

# Community organisations, community activists & Covid-19: Poverty Alliance briefing, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2020

## About the Poverty Alliance

The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network. Together, we influence policy and practice, provide evidence through research, support communities to challenge poverty and build public support for the solutions to tackle poverty.

Our members include grassroots community groups, activists who are experiencing poverty, academics, large national NGOs, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups.

## Background

Since the unfolding of the Covid-19 crisis, life has changed immeasurably for people in every community across the country. But as the weeks and months have passed it has become clear that the impact of the crisis is not being felt equally and that people living on low incomes – particularly disabled people, black and minority ethnic groups and women - are being disproportionately impacted. People already living in poverty have seen its grip tighten, while many more people continue to be swept into poverty. It is clear that what began as a health crisis is creating a poverty and inequality crisis.

Since March, the Poverty Alliance has been seeking the experiences and perspectives from community organisations and community activists from across the Poverty Alliance network, around the impact that Covid-19 is having on them and on the communities in which they live and work. On 6th April, we published a [briefing on the initial impact on community organisations and activists](#), followed up on 22<sup>nd</sup> April by a [briefing on the key concerns of national organisations](#).

This briefing – while only providing a snapshot view - has been informed by subsequent engagement with community organisations and activists, and in particular by two recent meetings of the Poverty Alliance's Community Activist Advisory Group and an online meeting with community organisations.

## Ongoing impacts on community organisations

For community organisations, Covid-19 has represented the biggest challenge they have ever faced. The demand for their services has been unprecedented, and has meant that new and different ways of working to deliver support have been developed at pace. They continue to report ongoing impacts on their operations, including:

- Overwhelming pressure on services:

The acute pressures initially experienced by community organisations at the onset of the crisis appear to remain, with demand for the services and support of community organisations continuing to be extremely high and staff being busier than at any time in the past.

One community organisation based in Glasgow, for example, reported that demand for its services is now coming from people based across the city, whereas previously it was predominantly from individuals and families in its immediate vicinity. The same organisation is also now reaching its capacity limit, with the possibility that it will soon have to introduce prioritisation criteria.

- Continuing reformulation and evolution of services:

With most community organisations unable to deliver support in the usual manner, many have continued to evolve their services to adapt to the new environment. One community organisation is now delivering classes – including ESOL classes - and activities on Zoom, whilst supporting those without digital access and skills to get online in order to reduce the digital exclusion this may highlight. Another community organisation is creating a YouTube channel to deliver activities to the families that it supports. Several have also been developing and delivering activity packs for children and adults as alternatives to a reliance on digital activities.

Others are relying on delivering support through telephone calls in order to keep people connected and in touch with services.

- Increasing uncertainty over funding:

Most community organisations work within extremely tight financial constraints and are well-used to financial challenges. However, while most report that their existing funders have been extremely supportive and accommodating in terms of use of funds and in terms of reporting, there are growing fears over the long-term financial impact.

Of particular concern is longer-term funding for core costs, and also around what happens once the initial batch of funding that was made available in response to the crisis (for example the variety of funds created by the Scottish Government) ends, given the expectation that demand for services will not decrease in the short or medium-term.

### **Key trends and concerns identified by community organisations and activists**

Community organisations and activists continue to report a range of concerns regarding the overwhelming impact that Covid-19 is having on them, their communities, and the people that they work with. This impact is broad and – as the crisis continues into its next phase – ever-evolving, with some key trends and impacts including:

- Ongoing and increasing crisis:

While more than two months have elapsed since the start of the crisis, the level of crisis being experienced by many households on low incomes appears to be unyielding. At the outset of the crisis, the main priority of many community organisations became meeting people's basic needs, particularly around food.

This work has continued in the proceeding two months, with community organisations continuing to support people to access food (for example by delivering food parcels) and to ensure access to basic utilities (for example by paying for electricity top-ups), with no immediate sign of these needs substantially reducing. The crises being experienced by people living on low incomes appear to be becoming entrenched and more acute rather than easing, with one community organisation based in Glasgow reporting an almost-doubling of the number of families in crisis that it is working with.

