

AN AGENDA FOR CONSENSUS BUILDING ON THE SOCIAL SECURITY/BENEFITS SYSTEM

(Draft - comments to be sent to Michael.Orton@warwick.ac.uk by 17 March 2017)

This summary report presents findings from eight Workshops held in November-December 2016, attended by close to 150 participants, which addressed the question: *What practical, concrete steps can be taken to put the security back into social security in the short to medium term (and if this includes additional costs, how can it be funded)?*

Key findings

- There is lack of agreement on the term to describe the subject matter of the Workshops with phrases used by participants including 'welfare', 'benefits system', 'entitlements', 'social protection' and so on. In this report the phrase 'the social security/benefits system' is used to aid understanding but if consensus is to be built, agreement on a widely acceptable term is essential.
- Key themes relating directly to the social security/benefits system recurred across Workshops. These were: *Administration; Assessments, Appeals and Mandatory Reconsideration; Benefits; Benefit Rates and Uprating; Media/Public Attitudes; Principles; Sanctions.*
- Three further themes were *Advice Services, Employment, and Housing*, which are relevant to broader definitions of social security but not the core social security/benefits system.
- Considerable numbers of miscellaneous points not covered by the above themes were raised in Workshops (they are listed in the Appendices to the full report).
- In relation to practical, concrete steps in the short to medium term, there is no consensus.
- There are, however, possible starting points for building consensus under each of the key themes.

An agenda for consensus building, in the light of the research findings, can be based on addressing the following questions (with this report providing starting points to inform discussion)

1. What term should be used to describe a system of social security in relation in income?
2. What core principles should underpin this system?
3. What practical, concrete steps in the short to medium term should be taken regarding:
(i) Administrative issues such as delays; (ii) Assessments, appeals and mandatory reconsideration; (iii) Disability benefits and support; (iv) Sanctions and conditionality; (v) Universal Credit?
4. What level should benefits be set at and what should be the system for uprating?
5. Should there be an unconditional minimum income and if so, how could that be implemented?
6. What is the new narrative as an alternative to current negative discourse?

What next?

A network has been established, consisting of close to 150 people with a rich depth and diversity of experience and expertise and considerable enthusiasm for being involved in further work • The agenda that has been identified, however, is lengthy and to pursue it would realistically mean holding further rounds of Workshops • This requires funding and that is now being explored.

Acknowledgements

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Background: social (in)security

Socio-economic insecurity is a hallmark of our times. Its extent and impact were highlighted in a 2015 report - *Something's not right: insecurity and an anxious nation*¹. A second report – *Secure & Free*² – explored solutions to insecurity. It was found that on some issues e.g. housing, there is considerable consensus within civil society about what needs to be done and clear plans for how to do it.

However, on the core issue of social security in relation to income – what is referred to in this report as the ‘social security/benefits system’ – it was found that there is no consensus and no existing forum through which consensus can be developed. The motivation behind the Workshops was therefore to explore whether there is any common ground on which consensus building might be based, whether there is enthusiasm for doing so and what might be the way forward.

About the Workshops

The Workshop aims were to: identify immediately available answers to the Workshop Question (as above); create a community of interest around this issue; and plan next steps.

The Workshops were held in November-December 2016 in Glasgow, Leeds, London (2 sessions), National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers (NAWRA - 2 sessions), Salford and Teesside.

A participative approach was used, rather than standard roundtable/seminar/conference format, and a four stage process was followed. Stage One: identifying topics which need to be considered in addressing the Workshop Question. Stage Two: agreeing headings under which the topics identified at Stage One could be grouped. Stage Three: direct answers to the Workshop Question. Stage Four: determining priorities from the lists of ideas generated at Stage Three. The London 1 and Teesside

¹ Orton, M. (2015) *Something's not right: insecurity and an anxious nation* London: Compass.

² Orton, M. (2016) *Secure & Free: 5+ solutions to socio-economic insecurity* London: Compass.

sessions took a different approach at Stages Three and Four and the NAWRA sessions excluded Stages One and Two.

An Ethos was suggested for the Workshops, reflecting growing interest in developing new ways of making events like these more inclusive and productive. The ethos included seeing co-operation and compromise as strengths, emphasising points of agreement and at all times acting with care, compassion and respect.

145 people attended the Workshops, contributing a rich depth and diversity of experience and expertise. Of huge importance, a number of people with expertise by experience were involved. Their contributions were of immense value. Other groups of participants were: front-line advice workers; people from a very wide range of third sector organisations including charities, campaign groups, think tanks and bodies such as credit unions through to community groups; and academics. There were smaller numbers of participants from housing associations and local authorities.

