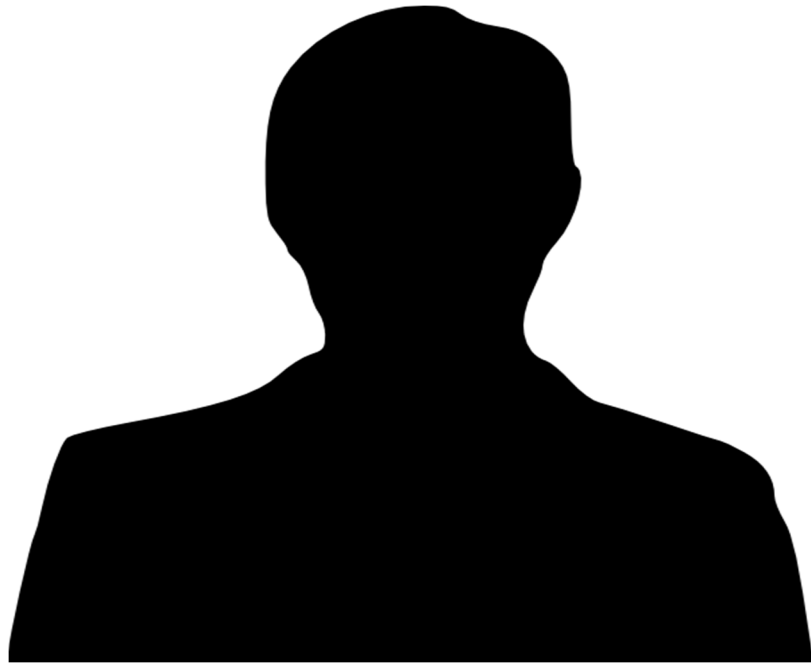


doorway

Moving on from Homelessness in North Wiltshire



“People like me are just a name on a dotted line”

The Real Impact of Welfare Reform

Doorway Guest Survey 2013

Introduction:

The Doorway Guest Survey 2013 was carried out between July and September of the year, and had a record response rate of 50 surveys completed. We hoped to record data about the service Doorway provides and also a snapshot of the impact of welfare reform at this current time.

There is a great deal of rhetoric surrounding welfare reform in the media. First, the narrative of reform being introduced as an efficiency measure that will continue to support those who 'deserve' it. Second, the frenzy around the narrative of strivers and scroungers which has seen an adverse effect upon communities in terms of social conflict. Often these narratives are not supported by stories from individuals who are experiencing the impact of reform, and are used to push a political agenda.

This report aims to provide an insight into how the welfare reforms are affecting the guests at Doorway: those who are homeless or vulnerably housed in North Wiltshire. Although the sample size is not big enough to make robust general assertions about the impact of reform, we hope to illustrate the rhetoric surrounding reform with stories from the real people who are experiencing it and who sadly are often overlooked.

The first section of the report will provide a quantitative analysis of the data we collected. It will show figures surrounding changes in benefits over the past year and how these have affected our guests. The second section will take a qualitative approach to the data and will outline narratives of certain guests who have experienced major changes to their income in the past year. During the exercise of completing the surveys on a one to one level, many guests were keen to outline how they would organise the welfare system if they had a chance. Section three gives an overview of four of these suggestions and gives a platform to those who are part of the system to say how they would organise it.

Methodology:

As stated, there were 50 respondents to the survey. The documents were completed on a largely one to one basis by the same researcher although a few guests completed them alone. The surveys allowed for broad discussions to be had about issues in the welfare system and it was clear that most people had very strong views about the system and how it is run. The survey was divided into two sections, the first is analysed in this report, and the second is part of a PhD project for a candidate at Cardiff University. This section asked questions on whether the welfare reforms met demands of social justice and effective agency.

Due to the nature of the sample group, some of the responses are inconsistent. However, it is highlighted where this occurs and often points to a fault in the system rather than the respondent. An example of this is the questions regarding Direct Payments, where there seems to be confusion about the definition and introduction of this scheme.

The data is intended to be a snapshot of those who are experiencing the most pertinent impact of welfare reform and thus will be engaged with from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives.

Section 1: Quantitative Analysis

Questions one to nineteen of the survey asked about changes the guests had experienced in the previous year. They combined quantifiable answers with questions about the impact of these changes which have subsequently been coded into groups of responses.

