

Doorway Survey 2012 – Welfare Reforms and Agency

In order to compile data on the welfare reforms and agency I carried out a survey at Doorway Wiltshire, an open-access drop-in centre for those who are homeless or vulnerably housed. The nature of the organisation and service-users (guests) meant that a range of different kinds of engagement with the welfare system could be recorded. For example, the survey documents those receiving disability benefit, those on job seeker's allowance and those finding it difficult to claim benefits because they do not have an address. I have written and completed guest surveys at the centre for the past two years as well as being a support worker there, and my specific questions for this paper were an addition to the 2012 guest survey. The nature of my relationship with the organisation therefore allowed me to carry out this research competently as I have an already established relationship with the guests. This is beneficial when undertaking research with those with chaotic lifestyles. The broader survey had 50 respondents, 4 of which failed to complete the section on benefits and 1 refusal. I therefore had a total of 46 respondents who answered questions regarding their benefits. The majority of the surveys were completed on a one-to-one basis with the guests and myself, with a few guests preferring to complete the surveys on their own. The data was collected over a period of five weeks spanning June and July 2012. Due to the nature of the guests attending the drop-in centre there are inconsistencies in responses to the survey and a range of percentages in response rates to questions. I highlight these within my analysis as this inconsistent response leads to a high margin of error within the data. I suggest that this data be used purely as an indicator of a change in relationship between benefit claimants and the welfare system in regards to effective agency.

My methodological approach in this research is one of methodological pluralism. Rather than looking for patterns within the data I aimed to record a snapshot of the current relationship between claimants, the welfare system and the welfare reforms. In this regard, the research can be considered a case study as it reflects the specific context of those who use a particular front-line homelessness organisation and their response to welfare reform. I designed the survey in a way that asked a range of direct quantifiable questions each followed by a question regarding the impact of this change. The data therefore is large-N but can be analysed in both quantitative and

qualitative terms. The method used to collate the data is quantitative but the nature of respondents and execution of the surveys allows for a further qualitative approach to the responses.

The design of the survey was very important in regards to gleaning the information that I wanted to collect from the specific context in which I was collecting it. As I was engaging with people with chaotic and complex lifestyles the survey had to be designed so that it was easy to use and held guests' attention but gave ample opportunity for a high level of detail. The survey is divided into three sections each with a quantifiable question followed by a question regarding impact. The sections cover changes in benefit, the process of the benefit changes and how these changes relate to agency. The first question asks 'has your benefit allowance changed in the last year?' with yes or no options to choose from. The next question asks how it has changed and allows space for a full answer. This is then followed by the question 'if it has reduced, does it still allow you to do the things you could do/wanted to do before the change?'. This section aims to record how many people have already been affected by the changing approach to welfare and relate this to agency. The second section aims to record the impact of the process of change. The first question asks 'have you had to attend a meeting or tribunal about your benefits in the last year?', again with an option for a yes or no response. This is followed by 'how has this affected your life?'. The third section asks direct questions about the new approach to welfare and agency. It asks 'do you feel that the new benefit system allows you to effectively take control of your life?' with a yes or no option for response. The survey finally asks 'how have the changes made an impact on your life?'. This design allows for both a quantitative and qualitative approach to the data. I will first give an exposition of my research from a quantitative approach and then analyse issues raised by particular respondents in more detail. This second level of analysis will focus more on the respondents' narrative of engagement with the welfare reforms. I suggest that the combination of approaches is beneficial in this context as it gives a full picture to this specific case study.

The first section (see Appendix 1) aims to record whether respondents' benefits had changed in the last year. 63% answered no, 33% answered yes and 4% state that they are not on benefits. This reflects the timeline of the process of reform; it has begun but is not yet in full effect. The introduction of Universal Credit will begin in

October 2013 whereas Personal Independence Payments will begin in April 2013. In regards to the reform of disability benefit, reassessments for Employment Support Allowance are already being carried out and the reform will shortly be introduced that this benefit can only be claimed for a year. When the responses of the 15 claimants who state that their benefits have changed is analysed further through the second question, there are a range of ways this change has occurred. Of the 15 respondents 33% of claimants have seen an increase in their payments whereas 27% have seen a decrease. 40% of the respondents have had their benefit reclassified, all to ESA. This final figure again reflects the point that the process of welfare reform has reached in terms of reassessments. Of those whose benefits have decreased, 25% have seen a decrease after an assessment. This may be seen to reflect the aim of reducing the welfare budget through a reclassification of claimants. For those whose benefits have increased, 60% of those are through a reclassification to Disability Living Allowance. Although this is a positive result in terms of claimants receiving more support, this benefit will be made redundant through the welfare reforms. Furthermore it is unclear if these claimants are aware of this change. One respondent has been through a two year tribunal process which made them 'stressed out' in order to secure this top-up benefit. By April 2013 this funding will no longer be available.

