The Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance believes that Local Authorities and the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman should have a duty to refer or signpost individuals to organisations providing support, information and advocacy.

Impacts of Welfare reform

Independent advocacy organisations across Scotland have been reporting on the impacts of the various aspects of welfare reform on people they support and on the numbers of referrals they are receiving. These can be due to direct and indirect aspects of welfare reform and include the introduction of Personal Independence Payment (PIP) to replace Disability Living Allowance (DLA), and issues around housing benefits, assessments and loss of income.

Role of Advocacy

Advocacy organisations are clear that their role is to support people to access expert information and advice on welfare issues; they do not provide such information and advice themselves. Advocacy organisations would however support service users at medical assessments and other interviews and many organisations have seen substantial increases in requests from service users for such support. There has also been an increase in requests for advocacy support when accessing specialist information and advice.

Steady Increase in Demand

From a survey of advocacy organisations, 87% of respondents reported receiving referrals in relation to benefits or aspects of welfare reform in the 2013/14 year, an increase of 7% over the 2012/13 year.

In response to an earlier survey all advocacy organisations had previously reported increasing numbers of referrals for issues in direct or indirect relation to benefits, assessments, housing benefits, debt or loss of income issues, homelessness etc.

The results of these surveys show steadily rising demand for advocacy support in relation to benefits and welfare reform issues. Organisations report that demand for advocacy in direct or indirect relation to welfare reform has seen a 100% increase in the 2013-2014 year over that experienced in the 2012-2013 year. Advocacy organisations now estimate that around 20% of all referrals have some connection to welfare reform.
Reports are consistent from across Scotland. The impact of welfare reform on individuals is not merely financial but can have serious impact on mental and physical health and wellbeing.

Future Challenges

There is already a significant amount of advocacy support being provided in direct or indirect relation to welfare reform in general. All areas of Scotland report increasing numbers of such referrals.

Organisations report that, while they will refer people in to specialist information and advice services, some of those they support feel that they also need advocacy support when facing welfare reform related issues. It is important that independent advocacy is available as, while some will require only the support offered by information and advice agencies, others will require independent advocacy support to access and understand the necessary information and advice.

Recognition of this has led in some areas to commissioners and funders providing small amounts of funding to support increased capacity within advocacy organisations. The majority of advocacy organisations are already working on issues relating to welfare reform and there is significant knowledge and experience of the direct and indirect impact. However it may be difficult for some organisations to deal with any greater increase in volume without some additional resources.

While, in many areas advocacy organisations have developed links with their local information and advice agencies, advocacy organisations in some areas have reported that their local information and advice agencies also have increasingly limited capacity. This has created additional difficulties for service users.

Access to Independent advocacy

Independent advocacy provision varies across Scotland. Under the terms of the Mental Health (Care & Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003 everyone with a mental disorder has a statutory right of access to independent advocacy; as a result, in all Scottish Local Authority areas, there is independent advocacy provision for people with mental health problems, learning disabilities or dementia. Many Local Authority areas have broader access criteria including access for older people, people with a community care issue, and people with alcohol and drug problems amongst others. However in some areas access may be limited to those with a statutory right.

Findings from the most recent study of Scottish advocacy provision shows increased demand alongside standstill and reducing budgets. Advocacy organisations report the need for waiting lists and many are now required to prioritise individuals who may be subject to compulsory measures under the terms of the Mental Health Act. As a result many people seeking advocacy support for a welfare reform related issue may have to wait for some time before they can access independent advocacy.

To ensure that people who are experiencing the impact of welfare reform in whatever guise (ESA, PIP, Housing Benefits, loss of income, medical assessments, care charges, etc) there needs to be sufficient provision of information and advice and
also of independent advocacy to meet the needs of the most vulnerable members of
our society.

Muriel Mowat
Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance
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The Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance (SIAA) is Scotland’s national
membership body for advocacy organisations. The SIAA promotes, supports and
defends independent advocacy in Scotland. It aims to ensure that independent
advocacy is available to any person who needs it in Scotland.