

Devolved approaches to social security in the UK – lessons for Greater Manchester

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We are pleased to be launching, in partnership with the Sustainable Housing and Urban Studies Unit ([SHUSU – University of Salford](#)), [a series of short essays](#) exploring approaches to social security at a devolved level in the UK. The aim is to understand what lessons there are for Greater Manchester (GM) from approaches taken in the devolved nations, and to consider what COVID-19 means for the future of local welfare provision.

Dr Mark Simpson (*Reflections on Northern Ireland’s mirror image approach to devolved social security*) highlights the different payment arrangements for Universal Credit (UC) in Northern Ireland (the only part of the UK where welfare policy is wholly devolved). In contrast to England, UC payments in Northern Ireland are made twice monthly by default and the housing element is paid automatically to landlords.

Despite the different levels of social security powers that exists in Northern Ireland and Scotland, both nations have sought to mitigate against some of the worst aspects of UK policy. Professor Sharon Wright (*Social security in Scotland*) explains that in 2018/19 the Scottish Government spent approximately £125 million mitigating UK cuts. According to Professor Wright, Scotland’s approach shows the value of listening to those with lived experience of social security and enabling local people to feed into the design of policies and practices.

An approach that responds to the needs of service users was at the heart of the *DWP and Oxfam Livelihoods Training Project* in Wales. Professor Lisa Scullion (to whom we are grateful for bringing this series of essays together) and Dr Katy Jones (*Taking an assets-based approach to Jobcentre Plus support: Lessons from Wales*) discuss how the project took a person-centred approach to tackling poverty, embedding understandings of poverty within DWP across Wales. Findings from this project could inform the development of labour market programmes in GM.

Dr Daniel Edmiston, Dr David Robertshaw and Dr Andrea Gibbons explore the impact of COVID-19 on local responses to welfare provision (*What can local responses to COVID-19 tell us about the potential and challenges for devolved ‘welfare’?*). Whilst recognising the incredible local cross-sector working that has happened during the pandemic, they warn of the risks presented by local welfare support operating in a context of diminishing resources. In this context, increased autonomy that a devolved approach to welfare may bring would need to be accompanied by mechanisms of accountability for local citizens to articulate their needs and preferences about local provision.

There are two aspects to approaching social security policy in GM. The first is to consider what can be done with existing powers. The second is to consider whether GM should seek devolution of aspects of the system and, if it were to do so, what powers it should seek and how it should use those powers. GMPA is currently undertaking research on the first of these considerations, exploring local welfare schemes, with a view to developing policy and a good practice guide for local authorities and their partners. This will be published later in the year.

On the second consideration, these essays encourage further discussion about how devolution of social security system could help strengthen the fight against poverty in GM.

What comes through strongly in the essays is the need to for a person-centred approach to welfare policy that ensures people with experience of using the social security are involved in service design. Also important to recognise is that regardless of the levels of power over the system that exist, what can be done locally, as Dr Mark Simpson says, to support people accessing the welfare system depends on the interaction of available powers, available budget and political will.

[To read the essays click here](#)