

Introduction

This time last year, advisers were preparing themselves for the national roll out of Universal Credit. Or was that the year before last? The programme has been so 'on time and on budget'¹ that the actual implementation date seems to have eluded us all here at NAWRA. Early last year there were calls for the National Audit Office to review the cost of the Universal Credit programme, then standing at around £16 billion, and continuing arguments between the Treasury and Ian Duncan Smith over his 'flagship' project.² And now, we have literally hundreds of successful claimants enjoying the benefits of David Cameron's "lower tax, lower welfare society".³

The General Election saw the end of the Coalition and a push towards a further £12 billion of cuts to social security spending. While there was a much trumpeted 'U-turn' on planned cuts to Tax Credits in the Autumn Statement, those in the know quickly realised that government cuts were just being moved into the Universal Credit regime via changes to tapers and other allowances.

There have been some high profile challenges to the cuts this year, not least the rejection of ESA cuts by the House of Lords (for what it was worth) and the legal cases involving the bedroom tax. But the trajectory is still downwards with regard to the governments treatment of benefit claimants, with ever stricter sanctions regimes, the impact of the 'mandatory reconsideration' process on independent appeals and continuing stigmatisation of claimants through the popular press and television.

As advisers, we see the impact on our clients and our communities at first hand. Against the backdrop of cuts, both to the benefit system itself and to local government spending, NAWRA members continue to fight the good fight. Our members should continue to be proud of the work they do every day, helping to effect the rights of individuals and families and campaigning for change. And maybe one day, if we are really patient, we'll even see the full national roll-out of Universal Credit.

¹ Iain Duncan Smith says Universal Credit 'on budget' despite millions wasted, The Telegraph, 09/12/13, at bit.ly/21jWb5D

² George Osborne in conflict with Iain Duncan Smith over universal credit, The Guardian, 06/11/15, at bit.ly/1RDSkN6

³ David Cameron: I'll end welfare merry-go-round, BBC News, 22/06/16, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-33221966>

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. More detailed information can be found on our website at www.nawra.org.uk.

NAWRA meetings

We held four conferences last year. 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.

Minutes, workshop notes, presentations and all related documents can be found on our website at <http://tinyurl.com/nfnw2zr>.

Thank you to all the organisations and dedicated staff who gave us space and helped to host our meetings over the past year. We could not have done this without you!



Stoke on Trent, 6 March 2015

Staffordshire University hosted our first meeting of 2015, which included our AGM. The University highlighted the range of courses available on their advice studies programme and our guest speakers were Andrew Hood, from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, and Jackie Cox, from Church Action on Poverty. Andrew highlighted the challenges facing the (then) coalition government around social security spending and Jackie outlined the 'real Benefits Street' project aimed at dispelling myths about claimants.

Workshop topics covered 'students and welfare', 'WCA: mobilising – case law developments', 'experiences of the mandatory reconsideration process' and 'Universal Credit: issues and experiences'.



Wolverhampton, 5 June 2015

Our academic journey continued to the University of Wolverhampton in June with Steve lafrati, senior lecturer and course leader in Social Policy, as our keynote speaker. Steve considered ways of supporting people out of poverty and looked at methods employed to reduce 'welfare demand' in Wolverhampton. Our second guest was Ruth London, from Fuel Poverty Action, who highlighted their campaigning work.

Our workshops looked at 'Personal Independence Payments: the role of the assessment provider', 'pensions, tax and benefits', 'Wolverhampton's Law Student Representation Project' and 'the Equality Act and social security'.



Edinburgh, 4 September 2015

Our annual visit to Scotland took us to the magnificent City Chambers on Edinburgh's Royal Mile. Ann McVie, Head of the Scottish Government's Low Income Benefits Policy Unit, was our keynote speaker and she gave an overview of the work being undertaken around a new framework for social security in Scotland. Our other guest speakers were Robin Tennant, from Poverty Alliance, who spoke about claimants and stigma, and Eri Mountbatten, NAWRA committee representative, on the thorny issue of mandatory reconsideration.

A varied programme of workshops covered 'developing a child poverty strategy', 'benefit conditionality long-term survey', 'provision of advice to Polish and Romanian communities' and 'Universal Credit: the perspective from landlord-based welfare rights advisers'.



Sunderland, 11 December 2015

Our final meeting of 2015 took us to the north-east and the beautiful national Glass centre on the banks of the River Wear. We were delighted to welcome Professor Ted Schrecker, Professor of Global Health Policy in the Centre for Public Policy and Health at Durham University, who gave the second annual Phil Hanns Memorial Lecture, a tribute to our colleague and friend who sadly passed away in 2013. Professor Schrecker gave a fascinating lecture on the topic of 'neoliberal epidemics and the war against the vulnerable', highlighting his research showing that we are definitely not 'all in it together' and that many so-called reforms serve to worsen inequality rather than reduce it.

