

Introduction

The past year has seen intense activity in the field of welfare reform and, as we move into 2017, we are seeing more of the impact on our clients and communities.

While Universal Credit has still not been fully rolled out (how many times will we say this?!), we have seen 'full service' launched in some areas with myriad problems in its wake. The further reduction in the Benefit Cap is also having a huge impact with many families across the UK now finding it more difficult to meet basic expenditure and being forced to choose between paying rent and putting food on the table. The official response of 'they should get a job' fails to consider issues such as affordable childcare, skills shortages, insecure employment conditions and evidence that being on a low income can move people further away from the labour market rather than 'incentivising' work.¹ Continuing use of sanctions, despite evidence that they do not help to move people into work², has pushed people further into poverty.

A recent Joseph Rowntree report found the number of people living below an adequate standard of living had increased by four million to 19 million over the past six years. This includes six million children. Of the total number, over 11 million are at real risk of poverty. The United Nations has also raised 'serious concerns' this year about UK poverty and inequality.³ Rising inflation, combined with stagnating wages and cuts to benefits, mean that nearly one-third of the UK population are struggling to make ends meet. As well as Theresa May's much trumpeted 'JAMS' (Just About Managing) there are millions more who are not managing at all.

The recent release of the hard-hitting Ken Loach film, 'I, Daniel Blake', has helped highlight some of the injustices in the system that we, as welfare rights advisers, work daily with clients to tackle. The public reaction to the film – which won the Palme D'Or and later a BAFTA - was very 'sympathetic' but there were criticisms from an ex-Secretary of State,⁴

¹ Butler, P (2016) 'Docking welfare payments is not incentive to work, report claims'. The Guardian, 5 June 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jun/05/docking-welfare-payments-is-not-incentive-to-work-report-claims>

² National Audit Office (2016) 'Benefit Sanctions'. <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/benefit-sanctions/>

³ Mortimer, C (2016) 'Government austerity policy a breach of international human rights, says UN report'. The Independent. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/austerity-government-policy-conservatives-poor-food-banks-inequality-un-a7110066.html>

⁴ Simons, N (2016) 'Iain Duncan Smith Says Parts Of Ken Loach's 'I, Daniel Blake' Benefits Film Are 'Simply Not True'. Huffington Post, 28 October 2016). http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/iain-duncan-smith-says-parts-of-ken-loachs-i-daniel-blake-benefits-film-are-simply-not-true_uk_581318b8e4b0ccfc956268fa

and a Jobcentre Plus manager, describing the film as ‘inaccurate’. As advisers, we know only too well the hurdles that people must jump through to claim benefits. And we also know stories, often with tragic consequences, of the impact these hurdles have on individuals and families.

It is against this tide that we must keep swimming. We must keep challenging, building our evidence base and working to influence policy. And by doing this together, we are much stronger and ultimately have greater effect.

Our work in 2016

Over the past year, NAWRA, on behalf of our members, has continued to perform an essential function in terms of sharing good practice, providing a forum for learning and seeking to influence decision makers. These are just some highlights. You can find more detailed information can be found on our website at www.nawra.org.uk.

NAWRA conferences

As in previous years, we held four conferences in 2016. Each event included guest speakers and a programme of interactive workshops. This year, our speakers and facilitators came from a range of member organisations alongside respected academics, practitioners and partners. We also offer a forum for information exchange, giving members the opportunity to discuss issues of common concern and to share good practice. You can find all the notes from workshops, presentations and related documents in the member’s area of our [website](#).

Thank you to all the organisations and dedicated staff who gave us space and helped to host our meetings over the past year. Your support has been invaluable and we cannot thank you all enough!



Belper, 11 March 2016

Derbyshire County Council hosted our first meeting of 2016, which included our annual general meeting and election of committee representatives for the next two years (see below). We welcomed back Professor Christina Beatty, from Sheffield Hallam University, who gave an update on her research into unequal impact of welfare reform across the UK and highlighted the financial loss to communities and the local economy, as well as the personal losses to individuals and families.

Workshops looked at using MPs to get better outcomes for clients, moving PIP caselaw forward, challenging the dominant narrative on ‘welfare’ and learning lessons from sanction challenges.



Greenwich, 3 June 2016

Our summer meeting was held in the grand surroundings of the Royal Naval College in Greenwich, in the shadow of the Cutty Sark. The conference was hosted by the University

of Greenwich and Greenwich Welfare Rights Service. We were delighted to welcome back another NAWRA veteran, Professor Paul Gregg, who talked about the labour market since the financial crash and the changing face of poverty. We also heard Amanda Finlay CBE, Vice Chair of the Low Commission on the Future of Advice and Legal Support, talk about the Commissions legacy and Jo Silcox, of Harrow Law Centre, talk about the availability of Legal Aid for appeals to the Upper Tribunal.

