

## **Written evidence submitted by All Wales People First (BSW0039)**

All Wales People First is the united voice of self-advocacy groups and people with learning disabilities in Wales.

All Wales People First is an organisation for, and led by, men and women with a learning disability. It is unique in Wales in that it is the only national member-led organisation that represents the voice of men and women with a learning disability.

### **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?**

In our experience through working with people who have learning disabilities, benefits have a much wider context than simply giving people money to meet a basic need. The relationship between benefits and the availability to paid jobs for disabled people is a crucial one to acknowledge and address.

We note that economic deprivation and unemployment have been consistently higher for some areas of Wales compared with other regions of the UK for some time. Although the benefits system is integral to sustaining people's basic needs, our members with learning disability tell us that it's through being part of their communities, having access to good education and jobs which make a real difference to the quality of their lives.

Benefits under the current system fall short of providing many people with learning disabilities in Wales with the tools to empower them to meet their own wellbeing needs. Yet, so many disabled people do remain on the benefit merry-go-round when they are able to and would prefer to be in paid work.

Of course adequate benefits are important for people who are not able to work and who need them. Not everyone is able to work. But there are few incentives and real opportunities to help people with learning disabilities to move away from benefits. Inevitably this issue increases dependency on benefits.

This issue of access and support to employment is very relevant to any benefit reform in Wales, since fewer people receiving benefits could potentially support cost efficiencies and more resources to allocate where there is greater need.

There are large rural areas in Wales which impact access to support and services. According to some of our members who rely on public transport to access wider communities for work, the infrastructure in some areas of Wales and the current public transport systems do not lend themselves well to being able to get around reliably and on time for appointments and work.

Many people with learning disabilities do not drive and their only way of getting around is via public transport.

It is essential that a more holistic approach is taken to tackling the wider issues around an inadequate benefit system in Wales.

In terms of benefit system -specific issues, disabled people who need and rely on benefits tell us that the application system is often humiliating and stressful. People with lifelong and or degenerative conditions find themselves having to jump through hoops to continue to receive the support they need.

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

The barriers outlined in the previous question were a big issue for many of our members with learning disabilities before the Pandemic. Covid 19 and Lockdown merely exacerbated an existing inequality.

Lots of disabled people want to and could work with the right support, but they often have no other choice other than remain on benefits.

Having access to benefits doesn't tend to tackle poverty or socio- economic inequalities. The fundamental problem in our experience is people not being able to access and participate fully in their communities and access to employment.

In terms of pandemic specific issues, in many cases, people with learning disabilities were the first to be laid off rather than furloughed.

Subsidised and/or supported work placements were not compatible with furlough. Although supported employment schemes are designed to tackle inequalities, the pandemic had a negative impact for people engaged with as they could no longer provide or sustain placements.

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

Covid didn't cause the problems for people with learning disabilities, it exacerbated inequalities which already existed.

People with learning disabilities often only have people in their lives who are paid to be there. If those paid people can no longer visit then the person with a learning disability becomes isolated.

Inevitably this will impact mental health and in turn physical health.

Where general house call support, health checks and medical procedures stopped happening throughout lockdown, there has been an impact on physical health too.

Resources need to be dedicated providing and raising awareness about regular health checks for people with learning disabilities

Mental health support is needed post pandemic to help mitigate the impact on health.

Covid has certainly highlighted a lack of community cohesion and people with learning disabilities who are known to us have been completely isolated during the pandemic.

**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?**

Furlough has likely helped a percentage but many people with learning disabilities were not eligible or offered furlough.

They've been the first to be laid off in many cases, and not been given the opportunity to be retained on furlough.

As we have stated in previous answers, there is a wider context to providing people with benefits. The lack of jobs and more competition has put people with learning disabilities at bottom of

Covid has pushed people with learning disabilities back in to silos and more reliant on benefits.

People need more support to meet their own wellbeing needs for example through accessing their communities, making meaningful connections and being active contributing citizens.

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

As previously stated, Furlough has likely helped a percentage but many people with learning disabilities were not eligible or offered furlough.

Lockdown meant that day services were cut off and face to face services were restricted or cut off for people with learning disabilities. Where essential services defaulted to meeting physical and care needs, loneliness and isolation have been huge issues for many of our members with learning disabilities.

Where people with learning disabilities had grown confidence and a sense of belonging before lockdown, the impact of covid has been profound in many cases

Previously we believe that many wellbeing needs were being met outside of the benefit system through face to face contact with people and groups such as People First. Where these connections were impaired or lost, the need for paid support has increased.

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

We believe that benefits should be a devolved jurisdiction. The current system is incompatible with the spirit of Welsh-specific personcentred legislation such as the Social Services and Wellbeing Wales Act and Wellbeing of Future Generations Act.

The horrendous and degrading PIP benefit assessment experiences which are common, are not compatible with the spirit of Welsh legislation.

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

As highlighted in the previous question, there have been different political ideologies over some years and this disparity is evident. The benefits system is a clear example of this. It is not compatible with the spirit of Wales-specific law.

There is a clear focus with the current system around getting your basic needs met rather than providing people with the tools to meet their wellbeing needs. Under the current system people on benefits are by default kept out of society. They are either too poor or do not have adequate tools to connect meaningfully. Wales-specific legislation is about giving opportunities, growing prosperity for all and being part of the community.

### **What are the implications of the Universal Basic Income pilot in Wales?**

The current benefits system presents challenges around changing negative attitudes about disability. Negative disability stereotyping is a widespread issue in our experience. Many of our members have some experienced of disability related hate.

It is possible a transparent system such as Universal Basic income would remove the stigma of claiming benefits,

This could in turn change negative attitudes about disabled people, for example which stem from assumptions about scrounging and free hand outs.

*August 2021*