The final question of this section asked about the impact of these changes. Although there were few responses to this question, the answers given are pertinent. One respondent whose benefit has decreased after a reassessment states 'just keeping my head above water foodwise.' Another claimant who has seen their benefit decrease states 'could just about manage before but not now.' The same sentiment was prevalent amongst those whose benefits have been reclassified. One homeless respondent who has been reclassified from Job Seeker's Allowance to Employment Support Allowance states 'not enough – can't eat healthily with this money and no cooking facilities'. These responses appear to show that the trend of benefit reduction and reclassification of benefits contributes to a feeling of a lack of agency amongst claimants. Moreover, it is important to note that the process of transition to the new welfare system is in its infancy and many more changes are yet to be implemented.

The second section (see Appendix 2) of the survey refers to the effect of the process

of change on claimants. When asked whether claimants had attended a meeting or tribunal regarding benefits in the last year, 74% of respondents said no and 26% said yes. 11 guests failed to respond to this question. The responses to the second question on the impact of this process were varied. Of those who had attended a meeting or tribunal, 10% responded positively to this event. One respondent was pleased that they had been reclassified in terms of benefit allowance through this process as this meant that they got increased mental health assistance. Although not specified, one can infer that this could have included a move onto DLA benefit which is to be cut. In many of these cases, an increase in benefit will only be for a limited amount of time due to the reform of DLA. 90% of respondents had a negative reaction to the process. Furthermore, some respondents had a meeting or tribunal arranged for the future that they were feeling negative about. One respondent who must attend a meeting shortly stated that the process 'affects problems with [my] anxiety and depression – another thing to worry about.' This issue of an increase in anxiety was mentioned frequently throughout the completion of the surveys and also in conversation within the drop-in centre more generally. Of those who had attended meetings or tribunals in the last year, 80% state that it has increased anxiety. Respondents state that these processes 'create enormous anxiety' and means that they 'can't plan ahead'. Many of these respondents already suffer from mental health illnesses and claim that this process of transition exacerbates anxiety and depression. Furthermore, the transition from measuring disability to measuring capability is likely to have adverse effects on those claiming disability benefits for a mental health illness. These are often also the people who find change very difficult to cope with and rely on consistency. One respondent mentions that both the transition to the new system and the system itself lacks sensitivity and fails to engage adequately with those with mental health problems.

The final section (see Appendix 3) asks questions regarding the new welfare system and claimants having control over their lives. Although the new system is only in the process of being established, the results give an indication of how people feel the system supports them in these early stages of reform. Unfortunately the respondent rate for this question was low with 60% of the data set giving no response. This could be the result of the wording of the question: 'do you feel that the new benefit system allows you to effectively take control of your life?'. This may be seen as a complex question for those who are not aware of the changes to the benefit system and for

those who live chaotic lifestyles who may not have an immediate understanding of the concept of effectively taking control of their lives.

30% of respondents to this question state that yes; the system does allow them to assert control over their lives, whereas 70% said it does not. Surprisingly, there is no direct correlation between the answers given for the first question in this section and the answers given for the second. Some respondents who answered yes to the previous question continue to discuss a lack of agency when asked about the impact of the changes in the second question. For example, one respondent has answered in the affirmative to the first question and then responds to questions about the impact of the changes by stating 'under control before, now pick and choose which bills to pay'. I have divided the responses to the second question into three categories: increased agency, lack of agency and increased anxiety. 16 guests responded to this question. 13% of these guests gave responses that can be categorised as suggesting that the changes in welfare are contributing to an increase in agency. This includes responses such as 'being able to better my quality of life – food and clothing' and 'better now I get DLA and bus pass'. Again however, this positive result is based on a transfer onto DLA which is temporary. 25% of respondents mention an increase in anxiety in regards to the changes. As well as an increase in mental health problems, an increase in other health issues is mentioned. One respondent states 'makes me stressed out – have to take more pills', whereas another mentions an increase in epileptic fits as a response to the exacerbated anxiety. 63% of respondents give answers that could categorise the changes as causing a lack of agency. One respondent states that they feel 'not in control at all' and another argues that the 'system doesn't allow me to do the things I want to'. Although the data was compiled at the beginning of the introduction of the new welfare system I suggest that it already shows claimants to be feeling a lack of control over their lives due to the changes. This is only going to increase with the introduction of the stringent conditionality of the new system.