Our workshops considered ESA safeguarding guidance, experience of Universal Credit digital roll-out, welfare rights and human rights, and working with students in the advice sector.



Glasgow, 2 September 2016

Our annual visit to Scotland took us to Glasgow this year for a conference hosted by Glasgow City Council Welfare Rights & Money Advice. The concept of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) quickly became the theme of the day. Our first guest speaker, Malcolm Torry of the Citizen's Income Trust, who outlined the basics of UBI and led a lively discussion. We were also honoured to welcome Professor Paul Spicker, of Robert Gordon University, who addressed us on the ambitious theme of 'What's wrong with social security, and what can Scotland do to set it right?'

A varied programme of workshops discussed whether it is time for UBI in the UK, pensioner's advice needs, alternative sources of support for clients, and lone parent awareness.



Stoke-on-Trent, 2 December 2016










Our final meeting of 2016 took us to Staffordshire University for the second time in two years. Patrick Butler, of The Guardian, gave the third annual Phil Hanns Memorial Lecture; a tribute to our great friend and much-missed colleague who passed away in 2013. Patrick highlighted the 'post-truth' environment that is becoming ever more a feature of debate in the media and talked passionately about the trend for ignoring facts when determining government policy, sanctions being a case in point. We also heard Ruth Smeeth, MP for Stoke-on-Trent North, on 'holiday hunger'.

Workshops covered Discretionary Housing Payments, working with corporate deputies, 'putting the security into Social Security', and judicial views towards representatives.



Unfortunately, the final meeting of the year was not followed by our annual Christmas get-together. We'll try harder in 2017!

Policy and campaigning work





One of NAWRA's twin aims is 'to challenge, influence and improve welfare rights policy and legislation' and we have continued to be active in the policy field. Among the issues we have worked on this year are:

-  As part of the HMRC-sponsored Benefits & Credits Consultation Group, we have been involved in policy debates on issues including the ‘two-child’ policy, HMRC digital services and the strengthened self-employed test for Tax Credits.
-  We responded to the HMCTS consultation on [appeal tribunal composition](#), which resulted in a decision not to proceed with the proposal to introduce a single member panel as the default position in the unified tribunals.
-  Our [essential guide](#) to benefit changes and welfare reform was fully updated and made available to members. Amongst other changes, it highlighted the 4-year freeze in most working age benefits, waiting periods for help with mortgage interest returning to 39 weeks, extension of JSA conditionality and the introduction of the ‘Single Tier’ State Retirement Pension.
-  In Wales, we met with Capita to raise member concerns about medical assessments.
-  We [responded to the consultation](#) on Business Rates which included a suggestion that Attendance Allowance could be ‘localised’. Our submission was quoted in a House of Commons Library paper on ‘The Future of Attendance Allowance’. In England and Wales, and presumably Northern Ireland, this proposal on Attendance Allowance was dropped. Scotland has separate powers under the Scotland Act.
-  Our [response to SSAC consultation](#) on decision making and appeals was highlighted on the [Politics UK](#) website, helping to raise our profile in the media.
-  One of our representatives in Wales, Eri Mountbatten, [wrote a blog](#) on the UK Administrative Justice Institute (UKAJI) website highlighting problems with the mandatory reconsideration regime. UKAJI tell us that the blog saw more than 800 hits on first day of publication – a record for their website!
-  We were involved in the steering group looking at [Citizens Income](#), including specific input into a statement on dignity for disabled groups.
-  Compiled a [response](#), based on members’ views, to the Green Paper on Work, Health and Disability, ‘[Improving Lives](#)’.

Over the coming year, there are a substantial number of issues that will impact on our clients and our work as advisers. We have already identified a few areas for policy work to look at, including:

-  The impact of Universal Credit implementation in ‘full-service’ areas, particularly for sick and disabled clients and on issues such as ‘implied consent’;
-  Benefit migration and opportunities for ‘take-up’ activity with pensioners, people with disabilities and other groups.

NAWRA also continues to maintain a presence at influential forums, conferences and other events. We also have maintained representation or links with:

-  [Benefits & Credits Consultation Group](#)
-  DWP Operational Stakeholder meetings
-  DWP Personal Independence Payment forums
-  Local Government Association Social Security Advisers Group



[National Association of Student Money Advisers](#)



Regional liaison with Jobcentre Plus



Rights Advice Scotland ([RAS](#))



[Social Security Advisory Committee](#)



Trade Unions, including Unite and PCS



University links including Sheffield, Glasgow and Essex



Welfare Rights Advisers Cymru (WRAC)

All our published activity can be found in the [resources area](#) of our website. You can also contact your [regional representative](#) for further information.

