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An agenda for fixing the social security/welfare benefits system

Sarah Batty and Michael Orton

Introduction

Social security/welfare benefits are a fundamental and critical element in tackling economic disadvantage but as Lister (2016) has noted, the current UK system is not preventing poverty, relieves it inadequately and the growing reliance on food banks is merely the most visible tip of an iceberg of unmet needs. There is much criticism of the current system – from the bedroom tax to the benefits cap, and sanctions to work capability assessments – plus detailed analysis such as Spicker's (2017) *What's wrong with social security benefits?* Projections by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and others show that recent changes to benefits will contribute to increases in already high levels of poverty e.g. the Joseph Rowntree Foundation forecasts there will be 1.2 million more children in poverty by 2020. Not only this, but debate on the topic has become highly politicised and divisive, being described as 'angry and fruitless' (Unwin, 2013) and 'toxic' (Lister, 2016).

Given the politicised nature of the issue, there is potential for civil society to play a leading role in moving debate on. Research (Orton, 2016) has found, however, that there is a lack of agreement even within civil society on ways forward. The research identified that on some issues e.g. housing, Early Childhood Education and Care and minimum wage levels, there is considerable consensus (within civil society) as to what needs to be done and some detailed plans for how to do it. But on the core issue of social security in relation to income that is not the case; there is apparent lack of agreement about ways forward and certainly no detailed plans as exist for other fields. Saying there is little agreement is not to suggest an absence of ideas. There are strong advocates of an unconditional universal Basic or Citizen's Income while others express preference for contribution-based entitlements or universal but means-tested benefits. There are different views on the importance that should be given to public services versus individual income support measures or whether to prioritise immediate issues such as the bedroom tax or longer-term changes to Universal Credit and the tax system more generally.

This article reports on a project that sought to redress this by using a solutions-focused approach with emphasis on building consensus. Supported by a small grant from the Social Policy Association, the project consisted of eight deliberative workshops which tackled a very specific question: What practical, concrete steps can be taken to put the security back into social security in the short to medium term? The article is in three parts. First it explains the project methodology. Second, key findings are presented. Third, an agenda for fixing the social security/welfare benefits system is posited.

The project

As already noted, the project consisted of eight deliberative workshops. The workshops were held in November-December 2016 in Glasgow, Leeds, London (2 sessions), Salford and Teesside plus two at a National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers (NAWRA) event. A

participative approach was used, rather than standard roundtable/seminar/conference format, with a range of facilitation techniques used to stimulate thinking, discussion and consensus building. An ethos was suggested for the workshops, reflecting growing interest in developing new ways of making such events more inclusive and productive. The ethos included seeing co-operation and compromise as strengths, emphasising points of agreement and at all times acting with care, compassion and respect.

The workshops followed a four stage process, although with slight variations as relevant to the individual setting. The process was as follows. Stage One: identifying topics which need to be considered in addressing the workshop question. Stage Two: agreeing headings under which the topics identified at Stage One could be grouped. Stage Three: direct answers to the workshop question. Stage Four: determining priorities from the lists of ideas generated at Stage Three.

Close to 150 people attended the workshops, contributing a rich depth and diversity of experience and expertise. Of huge importance, a number of people with expertise by experience were involved. Their contributions were of immense value. Other groups of participants were: front-line advice workers; people from a very wide range of third sector organisations including charities, campaign groups, think tanks and bodies such as credit unions through to community groups; and academics. There were smaller numbers of participants from housing associations and local authorities.

A separate record of each of the workshops was written and sent to participants in the relevant session. The analysis drawn upon here was based on then looking across all eight workshops collectively rather than separately, and identifying recurring topics and themes i.e. where there is common ground beyond any one individual session.

Findings

At Stage One of the workshops a very large number of topics were posited – more than 120 in total, equating to around 20 topics in each of the six sessions in which the exercise was undertaken.

The analysis identified themes that were mentioned in three or more workshops i.e. at least half of the workshops in which the exercise was done (although this still left a large miscellaneous category of topics mentioned in only one or at most two workshops).

