

Title: The Age of Austerity: *The Impact of Welfare Reform on People in the North East of England*

Authors: Andrew Clifton, Joanna Reynolds, Jennifer Remnant & Jane Noble

Introduction

According to Mark Carney the Governor of the Bank of England the United Kingdom economic outlook is getting brighter: "For the first time in a long time you don't have to be an optimist to see the glass is half full. The recovery has finally taken hold (Carney 2013)." Unemployment is falling; as have interest rates and GDP (Gross Domestic Product) growth has been upgraded from 2.5 per cent to 2.8 per cent for the year 2014. Despite these "green shoots of recovery", the impact of government austerity measures and social policy decisions means the outlook for millions of citizens remains bleak.

The Welfare Reform Act received Royal Assent on 8th March 2012 and legislates for the biggest change to the welfare system for over 60 years in the United Kingdom. The coalition government is looking to reassess all those on Incapacity Benefit (IB) with a new test, the Work Capability Assessment (WCA), which measures a person's entitlement to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA).

Eighteen months on there is much anecdotal evidence suggesting the reforms are having a negative impact on the economic status and well-being of service users. In particular the WCA is causing fear among many mental health service users due to the nature of the testing procedure which is carried out by the healthcare firm Atos who have the responsibility of identifying the people on IB who are deemed "fit for work" (The Guardian, 2012). As recently as 22nd May 2013 two people with mental health problems won a legal challenge in the High Court claiming the WCA test would discriminate against them, with the judge stating the test puts people with a mental illness at a "substantial disadvantage" (BBC, 2013).

Against this background, collaboration between researchers from Northumbria University and Mental Health service users was established to explore what impact, if any, the welfare reforms are having on people in the North East of England. A discussion on the nature of the collaboration is reported elsewhere (Clifton et al, 2013) and this article will provide a summary of the main research findings. Ethical approval was granted by the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences Research Ethics Review Panel, University of Northumbria, the employer of the researchers, and we used a mixed methods design

incorporating two key methods: use of a questionnaire and focus groups to collect data for further analysis.

Findings

15 participants completed the questionnaire and attend a focus group one week later. A summary of research findings is presented below:

The current system is inaccessible and non-inclusive for us

The participants discussed the different ways in which the system prevented or challenged their engagement with it. The different component parts of the system (the ESA application form, WCA and tribunals) function separately from each other, and not as a joined-up system. This means that people who are making an ESA application have to abide by each part of the system's own set of requirements. Some of these requirements seem to be in direct conflict with each other; for example, some service users talked about being turned down for ESA, because they were deemed fit to work, but when they went to the Job Centre to look for work, they were refused the right to sign on because the Job Centre deemed them unfit to look for work. The participants (many of whom are educated to Undergraduate and Post Graduate Degree level) stated that the communication within the system also prevents engagement; the letters they receive and the forms to complete are not written in Plain English and do not provide clear information.

The government letter – why they can't give you letters in English... instead of big words... The way they put their form – their government words – and, like, long words....instead of just putting them in plain English.

Participant

Participants explained that an independent insurance company has been commissioned to conduct the ESA assessments with applicants, and that the staff completing the assessments with applicants, are on financial incentives, where the more people they deem fit to work, the more commission they receive. Participants described feeling judged and seen as a "scrounger" by the staff conducting the WCA interview. They stated that the WCA questions, and the person asking these questions in the interview, were un-empathic and did not treat the person as an individual with their own specific set of needs and abilities. Instead, participants talked about being "shoehorned" into categories that are an incorrect "fit". Because of the target driven nature of the WCA part of the system, participants experienced a strong sense of being rushed through the system and reflected that individuals are not looked at in their own context; their own individual case;

It can't be right that the people who are assessing you are going to make financial gain out of you...