- Issues around support for families eligible for free school meals:

Community activists continue to report challenges with the approaches that some local authorities have taken to supporting families who are eligible for free school meals. Models of provision that involve vouchers that can only be redeemed in one retail outlet were considered to be particularly inappropriate and unable to meet the needs of all families.

Concerns have been expressed by community activists, for example, about the approach taken by Glasgow City Council of providing Farmfoods vouchers. These cannot be redeemed online - meaning families who are shielding may be unable to use them – and some community activists reported that, with no local Farmfoods store in their community and no independent means of transport, their vouchers were also not being used. It was felt that this approach could also create additional stigma for families.

Other models that involve families having to travel to schools to pick up food parcels were also felt by community activists to be wholly inappropriate. While it was accepted that local authorities had to respond at pace to the crisis it was strongly felt that – more than two months after school closures – local authorities should be prioritising the development of cash-based approaches, which are the most effective, dignified and efficient way of supporting families through this period.

- Digital exclusion:

A lack of internet access and/or low levels of digital literacy continue to be a key theme being reported by community organisations and activists, and is making life significantly more challenging through this period for many people living in poverty across Scotland.

Previously reported challenges for children without digital access being able to continue home learning remain an issue, with concerns from community activists that the longer-term impact on the attainment of some children will be significant. Other specific issues reported in relation to digital exclusion include challenges for people in accessing online banking (which can make it more challenging for people to manage finances) as well as challenges for people who do not speak English to access online ESOL classes.

For people living in rural areas whose digital access issues may be more related to the poor provision of broadband in their community, the current situation was reported to be exacerbating social isolation. With online contact now being the primary form of social contact for most people, an inability to engage with family and friends online (or, in areas with poor phone signal, on the phone) was said to be hugely challenging.

Many community organisations are undertaking work – some supported by the Scottish Government – to ensure that all of the individuals and families that they are working with are digitally connected (for example by paying for the installation of broadband in their homes). However, for many people there is still a gap in terms of their digital skills, which can be challenging to bridge or address in the current circumstances.

- Increasing numbers of people being impacted by benefit cap:

The UK Government's decision to increase Universal Credit standard allowance and the basic element of Working Tax Credit by £20 was welcomed by community activists and community organisations, particularly after several years in which – due to the decision to freeze working-age benefits – the support provided by these benefits has been significantly eroded.

However, the increase has also meant that many more people – particularly lone parents, the overwhelming majority of whom are women - are now being affected by the benefit cap. For them, there has essentially been no increase in financial support. Given that the only two

ways of escaping the benefit cap – either moving into cheaper housing or working more – appear entirely impossible during this period, this only serves to highlight the profound injustice of the benefit cap policy.

- Lack of additional support for people on legacy benefits:

While people accessing Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit have received an increase in financial support, community activists have expressed concern that no equivalent increase in support has been provided to people receiving legacy benefits, such as Jobseeker's Allowance.

For community activists who continue to receive legacy benefits, there was a deep sense of injustice, particularly given that a significant number of people still receiving legacy benefits are disabled and are already disproportionately impacted by the effects of Covid-19.

- Mental health impact:

Community organisations are witnessing a significant spike in the number of people experiencing mental health issues, with a number of community organisations based in reporting a sizeable increase in suicidal ideation among the people that they support.

Exacerbating this is the fact that access to mental health care professionals during the pandemic has been extremely difficult for many people. In some areas, there is said to be very little provision for people in need of mental health care, particularly more specialist care.

Relatedly, with people who have addiction issues being more likely to also experience mental health challenges, there are concerns from community organisations that – with group support for people with addictions still suspended – this may lead to relapse episodes.

These concerns over the mental health impact relate not only to the short-term but also the long-term, with fears that people who were living with mental health issues prior to the crisis will have seen these issues entrenched in the last few months, and this this will pose a much longer-term challenge.

- Cuts in social care packages and support:

Both community organisations and community activists expressed serious concern about access to social care during the crisis for disabled people and people with long-term conditions; groups which are already at much more risk of experiencing poverty.

Reports from community organisations in Glasgow, for example, suggest that social care packages have been withdrawn for sizeable numbers of people, with many disabled people either left reliant upon the support of family, neighbours and friends or left without any support at all.

