

Working Together to Tackle Poverty Conference



Report produced by Citizens Advice Bureaux in Glasgow

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1. Introduction

The Working Together to Tackle Poverty Conference, organised by the eight Citizens Advice Bureaux in Glasgow, brought together decision makers, managers and front line staff from the statutory, private and voluntary sectors. The aim was to identify issues contributing to hardship, to share information regarding work being undertaken and to consider what steps could be taken in the future.



Two hundred and thirty people attended the conference. Feedback, on which this report is based, was gathered via facilitated discussion groups and through completion of evaluation forms. Responses showed a shared willingness to 'fight poverty in Glasgow' with 'numerous organisations working towards the same goal.' There were very grave concerns raised about the growing inequalities in our society the consequences of widening gaps in wealth, health and opportunity.

We are grateful to the BIG Lottery Fund Scotland and to Glasgow City Council for their support in making the conference possible.

During the conference the new Support and Connect Project was launched. This Project brings together seven of the city's CABx to employ a team of Community Information Workers with funding from BIG Lottery Fund Scotland. The Workers main purpose is to reach out to people facing hardship and to put them in touch with services that offer practical and emotional support.

2. Keynote speakers

- **Jackie Killeen, Director, BIG Lottery Fund Scotland**
- **Councillor Malcolm Cunning, Glasgow City Council, Poverty Leadership Panel**
- **Keith Wimbles, CEO Voluntary Action Fund and Convenor of the Scottish Funder's Forum**
- **Dr Jim McCormick, Joseph Rowntree Foundation**
- **Caroline Mockford, Poverty Truth Commission**
- **Margaret Lynch, CEO Citizens Advice Scotland**

3. Main issues

1. Sanctions

Particular concerns were raised in relation to the *'ineffectiveness of sanctions'* – viewed as often *'brutal and unreasonable.'* Sanctions were perceived to be increasing in number, longer in duration and applied for 'trivial reasons'. For example, sanctions being issued to claimants who may not be computer literate, who were not logging into necessary sites or were not applying for appropriate jobs suggested by Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) staff. Attitudes towards volunteering while on benefits were described as 'strict'. Resulting problems for people sanctioned included: increased debt, health problems and homelessness which in turn add costs to other parts of public service provision.

2. Attitudes

a) Feedback highlighted the need for a change in attitudes. This covered both the need for **cultural change** by tackling media mistruths, myths and propaganda specifically regarding the treatment of benefit claimants.

'People [should be] treated with more dignity not as "scroungers and skivers".'

b) Concern was expressed regarding attitudes by staff at the DWP and the treatment of claimants, who are 'entitled to respect'. Training was advocated for DWP staff in relation to customer care and in gaining a better understanding of claimants' situations, for example, mental health and learning disabilities.

3. Welfare Reforms

a) There was perceived to be a lack of support and provision of clear information relating to Welfare Reforms – ‘difficult processes’, such as JSA applications, and making new claims, were viewed as problematic.

It was generally felt that people are waiting too long for decisions, systems are too complex and there exists a lack of readily available information and support.



b) Inconsistencies were identified, with some staff ‘harsh’ yet others ‘understanding’. The ‘lack of uniform interpretation of legislation’ led to a failure by DWP staff to evenly apply rules and regulations, making it difficult for other agencies to deal with them and therefore to support their clients.

c) There was felt to be a particular issue with Universal Credit: it was ‘wrong to penalize people if they work more hours.’ Universal Credit was not believed to ‘make work pay.’ Difficulties relating to Universal Credit were clearly demonstrated in the video shown by Jim McCormick, part of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, ‘Does Universal Credit Make Work Pay?’ (<http://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/2013/07/does-universal-credit-make-work-pay>)

4. Digital Inclusion

a) A particular problem was raised with regard to digital inclusion, mainly to do with on line DWP benefit applications and DWP job search provision. Apart from difficulty of access, this drive was believed to impact on more vulnerable members of society including people with learning difficulties or mental health problems.

b) There is a lack of support for people experiencing difficulty accessing services, for example, those lacking IT skills and those with literacy or language issues plus the visually and hearing impaired and more needs to be done to address this problem

5. Housing/Homelessness

a) There is a lack of availability of social housing and services for the homeless are inadequate – the *'Simon Community report handing out more sleeping bags'* and *'People are waiting weeks for an appointment and having to take a tenancy without even having a bed.'*

b) There was a perception that homelessness was increasing due to benefit sanctions and that increasingly people were becoming homeless through unemployment rather than problems such as addiction.

c) The *'Bedroom Tax'* was viewed as a major issue: *'Under occupancy charges are creating 'devastating hardship'*. The point was made that, when a parent is not the sole carer of their children, they have to decide whether to take a one bedroom house and not have links with their children or to have a two bedroom house and risk falling into rent arrears and possibly homelessness – *'rent arrears are leading to evictions'*.



