

DEEP END SUMMARY 21

GP experience of welfare reform in very deprived areas

In March 2012, GPs at the Deep End produced a report on “GP experience of the impact of austerity on patients and general practices in very deprived areas”. Eighteen months on, Deep End practices are seeing increasing problems associated with the welfare reforms. This short report provides a follow-up to last year’s report, and comes at a time when GPs across the UK are receiving criticism for their role in the welfare process.

- Changes to welfare have both **intended and unintended consequences**, which need to be measured and reflected upon, otherwise they may result in great damage.
- **We remain concerned that**, in its entirety, the welfare reform programme will be detrimental to the lives and well-being of the poorest in society.
- The **Welfare Reform Act (2007)** removed Incapacity Benefit (IB) and the Personal Capability Assessment (PCA) and replaced them with Employment Support Allowance (ESA) and the Work Capability Assessment (WCA).
- **The entire ESA application process is too long and complicated.** Many people, but particularly those with mental health problems, addictions, and cognitive impairment, find the process of form-filling, assessment, rejection, then the appeals process, punctuated by meetings with welfare officers, lawyers and the need for further medical evidence, to be confusing and demanding to navigate and, ultimately, damaging to their health.
- **Requests for medical information and support** fall most heavily on general practices serving very deprived areas, in which the numbers of such requests are concentrated. This places **additional demands on an already overloaded system** and compromises the time available for other aspects of medical care.
- **We all recognise the health benefits of appropriate work.** ESA should be part of a process which enables people to maximise their potential in achieving that benefit. Therefore, the underlying ethos of this process should be that of **support, understanding and enablement**. ESA, as it stands, fails in that endeavour.
- The **Welfare Reform Act (2012)** has introduced a number of additional changes, including Universal Credit, the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) to replace DLA, and changes to housing benefit, widely referred to as the “Bedroom Tax”.
- **The real costs of the “Bedroom Tax” are unknown**, but there are early indications that, since its introduction in April 2013, there have already been damaging effects on communities, families and support networks for society’s most vulnerable.
- **This report sets out a number of recommendations** to make the welfare system fairer, simpler, and easier to navigate. Central to this is the need for a radical overhaul of the Work Capability Assessment, which is not fit for purpose.

“General Practitioners at the Deep End” work in 100 general practices, serving the most socio-economically deprived populations in Scotland. The activities of the group are supported by the Scottish Government Health Department, the Royal College of General Practitioners, and General Practice and Primary Care at the University of Glasgow.

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Full report available at <http://www.gla.ac.uk/deepend>