NAWRA development activity

Last year, we highlighted some ongoing work on the development of NAWRA as a membership body for the sector. Following a detailed membership survey, this work has focused on:



Communication with members/NAWRA committee transparency;



NAWRA membership and ethos; and



Future developments and aspirations.

Several actions have since been agreed and, hopefully, you will have already noticed that some of these are in place. These have included:



A report on the survey findings was issued to all members;



More effective communication with regional representatives on the NAWRA committee;



Work on the visual impact of membership emails is due to be completed shortly and emails now include direct links to committee contacts;



All committee minutes are now published on our website;



Ongoing work on reorganisation of our website;



All committee members now wear identity badges and NAWRA branded lanyards at events.



Advertising of NAWRA membership in sector magazines and other publications



Labelling workshops to ensure they are pitched at the right level, and ensuring that at least one workshop at every conference is at an introductory or refresher level;






Considering more creative ways to reach out to potential new members and gaining feedback on why some organisations are lapsing their membership.

We will continue to review these actions, and discuss other initiatives over the coming year. If you have any suggestions, or would like to get directly involved in these discussion, please [contact us](#).

Social media

We have continued to develop our social media presence and are regularly using our website, Twitter and Facebook as part of our communication strategy.

The table below gives some key statistics for the past year, along with comparative data from the previous two years. This shows that our website traffic has declined from last year's peak but visitor numbers are relatively steady. Our profile on Twitter has risen significantly, by comparison, and we have also seen a steady increase in subscribers to our Facebook page.

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|--|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
|  Website (www.nawra.org.uk) | Jan-Dec 2016 | Jan-Dec 2015 | Jan-Dec 2014 |
| Views | 23,317 (-9.6%) | 25,789 | 24,725 |
| Visitors | 8160 (-2.3%) | 8355 | 6406 |
| Average views per day | 64 | 71 | 68 |
| Peak visits | N/A | 3,083 (Sept) | 3,120 (Sept) |
|  Twitter (@nawra_uk) | Jan-Dec 2016 | Jan-Dec 2015 | Jan-Dec 2014 |
| Followers | 862 (+12.8%) | 764 | 610 |
| Profile visits | 3735 (+27.2%) | 2936 | N/A |
|  Facebook (NAWRA) | Jan-Dec 2016 | Jan-Dec 2015 | Jan-Dec 2014 |
| Total page likes | 257 (+14.2%) | 225 | N/A |

Committee membership

During the past year, the NAWRA committee members were:

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|------------------------|--|
| Chair | Alan Markey , Coventry Independent Advice Service |
| Treasurer/Secretary | Kelly Smith , Child Poverty Action Group |
| North West England | Patrick Hill , Trafford Council (to March 2016) Terry Patterson , Manchester City Council (from March 2016) |
| North East England | Julie Henry , Durham Welfare Rights Service |
| Yorkshire & The Humber | Jim McKenny , Kirklees Council |
| Midlands (East) | Juan Ramirez , Derbyshire County Council Welfare Rights Service |
| Midlands (West) | Alan Markey , Coventry Independent Advice Service |
| East England | Tamara Moreau , Colchester Borough Council |
| London | Maureen Arthur , Family Mosaic Corin Hammersley , Greenwich Welfare Rights |

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|------------------|---|
| South East | Simone Caudell , Orbit Housing (to March 2016) Jenny Wood , Citizens Advice Bournemouth (from March 2016) |
| South West | Daphne Hall , Lasa/rightsnet |
| Scotland | Tom Lamb , Dundee North Law Centre (to March 2016) Position currently vacant |
| Wales | Eri Mountbatten , Aberystwyth University Students Union Tom Messere , Big Book of Benefits and Mental Health |
| Northern Ireland | Position currently vacant |

This year, we said ‘farewell’ to one of our longest serving NAWRA committee members, Patrick Hill, who has entered retirement. If you have ever been to a NAWRA conference, then you probably met Patrick. His work on behalf of claimants and his community was tireless and he is greatly missed by all of us. I’m sure we’ll see him again soon!

Thank you to all members of the committee who have given their time to further the aims and objectives of NAWRA. Everyone on the committee has a day job and so their time and commitment to NAWRA is hugely appreciated.

Thank you!

I would like to finish this report with a huge thank you to all of you as NAWRA members. Your support helps us to grow and makes us more effective as a representative body for the sector. By supporting each other, and continuing to learn from each other, we make the sector more vibrant and able to respond to the changes ahead.

I hope that 2017 is a successful one for all of you and that we all continue to make a real difference to the society that we are all a part of.

Best wishes,



Alan Markey
NAWRA chair
February 2017