After giving a quantitative analysis of my research, I will now engage with it using a more qualitative approach. I will use particular surveys to give weight to worries previously mentioned in this paper: the move to conditionality of payments, the metric of capability and the mandatory nature of the new system. I have chosen four surveys which engage with these concepts in depth, and will also be using a

statement written by a Big Issue vendor in summer 2011 regarding his benefits. I hope to show that these theoretical issues are also practical, pertinent issues and that they undermine agency.

The first issue is that of the metric of capability. Within the centre where the research was completed there is a widespread belief that conditions for qualifying for disability benefits have become more stringent. This is supported by the outlined proposals for PIP which focus on capability rather than disability. Although this has not yet been introduced, I suggest that the metric is already being used in regards to reassessments of claimants. Respondent Five states that his benefits have been reduced from £180 a fortnight to £51 a week due to a reassessment which concluded that he did not qualify for a disability-based benefit. He suggests that this result is inadequate as he has rapidly reducing eyesight and a curvature of the spine. This respondent is currently engaging with charities in regards to his eyesight as he is almost blind. Respondent Fifty has experienced similar problems. He has damaged nerves in his right leg which leave him partially paralysed, and a blood infection. He is still on JSA and is waiting for a tribunal regarding his rejected application for DLA. This process has caused him anxiety which in turn has increased his epileptic fits. He is critical of the assessment process and states that the conditions to qualify as able to work are too low. He claims that the condition of being fit-for-work which was used at his assessment was being able to lift an empty cardboard box.

These case studies suggest that the conditions for qualifying as fit-for-work are very low. In fact, I suggest that they appear to neglect diagnosed disabilities. When categorised as able to work, the stringent conditions of job seekers' benefits and Universal Credit will apply to claimants. If these are individuals who have disabilities which have not been adequately recognised they are not going to be able to meet these conditions. They will therefore lose their benefit. If this is a widespread practice within the welfare system, in a few years those who are some of the most vulnerable in our society will not be receiving state support as they will have failed to meet the stringent conditions of welfare that the state claims they should be able to meet. Respondent Five's eyesight is such that he cannot always write his name within a box, yet he might have to be able to complete any work programme set by the job centre regardless of his disability. Failing to meet this condition will incur benefit

sanctions. I suggest that the conditions for qualifying as fit for work are far too low. They ignore diagnosed disabilities and in turn undermine people's agency.

The second issue is that of conditionality. For Respondent Seven this is part of a set of broader problems including the nature of the engagement with disability and the value system being used to define the conditions of receiving benefits. This respondent had recently been moved onto ESA benefit from Incapacity Benefit which he qualifies for because of his mental health problems. This transition had exacerbated his illness and created enormous anxiety. He finds the level of proof needed to qualify for the benefit problematic especially in regards to the nature of his disability. He states 'mental health and disability is intangible'. He suggests that the system lacks sensitivity and is not suitable for engaging with those suffering from mental health problems. The respondent argues that this metric of disability is inadequate. Furthermore, the similar approach to conditionality is also problematic. The high level of conditionality is not appropriate for some with disabilities. For example, setting the condition of attending a 30 hour a week work programme as part of a large group in a different town may not be something that someone suffering from anxiety will be able or comfortable to do. He argues that for those with disabilities many achievements are not quantifiable by these standards. For example, if one is uncomfortable with change, a slight change in daily routine may be a great achievement in regards to preparing for work. This would not be recognised as an achievement by the new system. The system also has a stringent approach to volunteering. In many cases it must be prescribed by the job centre, regardless of whether a claimant already has a volunteering job. Furthermore, work schemes will override these longer term commitments again regardless of circumstance. The respondent states that social contributions should be taken into account in regards to benefits. This could include improving self-esteem, volunteering and helping others. He suggests that the value system of the new approach to welfare should change to a more claimant-focused approach. This would deal with the nuances of people's disabilities and allow for individual targets to be set in order to meet conditionality, rather than universal conditions that in many cases are just not suitable for the claimants involved.

Although many would assert that this is a soft approach to welfare and that for public money to be spent stringent conditions should be met, I suggest that a claimant-

focused approach may indeed quicken the process back into work. I do not agree that any job at all should be the main aim of the system, but one that is suitable for a claimant is more likely to develop into a long term commitment. This in turn could yield the same result as the current system aims for: more people in work, less money spent on welfare but in a way that recognises individuals' issues and supports claimants to find appropriate work that meets their needs. In order for a claimant-focused approach to exist, the value system of the current system would have to change. This would involve a move away from hard, quantifiable conditions on payment to an individual support package which takes account of a claimant's circumstances. Although possibly difficult to execute nationally, I suggest that this is a preferable approach to conditionality on payment.

