Phoenix Futures

UK Welfare Reform Bill

Phoenix Futures provides a range of community, residential and prison-based services for people affected by alcohol and drug addiction. We work with some of the most vulnerable members of our society who face significant social, economic and health barriers to improving the quality of their lives.

**The impact of Welfare Reforms on people with substance misuse problems and those in recovery from addiction**

Most people dealing with a substance misuse problem are on a low income and are dependent on financial assistance from the state to support themselves and their families. Any reduction in state support will disproportionately affect this group of people as they often have physical and mental health problems that require extra expense on healthy diets, fuel, travel and clothing.

Individuals who are seeking to maintain their recovery from addiction need stability in terms of income and accommodation as the basis to develop the skills needed to build healthy futures for themselves and their families. Access to education and training opportunities is often dependent on having an affordable home so cuts to Housing Benefit may prevent people from pursuing such options. Their life chances and those of their children - who suffer greatly from the affects of substance misuse, as can be seen in the number of children taken into care from parents who have been unable to support them whilst addicted to alcohol or drugs – suffer greatly if the opportunity to learn new skills and thus move into paid employment is denied them.

It can take several years for an individual in recovery to develop the skills they need to enter employment and during that time there can be a fragility to their situation until they develop the confidence and self-esteem to be able to deal with the pressures that life throws at them. When additional medical needs are taken into account – such as dealing with Hepatitis or a chronic liver disease – it is even more important that stability exists. State support for this vulnerable group is critical for several years in order to enable sustainable recovery.

The impact on the children of people addressing a substance misuse problem is significant as the families affected by a person’s substance misuse more often than not have no financial resources or savings to turn to when money is needed for even the basics required for a reasonable standard of living e.g. food, furniture, clothing. For those families seeking to re-establish positive relationships and create a better home life for themselves, reductions in Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefits will have an enormously detrimental impact.

For many people recovering from addiction, there are huge benefits to society. Most people addicted to heroin for example commit crime to pay for their
habits and those caught for serious and repeat offences are imprisoned at great cost to the state.

Urgent access to costly hospital treatment is frequent amongst those with addiction problems.

Should an individual feel unable to cope and drift back into addiction there is a significant cost to society.

The provision of adequate state financial support is crucial to maintaining people in recovery for the early stages during which time they can build up ‘recovery capital’ that will enable them to remain substance free for the long-term.

Employability

People with substance misuse problems and those in recovery from addiction are amongst those furthest away from employability due to the lack of experience, criminal records, low educational attainment and health conditions.

There are some excellent support services that bring such people closer to the job market through support, training and education. If people are forced into work-related provision rather than complete the treatment that they may be receiving from services such as Phoenix Futures there is a concern that a significant proportion will be unable to cope and could return to substance misuse. It is therefore crucial that treatment providers can play a liaison role with the DWP to ensure that individuals are fully assessed as to their capabilities to prevent putting pressure on people who may not be able to cope with re-entering the workforce and who could slip back into very negative behaviours if under pressure to do so.

It is crucial that work-related assistance is flexible enough to enable those in need of treatment for their addiction to be able to access that treatment and then seek to move toward employability as they become stronger.

Social Fund

The Social Fund is a source of significant help to thousands of people in recovery each year. It supports the establishment of a home – one of the most significant elements of ‘recovery capital’ – and provides assistance at times of crisis which for those struggling to combat their addiction are far more frequent than for most people who are dependent on state benefits for their survival.

We work with many people who have struggled to obtain the basics to establish a new home and have often resorted to non-mainstream sources of finance to purchase essential items. This has led some to become heavily indebted that has caused severe hardship in the long-run and put people at risk of returning to substance misuse due to the stress of their situations.


Health impact

The planned cuts to Disability Living Allowance entitlements will impact significantly on those people with a substance misuse problem and those in recovery. DLA payments enable people to manage their illnesses through helping with transport costs which are needed to attend medical treatment as well as access social and psychological support. The additional income also helps support the healthy diets that people with Hepatitis and other long-term conditions need to have. Clothing can also be a much needed support for those made more vulnerable by medical conditions.

Any reduction in income for these vulnerable individuals will lead to increased ill-health and additional demands on an overstretched NHS.

Kinship carers

There are hundreds of kinship carers in Scotland who are looking after their grandchildren or other relatives because the parents of these children are unable to support them due to their addiction. Kinship care often continues well into an individual’s period of recovery as individuals require time to address their psychological and physical health needs to embed their recovery. Any reduction in income that may affect kinship carers will have an impact on these vulnerable children and could at worst dissuade potential kinship carers from providing assistance which would in turn put additional pressures on the state to support the children.

It is extremely costly to provide foster care and more costly to take a child into residential care so there is a potential for a false economy if children’s lives are impacted by the welfare reforms.

Having a child taken into care can often set back a parent with an addiction and cause them to spiral back downwards. If their child is in the care of kinship carers then the close family relations have a greater chance of developing and provide greater incentive to address their addiction.

Summary

We support the expansion of assertive employability support for people with substance misuse problems as there are specific needs within this group that have to be addressed and the motivation that can result from such support can produce exceptionally good outcomes.

We broadly agree with the points laid out in the Scottish Campaign on Welfare Reform’s briefing paper – see http://www.cpag.org.uk/scotland/welfare_reform_scot.htm

We are concerned that people with substance misuse problems will be disproportionately affected by welfare reform due to their ongoing mental and physical health problems as well as the lack of financial resources that they
have access to. The impact of the reductions and restrictions in welfare benefits will not only impact negatively on the individuals and their families, especially dependent children, but will risk social and economic harm if individuals return to substance misuse as a direct or indirect consequence of such reductions and restrictions.