

WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

WOMEN AND WELFARE INQUIRY

WRITTEN SUBMISSION RECEIVED FROM ROSS-SHIRE WOMEN'S AID

Ross-shire Women's Aid provides support to women with experience of domestic abuse, we regularly support women to access benefits this can include JSA, ESA, Income Support, CTC, WTC, Housing Benefit & Scottish Welfare Fund.

We have specialist workers, supporting women from Eastern European Communities.

The very act of leaving an abusive partner brings with it some inevitable losses, for many this can include loss of financial security. Many of the women we work with struggle to survive on the benefits they receive, the additional costs associated with trying to live lives free from domestic abuse can put pressure on already restricted income. The additional costs that come from living in a rural area such as higher transport, food and fuel costs can also adversely impact on those we work with.

Delays in claims being processed and sanctions are having a massive impact on women and their children, we are using food banks more regularly than we were previously and we are having to subsidise living costs for more women than we were previously required to. In the last year we had to write off just under £3000 in loans provided to help women buy essentials and in unpaid electricity/gas costs as women did not have access to funds. An example of the impact of sanctions and delays is as follows:

G is 32 years old from Latvia. Arrived in the UK in July 2014 to join her partner in Bradford, UK, on the basis that he would find employment for her. No employment found because of G's lack of English and because she was pregnant. Partner was abusive towards her, which culminated with G being forced out of his house as she wasn't contributing financially.

G was 7 months pregnant at the time, slept rough for 2 nights before her sister managed to send her money for the bus ticket to come to Highlands.

While accommodated in the Refuge G was supported to access JSA, which was approved in November 2014. G also benefited from an initial 4 week' exemption to sign on, on the grounds of DA.

In Dec. 2014 G moved back to another area of the Highlands to be closer to her family, as she was feeling socially isolated (due to lack of English) at a very difficult time - her baby was due at the end of December 2014, after a difficult pregnancy.

On the day G went to sign on at the local Job Centre, she felt ill during the interview with the officer. Staff at the Job Centre phoned the ambulance and G was taken to Hospital, where she was kept for 3 days. This incident led to G's JSA being stopped, as it constituted evidence for the staff at Job centre that she wasn't actively seeking

work or available for work. G was only informed of this a week later, when her appointment was rescheduled. During this time her sister had made contact with the Job Centre staff on G's behalf and no mention of her JSA being stopped was made nor any advice provided on how could GJ regain this right.

At the local Job Centre G was not provided with any advice about how to exercise her right to be exempted from signing on, on grounds of DA for the remainder of the 9 weeks, as per the DV easement regulations.

Moreover she was advised wrongly by staff at the Job Centre to apply for Income Support, which was rightfully not approved.

With RWA support G reclaimed her right to JSA from 25.01.2015, and a first payment was made on 29.01.2015. Between 03.12.2014 and 29.01.2015 G and her new born baby had to rely on parcels from the Food Bank for basic items like food, pampers and powdered milk or clothes donations from various sources.

Delays in gaining a resolution to claims place not on a financial strain, but also on mental one on the individual concerned. As often (as it was G's case) they have to deal with countless request to fill out other forms, provide more evidence in support for their claims and then a new term for dealing with those requests kicks in.

The recent changes in relation to the entitlements of women from Eastern European Communities have severely impacted on their ability to be independent. If a woman is awarded income based JSA or ESA they are no longer entitled to Housing Benefit, since these regulations came into force we have worked with a number of women who have been affected by this. This includes Mrs K:

Mrs K is a Polish national, who had arrived in the UK in 2009; she has been in full-time employment for several years and has not needed to claim any benefits. In October 2014 she left her job due to domestic abuse experienced from her husband. She left her marital home and was rehoused in temporary accommodation along with her three children. Mrs K claimed HB and JSA and was granted Income Based JSA, because she hadn't contributed enough Class 1 National Insurance in the 2012-2013 due to gap in her employment. As Mrs K is an EEA jobseeker, therefore her HB claim was refused and she had to find somewhere else to stay as the costs of temporal accommodation are high.

For the women we support who receive employment support allowance the process of having their claims reassessed can be very stressful and can contribute to any meant health issues being exacerbated. Women who have experienced domestic abuse will quite often experience poor mental health as a result of the trauma they have experienced and the nature of the abuse they have lived with can affect their ability to deal with distress. One women's account of this is as follows:

I am experiencing trauma, severe depression and anxiety as well as physical conditions I first claimed ESA in 2010, this took almost 15 months to be processed, at this point I was put onto the work related rate until the DWP decided to call me in

for another ATOS examination on November 22nd 2013 which added to my already very stressful life due to having being evicted by a private landlord at Christmas. I was in a very distressed state during the most part of the examination by yet another Nurse and yet the ATOS report stated completely the opposite to what the reality of my conditions was and my facial expressions and capability for work she witnessed on that day.

This decision has placed me in an intolerable social and financial situation and only adds to the mass financial difficulties and shortage of income I currently have. Unlike before, the rules now do not allow me to continue to claim even the basic level of ESA, whilst I await an appeal date. I have had to claim JSA of just £71.70 per week instead of the ESA work related amount of £100.15 a shortfall of £28.45, this has severely impacted on me.

A number of the women we work with have been assigned to work related activity groups. While this may be a helpful support for some, for some of the women we work with their mental health issues mean that attending groups is not something they are able to do without a lot of support, the current system does not appear to take the suitability for group work into account when deciding what an individual's support needs are. The idea that one size fits all can be damaging and in terms of the requirements for individuals to participate the consequences of not doing so can be severe.

While the introduction of the Scottish Welfare Fund as a replacement for Community Care Grants was a positive development, the way this is administered can cause difficulties for women. Women can be waiting an inordinate length of time to have goods delivered, when they are being assessed for grants a washing machine is not classed as a priority item and women are being told that only one room in the house requires to be carpeted. We have also noticed that the way discretionary housing payments are assessed can be changeable depending on the individuals accessing claims.

On a positive note in relation to new developments the Domestic Violence Easement Scheme for those on JSA is of benefit to women who have experienced domestic abuse. However given recent experiences of different job centres there still seems to be a lack of awareness about this across the network of job centres and sometimes women have to know about it rather than it being offered to them.

Any changes to system need to ensure that people are dealt with as individuals taking into account their circumstances. Tailored support to help people back to work needs to be person centred, working with the strengths the individual has and helping to address any vulnerabilities. Offering group work then penalising individuals who are unable to attend due to their experiences is not a supportive intervention. We would suggest that any changes should ensure that welfare to work providers should only be rewarded for getting individuals into quality jobs and that on-going support is provided where relevant.

The current discriminatory system for women from Eastern European Communities needs to be addressed, to ensure they are able to access adequate support so they

have the same options as women from the UK have in relation to help with housing costs, this is particularly important when women are looking to leave an abusive partner.

We would like to see the welfare fund or discretionary housing payment systems, ensure that they take into account the unique circumstances of women with experience of domestic abuse and offset the additional costs which can come as a result of this for instance helping to pay for storage while a woman is in temporary accommodation or cover removal costs if a woman has to move due to domestic abuse these are all costs which can prevent women from taking action which could improve their safety.

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