The final issue I will engage with here is that of the mandatory nature of conditions which I suggest undermine agency. Respondent Six states that his benefit was sanctioned after he didn't apply for a job which was 20 miles away. He was also sanctioned for non-attendance of a course which he did not know was mandatory. His benefit was reduced to £60 a fortnight for 26 weeks. This situation made his life difficult and increased his anxiety and stress. After being advised to go to the Citizens' Advice Bureau regarding this matter, they are now pursuing a court case with the job centre. The Big Issue vendor who shared his story with me faced a similar situation. He was taken to tribunal in regards to his benefits when he failed to apply for a job as an assistant manager of an IT shop. The vendor states that he did not apply for this as he does not know how to turn a computer on. After failing to receive and complete paperwork for a second time his benefits were sanctioned. When considering these issues it is important to remember that often benefit claimants are without transport, have left education at a young age and may have chaotic lifestyles. It appears to sometimes be the case that when claimants do not meet their work search requirement it is because they feel the jobs available are not suitable for their needs. This is entirely understandable in regards to the two cases previously mentioned. I suggest that these conditions on searching for work often undermine claimant's agency. If the jobs they have to apply for are not suitable, such as those which are a long distance away, their freedom to choose the terms of their occupation is undermined. If they refuse to apply for these however their benefits are reduced and their agency further undermined. Again I suggest that a claimant-focused approach to welfare is a preferable system where individuals' needs could

be met alongside conditionality for and accountability of public funding.

As previously mentioned, benefit claimants may have chaotic lifestyles. Even for those with ordered lifestyles, the impact of a sanction of benefits is far reaching. For example, the respondent who had his benefits docked for 26 weeks to £60 a fortnight will have had to pay for bills, food and other essentials from that money. For those with chaotic lifestyles the impact can be more pertinent:

In the last few months I had been trying to sort my life out. I'm in treatment for my drug addiction. In the last three to four weeks I haven't used any drugs and I have managed to manage my money so it lasted me and I didn't sell the Big Issue...and actually look for work. But now that my JSA has been stopped that means I have to sell the Big Issue everyday because I need money to buy food and to pay rent top up. It also means that I will be at risk of using [drugs] again. It is only a matter of time and it will happen.

Although I cannot outline in depth this approach in this paper, I suggest that an agency-based theory of distributive justice in the form of a claimant-focused approach to welfare could both meet the needs of individuals, stakeholders in the welfare system and the government's aim to reduce the cost of welfare. It would also allow individuals to assert effective agency and become active citizens – both of which Cameron supports. I suggest that this approach could also support the Capabilities Approach in valuing human dignity over aggregative approaches to justice. This claimant-focused approach would involve a change of value system from one that uses a quantitative metric of capability/disability and job-seeking, to a system that acknowledges the capabilities of individuals. Although Duncan Smith claims his new approach to disability welfare does this, I suggest that it uses a false metric of capability. By using the emphasis on dignity both agency and active citizenry could be supported, and I suggest a more successful and sustainable approach to welfare could be created.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1: Tables of Data for Section 1

Question:	Number of respondents:	Response: Yes	Response: No	Response: Not on benefits	Response: Failed to respond
Has your benefit allowance change in the last year?	46	15	29	2	4
Percentage of respondents:	100%	33%	63%	4%	

Question:	Number of respondents:	Response: Benefit increased	Response: Benefit decreased	Response: Benefit was reclassified
How has it changed?	15	5	4	6
Percentage of respondents:	100%	33%	27%	40%

Question:	Number of respondents:	Response: Yes	Response: No
If your benefit has reduced can you still do things you want to do?	5	0	5
Percentage of respondents:	100%	0%	100%

Appendix 2: Table of Data for Section 2

Question:	Number of respondents:	Response: Yes	Response: No	Response: Failed to respond
Have you had to attend a meeting or tribunal about your benefits in the last year?	39	10	29	11
Percentage of respondents:	100%	26%	74%	

Question:	Number of respondents:	Response: Positive way	Response: Negative way
How has this affected your life?	10	1	9
Percentage of respondents:	100%	10%	90%

Question:	Number of respondents:	Response: Negative way due to increased anxiety
How has this affected your life? Response: Negative way	9	8
Percentage of respondents:	100%	89%

Appendix 3: Tables of Data for Section 3

Question:	Number of respondents:	Response: Yes	Response: No	Response: Failed to respond
Do you feel that the new system allows you to effectively take control of your life?	20	6	14	30
Percentage of respondents:	100%	30%	70%	

Question:	Number of respondents:	Response: Increase in agency	Response: Decrease of agency	Response: Increase in anxiety or depression
How have the changes made an impact on your life?	16	2	10	4
Percentage of respondents:	100%	13%	63%	25%