People want to work: providing tailored support, rather than extra responsibilities, is key

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Qualitative research into the impact of welfare reforms have found that they led to an erosion of resilience and increased sense of powerlessness, often making people less able to get into work. Demanding more and more from people whose access to support has been drastically cut won't help the government's welfare reforms to succeed in their objectives, argues ***Liam Crosby****.*

DWP Ministers have been out in force recently, announcing a raft of further changes to the social security system. From fraudsters having to sell their homes to further restrictions on migrants' benefits, it's the sort of stuff that thrills large parts of the British population (though even the Telegraph couldn't help pointing out the irony in a week where Minister Miller continues to dominate the headlines).

These are just the latest policies being proposed in the coalition's wide-ranging, flagship welfare reform programme. Many people would agree with the stated aims of the reforms — "simplifying the system and making work pay" – and many organisations providing benefits advice and employment support at the frontline have been calling for this for years.

But in order to ensure that the laudable objectives of a system that's simple, fairer and supports people to work become reality, it's essential to understand the impacts that ongoing changes mean for people. Some of the new changes – including that jobseekers will need to bring a CV, email address and Universal Jobsmatch account to their first meeting with an adviser – are sensible and achievable for most people but could appear as another unmanageable disruption for many others.

To understand the overall impacts of the changes to benefits on people in our community, at Community Links we have undertaken in-depth qualitative research into how people are affected – not just financially but also in terms of employment opportunities, family life, their health, wellbeing and resilience. We then published a research report of our main findings.

For a few of the people who we spoke to, the reforms had encouraged positive moves into work: take Shanti, who having lost £300 per week as a result of the benefit cap (she lives with five children in a three bedroom house) successfully made the move into work. She felt positive about this change: "I pushed myself to overcome all the bad stuff. Sometimes I wish I had done this ages ago".

But for most people who we spoke to, the cumulative effect of several simultaneous changes has left them less, rather than more, able to cope. Many of the research participants were attempting to save money by missing meals and leaving homes unheated. The consequent degradation of physical and mental health was noticeable, with several people reporting depression and anxiety. People were fearful of rent arrears and eviction as securing housing became people's top priority. Some turned towards crime including stealing food.

Altogether, these impacts led to an erosion of resilience and increased sense of powerlessness, which made people unable to make the important decisions which might get them into work. These findings were confirmed by focus groups with employment advisers at Community Links and other stakeholders, who highlighted how people having to deal with immediate and severe changes to their income and living situation became "shackled" and immobilised by the pressure, and unable to focus on their job search. Our analysis showed three clear reasons for these impacts and the consequent erosion of resilience:

1. A significant, and sometimes overwhelming, cumulative financial impact of the different reforms happening at the same time.
2. Poor communication, particularly of how the reforms fit together, resulting in a worrying lack of understanding
3. A lack of compassion and inadequate support to help navigate the reforms left people feeling unable to identify the best courses of action to make positive improvements.

Take Mr Okafor. He has worked much of his life in an Airport, and would have no problem writing a CV. As part of the welfare reforms, he was moved from Income Support to Jobseekers Allowance; he's also been affected by changes to his housing benefit and council tax – and soon his Disability Living Allowance will also change. Together the reforms have decreased his income from £205 per fortnight to £140 per fortnight. This has had serious broader affects – he has cut back on food, struggled to pay his rent, he experiences stress and anxiety.

Mr Okafor is keen to work and was attempting to search for jobs, but his benefits were sanctioned when a jobcentre adviser decided he wasn't looking "properly". He says this is because he was not helped to know what to do by the jobcentre staff; in spite of the fact that he hasn't used a computer much before, he was expected to get on with searching online (a situation that isn't all that uncommon). Not surprisingly, he feels unsupported: "Jobcentre staff say it's down to you to look for a job". He doesn't think that there has been adequate communication and feels confused by different things changing at the same time.

Iain Duncan Smith has recently said that the new measures are about "making sure that if someone fails to meet their responsibilities, they will face the consequences". But this depiction of benefit claimants as irresponsible layabouts is wrong. People are keen to make change, they just face barriers – which the confused and complicated delivery of the recent reforms have often entrenched. Mr Okafor, for example, comes into Community Links almost every day to phone employers, DWP and Newham Council in order to try to sort out his situation. His problem isn't that he's irresponsible; it's that he's been hit by financially devastating changes, without being told how they fit together or supported to navigate them.

Demanding more and more from people whose access to support has been drastically cut won't help the government's welfare reforms to succeed in their objectives. We need to make sure that future changes to social security take proper account of people's situations, and provide adequate financial and advisory support to enable those who can to make the changes that they are so keen to do.

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