Out of the 50 respondents, 68% had seen their benefits change in the past year. The following responses regarding details of this change can be seen below:

Type of change	%	Type of change	%
Employment – JSA	18.00%	JSA – ESA	21.00%
Income Support – ESA	9.00%	Bedroom tax reduction	6.00%
Reduced ESA/DLA	3.00%	Carer's allowance to ESA	3.00%
Sanctioned	6.00%	ESA – JSA	6.00%
Council tax reduction	9.00%	On to ESA	9.00%
DLA – PIP	3.00%	Stopped claim	3.00%
Household change	3.00%		
Respondents had:	%	Respondents had:	%
Experienced reassessment	21.00%	Experienced multiple changes	12.00%

[based on response rate of 34 surveys]

Surprisingly, the highest figure is the shift from claiming JSA to ESA. These figures also show a high rate of individuals moving from employment to JSA, perhaps suggesting an increase in unemployment. Also to note is the significant number of individuals who have experienced reassessment in the past year.

Respondents were asked whether these changes to their claims had been simple. 38% replied that the transition had been easy but 62% stated that it had not been a simple process. When asked for more details on the difficulties individuals had experienced the following responses were given:

Difficulties:	%	Difficulties:	%
Sanctioned	11.00%	Forms	16.00%
Long process	11.00%	Internet access	5.00%
Dyslexia	5.00%	Going to appeal	11.00%
Delayed payment	5.00%	Use of 'phone	5.00%
Financial hardship	16.00%	Uneasy with face to face meetings	5.00%
Understanding	5.00%	Worse off working	5.00%

[based on response rate of 19 surveys]

Although the response rate for this question was low, it gives an indication of problems experienced by those currently claiming benefits. Pertinently, there seems to be a serious issue in accessing the system with 16% stating issues with the ability to correctly complete the appropriate forms, 5% citing dyslexia as a barrier to the process, 5% saying they are uneasy with face to face meetings and 5% stating that understanding the process is problematic. The highest result is that of financial hardship, suggesting that the system is not working as efficiently as it could.

34 guests responded to the question of whether they had been involved in the appeals process in the past year, with 47% saying they had been. Of this number, 69% had received support during this process. The table below outlines the agencies that provided this support.

Agency:	%	Agency:	%
CAB	56.00%	Alabare	6.00%
Unity House	6.00%	Turning Point	6.00%
CPN	19.00%	Doctor	25.00%
SWAN	6.00%	Brighter Futures	6.00%
Greensquare	6.00%	Hospital	6.00%
Issues with support:	%	Issues with support:	%
Not adequate	13.00%	CAB – limited resources	13.00%
Grouped support:	%	Grouped support:	%
General support agency	44.00%	Supported by medical staff	31.00%

[based on response rate of 16 surveys]

Two issues are apparent through this data. First, is that the majority of those who sought support for this process did so from the CAB but the organisation is under financial pressure and therefore cannot support as many individuals as previously, due to limited resources. The second issue is the number of respondents who were being supported by medical staff such as CPNs and doctors. This could suggest an increase in the workload of medical staff as they are dealing with benefit claim issues as well as health issues for individuals. It could also suggest that those who are experiencing the appeals process are those who really are ill or long term sick as they would have the most contact and better relationship with their medical staff in order to receive support.

When asked whether Doorway had provided support with benefit changes, 29% replied that they had, 35% that they had not and 15% that they did not know about Doorway at the time of their appeal [based on response rate of 34 surveys]. This could suggest, analysed with the high percentage of respondents moving from employment to JSA, that more individuals are attending Doorway sessions as a result of benefit changes.

When those who received help from Doorway were asked about the nature of the support they received from the organisation, the following response were given:

Help received:	%	Help received:	%
Talked through changes	10.00%	Practical support	10.00%
Support/advice	40.00%	Signposted to other services	30.00%
Food parcels	10.00%	Food at session	10.00%
Clothes	10.00%	Budgeting advice	10.00%
Internet access	20.00%		

[based on response rate of 10 surveys]

Guests were also asked whether they had difficulty in accessing the internet in order to make claims. 31 guests responded to this question with 48% stating that it was difficult to access the internet. 6% added that it was a disability (dyslexia and blindness) that stopped them using the internet. Again this suggests that accessibility to the benefits system is problematic.

