



**SURF**  
Scotland's Regeneration Forum

SURF : sharing experience : shaping practice



## **Red Tape and Benefits**

**Learning from an Alliance for Action Shared Learning Session – Spring 2018**

**The impact of income regulations on community participation and regeneration  
policy and practice**

*“It would be nice if the poor were to get even half of the money that is spent in studying them”  
— Bill Vaughan*

This report explains the background, context and content of the session and records the learning and outputs achieved. Participants included relevant SURF Alliance for Action partners including people living and working in the Alliance focused communities.

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## Background (Alliance for Action)

In 2011-12 SURF delivered a participative study on responses to recession-based policy decisions in two contrasting case study disadvantaged areas: Govan in Glasgow and the Gallatown in Kirkcaldy, Fife. That collaborative investigation was supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) and the Scottish Government. The research was presented as '[Reality, Resources, Resilience](#)' - a report published by the JRF as a SURF-authored Programme Paper in January 2013.<sup>1</sup>

SURF's Alliance for Action was developed in response to the research findings, which had identified a need for a more coordinated approach towards connecting local knowledge and assets to policy and investments from a wide range of local and national partners.

The operational Alliance model built on the individuals, networks and connections SURF identified and fostered in the initial Alliance for Action feasibility studies in Govan and the Gallatown. In early 2016, the Alliance for Action programme was expanded to include Rothesay on the Isle of Bute. Dunoon became the fourth Alliance site in 2017 and Langholm became the fifth in early 2018.

The dual purpose of SURF's Alliance for Action programme is to:

- strengthen resilience and practical outcomes in the programme's case study communities;
- enhance wider policy and resource considerations for supporting community regeneration.

One way in which SURF pursues these aims is by facilitating and promoting opportunities for communities to learn from each other and for national funders and those with policy and political influence to learn from the realities of the Alliance communities.

Themes for the shared learning events are selected in response to issues identified as relevant by the Alliance communities. Previous themes at Shared Learning Sessions have included heritage, creativity, nutrition and mental health.

This paper reports on the April 2018 Alliance shared learning session. It focused on the community regeneration impact of sanctions, rules and regulations which tend to disrupt state payments from the Department of Work and Pensions and the Home Office. It also considered how the emerging Scottish Government Social Security can be more supportive and effective.

## Why Red Tape and Benefits?

**Red Tape and Benefits** was selected as a theme in response to community concerns about the ongoing, negative impact of sanctions and penalties on benefit recipients, community activity and wider generation concerns. The perception that the imposition of benefit 'penalties' is both unpredictable and

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<sup>1</sup> A final report on SURF's 'Reality, Resources, Resilience: Regeneration in a Recession' /7programme is available on the JRF website: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/reality-resources-resilience>

inconsistent is borne out by research.<sup>2</sup> Additionally there is no evidence that they ‘work’ by either increasing the numbers finding jobs or by ‘encouraging’ the unemployed to ‘look harder’ for work.<sup>3</sup> This could be seen as part of the same pattern of benefits revision which has resulted in the introduction of Universal Credit – still being rolled out across the country. The National Audit Office in this month’s (June, 2018) review of the introduction of Universal Credit has concluded that, similarly, there is no evidence of any value in ongoing replacement of benefits with Universal Credit, and that it has, similarly had a ‘hugely negative effect’ on many claimants.<sup>4</sup>

These revisions to the DWP system are imposed on those who are already vulnerable and the destructive impact on individuals and their families undermines efforts to engage and build capacity and support regeneration.

Scottish Government MSPs unanimously passed legislation earlier this year (April, 2018) which should establish a devolved Scottish social security system by 2021.

## Purpose

The shared sessions are a key part of the Alliance commitment to capture, record and present learning both within the communities themselves and across the broad network of SURF partners and supporters. This event set out to:

- showcase the experience of the benefits system of people working and living in different Alliance communities.
- demonstrate the way in which the sanctions and penalties positive mental health is integral to successful capacity building and community engagement;

## Process

The event was held in Govan at the Kinning Park Complex - an exemplar of community-led regeneration in practice – and a midway accessible point for participants travelling from Rothesay, Dunoon and East Kirkcaldy.

