SIAA Briefing
Welfare Reform

The SIAA is deeply concerned about the impact of Welfare Reform on Scotland. Evidence from Independent Advocacy organisations show that both the changes to the benefits system to date, such as the introduction of the work capability assessments, and the prospect of further changes through the Welfare Reform Bill are having a negative impact on the well-being of some of Scotland’s most vulnerable people.

Independent Advocacy is an important source of support for many going through the benefits system. Independent advocates support individuals to understand their rights and empower them to take control over their lives. Independent advocates might, where needed, help people to access welfare and benefits advice and might support people through appeals.

The SIAA will shortly be publishing new research, titled ‘More or Less?’, which shows that welfare reform is increasing demand for Independent Advocacy but funding problems are making it increasingly difficult for organisations to meet this demand. Action must be taken to ensure that all those in receipt of benefits have access to Independent Advocacy when they need it.

The impact on people supported by Independent Advocacy Organisations

Independent Advocates have raised several concerns in relation to welfare reform and highlighted the negative impact that these changes are having on the people they support. It is clear from the evidence that the stresses of dealing with changes to the benefits system are having a serious impact on people’s mental health and well-being.

Negative impact on people’s mental health and wellbeing

“We have spoken to services users who have either had or fear having Council Tax and Housing Benefits (and possibly other benefits) taken away as a result of losing their Employment Support Allowance (ESA). This can cause serious financial hardship potentially leading to debt, homelessness and subsequent deterioration in mental health.”

- An Independent Advocacy Organisation

“Benefit changes are clearly making life more uncertain and more difficult than it needs to be for people who may already be struggling with other issues (such as housing, health or family breakdown) and it is clearly affecting people's mental health - to the point of people reporting suicidal thoughts related directly to their experiences with the benefits system.”

- An Independent Advocacy Organisation
Increased marginalisation and stigma

“Some service users have expressed concern that they perceive increased stigma towards people with mental health difficulties and benefits claimants through their being portrayed in the media with the use of words like "cheat", "work-shy" and "scrounger" - particularly as the economy struggles. Some people have said that they feel the media is blaming them for the current economic situation.”
- An Independent Advocacy Organisation

Increased risk of poverty and homelessness

“There is a lack of one bedroom housing in our area, and in some cases benefit is not enough to cover rent – in particular to private landlords at the moment. There are very real worries about when this affects Local Authority housing. We have a case where an individual was on income support with disability premium and was advised by the Jobcentre Plus said he wasn’t entitled to income support. He appealed and was transferred to ESA however through the transfer he lost (by mistake) severe disability premium at £57 a week. In the midst of the changes he was advised he couldn’t claim full housing benefit so had to fork out some rent money too. This left the person very short of money. He did try to sort it out himself but found he needed our support.
- An Independent Advocacy Organisation

Poor quality of disability assessments and wider benefits system

“The system has been described to us as degrading.”
- An Independent Advocacy Organisation

“[Some people have] extreme difficulties explaining to a complete stranger the effect illness has on day to day life with some people saying they are fine (because they want to be fine) when they are not managing too well.”
- An Independent Advocacy Organisation

“The issues that come up most frequently are: the inadequacy of the Work Capability Assessment to evidence ESA eligibility on mental health grounds, the perceived lack of compassion, and the overall complexity of the application, decision-making and appeal processes, especially for someone who may be struggling with depression, anxiety and other conditions.”
- An Independent Advocacy Organisation

“Some panic about the phone call as they don’t know when it will happen and can’t access/organise support to be there when it does. They are scared to leave the house in case they miss the phone call, and don’t know what questions will be asked. They feel like it is entrapment.”
- An Independent Advocacy Organisation
Access to Independent Advocacy

According to the SIAA research report, ‘More or Less?’, on the impact of the recession, which is due to be published shortly, 95% of Independent Advocacy organisations had experienced increased demand for their services over the past two years. Many organisations referenced benefit changes as a reason for the increase.

“Other voluntary organisations are losing funding and indeed local authority cutbacks result in people being placed in a more vulnerable position, requiring more support”
- An Independent Advocacy Organisation

“There was an increase in demand from people who were attending interviews to decide whether or not their benefits should be withdrawn – this caused many people a great deal of alarm.”
- An Independent Advocacy Organisation

In their recent report, ‘Fluctuating Outcomes’, CAPS Independent Advocacy found that in East Lothian and Midlothian there had been a huge increase of over 75% in the number of cases they were dealing with relating to ESA from October 2010 – March 2011.

79% of Independent Advocacy organisations who contributed to ‘More or Less?’ expect demand to increase over the next year and 58% reported changes to benefits as an emerging issue affecting those supported by their organisation.

“We anticipate more people will come to us in relation to benefit appeals. The changes to benefits including medical assessments relating to disability, coupled with increased demand on other organisations such as CAB, mean we will be picking up more cases. We also expect changes to housing benefit to result in increased demand.”
- An Independent Advocacy Organisation

Yet alongside the increased demand for their services, 55% of Independent Advocacy organisations in the research stated that their current level of funding is not sufficient to meet demand for their services.

“The demand for our service has grown but the service has been unable to grow with this demand because of lack of funding”
- An Independent Advocacy Organisation

“We are already overstretched in relation to the number of available staff hours compared with the vast number of hours of advocacy intervention required”
- An Independent Advocacy Organisation
Barriers to volunteering

Independent Advocacy organisations have also expressed concerns that welfare reforms will reduce opportunities for personal development and capacity building. The ‘SIAA 2009-10 Advocacy Map’ showed that Advocacy organisations throughout Scotland had recruited 1,200 volunteers. Many of these volunteers are former advocacy service users looking to offer peer support and improve their own skills and to use their own experiences to benefit others.

“There has been some concern among potential volunteers that they may lose their entitlement to benefits if they become involved in volunteering because they will be deemed fit to work. We have heard of someone who was advised informally by another organisation to take this into account before becoming a volunteer.”
- An Independent Advocacy Organisation

Conclusion

It is clear from the SIAA research, “More or Less?”, that welfare reform is creating much fear and anxiety. Independent advocates are deeply concerned that the changes will lead to an increase in poverty and marginalisation, an increase in homelessness, problems with budgeting and debt, and increased demand on mental health services and Independent Advocacy. Ultimately, welfare reform in its current form will lead to deterioration in quality of life for many unless the changes are reviewed or support measures put in place to counter the negative effects.

The Welfare Reform Bill and wider benefits system should be revised to better reflect the needs and circumstances of those receiving benefits and action taken to ensure that all those in receipt of benefits have access to Independent Advocacy when they need it.

17 November 2011

If you have any further questions regarding this briefing please contact Shaben Begum, Director, (sbegum@siaa.org.uk) or Erin Townhill, Policy and Parliamentary Officer, (etownhill@siaa.org.uk) at the SIAA office or phone 0131 260 5380.