We were fortunate to also have a returning NAWRA guest speaker in Dr David Webster, Honorary Senior Research Fellow (Urban Studies), at Glasgow University. Dr Webster updated us on his research around benefit sanctions and particularly highlighted the increasing use of sanctions among vulnerable claimant groups and the ever decreasing number of appeals (in light of mandatory reconsideration rules).

Workshops covered 'ESA safeguarding guidance', 'Kapow! to the GPOW (genuine prospects of work test)', and 'Universal Credit: online claim form'. (Gareth and Patrick's annual Christmas addresses were noticeably absent this year – maybe next year eh?!)

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:

- **Mandatory reconsideration** – including an article in 'Adviser' magazine, blog posts, workshops/speaker slots and members inputting into research. We attended an Administrative Justice conference in Sept 2015 highlighting issues

raised by NAWRA members. This feedback was passed on to SSAC and has helped to give weight to SSACs recently announced review of the mandatory reconsideration regime. We are currently undertaking new research underway to feed into SSACs review.

- **Tax Credits** – We continue to be an active member of the national HMRC consultation group and have been challenging the way that HMRC recover overpayments from vulnerable claimants. This policy is now under reconsideration. We also campaigned for the introduction of 0345 numbers for claimants with ‘pay as you go’ mobiles so that they are not penalised with additional charges.
- **DWP Operational Stakeholders Group** – We regularly attend these meetings and represent members' views by collecting information via conferences, email and the rightsnet discussion forum.
- **Universal Basic Income** – we attended the inaugural campaign meeting with Basic Income UK, the Centre for Welfare Reform and others to explore the potential for radical reform of the UK social security system. This will be discussed further with members.

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

- Local Government Association Social Security Advisers Group
- Regional liaison with Jobcentre Plus
- National Association of Student Money Advisers
- Social Security Advisers Committee
- Trade Unions
- Welfare Rights Advisers Cymru (WRAC)

All of our published activity can be found in the resources area of our website (www.nawra.org.uk/index.php/resources).

NAWRA development activity

In our previous annual report, we highlighted our intention to undertake a review of our activities and position in the sector and to carry out a membership survey to inform this work.

The survey helped us to focus on three key areas:




- Communication with members/NAWRA committee transparency;
- NAWRA membership and ethos; and
- Future developments and aspirations.

Utilising the results of the survey, a sub-group of the NAWRA committee has been working on a range of possible actions in these key areas against the backdrop of a rapidly changing social and political environment. We are committed to improving our communications to members, whether directly or through social media, to raising the overall profile of NAWRA nationally and to ensuring that all members have the opportunity to benefit from NAWRA conferences and other activities. A separate report on these actions will be posted on the NAWRA website and communicated directly to members over the coming weeks.

Social media

We will be developing our social media strategy this year as part of our ongoing development activities. We have maintained the blog-style of our website and our presence on Twitter. Use of Facebook and other social media platforms, such as LinkedIn, will be reconsidered as part of our future strategy.

Some statistics from 2015:

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|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|
|  Website (www.nawra.org.uk) | Jan - Dec 2015 | Jan - Dec 2014 |
| Visits | 25,789 | 24,725 (+4%) |
| Average visits per day | 71 | 68 (+4%) |
| Peak visits | 3,083 (Sep 2015) | 3,120 (Sep 2015) |
| | | |
|  Twitter (@nawra_uk) | Jan - Dec 2015 | Jan - Dec 2014 |
| Followers | 764 | 610 (+25%) |
| Average new followers per month | 11 | N/A |
| Profile visits | 2936 | N/A |
| | | |
|  Facebook (NAWRA) | Jan - Dec 2015 | Jan - Dec 2014 |
| Total page likes | 225 | N/A |

Our website has continued to develop into more of a 'blog' style, allowing us to post updates on activities and to highlight campaigns and other useful information.

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 |

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| North East England | Julie Henry , Durham Welfare Rights Service |
| Yorkshire & The Humber | Jim McKenny , Kirklees Council |
| Midlands (East) | Juan Ramirez , Rushcliffe Advice Network |
| Midlands (West) | Alan Markey , Coventry Independent Advice Service |
| East England | Tamara Moreau , Colchester Borough Council |
| London | Maureen Arthur , Family Mosaic Shawn Mach , rightsnet/London Advice Services Alliance (to November 2015) Corin Hammersley , Greenwich Welfare Rights (from November 2015) |
| South East | Simone Caudell , Orbit Housing |
| South West | Daphne Hall , London Advice Services Alliance |
| Scotland | Tom Lamb , Dundee North Law Centre |
| Wales | Eri Mountbatten , Aberystwyth University Students Union Tom Messere , Big Book of Benefits and Mental Health |
| Northern Ireland | Position vacant |

Thank you to all the members of the committee who have given their time to further the aims and objectives of NAWRA. Your contribution is hugely valued and valuable.

Finally, thank you to all of the members of NAWRA who have helped make all of the conferences this year so successful. Even after all these years, I am still personally invigorated by the energy and enthusiasm you all bring to the organisation and to the knowledge and experience you share.

Here's to another fantastic year.

Alan Markey
NAWRA chair
March 2016