SURF colleagues provided introductions, general background and broad context. Several speakers gave short presentations on their individual experience of the benefits system as it impacted on individuals and their different Alliance communities. These included an advisor from *Money Matters* who has worked with benefit claimants in crisis at outreach surgeries across Glasgow and representatives from

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<sup>2</sup> National Audit Office review. (November 2016)

<sup>3</sup> Martin Taulbut, Daniel F.Mackay, Gerry McCartney (2018) "Job Seeker's Allowance, benefit sanctions and labour market outcomes in Britain, 2001-2014", *Cambridge Journal of Economics*. bex088, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cje/bex088>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.nao.org.uk/report/rolling-out-universal-credit/>

the *Govan Community Project* who spoke about similarly disruptive regulations around payments made to refugees and asylum speakers.

The presentations stimulated ongoing discussion and debate during which participants exchanged experiences and information. The conversation continued over lunch.

## Learning

Concerns about the benefits process were among the issues which led to Scottish Government's review of the benefits system. The reported experience, knowledge and concerns of participants in the Alliance Shared Learning event reflects and reinforces the review's findings.

The lived experience of participants across the Alliance for Action communities, identified the impact of a benefits system which is perceived as being inconsistent, unfair and bereft of understanding of the realities of the lives of those who are dependent upon it.

## Summary of findings:

1. **The random nature of interventions** results in people living in fear and withdrawing from activity that might lead to sanction.
2. **Them and Us.** Sanctions increase feelings of 'other'; of the world being divided into an all-powerful *Them* oppressing a powerless *Us*.
3. **Penalised for being poor.** The DWP appears unwilling or unable to recognise the nature, causes and effects of poverty. As a consequence, it fails to make sufficient allowances for the reality of differing lives lived outside assumed 'normal' parameters.
4. **Fit for Work.** Amid ongoing concerns about the numbers of people mistakenly being declared fit for work at tribunals, local DWP officers often fail to recognise 'hidden' illness and the different levels of 'fitness' needed to take up paid employment or unpaid 'voluntary' work.
5. **Media perceptions:** Portrayals of those on benefits, as scroungers and layabouts are inaccurate, upsetting and reinforce social divisions.
6. **Ripples in a pond:** The negative impact of sanctions is rarely confined to the individual whose benefits have been reduced or stopped.
7. **Unfit for purpose:** Current DWP processes, practices and communications are not fit for the stated purpose of supporting the vulnerable, saving money and encouraging the uptake of paid employment.

8. **What could work:** Participants identified ways in which changes in policy and process could support an improved system.

### 1: The random nature of interventions

The most consistent concern was the random nature of sanctions. Inconsistency across – and even within – centres and geographical areas as identified by the National Audit Office review (November 2016) was borne out by the lived experience of participants. Those in receipt of benefits couldn't predict what kind of behavior would result in penalties.

*“You get in the mindset that no matter what you do, you'll get sanctioned regardless. You can try and jump through the hoops, but they still get you.”*

One contributor reported he had found that DWP offices in areas with fewest employment opportunities, were most likely to impose sanctions. Others took the view that this was down to staff either responding to local management pressure or their own idea of 'who should be punished'.

While the financial hardship caused by penalties was serious, the impact of not knowing why or when a sanction might be imposed, caused fear and stress.

### 2: Them and Us

The sanctions themselves and the apparent lack of logic in their imposition contribute to increased feelings of separation and feeds into a culture of viewing the world in terms of 'them and us.'

Benefit recipients talked about sanctions in terms of punishment.

*“Like being given the belt at school”*

If there is no consistency to sanction imposition, then people feel they are being punished for being on benefits, punished for being themselves.

*“It becomes part of people's identities. They start to believe they are worthless.”*

### 3: Penalised for being poor

Poverty is not only about having less money. Being forced to survive on minimal and, often an insecure, income, has other recognised consequences in terms of an increased likelihood of poor mental and physical health and damaging behaviours, which can lead to a disordered lifestyle. In the poorest communities, support structures, in the form of family, neighbours and friends, are likely to be in the same position.

