

SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE

BENEFIT TAKE-UP

SUBMISSION FROM POVERTY ALLIANCE

About the Poverty Alliance

The Poverty Alliance is the national anti-poverty network in Scotland, established in 1992. We are an independent organisation with over 230 members drawn from the voluntary and public sectors, trade unions, researchers, faith groups and individuals with direct experience of poverty. Our aim is to work with others to enable communities and individuals to tackle poverty.

We have a number of key policy areas that provide the focus for our activities; these are addressing low incomes, supporting services to address poverty, enhancing the participation of people with direct experience of poverty in policy development processes, and addressing attitudes to poverty.

Background to submission

The Poverty Alliance welcomes the Social Security Committee's focus on benefits take-up, and welcomes the opportunity to respond to this important inquiry. Take-up of benefits is a hugely important issue, and ensuring that everyone is accessing what they are entitled to has a vital role to play in loosening the grip of poverty on people's lives.

This submission has been directly informed by the views of members of our Community Activist Advisory Group - which is a group of individuals with lived experience of poverty – as well as by the organisational knowledge that we have developed through research and community engagement in the longer-term.

Response to inquiry questions

Q. What do we know about how much is unclaimed and why?

There are a number of reasons why people are not currently claiming the benefits to which they are entitled. These include:

- Knowledge and awareness of entitlements

The most commonly cited reason for non-take-up by the community activists with whom we engaged on this issue was the lack of knowledge that many people have about what social security support they are entitled to. In the words of one community activist:

“Fundamentally, it's impossible to have knowledge of something that you don't know exists.”

People who in work may be particularly unaware of their entitlements, given that they are less likely to be in contact with services that may make them aware of the social security support they can access.

Anecdotally, awareness appears to be particularly low among members of groups who may already experience disadvantage, for example young people, ethnic minorities, and new or elderly migrants. Among older people, particularly for people who have been in work and who have had little engagement with the social security system before, there can be a lack of clarity around how to navigate the system, and there is often an expectation that they will be informed about their entitlements. One community activist told us: *“In my situation, I hadn’t claimed benefit in nearly thirty years so didn’t know where to start, and I’m still not sure that I am in receipt of all of the benefits I am entitled to across the financial year.”*

- Stigma

From our extensive engagement with and work alongside people experiencing poverty, it is clear that one of the most significant barriers to take up of social security benefits continues to be the stigma that is too often associated with poverty more broadly, and the social security system in particular. This stigma is primarily driven by the combination of institutional decisions, policies and practices with a negative political and media discourse.

In terms of institutional stigma, of particular impact has been the imposition of policies and practices such as the punitive sanctions regime, increased conditionality, the freeze on working-age benefits, the two-child limit, and an assessment process that individuals too often experience as dehumanising and uncaring.

This institutional stigma is both a cause and symptom of a political and media discourse which depicts the social security system – and people accessing the system – in an overwhelmingly negative light. This sort of depiction often feeds into everyday language that people use when talking about social security, which further embeds the stigma that people experience. The interaction between this institutional and public (i.e. media and political) stigma can be seen in the social security policies of the last decade, which were underpinned by the notion – which was not based on evidence - that social security policies were fostering cultures of dependency and worklessness.

The end result has often been the internalisation of this stigma, which has led to some people disengaging entirely from the system and not accessing what they are entitled to, particularly if accessing their entitlements requires them to undergo processes (e.g. the assessment process) that can feel hugely stigmatising.

- Inadequacy of support

For many people, the extremely low levels of financial support provided by many social security benefits means that they make the calculation that it is simply not worth engaging in often stressful, stigmatising and complex processes to claim their entitlements, given the low level of support that they will ultimately receive. This is something that has been compounded in recent years by policies such as the freeze on working-age benefits and the two child limit, which have reduced the support provided to people and which –

consequently – risk further disincentivising (whether by extension or design) individuals from claiming their entitlements.

To quote one member of our Community Activist Advisory Group:

“There is a perception that you won’t receive enough benefits to cover your basic living costs. Because of this perception, I think a lot of people who are ‘just getting by’ feel there is no point to putting in a claim as they will get very little, if anything at all, after going through a rigorous application process.”

- Complexity of system

The social security system’s complexity, particularly at the UK level, can act as a major obstacle to people accessing their entitlements. Whether because of the kind of language used in application forms, the multitude of information that people are required to provide, or the lack of support available to submit claims, accessing entitlements through the social security system can be hugely complex, confusing and stressful.