One community activist, who is disabled and lives with a range of long-term conditions, has faced significant challenges in accessing the support he needs, with it taking almost seven weeks to receive the social care to which he was entitled; during which time his access to food was limited and his mental health deteriorated.

- Inconsistency in support for shielded groups:

Community activists who are living with long-term conditions have reported inconsistencies in the level of support made available to them by local authorities, with a belief that the criteria for shielded groups have not been well-communicated in some areas. As a result, many felt as though they were missing out on the support that they need and were either

having to, for example, go without the food and essentials they need or were putting themselves at risk by shopping for food.

In some local authorities, too, there have been concerns raised over the quality and adequacy of food provided to people in shielded groups, as well as concerns over the regularity of food packages being provided.

- Impact on people with No Recourse to Public Funds and people in the asylum system:

Community organisations are seeing increasing numbers of people with No Recourse to Public Funds being pulled into crisis, with their lack of access to social security support, in particular, meaning that many are being left without any source of income and are at serious risk of destitution. For those people with No Recourse to Public Funds who work, there are concerns that they feel compelled to continue working because they will otherwise receive no other forms of support.

People in this situation include individuals in the asylum system, the families of international students and other people with restrictive visas, with many being forced to rely on friends for financial support in order to meet their basic needs. Particular issues are being faced by women with No Recourse to Public Funds who are seeking to leave abusive partners; issues which existed pre-crisis but which have been significantly exacerbated.

Community organisations are also reporting issues in relation to the rehousing of people in the asylum system, who are often being placed in accommodation where social distancing is not possible, thereby putting them at greater risk.

- Child maintenance issues

Following the Department for Work and Pension's decision to redeploy staff to work on Universal Credit applications, the Child Maintenance Service is no longer chasing any missed or underpaid child maintenance payments.

As a result, many community activists – all of whom are women who are lone parents – have reported that the child maintenance payments that they were receiving have either stopped or have been substantially reduced with no prior warning, and that they have no recourse for redress through investigation or appeal.

This is creating additional financial insecurity for them, with lone parents – who are already at heightened risk of experiencing poverty - finding it even more difficult to stay afloat and provide for their children's basic needs.

- Employment impact:

A continuing concern among community organisations and activists remains the short, medium and long-term impact on the labour market. While the short-term impact on unemployment has been somewhat lessened by the UK Government's Job Retention Scheme, there are uncertainties about its ongoing viability and the potential knock-on impact on unemployment and, as a consequence, the impact on levels of poverty.

Rural employment has also been raised as a particular issue. In many more rural areas of Scotland, people rely upon seasonal employment to get by. Many of these workers may not be eligible for support from the Job Retention Scheme, and are also highly unlikely to access employment this summer due to the likely continued closure of the tourism industry. As a result, some workers may miss out on a full year's worth of expected income; something that could have serious long-term implications for rural poverty.

It is clear from the experiences of community activists that the employment impact is also not being felt equally, with women in low-paid jobs (especially BME women and young women) being more likely to be experiencing job disruption and subsequently being placed at greater risk of being pulled into (or deeper into) poverty. There is therefore a clear risk that the short-term employment impact entrenches the gender inequalities that are so persistent in our labour market.

## **Conclusion**

Several months on from the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, it is clear from the testimony and experiences of community organisations and activists that its social and economic impacts show no signs of easing. Levels of crisis remain high, and community organisations continue to be under immense pressure while working at the frontline to support people on low incomes through this period.

In the short-term, there is therefore an urgent need to continue to listen to the voices of those living and working in the communities most impacted by the crisis. These voices are making clear the need for urgent social security measures, in particular, to be brought forward in order to boost the incomes of those most struggling to get by.

While the pressing need for short-term and urgent action to better support people on low incomes remains, focus is now also turning to the longer-term impacts. It is clear already that the crisis is, in the words of one community organisation, 'supercharging' pre-existing inequalities around disability, gender and race, and that there is deep concern about what the impact may be in the years ahead.

So as we move into the next phase of the crisis, it is also essential to ensure that the voices of community organisations and activists continue to be heard and acted on, and that they are at the heart of the social and economic recovery plans that are now beginning to be developed at the local, Scottish, and UK level.

### **For more information, please contact:**

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