

Welfare support is mental
health care

NSUN briefing

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Social Security & Disability Justice: Visual notes by Tamara-Jade Kaz.

Image description: Visual notes created by Tamara-Jade Kaz, summarising the findings of this work. On a cream background, there is text with multiple colours and sizes. There are lots of little illustrations — such as weighing scales accompanying a heading of 'fatphobia' in welfare systems, or a rain cloud with text inside reading 'gatekeepers have the power to make your experience miserable'.

About this briefing

We've been talking to grassroots and user-led groups across London, discussing the barriers faced by those who live with mental ill-health, distress, or trauma. This is the second of three briefings coming out of those conversations.

Here we focus on the welfare system as it is experienced within communities, particularly its disproportionate impact on the so-called mentally ill. We see the welfare system as exclusionary and punitive, exacerbating the conditions of suffering.

Collectively, the briefings highlight the **need to consider mental healthcare far beyond medical interventions; and instead call us to reimagine the material**, including the systems and structures that create and exacerbate distress. [You can find all three briefings here.](#)

Learnings

- Those with mental ill-health, distress, or trauma experience the welfare system as exclusionary and punitive. This is worse for those experiencing multiple minoritisations such as those with No Recourse to Public Funds.
- The failings of the welfare system extend beyond questions of eligibility. It also includes the confusing and contradicting processes through which support can be accessed.

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Background

There has been an attritional process taking place over the last decade, whereby social protections have been stripped away. These have made recent shocks in the cost of living even more serious and detrimental to people's wellbeing.

Changes such as the **two child limit**, bedroom tax, **sanctions** and debt deductions from benefits in addition to the failure to raise benefits at a level that accounts for inflation have contributed to the precarity of people who receive benefits.

For those frozen out of the benefits system or unable to access it, destitution is a state-sanctioned policy norm through the **No Recourse to Public Funds** condition.

Being subjected to the welfare state has been lethal for some. Projects like **Deaths by Welfare** work to record and witness these lives and their deaths at the hands of the state. Whilst there have been efforts to suppress the impact of the current welfare system, Disabled activists have been bringing the consequences to the fore.

Ongoing reforms aimed at placing increasing pressure on people who use the benefits system are based on the idea that a good welfare system makes work unappealing. This is a simplistic view that misses out on the complexity of managing your health, the care you may need, the care you give and working.

Focus on squeezing those on benefits, including part-time workers, misses a key part of the picture: **people are often putting in unpaid full-time shifts in other areas of their lives, even when they are in receipt of welfare support.** These experiences remain invisibilised which means that we have a significant mismatch between what people's lives are actually like and what policy makers imagine people's lives to be.

How do people involved in grassroots groups understand the impact of the welfare system?

We spoke to grassroots group members who are on the ground in London about how they understand the benefits system. This is what we heard:

The barriers within the system are a serious deterrent to accessing the support to which you are entitled. People spoke to us about gatekeepers, inaccessibility, and the relationship between accessing welfare and worsening mental ill-health.

“The gatekeepers — the people who are working within the system themselves — can make life so miserable for you or make you access the system. One individual sitting behind a desk can stigmatise you just by looking at you as you walk through the door. By the time you get to them you’re comfortable to share your problems. The language they speak is so stigmatising and degrading. The tabloid lines — they came to steal or take from the economy of the country.”

“We work with people with mental ill-health and you can see that **these policies are exacerbating problems.**”

“I think the whole thing is based on fear really.”

People face barriers from policy design to delivery of welfare and we are getting further away from a system that supports us to live well. **Accessibility is not adequately considered when it comes to the current systems**, despite evidence — like the [DWP report on the impact of sanctions](#) — that punitive features of the system do not achieve what they intend.

“Every single barrier you might face as a neurodivergent person you face in trying to access welfare support.”

“I’m pretty sure that if I went through with applying for PIP [Personal Independence Payment] for example, **the assessor would have no understanding of the condition I live with** and it’s one that’s heavily stigmatised, that’s misunderstood, that’s often faced with lots of sexism as well and **I don’t want to put myself through that** and I think lots of people do not want to.”

“One friend would have been entitled to UC [Universal Credit] for over a year and they didn’t even know. They have **so much guilt and shame and fear**. They’re also neurodivergent and **the systems aren’t conducive or accessible**. My friend has missed two appointments and **they are spiralling.**”

One participant spoke about the impact of fatphobia, and how being in a bigger body meant they were seen as less credible or deserving of support:

“My size — when they see me, they think I’m a big eater... So by the time I express that I’m going through this and that, no one will believe you. The first thing they talk about is your weight. So presenting to access any benefits I have to think twice. So what do I do? I have to struggle and go wherever I can to access support.”

Not being allowed to thrive was a common theme, with participants sharing how little the current system actively contributes to people’s wellbeing, or uplifts people in need of support:

“A welfare system designed like ours isn't built around thriving, or to liberate human beings.”

“For Black and brown people, queer and disabled people, **these systems weren't designed to make us thrive**”

What do we want to see?

- An accessible social security system that does not treat individuals with suspicion.
- A true safety net for all who need it, for as long as they need, without the need for discretionary supplementation to help people make ends meet.
- Access to adequate support to live securely, irrespective of immigration status: an end to the No Recourse to Public Funds condition.
- Entitlement to social security without fear of punishment: an end to sanctions, bedroom tax, the two child limit and other punitive measures.
- Support that considers people's paid and unpaid work: a living wage for carers.

“Support people to work in different [and] more flexible... more creative ways that support their disabilities... Think about disability in a different way. Rather than something that needs to be penalised or punished or improved.”

“You could just be texting people information alerts that say that this is available to you. You know, if the government knows you're not working, why are you not getting a [message] saying, “hey, this is, here's your nearest job centre, or the GP says you've been diagnosed with this disability” [or] a text saying “hey, here's how you can sign up for your benefits.”



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