The issue of inconsistency is prevalent in the data regarding responses to the series of questions on Direct Payments [DPs]. 44 guests answered this question with 39% stating that they are using DPs. 45% said that they were not using this payment method and 16% said that they were using it but when this was cross referenced with their initial response to whether their benefits had changed in the past year they stated it had not. Of those who said they were currently using DPs, 53% stated this was a positive experience with 29% saying that it was not. Although the data is problematic in itself, it still indicates an issue in that there is a lack of clarity around what exactly DPs are, and how and when they will be implemented.

Question 13 asked guests whether they were concerned about changes in the future to the benefit system, and if so what aspect. 44% of respondents stated that they were concerned about future changes, with 14% stating they were not and 10% asserting that they could only worry about their current situation. When asked for more details on their concerns respondents replied:

Area of concern:	%	Area of concern:	%
Finances	27.00%	Unclear what will change	4.00%
Any change to benefits	4.00%	Mental health	8.00%
Access to education	4.00%	Bus pass availability	4.00%
Fear of the unknown	4.00%	'Bedroom tax'	4.00%
Monthly payments	41.00%		

[based on response rate of 50 surveys]

The high rate of those concerned about monthly payments further supports the lack of clarity around DPs as it undermines those who stated that they were already receiving benefits this way. Also problematic is the number of those who are worried about the impact

the changes will have on their finances.

The final set of questions regarded the impact of the aforementioned changes on individuals' lives. 11% stated that the changes had been positive, with 73% stating they had been negative and 5% saying they had been both positive and negative. The guests were then asked about a variety of areas of their lives that the changes could have impacted on. The results are as follows:

Area of impact:	%	Area of impact:	%
Mental health	49.00%	Finances	38.00%
Social life	24.00%	Ability to work	5.00%
Providing for family	16.00%	Substance misuse	16.00%
Health	27.00%	Paying bills	32.00%
Criminal activity	11.00%		

[based on response rate of 37 surveys]

The highest area of impact is that of mental health, closely followed by finances and paying bills. The results show that almost a third of respondents' health has been affected by the changes and that criminal activity has also increased as a result of changes.

Responses also show that out of those whose benefits have changed, 43% had to attend a foodbank and 76% had received a Doorway take out because of the changes.

Section 2: Qualitative Analysis

In this section, four survey responses will be engaged with in more detail in order to give an indication of the holistic impact welfare reform is having on individuals. The issues that arise from these responses are the reforms undermining the ability to further education and active citizenry, the lack of support for ex-military personnel, and a snapshot of the impact of bedroom tax.

Respondent 12

Respondent 12 was moved from ESA benefit to JSA in the past year. They did not find this process simple as they went to appeal and needed support from their mental health support team, CPN and doctor to do this. The impact of this change is that the respondent can no longer attend college as this does not fit with the job seeking demands of JSA. The individual was really gutted that this was the case, as they had invested time in progressing through the course and was really passionate about the subject, and furthering their education. Due to their reassessment they can no longer continue this project of becoming more qualified as there are substantial conditions on the receipt of JSA which mean that they must spend their time looking for work. This shows a flaw in the system where education is not valued as a means to improve job prospects.

Through discussion, the respondent indicated that this had obviously had a negative impact on their life, and severely affected their mental health problems. They also stated that their

criminal activity had increased as they did not have enough money to meet their needs.

Respondent 12 also expressed concern about future benefit changes such as the introduction of Universal Credit.

Respondent 46

This respondent moved from JSA to ESA following appeal. Although this is positive, the respondent's benefits were stopped for six weeks during the transition as well as the process itself exacerbating their mental health problems. Again, the respondent stated that they had support with their appeal from medical staff and the CAB. Doorway supported the respondent following their appeal by telephoning the Job Centre about their claim and signposting them to the CAB for a food parcel.

Towards the end of the survey, the respondent flippantly mentioned that they had already had to move because of the 'bedroom tax', as if this was not quite connected to the benefits system. They outlined that they could not afford the rent following the introduction of the subsidy on a spare room but that their children used the room when they visited. The individual stated that they would love to return to work for personal reasons, and so that their children could stay in their own room when they visited, but that their mental health was too bad for this to be possible. The respondent asserted that the cumulative negative impact of these changes exacerbated their mental health and health problems, and made paying bills and providing for family difficult. They expressed concern about the future shape of society and the welfare system, and the impact it might have on their children.