The majority of the identified themes related directly to the operation of the social security/benefits system e.g. administration, assessments and benefit rates. Two other themes are not direct operational matters but are still of great importance to the social security/welfare benefits system: principles and media/public attitudes. An additional three themes were identified - advice services, employment, and housing - which are relevant to broader definitions of social security but not the core social security/welfare benefits system.

Findings at Stage Two were similar to those at Stage One with a number of themes recurring across workshops but also a significant proportion of miscellaneous points.

At Stage Three a very large number of ideas were identified - over 400 in total, equating to more than 50 ideas per workshop. Recurring themes were again evident although with slight differences to those at Stage One, resulting in a final list of seven key themes: administration; assessments, appeals and mandatory reconsideration; benefits; benefit rates and uprating; media/public attitudes; principles; and, sanctions.

However, in relation to what practical, concrete steps should be taken in the short to medium term, there was no consensus. Examples of the range of ideas posited under the seven key themes are as follows.

Assessments, appeals and mandatory reconsideration - ideas ranged from ending the work capability assessment to integration of social care and disability benefit assessments, and from a new model of capability for work to altering or abolishing mandatory reconsideration.

Benefit rates and uprating - ideas included a minimum basic income to cover basic needs, doubling the current rate of child benefit for second and subsequent children, a triple lock for children's benefits, extending the triple lock on pensions to all in the social security system, a universal generous child benefit and a citizen pension.

Sanctions - ideas included abolishing sanctions through to having sanctions but reducing amounts lost, length of time, numbers affected and being less rigid, along with mentions of other issues such as voluntary rather than mandatory training programmes and evaluating the wider costs of sanctions such as in relation to health, crime and so on.

At Stage Four, some level of agreement on priorities was reached within individual sessions but consensus was not evident across the different workshops. Priorities identified at Stage Four provide potential starting points for building consensus under key themes, with possible examples as follows.

Administration - DWP response times, staff training and telephone charges + the design of Jobcentres.

Assessments, appeals and mandatory reconsideration - abolition, review or revise.

Benefit rates and uprating - formula for uprating, increasing child benefit, a minimum income level.

Benefits - universal credit, housing benefit, disability benefits, conditionality.

Media/public attitudes - changing public views, change media representation - show it could happen to anyone, co-ordination across think tanks, NGOs, academics and practitioners.

Principles – a human rights approach, the right to social security as defined in ICESCR, involvement of service users, a public service ethos, respect and dignity, statutory entitlements.

Sanctions - abolish or rethink them.

An additional finding relates to the fundamental matter of language and terminology. The workshop question referred to 'social security' but participants used a range of different terms i.e. 'welfare', 'benefits system', 'entitlements', 'social protection' and so on. The phrase 'social security/welfare benefits' is used in this article to help provide clarity but the finding from the workshops is that there is a need to develop agreement on the term to describe the subject matter being covered.

An agenda for fixing the social security/welfare benefits system

The workshops may not have provided definitive answers to how to fix the social security/welfare benefits system, but the findings do suggest an agenda from which consensus could be built. The suggested agenda consists of the following six questions.

1. What term should be used to describe a system of social security in relation in income?
2. What core principles should underpin this system?
3. What practical, concrete steps in the short to medium term should be taken regarding:
(i) Administrative issues such as delays; (ii) Assessments, appeals and mandatory reconsideration; (iii) Disability benefits and support; (iv) Sanctions and conditionality; (v) Universal Credit?
4. What level should benefits be set at and what should be the system for uprating?
5. Should there be an unconditional minimum income and if so, how could that be implemented?
6. What is the new narrative as an alternative to current negative discourse?

Conclusion

If the workshops are seen as a one-off, they simply confirm lack of consensus on ways forward regarding the social security/welfare benefits system. But if viewed as the start of a process, they have identified an agenda for fixing the current system. At the very least, a basis has emerged from which a shared civil society viewpoint can be developed.

The full research report is available at: <https://tinyurl.com/hb6kb2k>

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