6. The Working Poor

a) *'Whilst there is a need for more jobs there is also a need for jobs that pay decent wages.'* Major concerns were expressed regarding **zero hours contracts** and **low wages**, for example: zero hours contracts made it difficult to budget, and 'false apprenticeships' with low wages for young people. The living wage was considered to be 'set too low' and it was advocated that *'all public bodies should pay a living wage.'* This should also *'apply to commissioned services'* including those commissioned by Glasgow City Council.

b) **Transition into work** was viewed as becoming increasingly problematic: *'more difficult as job grant has gone'*. The view was expressed that people need more support in moving onto paid work, for example, for people also tackling addiction. *'DWP do not support people in finding jobs.'*

The point was made that *'low paid jobs won't eradicate hardship'* and greater support is needed so that people can move on from *'low level entry jobs on to jobs with better prospects.'* Issues identified included the need for skills training for younger people, support for study, and opportunities to try out alternatives such as self-employment without being penalised.

7. Childcare

Lack of affordable childcare prevented take up of employment. *'People are willing to work but can't afford to – [lack of childcare is] a huge barrier.'* Access *'needs to be revolutionised and make work pay.'*

8. Food Banks

a) A significant increase in the number of and use of food banks was highlighted. This included use by those in work. Issues identified included the need for more information about food banks and their locations but the view was also expressed that *'solutions be found to eradicate food banks.'*



b) The need for **healthier food** to be more available was highlighted including: opportunities for people to grow their own food, for example, the *'development of community gardens'*.

c) The high price of food and fuel was identified as contributing to in-work poverty as well as affecting those on benefits. It was noted that workers on home visits find homes are *'a lot colder'* and that *'there is less food in the house.'* This is particularly problematic for the elderly, the sick, the disabled and families with young children.

9. Fuel Poverty

The point was made that the: *'Unemployed/sick tend to use more energy than working families.'* The need for *'utilities that are affordable'* was emphasized and the legislation to open up energy markets. Action by the Government to regulate prices and cap fuel (and food) costs was also stressed.

10. Debt

a) Increasingly more people were falling into **rent arrears** and **council tax arrears**. It was felt that people from ethnic minorities could experience debt/rent arrears due, in part, to language barriers. The disabled were also increasingly facing debt due to Bedroom Tax sanctions.



b) There was perceived to be an increase in gambling and a growth in betting shops, pawn shops and pay day lending. Pay day lending created a: *'vicious circle as one missed payment can lead to prolonged struggle to clear debt.'* It is *'too easy to get a loan'*. There were calls for the better promotion of Credit Unions where more affordable credit can be accessed and money advice provided.

11. Working Together

a) There exists: *'A wealth of information but not enough sharing and working together.'*

Participants expressed the view that more inter-agency work was required with better communication, information sharing, use of networks and the development of joint strategies. Concerns however were raised about voluntary organisations having to do more with reduced or stagnant budgets as this can be a real barrier to working together.

Co-ordination and partnership work was strongly advocated – 'at community /city level' and the need to engage with people at ground level was stressed. 'Work should take place within communities to identify needs not being met so that this can be fed back.', 'Evidence gathering to record common issues,' and 'Front line workers to inform policy.' Other issues highlighted regarding working together included: joint training, the development of common policies and creating a 'collective voice' to 'protest and challenge'.

Case studies should be compiled and fed back to, for example, the Poverty Leadership Panel.

b) Participants felt that the conference had been very useful in both highlighting issues and sharing concerns. Feedback from the conference 'should be fed back to Scottish Government.' There were numerous calls for a follow up event.

4. What next?

This report will be circulated to:

- Conference participants (and those who could not attend but requested a copy)
- Members of the Poverty Leadership Panel
- Glasgow City Council elected members
- Glasgow MSPs and MPs
- Scottish Parliament Welfare Reform Committee
- Citizens Advice Scotland
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Third Sector Forum
- Area Development Groups
- GAIN

Glasgow CABx will hold a follow up meeting for organisations working in their area to explore in more detail how they might work together to more effectively support people in hardship.

5. Sources of help

Advice Guide

This is a website supported by Citizens Advice Scotland which contains information on a range of issues including welfare benefits, debt and housing

<http://www.adviceguide.org.uk/scotland.htm>

Glasgow Information and Advice Network (GAIN)

This link takes you to a list of useful contacts that appear on the GAIN website

<http://www.gain4u.org.uk/Pages/Show/124>

Credit Unions

<http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=10677>

6. Video

A short highlights video of the conference has been produced and can be viewed at:

<http://vimeo.com/citizensadvicescotland/glasgowconference>

Glasgow Bridgeton CAB, Glasgow Castlemilk CAB, Glasgow Central CAB, Glasgow Drumchapel CAB, Glasgow Easterhouse CAB, Glasgow Greater Pollok CAB, Glasgow Maryhill CAB and Glasgow Parkhead CAB are all members of The Scottish Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux: Scotland's largest independent advice network. CAB advice services are delivered using service points throughout Scotland, from the islands to city centres.

The CAB Service aims:

to ensure that individuals do not suffer through lack of knowledge of their rights and responsibilities, or of the services available to them, or through an inability to express their need effectively

and equally

to exercise a responsible influence on the development of social policies and services, both locally and nationally.

The CAB Service is independent and provides free, confidential and impartial advice to everybody regardless of age, disability, gender, race, religion and belief and sexual orientation.



If you require more information on the conference, the Support and Connect Project or wish to discuss follow up action please contact:

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