The result is that behaviours which result in sanctions or penalties, may in some cases be inevitable. People feel they are being punished for not having transport, not having enough for the fare, not having reliable childcare, not having access to the internet, not being able to understand the complex, and sometimes archaic, language of official communications and not being sufficiently able to overcome

their stress and anxiety to jump through successive bureaucratic hoops. The potential consequences of poor timekeeping, missed appointments, a failure to communicate with a 'sufficient' number of potential employers, and an inability to comprehend or respond to complex paperwork, may all lead to the imposition of sanctions.

*"If you're in stress then that impacts your mental health and how you perform at the job centre. You don't tick the right boxes and that's you in a spiral of sanctions and ever more requirements that you can never meet".*

As many as four out of five appeals against sanctions are successful<sup>5</sup>, but by then the damage is done. The result is that the poorest and most vulnerable people are waiting months for money that should not have been withdrawn in the first place.

#### 4: Fit for work?

Meaningful activity; a sense of purpose; socialising; these can make the difference between poor mental health and a sense of wellbeing.

Volunteering formally or informally within a community can be a lifeline for the unemployed or long term sick. It makes people feel useful. It allows them to interact with their peers in a safe environment. It builds self-esteem. It can provide a structure to a life which otherwise has few boundaries. It gives people a sense of purpose. Yet, any commitment to a regular activity can be penalised as evidence that the benefit recipient is not available for work; not devoting sufficient time to seeking paid employment; and (for those who are on sickness benefit) evidence that they are healthy enough to be back at work.

Even leaving aside reports of those many cases of physically ill people who are wrongly told they are 'fit for work', the DWP is additionally criticised for apparently failing to understand the nature of poor mental health. If someone, on a good day, is able to offer some flexible, voluntary support at the local community centre, it does not mean they are fit for paid employment.

*"There is a stigma and shame attached to mental health that make people psyche themselves up for an appointment."*

Likewise if someone who is long term unemployed wants to make a useful contribution to their community, while chasing those few formal paid jobs that become available, it does not mean they are no longer looking for, or available for, paid employment.

*"They use things that people do to better themselves against them."*

*"Sanctioning someone who works as a volunteer is removing the meaning of people's lives."*

There were examples given of volunteers being sanctioned for three weeks; for six weeks. Even these 'short' periods without any income, were enough to result in homelessness. Poor people don't have a

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.benefitadvice.org/news--views/on-universal-credit-and-been-sanctioned-four-out-of-five-universal-credit-sanction-appeals-are-successful>

cushion to tide them over a dip in income. Their friends and family may be equally vulnerable and cannot be relied on to have the means to provide support. No income – even for three weeks – can mean no shelter.

## 5: Media Perceptions

Participants cited the Channel 4 television series *Benefits Street* as an example of the type of media coverage of poverty which contributed to a public perception of those on benefits as lazy and undeserving. What was viewed as the disproportionate coverage given to benefit fraud by some national newspapers was another example of a media presentation of poverty which had little to do with reality.

The percentage of people who would want to, or who could make a living out of, ‘screwing the system’ was minuscule. The cost of fraud was less than the cost of treating anxiety and stress caused by a system which seemed to assume that everyone was on the make.

*“It’s propaganda against the poor. The media works to make the rest of them feel better by pushing a negative picture of those on benefits. It feeds resentment about those who are getting away with it. It scapegoats the poor, refugees, immigrants”*

*“It’s extremes that makes the news, not the swathes of people not earning enough to live. “*

## 6: Ripples in a pond

The impact of sanctions and penalties is rarely confined to the one individual whose income is reduced or lost.

The apparently haphazard nature of the sanctions frightens people. If there is no obvious consistency, then it could easily happen to them and the insecurity and fear which results adds pressure to those already just managing.