We know that it can be particularly complex for particular groups of people, such as people who speak English as a second language, people with low literacy levels, people with learning disabilities, people with mental health conditions, and people who may be new to accessing social security such as new refugees.

The increasing reliance, at least at the UK level, upon the digital making and management of claims can add a further layer of complexity for many people. As stated by a member of our Community Activist Advisory Group:

“Even though I am very well educated and proficient in IT, I still find this process to be a nightmare. I wonder how people with very little or no IT knowledge would cope.”

Another member of our Community Activist Advisory Group, who has a visual impairment, spoke of the additional complexity that they faced in submitting a Universal Credit claim online:

“I received no help as they were pressurising me for my details if I wished for a quick decision; my visual impairment meant that I had to fill my Universal Credit form online using my mobile phone which took me eleven and a half hours.”

Q. What are the gaps in knowledge/research and how can they be improved?

The most significant gap in our collective knowledge and research relates to the precise levels of take-up of different social security benefits. While the Department for Work and Pensions does produce some estimates, these are not exhaustive and paint only a limited picture. We do not know exactly, for example, which groups are particularly under-claiming for which social security benefits; something that will clearly hamper efforts to shape and target interventions aimed at boosting take-up.

The establishment of Social Security Scotland provides an excellent opportunity to improve evidence around levels of take-up, and efforts must be focused on building the evidence

base to allow us to have a clearer understanding of precise take-up rates; thereby allowing us to identify the areas in which efforts should be focused.

There is also a critical need to more routinely collect equalities data as part of the application process for different social security benefits, given the particular barriers that people with one or multiple protected characteristics may face in accessing their entitlements. Currently, minimal equalities data is collected as part of the Best Start Grant application process, for example, meaning that our understanding of which groups may be facing additional barriers to access is limited.

Q. How can the administration of benefits be improved to maximise take-up? Specific examples would be welcomed.

We frequently hear of the problems that appear to be inherent in the administration of social security benefits – many of which are detailed in answers to previous questions – and there are a number of ways in which these problems could be addressed, including:

- Designing all application processes to be as flexible as possible, and ensuring that people are able to apply via a number of accessible routes, e.g. online, by phone, by post, and in person if necessary.
- Designing all application processes and other relevant public-facing processes in partnership with people who have experience of the social security system. This should particularly include individuals who we know can find the social security system additionally complex such as people who speak English as a second language, people with low literacy levels, people with learning difficulties and people with mental health conditions.
- Minimising the need for individuals to constantly report on circumstances and behaviour (as currently required, for example, of most people claiming Universal Credit). We know that the degree of stigmatisation associated with a benefit can often relate to its administrative rules, and we also know that conditionality in particular has a stigmatising effect (and in turn suppresses take-up). Steps to reduce the demands placed on individuals in terms of continually ‘proving’ their entitlements, such as longer-term awards, would therefore be welcome.
- Ensuring that all staff in all relevant agencies receive sufficient relevant training, particularly around stigma.

Q. How far is it possible for technology to create a more automated system, that uses information gathered for other reasons to award benefits automatically? What would the advantages/disadvantages be of greater automation?

The technological possibilities of automation lie outside our area of expertise. However, given that individuals who are eligible for one social security benefit are usually entitled to others, and given the complexity associated with many application processes, it would clearly be of significant benefit to many people if automation was a more prominent feature of the social security system. If an individual was able to make one claim that would automatically trigger their entitlements for other supports, this would help to significantly increase take-up and would have a hugely beneficial impact on people’s lives.

Examples of automation are already in action and having a positive impact across Scotland. For example, Glasgow City Council have introduced a system linking housing benefit, Council Tax Reduction, school clothing grants and free school meals; thereby reducing the need for families to make multiple different claims and, in so doing, increasing take-up. The national roll-out of initiatives and processes like this would clearly be of benefit.

An automated approach would be particularly helpful for supports like the Scottish Child Payment which – if it is to have the substantial impact on levels of child poverty that the Scottish Government has projected – must have high levels of take-up.

Q. Are different approaches required for different benefits and different client groups?

Given the differing needs of different groups – and the different barriers that they face – there will be a need to develop different approaches to increasing take-up. The reason why a new refugee who speaks English as a second language is finding it difficult to navigate the Best Start Grant application process may differ significantly from why, for example, someone with a disability who has experienced hugely stigmatising PIP assessment processes may (in the future) be reluctant to engage with the new Scottish Disability Assistance process.

