

Written evidence submitted by Disability Advice Project (BSW0014)

We are a small user-led charity called the Disability Advice Project. We have been established for more than 20 years and we help people throughout South East Wales with issues around their long-term health conditions/disabilities or the issues that affect their carers. We provide advice on entitlement to services and benefits. We help with completing forms, compiling evidence to support claims and to appeal wrongful decisions. In the last 18 months we have helped almost 500 disabled people in Gwent.

1. What are the key challenges for the benefits system in Wales and how do they differ from the other nations and regions of the UK?

Wales has the highest proportion of disabled people in the UK, at 26% (Disability Wales). A major challenge is tackling inequality and exclusion.

We have seen more disabled people being made redundant during the pandemic than at any point on record. Joblessness in entire families has risen significantly. Many access to work schemes are unrealistic, as they fail to offer suitable opportunities, or the flexibility needed for disabled people and other family members who care for them. Travel costs are expensive in Wales and lots of rural areas still have poor broadband services making it difficult to access information.

2. Pre-pandemic, how effectively did the UK benefits system tackle poverty and socio-economic inequalities in Wales as compared to England and Scotland?

The benefits system has failed to keep up with the increase in living costs, especially housing costs. Unfortunately, we have seen poverty levels increase in South East Wales.

3. How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the type and amount of support needed by people in Wales?

Our clients are more isolated than ever before. They need more care at home to help them remain independent. Families need more respite care and community opportunities. Accessing services, employment, healthcare, and even everyday essentials has become much more difficult. Every area of life has been setback because of the pandemic. Significant investment is needed in health and social care to ensure a recovery and that this dire situation never happens again.

Our clients are terrified that they will lose their benefits, and this increases social isolation, as people are reluctant to ask for help. Clients are falling further into debt and only ask for help when they are desperate. Mental health suffers as a result. Many of our clients feel suicidal. We need a system where people can ask for help without feeling like they are a burden, where they can genuinely access flexible work in their local community without fear of losing benefits – a joined-up local approach that is a genuine service. Currently, support is incohesive, difficult to access and ineffective long-term.

Digital inclusion has improved but the cost of getting online and the need to learn new skills remains a major barrier for many of our clients.

The increased rate of Universal Credit provision was initially helpful but the uncertainty about this extra provision has led to greater anxiety in households which are just about managing.

Also, there has been confusion and high rates of anxiety for claimants who were told that their awards would be extended only for them to receive claim packs.

The Welsh Government's provision of free school meals during the pandemic was brilliant but in practice the scheme was difficult to administer. Food poverty and the impact of unhealthy lifestyles is exacerbating inequalities.

4. How effectively has the UK benefits system responded to these needs, and what else should the UK Government do to deliver the right support in Wales?

We need to strengthen social security. Making the temporary £20 a week uplift permanent and extending this uplift to people on legacy benefits.

Protect the elderly and disabled with a system that is less complex, faster, and easier to access. Carers have again been overlooked, despite their role becoming more difficult because of shielding – the miniscule increase in the Carers Allowance is an insult.

5. How effectively do the Welsh Government's allowances and grants meet the particular needs of people in Wales?

As the cost-of-living increases and local authorities make cuts, allowances and grants are failing to keep up. We find there are significant delays in accessing allowances and grants. More resources are needed to ensure these get to the people that need them when they need them. We need an increase in the publication of what is available for claimants.

Single claimants are often unable to access extra support and their disposable income will be significantly lower than claimants with children.

People with disabilities are being left for too long in unsuitable homes because of problems with councils' Disabled Facilities Grants processes. The process of applying for and receiving a grant is often hampered by delays and inappropriate advice. We often give advice to help people challenge unsuitable care plans and home assessments for adaptations. From April 2021 the Welsh Government said it would be simpler for disabled people to get help with small and medium sized adaptations to their homes as it removed the means test from small and medium Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG). We have not seen this.

Due to the increased cost of building works and materials the cap of £36,000 on Disabled Facilities Grants in Wales is now too low.

The special payment from Welsh Government for domiciliary care staff in Wales did not help those care staff who needed it most because if they were receiving tax credits or claiming carers allowance, they had the payment deducted from their credits/carers allowance and so received nothing and the payment went to UK government.

What reforms are needed to the benefits system and should there be further devolution of powers?

Devolution would allow for a system that reflects the challenges in Wales. It could be more agile and responsive and provide a holistic approach. However, there must be an adequate budget from UK government to cover these challenges.

The problem with reforms (for example, Personal Independence Payment, Universal Credit) is that they don't end up being a better system but cost a fortune.

6. How effectively do the UK and Welsh Governments work together in the delivery of benefits in Wales?

The DWP is outdated and out of step with claimant experience. They need to embrace digitalisation and modernise.

We need a dedicated adviser helpline. Our caseworkers waste so much time waiting on the phone for appropriate advice to be found. The lack of in-depth knowledge of some call centre staff is infuriating.

It is taking 4-5 months for the DWP to process both new Personal Independence Payment claims and Mandatory Reconsiderations. Mistakes are often made. The DWP is sending out review forms after they have told people their award has been extended. Also, people who have won their award at appeal are not being sent new claim forms early enough to keep their benefit. They then must wait (going without the benefit) until a decision has been made because of the delay in processing new claims.

The continued reliance on the health assessment, carried out over the phone, to assess mobility is flawed. They should instead follow the medical evidence provided or request further medical proof.

We are concerned about the ability of the system to cope when they stop telephone assessments. They are not coping now. There is a big delay in getting the assessments done. People are suffering unbearable hardship as a result. We believe the delays have been caused because so many staff have moved on to Universal Credit. As furlough ends for many people the demands on Universal Credit are going to go up again. We are concerned this will add to delays and the likelihood of more mistakes being made.

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