Participant

Not only is the system described as inaccessible, but participants talked about the fact that once people are within the system, they are “trapped” and not supported to exit the system. Participants discussed the current Government policies and the role these are playing in this lack of support for service users to exit the system, as the following conversation from the focus group illustrates;

- *With support and adequate provision there are people who can contribute to society. I, personally, value everyone in their social role. Unfortunately government policies don't seem to do this.*

- *Which is actually quite ironic since Mr Cameron brought through the Big Society, isn't it really.*

- *Yeah, we're all in the same boat apparently.*

- *And George Osborne said we're all in it together.*

- *And I would like to know as well the impact on the North East that closing Remploy has. Because I think that it's a disgrace. It really is.*

Participants

The system makes us more ill

Participants talked about the cyclical nature of the system, describing it as a “revolving door” or “vicious cycle” of forms, appeals, tribunals and reassessments. They talked about the increased anxiety, dread and distress that they experience within this constant cycle. Unsurprisingly, this has a significantly negative impact on their health and wellbeing. They describe a system that is designed to gather evidence of incapacity and this is in direct opposition to their own treatment, and personal, goals of improvement and development, with a more solution focused approach to their mental health and wellbeing.

The cyclical nature of the system means that the applicant undergoes constant questioning, both within the system and self-directed questioning e.g. "am I better"? The ESA forms are annual but the tribunal to appeal the decision of ESA can take 6 months, so it feels like every 6 months there is a reminder for people; "how far have I come?" "Am I better yet" and this has a detrimental effect on their sense of being able to move forward;

Well, I got my ESA 50 through last September. 6 months after my tribunal. And I spent 24 hours crying. Because I thought, "Oh, well how was I meant...? Was I meant to be better by now?" I hadn't come as far as I wanted to be. It makes you ill. It makes you worse. It makes you ask questions about yourself that... That you wouldn't ask. It's not right. It makes you doubt yourself. It makes you think, "Am I lying? No. What's wrong? Am I ever going to get better? Am I going to have to go through vicious circle again? Is this the beginning of another 6 months of assessments and tribunals and meetings and forming statements and...?" You despair.

Participant

The financial implications for participants in the system, as they describe in the following section, also have significant negative impacts on their health and wellbeing.

The system makes us poorer financially

Many participants discussed the negative impact of the system on their finances and their ability to live day to day.

Within the system, participants are required to call premium rate telephone numbers and pay for medical reports/ assessments. When benefits are suddenly removed or severely cut (if they are deemed fit to work following their ESA application), appeals and tribunals are required before benefits can be reinstated, and during this period (often of 6 months), people will accrue significant debts in order to live day to day;

[When I was initially declined on my second assessment my money stopped]...I had to get everything reinstated. But then I was back at the assessment rate until my tribunal, which was 6 months away. So I'm then on the lower rate – even though I was previously being awarded the higher rate...And it was only once...my decision was overturned at tribunal. I got the arrears paid back – which is a hefty sum... And you suddenly realise this... That money – I didn't see any of it, because I had to pay back the debts that I'd accrued over that time.

While people are in that situation, they can lose their house, they can lose their marriage. They can lose everything. [They] get everything paid up, but by the time they get it paid up – as I say, without interest – it's too late...because they're on the street. It's a long period of time to be without any money....or on less money than you're used to getting.

You know, there are people who can't afford to eat.

Participants

Participants discussed the multiple-impact of the different funding cuts within the recent welfare reform, including the Bedroom Tax, NHS cuts (meaning participants are waiting e.g. 18 months for a Psychiatry appointment) and the cuts to, or total removal of, funding for third sector organisations, who are typically the organisations who provide the vital support and provision for people's mental health and wellbeing. Participants suggested that these compounding factors are likely to result in increased psychiatric hospital admissions, and an increase in crime rates

No, I was just thinking that a lot of the cuts already on – around the benefits and everything else – I think it's going to see a bigger rise on the population of prisons...and some hospitals.

Participant

Conclusions

In this article we have presented a summary of findings resulting from a collaborative consultation examining the impact of welfare reforms on people in the North East of England. These are the experiences of real people who on a daily basis have to endure the significant impact the reforms are having on many individuals throughout the United Kingdom. Time will tell about the nature and extent of the current welfare reforms have had on mental health service users. However, without a shadow of a doubt, for many of the people who participated in this study these reforms have had a significant impact on their financial, psychological and emotional well-being. The coalition governments' current mantra is that reforming the benefit system aims to make it fairer, more affordable and better able to tackle poverty, this perspective does not reflect the experiences of the people who participated in this consultation.

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