Some groups may particularly benefit from public-facing awareness campaigns aimed specifically at changing the narrative around social security and encouraging people to access all that they are entitled to. Others may benefit from Social Security Scotland working in partnership with intermediary organisations (especially community organisations) with whom they already have trusted relationships, while others may benefit from welfare rights advice sessions being delivered in different locations (e.g. in housing associations, schools, primary care services).

Before these different approaches can be developed though, there is a need for a much more robust evidence base about which groups in particular have low take-up rates for which benefits.

Q. What kinds of eligibility criteria ensure better take-up?

Social security benefits with universal – or near universal – eligibility have the highest levels of take-up, for example child benefit. While universal approaches are clearly not appropriate for all forms of social security support, this does underline that the wider and simpler the eligibility criteria, the more people will access their entitlement. Conversely, we would expect that, broadly, the more complex or specific the criteria, the lower the take-up.

There is therefore a need to ensure that eligibility criteria is as simple as is possible and appropriate.

Q. How might the development of Scottish social security impact on take-up of both reserved and devolved benefits?

The development of the Scottish social security system offers an important opportunity to increase the take-up of both reserved and devolved benefits. Particularly given the

commitments that have been made to building a system based on dignity, fairness, respect and with the views of people accessing the system at its heart, it presents the chance to create a system that – through projecting a positive, rights-based and non-stigmatising vision of social security – boosts take-up of entitlements. There are, though, some points related to the intersection between reserved and devolved benefits that must be considered.

Given the reliance upon delivering some devolved benefits through passporting, there is clearly a risk that people who are not currently claiming those passporting benefits, such as Universal Credit, will consequently not claim benefits like Best Start Grant or the Scottish Child Payment. There is therefore a need to consider how efforts to boost take-up at the Scottish level intersect with – or support – efforts to boost take-up at the UK level.

There is also a risk that individuals – who may already be confused by the complexity of the social security system at a local and UK level – may be more confused by the addition of the Scottish system. There is therefore a need to ensure not only that staff administering the local, Scottish and UK levels are equipped with knowledge about the other systems, or at least the knowledge of where to signpost individuals towards. There is also a need to ensure that voluntary and community organisations, who carry out a significant amount of work in helping individuals to navigate the social security system, are adequately resourced to carry out that task.

Q. Are there other questions you think the Committee should consider as part of this inquiry?

Firstly, as part of its considerations on how stigma associated with social security may impact on take-up rates, we would encourage the Committee to also consider the importance of shaping public attitudes towards social security and how this could in turn help to boost take-up. We know it is not only the language that we use to describe social security that is important in shaping public attitudes, but also the way in which social security is framed. We know that framing social security as a key public service that we all rely upon - just as we all rely upon the health service and the education system - has an impact on attitudes, which in turn has an impact on stigma and take-up. Further exploration of this by the Committee would be extremely welcome.

Secondly, also welcome would be exploration by the Committee on the role of the Scottish Government in encouraging take-up of reserved benefits. With the Scottish Government take-up strategy focusing only on devolved social security benefits, there is a risk that this approach neglects the fact that many people are not accessing the reserved social security benefits which they are entitled to, which will have a knock-on impact on their eligibility for devolved benefits (which use Universal Credit for eligibility). While we understand there are concerns over fiscal framework implications, we believe this issue warrants further Committee attention.

Thirdly, we would urge the Committee to explore how people with lived experience of poverty and of the social security system can play a central role not only in developing actions to boost take-up, but also in delivering those actions. For example, through community-led awareness campaigns run in partnership with community organisations.

Fourthly, we would welcome exploration by the Committee on the wider organisations that could be involved in different ways in boosting take-up. For example, members of our Community Activist Advisory Group spoke with us about particular challenges faced by people in-work who may not be aware that they are entitled to social security benefits. There could, therefore, be a bigger role for trade unions - and even employers - to play in improving people's knowledge of the social security system.

Finally, what has been clear from our engagement with community activists has been the hugely important role that welfare rights and advice services have to play in supporting people to access their entitlements. The location of these services in housing associations, for example, was said to be extremely beneficial for people in-work who may otherwise find it difficult to access welfare rights services. A focus from the Committee on how welfare rights services can be further supported – and whether they are currently adequately resourced – would be welcome.

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