National Association of Welfare Rights Adviser (NAWRA) meetings and a future article in the EWS e-bulletin.

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