

Written evidence submitted by Swansea Council (BSW0020)

Swansea Council Tackling Poverty Service and Housing Response

- **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?**

Key challenges:

- *To make sure all the benefits and schemes work together and do not undermine each other.*
- *To reduce the need for repeated gathering of similar/same information.*
- *To make sure that criteria are clearly understood.*
- *To make the claims process as accessible and straightforward as possible.*
- *To ensure that people have awareness of the benefits that they are entitled to claim.*

Specific to Wales?

- *Any schemes/benefit system should take account of the demographic, the geography, employment patterns, poverty levels, a benefit system should be demand led not cash or budget limited.*
- *Wales has a higher demand – more people claim benefits in Wales than other parts of the UK, yet Wales receives less funding. Wales has a higher rate of poverty, especially in families.*
- **Pre-pandemic, how effectively did the UK benefits system tackle poverty and socio-economic inequalities in Wales as compared to England and Scotland?**
 - *Not very effectively. Nearly a quarter of the Welsh population were already living in poverty, pre-pandemic. In Wales, a lot of measures had to be implemented nationally, before the pandemic (and still are now) to address some of these issues, such as NHS Low Income Scheme, free school meals, help with costs of school uniforms and equipment, CTR scheme, food banks, discretionary assistance fund etc. Wales spent £400m a year on these benefits, which is the same as what the DWP spent on UC and JSA in 2018/19. Scotland has a lower level of poverty, as does England, so the demand is lower. Scotland has devolved powers, so they have also implemented some of their own schemes, such as Best Start Foods in order to help low-income families feed their children nutritious foods from an early age.*
- **How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the type and amount of support needed by people in Wales?**
 - *More ‘recently unemployed’ people have claimed benefits for the first time or when they were not claiming when the pandemic hit. More people whose income from work has reduced are now claiming benefits. The pandemic has increased the pace of online remote working and reduced support for those who need face to face help and more intensive support, however this support is needed as much*

as before. Recent research has shown that advisers are getting more requests from clients who have recently lost work or pay and less from those who were already long-term sick and disabled and who were already living in poverty suggesting that ability to access services (or not) is an issue that has got worse during the pandemic. Support will need to be provided in ways other than online/by phone. More people are using food banks, as a result of loss of earnings due to the pandemic. Many have lost their jobs or been furloughed, resulting in increased levels of poverty.

- *More people require access to benefits/awards to assist with payment of rent i.e. Housing Benefit, Universal Credit Housing Costs element, Discretionary Housing Payments and potentially the new Tenancy Hardship Grant to support them to pay their rent and sustain their tenancies subsequently preventing evictions and homelessness.*
- **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?**

- *UC has dealt with a very high volume of claims and that has been a necessary and positive response, but there are still many reports of claimants being excluded from the system due to inability to use the online system or long waits on phone lines. Other benefit phone lines have been very difficult to get through to with waits of over an hour and often the phone being put down after lengthy waits. The ability to contact benefit offices/administration centres by email would help some and would help those who have support services. Local offices with face to face contact is important and has been missed since DWP centralisation.*
- *Keeping the benefit cap has effectively continued to make sure that the poorest people on means tested benefits have not gained from the temporary increase in UC.*
- *Not responding to the request to increase legacy benefits in line with UC temporary increases has created confusion, injustice and inequality between two groups of people in very similar / identical circumstances.*
- *Not making the UC increase permanent and across all benefits could impact on local government finances as people will struggle to pay bills and eat properly resulting in greater pressure on local services.*
- *Not enough is being done to ensure the actual award and receipt of benefits offered, especially disability benefits such as PIP, ESA, UC LCW/LCWRA etc.*
- *Ensure the continuation of the Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) system*

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

- *Many of the measures are a temporary fix and do not address the root cause. An example of this is DAF – whilst it is important to have something in place for emergencies, the amounts awarded are essentially plastering over the issue, as they are low, one-off payments that will stop individuals going without today, but the challenges faced will still be there tomorrow. The amounts provided are very low; so many clients require repeat DAF applications. PIP is in most cases, a short-term award, which means that even clients with conditions that will not*

change, such as physical impairment, e.g. dwarfism, amputees, people with life-long illnesses, degenerative diseases, etc. are still required to attend repeat assessments and do not have permanent or fixed longer term awards. Wales also needs more grants and funding in the advice sector so that there can be more jobs created to help support the people that are most in need.

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- *The recent introduction of the Tenancy Hardship Grant is potentially a positive step to support private rented sector tenants who have had difficulties paying their rent due to the COVID 19 pandemic. Further consideration should be given to introducing a similar scheme for social rented sector tenants who were not entitled to or missed opportunities to claim housing related welfare benefits and therefore DHPs during the eligible period.*
- **What reforms are needed to the benefits system and should there be further devolution of powers?**
- *Disability benefits, especially PIP/ESA reform are the most urgent, as it penalises the most vulnerable in our society. There are a lot of overwhelming steps to take to access disability benefits and it seems to be set up to be such a long process, that many will give up under the weight of requirements and responsibilities with particular reference to appeals. LCW/LCWRA requires a lot from people upon application and in some cases, there are clients who cannot undertake the responsibility themselves, due to their disability / sickness and do not have advocacy. A step in the right direction would be to have more support workers / advice services assigned to individuals in this position. Devolution would allow government to make more decisions that are relevant to its local communities, where the needs can be drastically different to those in England. This would mean Welsh Government could work more effectively to improve services in Wales, such as more travel services becoming public sector, lowering prices of travel and becoming more affordable to people on low incomes. We have already seen some benefits of devolution, such as free travel for older people, free prescriptions and Wales' response to the pandemic, which has been more effective than central government's approach.*
- **How effectively do the UK and Welsh Governments work together in the delivery of benefits in Wales?**
- *It is difficult to answer that question but there is certainly room for improvement in this area. They seem to have different agendas; given that there is a lot of poverty in Wales and there is a high volume of working class people living here. A lot of people are pushed into work that is not suitable for them as a result of central government rules, in order to prevent loss of benefits. Sometimes it can be difficult to see how central government has much interest or investment in Wales and as a country and it seems that Wales is often overlooked. It appears that Welsh governments have to take a lot of responsibility themselves for supporting the people of Wales and there seems to be a lack of support for Wales from the UK central government.*
- **What are the implications of the UBI pilot in Wales?**

- *It seems a sensible approach that all households in Wales should receive an income that covers the basic cost of living at a minimum. Obviously the Senedd doesn't have all the powers in their own hands to do it, so it will need to be done within the powers that are available to them. It will need to be affordable and the pilot will need to be set up in the best possible way to allow conclusions from it that everyone would want to see. It needs to cover both urban and rural areas to capture the diversity of Welsh society. Obviously, even the pilot would cost a significant amount of money that would need to come out of the Welsh government's budget. Hopefully it will be successful and may even be a route to alleviating poverty and overcoming bureaucratic hurdles and sanctions in the current UK welfare benefits system.*

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