Sanctions further drain resources already struggling to cope with providing ‘normal levels’ of support to the poor. Foodbanks, community cafes, advice services and social services/ third sector support programmes can’t cope with a further influx of people in crisis.

In practical terms, desperate people turn to money lenders to get them through the crisis period. The high interest credit repayments spiral and families end up in debt with all the consequences that result.

It’s acknowledged that one of those consequences is an increase in criminal activity. Sanctions undermine self-worth, self-respect, any sense of having control of your own life.

*“Of course there’s a link to crime. If people have little to lose then they’re easy meat for criminals. There’s an obvious link between the money lenders and criminal activities. Young people are ending money laundering.”*

## 7: Unfit for purpose.

The difficulties created by the identified inconsistencies in the system are further complicated by poor communications and a system which sometimes seems to demand levels of concentration and comprehension which even experts find challenging.

Those with enormous expertise in supporting clients battling with red tape and official jargon, describe the systems and processes around benefit penalties and sanctions as not fit for purpose.

*“The system is complex for anyone to understand, let alone anyone with additional barriers”*

A regular requirement to complete forms online is just not viable for many people and communication sent by post as traditional correspondence is often confusing.

*“We see letters from the DWP which don’t make sense. One letter can contain contradictory information. Then we see multiple letters to one person saying the same thing or contradicting each other.”*

*It’s a constant battle to make sense of what they’re saying. We need them to use simple words and a clear layout.”*

## 8: What would work better

While there was a general consensus that many of the issues were a result of ideological and political assumptions that could not easily be challenged, there were several positive contributions and observations about suggested changes which could reduce pressure on benefit recipients. These included:

- Recognise the value of contributions to society that are not paid employment
- Encourage and resource programmes which support communities to understand their sense of place and history
- Introduce a transparent judicial review of sanctions
- Train DWP staff in recognising and supporting those with mental health challenges, including learning difficulties
- Review, redesign and redraft official websites and documents for simplicity of use and clarity of language
- Ensure that all written communications are made in simple language.
- Train staff in how to communicate clearly, both verbally and in writing<sup>6</sup>.
- Accept that no social security system can be fraud proof and instead of treating everyone as a potential criminal, produce a system that is respectful to the majority of users.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/> is one of many organisations which offer different levels of support to public sector and private organisations.

- A welfare system that was more respectful of the individual, would free up money currently used to deal with the human casualties of the present system, and who keep our criminal justice system and NHS stretched to breaking point.
- Support services (including Scottish Government and local authorities) need to be pro-active 'upstream', instead of reactive downstream when it's too late.
- Too many crucial support services (like Money Matters) survive on a patchwork of funders. These agencies should be funded consistently.
- Target most support to the most vulnerable. Allocate funds proportionately, not universally.
- Provide transparency about benefit payments. How much is written off in arrears? How much is unclaimed?
- Promote positive narratives about communities
- Remember that almost everyone needs the welfare system.

## In Conclusion...

SURF's role through its Alliance for Action approach has been to facilitate learning sessions in a way which creates an atmosphere of sufficient trust for all participants to engage in lively and informed debate.

**Feedback from these events has been entirely positive.**

Participants from the communities report feeling confident that their views have value and are heard by those who have some influence over decisions taken about their communities. Useful and mutually supportive relationships have been established between people facing similar challenges in diverse communities in different geographical locations.

Similarly, and importantly, funders and policy makers welcome the opportunity to meet and learn from those whose lives are impacted upon by their decisions.

This report focused on the learning from the most recent shared learning session (April, 2018).

Session themes are selected on the basis of community feedback. Reports on other sessions focusing on the roles of heritage, food, creativity in regeneration and on mental health and wellbeing can be accessed through SURF's website. (*Details below*).

This report, along with other similar reports are used as part of SURF's Alliance for Action work in broadening awareness, information and debate and informing related policy and resource considerations.

If you would like details about future SURF events, you can sign up to SURF's mailing list at [www.surf.scot/stay-informed](http://www.surf.scot/stay-informed)

*For more on SURF and its work, please visit the SURF website: [www.surf.scot](http://www.surf.scot)*

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