



Greater Manchester All Party Parliamentary Group

Chair Lucy Powell MP
Vice-Chairs Chris Green MP, Lord Goddard of Stockport, Ivan Lewis MP,
Baroness Morris of Bolton, Jim McMahon MP
Secretary Jonathan Reynolds MP
Treasurer Yasmin Qureshi MP

Non-Verbatim Minutes

Greater Manchester APPG: Making Welfare Work for Greater Manchester

Graphene Engineering Innovation Centre, University of Manchester

14:30-16:00, Friday 8th February 2019

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Kate Green, MP for *Stretford and Urmston*, welcomed everyone to the meeting and noted that she was standing in for Lucy Powell MP, chair of the APPG. She introduced James Baker, CEO of Graphene@Manchester, who welcomed the APPG to the GEIC.

Green noted that today's meeting would be centred on welfare reform, an area in which Greater Manchester (GM) had been doing innovative work for a number of years. The session would primarily focus on what GM needs to improve on, and what others including central Government can do for us.

THE IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORM IN GREATER MANCHESTER

Matt Ainsworth, *Assistant Director in Employment at GMCA*, said that his role was in reducing worklessness in GM. He suggested that the debate on universal credit had 'crowded out' discussion on broader welfare reform. The changes to all benefits, including the bedroom tax, benefit cap, two child policy, and disability living allowance becoming PIP, had cumulatively had a massive change and had taken £30bn out of the social security system according to research by Newcastle City Council.

Ainsworth then provided some statistics on the impact of government changes or reforms on Greater Manchester. There are 81,000 people on universal credit, with a further 200,000 on legacy benefits who will move onto universal credit over time. 20,000 disabled people in GM were unsuccessful moving onto PIP. Welfare reforms have disproportionately impacted single parents, in particular women.

As a solution, Ainsworth called for a more place-based approach to employment support and greater local autonomy for Jobcentre Plus. He also suggested that claimants should have more responsibility and control over how they receive benefit. He proposed that a new relationship with government, perhaps in the form of a partnership agreement, was needed in order to deliver a fit-for-purpose employment support and welfare system. Finally, he mentioned that there was now a partnership working group, co-ordinated by the GMCA set up to take that agenda forward and he hoped those in the room would support it.

Alex Whinnom, *Chief Executive of GMCVO* aimed to talk about the human impact of the statistics mentioned by Ainsworth. He said that the GMCVO worked with 3,000 organisations each year and that the voluntary and social sector was the first port of call for people in a crisis. In recent years it is getting much worse, unmet need is rising fast - for legal and financial advice and advocacy, housing support, mental health support, alcohol and drug support, help for victims of domestic violence – and so on with lots of unmet need forcing people

Supported by:





into poverty and destitution, with those who are disadvantaged suffering the most. Charities and voluntary groups cannot deal with the scale of the problem.

Whinnom said that he could remember when GM had two food banks, and there were now 170, with more appearing all the time. He said there was a great frustration in that social organisations were helping people out with preventable crises.

The meeting was then handed over to practitioners, to tell their first-hand accounts of the topics discussed.

Vinny Roche, from *First Choice Homes* said that for many people in Oldham, where he is based, universal credit is the straw that has broken the camel's back. He stated that there had been a 25% increase in food bank usage in Oldham in twelve months and he now worries about people becoming immune to words and statistics around the issue. Roche said that the five-week universal credit delay meant that it was taking 18 weeks for people to get into a regular payment pattern of rent.

First Choice Homes had seen arrears go up by £500,000 in a year through the impact of universal credit. He said that the data was clear: those on universal credit struggle to pay their rent. He said that people were now having to make a choice between whether they pay their rent, eat, or heat their home. His final point was that we needed to radically change the system of social security.

Rick Burgess, representing the *GM Coalition of Disabled People*, said that the UK is the first country in the world to be found by the UN to have caused grave and systemic human rights abuses towards disabled people resulting in a human catastrophe. He stated that the main engine of these human rights abuses was welfare reform, causing thousands of deaths. Burgess argued that this was not a policy failure but a hostile environment and that disabled people had been gaslighted by the state.

Burgess said Westminster was creating a set of disablist policies which started in 1999. A new approach was needed which must start from the position of doing no harm. He said a new approach must ask those who are subject to the social security system three questions: 1. How do you want to live? 2. What stops you from living that life? 3. What do you need to help you live that life?