Analysis: A separate record of each of the Workshops was written and sent to participants in the relevant session. The analysis here was based on looking across all eight Workshops collectively rather than separately and identifying recurring topics and themes i.e. where there may be potential common ground beyond any one individual session.

Findings

The first finding relates to the fundamental matter of language used in relation to the content here. The Workshop Question referred to 'social security' but it was evident in sessions that a range of different terms were being used such as 'welfare', 'benefits system', 'entitlements', 'social protection' and so on. The phrase 'social security/benefits system' is therefore used in this report to provide further clarity but the finding from the Workshops is that there is not even agreement on the term to describe the subject matter that was being covered.

At Stage One of the Workshops a very large number of topics were posited – more than 120 in total, equating to around 20 topics in each of the six sessions in which the exercise was undertaken.

The analysis identified themes that were mentioned in three or more Workshops i.e. at least half of the Workshops in which the exercise was done (although this still left a large miscellaneous category of topics mentioned in only one or at most two Workshops).

The majority of the identified themes related directly to the operation of the social security/benefits system e.g. *Administration, Assessments* and *Benefit Rates*. Two other themes are not direct operational matters but are still of great importance to the social security/benefits system: *Principles* and *Media/Public Attitudes*. An additional three themes were identified - *Advice Services, Employment, and Housing* - which are relevant to broader definitions of social security but not the core social security/benefits system.

Findings at Stage Two were similar to those at Stage One with a number of themes recurring across Workshops but also a significant proportion of miscellaneous points.

At Stage Three a very large number of ideas were identified - over 400 in total, equating to more than 50 ideas per Workshop. Recurring themes were again evident although with slight differences to those at Stage One, resulting in a final list of seven key themes:

• *Administration* • *Assessments, Appeals and Mandatory Reconsideration* • *Benefits* • *Benefit Rates and Uprating* • *Media/Public Attitudes* • *Principles* • *Sanctions*.

However, in relation to what practical, concrete steps should be taken in the short to medium term, there is no consensus. Examples of the range of ideas under themes are as follows.

Assessments, Appeals and Mandatory Reconsideration - ideas ranged from ending the Work Capability Assessment to integration of social care and disability benefit assessments, and from a new model of capability for work to altering or abolishing Mandatory Reconsideration.

Benefit Rates and Uprating - ideas included a minimum basic income to cover basic needs, doubling the current rate of Child Benefit for second and subsequent children, a triple lock for children's benefits, extending the triple lock on pensions to all in the social security system, a universal generous Child Benefit and a citizen pension.

Sanctions - ideas included abolishing sanctions through to having sanctions but reducing amounts lost, length of time, numbers affected and being less rigid, along with mentions of other issues such as voluntary rather than mandatory training programmes and evaluating the wider costs of sanctions such as in relation to health, crime and so on.

At Stage Four, some level of agreement on priorities was reached within individual sessions but consensus was not evident across the different Workshops. Priorities identified at Stage Four provide potential starting points for building consensus under key themes, with possible examples as follows (further detail is in the full report).

Administration - DWP response times, staff training and telephone charges + the design of Jobcentres.

Assessments, Appeals and Mandatory Reconsideration - abolition, review or revise.

Benefit Rates and Uprating - formula for uprating, increasing Child Benefit, a minimum income level?

Benefits - Universal Credit, Housing Benefit, disability benefits, conditionality.

Media/Public Attitudes - Changing public views, change media representation - show it could happen to anyone, co-ordination across Think Tanks, NGOs, academics and practitioners.

Principles – a human rights approach, the right to social security as defined in ICESCR, involvement of service users, a public service ethos, respect and dignity, statutory entitlements.

Sanctions - abolish or rethink them.

Conclusion

If the Workshops are seen as a one-off, they simply confirm lack of consensus on ways forward regarding the social security/benefits system • But if viewed as the start of a process they have taken two critical steps: a network has been established, consisting of close to 150 people with a rich depth and diversity of experience and expertise and considerable enthusiasm for being involved in further work; and an agenda has been identified for building consensus • The agenda is, however, lengthy and to pursue it would realistically mean holding further rounds of Workshops • This requires funding and that is now being explored.

The Workshop organiser and author of this report is Michael Orton. The full report is available at <https://tinyurl.com/hb6kb2k>