

Keith Fernet asks whether the current welfare system offers fairness to the vulnerable people whom it serves.

Is there **justice** in the welfare system?

I recently attended the launch of Caritas Social Action Network's (CSAN) latest report, Caritas reports: The impact of welfare changes in London.

The report investigates the impact of welfare reforms on vulnerable people, charity staff and services.

The topic of the welfare system is something which I have spoken and written about frequently in the past few years, particularly with regard to the question of its effectiveness and efficiency.

However, now that the implemented austerity measures have caused great changes to the welfare system, I think it both pertinent and important to ask if this new welfare reform provides a framework which offers justice to those accessing the system. To address this question, there is a need to examine what has been happening in recent years.

Unfortunately we have found that there has been a move away from face-to-face contact with clients, decision making has become more remote and removed, whilst there also appears to be a conflict between the silos of the welfare system and wider society.

These faults with the system were exemplified to me lately by the case of a young man who had recently been released from prison.

Upon leaving custody, he had a number of mandatory meetings to attend, including those with his probation officer and with JobCentre Plus. However, when these appointments were allocated they clashed, and with neither party willing to reschedule, he was faced with unenviable decision of which one to attend.

For fear of being sent back to prison, the young man met with his probation

officer, a decision which saved society £800 a week.

However, as a consequence of not being able to make his JobCentre Plus appointment, he was sanctioned and lost his access to benefits.

The staff at Caritas Anchor House, a homeless charity supporting marginalised people in East London, recognised

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the unfairness of this situation and worked with the individual to get justice for him, but such precious man hours should not be wasted dealing with an issue that could have easily been avoided.

This is just one example of many which illustrate the negative impact the welfare system can have on those it is there to help.

These people are often very vulnerable and in need of support provided by a so-

cial safety net – whether that be because they have fallen ill, lost their job, or more complex needs including addiction, poor mental health or have fled war or danger.

CSAN's investigative report into the impact of welfare changes also details the case studies of individuals who have suffered injustices.

The key findings from the report are also listed, and they offer cause for concern. It has found that the welfare system operates an inflexible sanctioning process, has removed free phone lines and face-to-face interaction - therefore reducing accessibility - and is perceived to have moved from an ethos of compassion to coldness.

The impact of these findings is immense, and these difficulties within the system are multiplied for those with mental health needs and learning disabilities.

The lack of justice in the welfare system is a clear sign that human dignity has been removed, and this desperately needs to be brought back.

It is not just those who use and need the welfare system that are feeling the changes and strains; the CSAN report has shown that the staff at charities are too.

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Yet, as all of this continues, we are witnessing an increase in demand for our services, as more and more people in society become vulnerable.

However, being able to deliver these services to our expected standards is



A benefits protest in Norwich Photo: Roger Blackwell



Keith Fernet

Photo: Caritas Anchor House

challenging when working in a climate of austerity; in the London Borough of Newham, where Caritas Anchor House is based, the social exclusion budget was cut by an astounding 60 per cent in 2014.

In order to gain an approach that restores justice and human dignity to the most vulnerable, myself, CSAN and their member charities are urging the government to consider the following:

Sanctions

- The introduction of a system whereby claimants are given a chance to provide an explanation for a first 'offence'.
- An end to the use of financial sanctions for people with mental health problems or learning disabilities.

Staff training

- The development of professional training for JobCentre Plus (JCP) employees

A GLIMPSE OF THE FUTURE: POSITIVE PARTNERSHIP WORKING

In the face of these difficulties, Caritas Anchor House has had to develop a radically different approach in its relationships with services like the police and the Department of Work and Pensions.

These organisations have been involved in Caritas Anchor House's service delivery, and they work with the charity's front-line service users and staff in partnership.

This type of partnership working offers a glimpse of what the future can be like – it is more humane, person centric, efficient and fosters a sense of joint purpose for all involved.

on how to assist and support vulnerable people.

Joint-working

- Regular visits by Jobcentre Plus (JCP) staff to local charities and organisations to meet front-line staff and clients. We also support the growth of outreach initiatives where JCP staff provide advice services within local charities and organisations.

Partnerships

- Faith communities to continue to work openly and practically with local authorities. We recommend building upon the beneficial partnerships which faith-based charities have with statutory agencies, acknowledging that charities reach many socially isolated people more effectively than statutory services.

It is also my belief that the services provided to the most vulnerable could be greatly improved if front line service providers, like Caritas Anchor House,

were allowed to become more involved in their lives.

The services which Caritas Anchor House delivers are done so in a holistic fashion, a fashion which I think is a more economic, effective and caring way of doing things.

To allow us to do so though, revenue needs to be channelled directly to us.

I wish to see a change in the current state of affairs, and I was heartened to read recently that an inquiry has been launched into the holes in our benefit 'safety net'.

This type of action is just what we need to get the welfare system into one which promotes justice and therefore human dignity.

To find out more about the work of Caritas Anchor House, please visit <http://caritasanchorhouse.org.uk/>.

To read CSAN's report into the impact of welfare changes, please visit <http://www.csan.org.uk/>. JM