Julia Savage, from *Asylum Matters* agreed with Burgess that talk of a hostile environment was pertinent, especially to her work with asylum seekers. She mentioned the five-week universal credit delay as a particular problem and stated that last year half of people in accommodation shelters were asylum seekers. She also mentioned that many high street financial opportunities weren't open to asylum seekers, as they didn't have the correct identification.

Savage suggested that an easy change to make would be to give asylum seekers the right to work while they were waiting to hear their status. She mentioned, however, that many are given official status but still struggle to access opportunities, whether through not speaking English, or lack of IT skills. Finally, she argued that there was a large amount of evidence from various social security services that wasn't being consolidated.

Supported by:





Graham Whitham, from *GM Poverty Action* stated that one of the things not mentioned by Matt Ainsworth was the scrapping of the discretionary social fund in 2013. He said this fund wasn't well known but was a very important part of social security, as it allowed access to community care grants and crisis loans.

Whitham explained that the Government passed responsibility for this type of support to local authorities, but that it wasn't ring fenced. He expressed disappointment that much of that support was now lost, with the UK seeing an increase in people using payday lenders. He said that GM Poverty Action had conducted research into the type of support available to people across the country and discovered that it varies hugely. They also noted a shift from people being given cash to people being supported through food handouts or energy vouchers.

He said that, for GM Poverty Action's perspective, cash should always be a preferred option as it gives people the dignity to make choices and allows people to respond to multiple needs. He stated that there was much to be learned from national schemes in Wales and Scotland.

RESPONSE

Lisa Scullion, *Professor of Social Policy at the University of Salford*, wanted to reflect on how her own academic work could reflect the themes thrown up so far in the discussion. She wanted to pick up on a point made by Rick Burgess on listening to those affected. She stated that she had always naively thought that politics was based on evidence but now realised this was not the case.

She stated that her department has set up an anti-poverty task force made up of the council, the university, and wider partners. They try and collect the opinions of those affected by social security changes and feed this back to Salford Council. Scullion's own research has found that the increased conditionality and sanction-based approach in the welfare system leads to counterproductive consequences. She suggested that the most important thing to do now would be to focus on the idea of causing no harm and push back on government policy.

Q&A AND DEBATE

Kate Green then opened the discussion up for comments and questions from the audience, with Andy Burnham due to speak towards the end of the meeting. A wide number of points were made:

- What flexibility does GM have within the current welfare system?
- What was the relationship between benefits and a much wider form of social support?
- Michael Stevenson from Citizens Advice suggested that GM could roll out a project within the DWP on what works in supporting applicants and those on benefits.
- The lack of choice over payment days and whether payment is weekly/fortnightly or weekly causes severe problems for claimants.
- The approach to welfare based on treating 'worklessness' can often become a box-ticking exercise.
- It was suggested by a member of the audience that the whole social security budget should be devolved to GM. Kate Green expressed hesitancy at this suggestion. Graham Whitham said that he

Supported by:





understood Green's response but that in Scotland, because there is more clarity around what the devolved powers are, they have been more capable of effecting changes to the delivery of government policy.

- Michelle, from the Guinness Partnership said that in her 20 years of working in housing she had never seen such poverty. She related a story of a man she knew eating cat food last week because he had no food, and a rise in the number of people wanting to commit suicide.
- Rick Burgess mentioned a meeting in Portcullis House, Westminster, that he had attended, with Sarah Newton MP, Minister for Disabled People, speaking, and that she appeared not to understand her brief.
- Richard from Stockport Council said that GM should ask for more devolution of DWP policy. He stated that there was a link between getting into work and good mental health but that the welfare system destroyed mental health.
- Julie Hilling, prospective parliamentary candidate for Bolton West, questioned whether the DWP were telling the truth when they state that DWP workers are not given targets to hit. Rick Burgess argued that the existence of targets was well known.
- The incompetence of Jobcentre staff is a problem for claimants in complex situations.

The panel's responses to the above comments and questions focused mainly on the issue of flexibility. **Matt Ainsworth** answered that there was flexibility within the current system, as shown by the example of Scotland and Northern Ireland, which he had recently visited, and which has the same sanctions regime as England. Ainsworth argued that in Northern Ireland, staff tend to see sanctions as a last resort, not as an inherent part of the system. He suggested that a quick route to change might be to copy this approach. He further argued that this was an example of a positive organisational and regional culture, with work places in Northern Ireland seeing themselves as genuinely trying to improve people's lives, proactively supporting vulnerable people to claim the benefits they are entitled to.