Respondent 9

Respondent 9's benefits changed from a Carer's Allowance and Income Support to ESA after becoming homeless and alcohol dependent. They were using Direct Payments to receive their benefits which was fine for the time being as they did not have any property to pay rent on. They expressed concern about coming changes which might lead to their benefits being withdrawn or lowered, and said that this had already had a negative impact on their life.

In further discussion about these changes, the respondent stated that they were ex-military and had found the transition between military and civilian life very difficult. They stated that they were not adequately supported through this change and that this had led to their current situation. They said that their current personal needs were not being met through the system as they did not have enough money and were without anywhere to stay.

Respondent 23

This respondent raised concerns about welfare changes affecting their ability to be an active citizen, contributing to their community. Respondent 23 had moved onto Direct Payments in the past year. They found the process of this change "abysmal" as they suddenly went a month into arrears which the individual was not aware of. They stated that they managed to change it back to weekly payments but the "implementation was erratic" meaning that some weeks they received payments, and other weeks they did not. The respondent also raised concerns about future changes, especially the withdrawal of their bus pass. They asserted that these changes were having a negative impact on their life including their

undermining their ability to pay bills, and exacerbating their mental health problems.

Respondent 23 stated that they found it important to be socially active, to try and change things in their town. They said that they were trying to be an active citizen but the changes to their benefits led to mismanagement of money and worsening depression. They noted that the current system lacked flexibility and encourages dependency as people cannot start things up on their own and be socially active.

These accounts of the impact of welfare reform appear to undermine the aim of the UK Government to make people more responsible and active, and less dependent on the welfare system. They show that a direct influence of the reforms have been individuals being less engaged with society, education and their families, and less able to take responsibility for their lives in terms of determining their future.

Section 3: Doing Things Differently

In the final section of the survey we asked how the benefit system could be changed in order to enable people to take more control of their life. Fantastically, many respondents had previously given this some serious thought and had well-formed alternatives which they shared with us.

This section therefore outlines four suggestions of how Doorway guests would arrange the welfare system so that it would better meet their needs.

Suggestion 1:	Voucher System
Problem:	System is too complicated with not enough communication between different agencies
Solution:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Individuals should be given one number for all stated provision.• Voucher could be provided to cover food, gas, electric etc• There would be joined approach to provision and the individual, with communication between agencies

Suggestion 2:	Pro-active, long-term, support system
Problem:	The system is too complex and only allows for short term fixes with minimal support
Solution:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage education and training• Adequate support for those going into short term or long term work• Corporate incentives for companies who take people on benefits on to work• Advocacy and mentoring throughout the process• Support for re-engagement with society, individuals to move from passive to active citizens

Suggestion 3:	50/50 scheme
Problem:	System does not give enough support to individuals - "they just want to make money and not help"
Solution:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50/50 financial scheme throughout getting employment • DWP continues limited financial support for a given period while individual makes employment sustainable • Quicker appointments with the Job Centre with actual support given

Suggestion 4:	Holistic Assessment System
Problem:	The system has too simple an assessment process which does not take account of an individual's actual needs
Solution:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A government body should assign a 'social worker' for a year or 6 months to an individual to undertake a full medical assessment • The individual's 'actual life' would then be monitored • Different benefits would be available to meet different needs • Everything would be "under the same roof" so that assessment and meeting needs would be holistic

Conclusion:

We hope to have used this data to provide a snapshot account of how the welfare reforms are affecting real people in communities. The survey shows that the majority of the impact of these changes are negative, and not just because of the cynical "we have less money" reason. Individuals' ability to take control of their lives is being undermined, they are being moved away from their communities, and are less able to provide for their families. People's health, both mental and physical, is being worsened and some individuals are not able to meet the needs of their health conditions. This does not appear to fit into the UK Government's narrative on welfare reform enabling responsibility and active citizenry, and the approach taken to individuals appears very much to fit into one respondent's statement that "people like me are just a name on a dotted line" for the Government and Job Centre.

To close, we will share some further quotes from the surveys:-

“Discriminating against a socio-economic class”

“Feels like the ground is moving beneath my feet”

“Wouldn't be so many homeless people if [the Government] did their job properly”

“Places like Doorway wouldn't exist if the Government
got it right”

“Forced out of home”

“Give me a chance to engage”