Ainsworth went on to suggest that in GM what was crucial was treating people in localities, and ensuring that social security was responsive to local need. He said that there was a piece of work to do on collecting the various approaches and studying their effects to make sure there was no 'doubling up' in the system. Finally, Ainsworth suggested that there were four approaches needed:

1. More guidance and support for DWP staff,
2. Greater links to adult skills and health support,
3. Jobcentre Plus needs to be more responsive to localities and differences across GM,
4. GM needs to take the opportunity to lobby for a changed national government policy and look at community-based practice models.

Jeff Smith, MP for Manchester Withington, said that he was still not clear how much flexibility there was under devolution to effect change in DWP policy within GM. He also asked Ainsworth whether Northern Ireland had any different powers that GM could lobby for. Smith also noted that it was a shame that no Conservative MPs were present.

Ainsworth responded that there was no more flexibility in the current system and that GM was subject to the same national welfare system. He said however that there might be some flexibility in setting budgets for and

Supported by:





managing local programmes, such as Working Well, and that Amber Rudd, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, had expressed interest in ‘testing differences.’ He gave the example of Scotland where claimants can decide whether to receive their benefit twice monthly or monthly and can also decide if rent goes directly to them or to their landlord.

He also mentioned a Department for Communities (NIE) initiative in Northern Ireland called ‘make the call’, which advertises which benefits people are entitled to on prime-time television. Under universal credit in NI, the system responds to those who have only half-completed an online claim, up to and including the point at which a community support worker is sent to their house.

Finally, **Lisa Scullion** noted that there was a huge difference across the UK in the effectiveness of job centres. Salford University had recently evaluated a project based around training DWP staff on poverty awareness.

Andy Burnham, *Mayor of Greater Manchester*, said that much DWP policy was implemented by civil servants who have never come into contact with the people affected by their policies. He said that he couldn’t remember a time when the situation had been this bad since he entered frontline politics. It is a ‘break down moment.’ He noted that “at the moment we’re trying to patch and mend, but it’s a finger in the dam type situation rather than anything that approaches a big solution”.

He suggested that DevoConnect (who provide the APPG secretariat) could help by providing support for the APPG’s projects moving forward. Burnham referenced the recent Prosperity Review which found that the welfare system was not only remote and punitive but was also much too focused on physical health rather than mental illness. He suggested GM could have an approach similar to that of Wales or Scotland.

Burnham suggested that any national welfare system was, by definition, going to be ‘tick box.’ He said that the Prosperity Review calls for ‘partnership devolution’, taking on part of the social security responsibility and allowing a certain level of flexibility. Burnham suggested that “we want to do with welfare in the next five years what we did with health in the past five years.” He suggested that GM was moving towards a one public service model, a Norway-style supportive model of social security. He further suggested that DevoConnect could support a piece of work from the APPG moving forward, possibly using evidence from the Prosperity Review.

Burnham said that what was being discussed and debated today was the effects of a top-down approach to welfare, and GM should be building a bottom-up approach. He argued that central government should let the combined authorities design the system, with a central function for voluntary and social organisations, as devolution must be there to answer questions of geographic inequality. He added that at his request Lloyds Bank in Manchester was now giving bank accounts to homeless people something said to be impossible previously.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Kate Green MP thanked everyone for attending and said that the panel were keen to see the GM APPG as the place from which much of this work challenging central government could come. Andy Burnham then agreed,

Supported by:





Greater Manchester
All Party Parliamentary Group

Chair	Lucy Powell MP
Vice Chairs	Lord Goddard of Stockport, Ivan Lewis MP, Baroness Morris of Bolton, Chris Green MP, Jim McMahon MP
Secretary	Jonathan Reynolds MP
Treasurer	Yasmin Qureshi MP

adding that the Mayor’s Office would be happy to share research with the APPG for that purpose. Burnham further added that a good idea might be to send a submission to the spending review 2019.

End of meeting.

Supported by:



This speaker and chair briefing has been prepared by DevoConnect who provide the secretariat function for the Greater Manchester All Party Parliamentary Group. If you have any questions, please get in touch via appggm@devoconnect.co.uk.