

What can local responses to COVID-19 tell us about the potential and challenges for devolved 'welfare'?

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Introduction

When thinking about the social security system, we tend to focus on individual claimants and the public institutions delivering policy on behalf of central government. Less attention is given to the crucial role local actors such as charities and support services play in bridging the claim between citizen and state through signposting people to benefits, supporting them with their application, or accompanying them to assessments. Moving everything online so it becomes 'digital by default', alongside increased conditionalityⁱ and complexityⁱⁱ within the benefits system has made the work of these local actors increasingly important in shaping how people understand and access benefits.ⁱⁱⁱ COVID-19 has underlined the crucial role these stakeholders play at a time when social distancing requirements have also disrupted or transformed local ecosystems of help and advice previously delivered face-to-face.

Welfare at a (Social) Distance is a new research project^{iv} exploring the changing coverage and quality of this assistance, and what it means for people's ability to access the benefits and employment support they are entitled to. Ideally, devolution promotes local determination of the support best suited to local conditions and needs. However, we are finding a number of emerging issues that raise questions about both the potential and challenges for a devolved approach to 'welfare' within and beyond the COVID-19 context.

Learning from COVID-19

We are currently conducting research with local and national stakeholders across four case study areas in England: Leeds, Newham, Salford and Thanet.^v Each area is very different in terms of its demographics, labour market and exposure to COVID-19, as well as its differing networks of co-ordination between third sector, voluntary and local government actors. As expected, this has resulted in considerable variation in the forms of support available and the ways in which organisations have adapted their services. Despite this, a number of common issues are emerging that highlight universal challenges and opportunities for devolution.

First, COVID-19 and the challenges that social distancing and emergency response present are prompting new ways of working across local government and the third sector. In certain cases, organisations are sharing resources, infrastructure and facilities in new and creative ways. They have developed new lines of regular and open communication, and where possible redeployed staff and volunteers to dynamically

respond to local need. This is in spite of chronic uncertainty, increased demand in key areas, economic stresses and the need to furlough staff and stand down vulnerable volunteers. Taken together, these dynamics seem to have moved many local ecosystems providing benefit, employment and crisis support to emergency operations that demand and encourage a more collaborative model sensitive to changing needs and capacity at the community or regional level.

It demonstrates that an effective and alternative liaison between local and regional actors is both possible and productive, even with relatively little resource or support. That said, interviews with key actors reveal that these ways of working draw heavily on the ingenuity and resilience of dedicated actors often going above and beyond 'the day job'. Late night and weekend phone calls, Whatsapp groups, emergency funding applications, the calling in of favours and development of local contacts to help adapt services and distribute resources were commonplace. These informal strategies have helped deliver on the promise of what a devolved approach to welfare might entail: increased autonomy to identify and respond to local needs as they arise. But can these strategies be sustainable in the longer term?

Since the pandemic started, many organisations have reached further into their communities to identify significant, often shifting, need. They remain acutely aware of the vulnerable groups that have disengaged with the suspension of walk-in provision and home visits. Meeting new needs while re-engaging existing clients poses a significant challenge in this context. Already reduced by a decade of austerity, many organisations have further depleted their reserves and face great future uncertainty. Many traditional opportunities for revenue generation are impossible in the current context. As emergency provision is scaled down, the difficult conversations about what it means to be "viable" and "sustainable" begin. At an individual level, workers confront a range of new challenges: staying up-to-date with constant changes and reversals to policy and regulation; delivering what was once face-to-face support by phone in the absence of visual cues; working remotely without "the person in the office that you could just ask" or colleague support through emotional encounters and trauma; and endless Zoom meetings. In combination, these present significant risks of institutional and individual 'burn-out'. This underlines the importance of properly resourcing devolved approaches to welfare if we are to fully realise on their potential.

Second, COVID-19 continues to exacerbate local authority disinvestment. This presents particular challenges to both the capacity for redistribution and the democratic accountability of devolution projects. Now and in the future, increased demand for local authority services alongside a significant drop in council revenues will threaten the eco-systems of support mediating access for many benefit claimants. This is already at a time of 'super-austerity' where pre-existing cuts to public spending have been overlaid by a second wave of regressive disinvestment. The third wave of cuts to come as a result of COVID-19 will further undermine the resources and capacity of local government and the third sector. Within this context, the great risk of devolution is that it decentralises the resourcing of such crisis responses, so those areas with the least lose out even more in the years to come.

In response to COVID-19, outreach models and local mutual aid groups have flourished to provide a range of ancillary support to benefit claimants that has, in lots of ways, been more tailored to local knowledge, skills and needs. In certain cases, these local forms of assistance have been able to identify and resource interventions much better than centralised government responses. However, without checks and balances in place these models of provision are more exposed to clientelism and patchwork provision contingent on capacity and even goodwill. As such, those with particularly acute or complex needs may end up 'slipping through the cracks' and certain local areas may not have the resource to meet particularly high demand. In such situations the increased autonomy that a devolved approach to welfare may bring, would need to be accompanied by corresponding mechanisms of accountability for local citizens to articulate their needs and preferences about the quality and accessibility of regionally defined services. Without this, there is a real risk

that devolution exacerbates regressive or unequal service provision with little mechanisms of redress for those worst affected.^{vi}

Lessons for Greater Manchester

COVID-19 is obviously an exceptional moment but many of the challenges it presents to local stakeholders, organisations and networks are not new. Indeed, problems faced by local actors responding to the pandemic are part of a broader set of issues only made worse or amplified by COVID-19. Our emerging findings point to the potential benefits that devolved approaches to welfare may bring: tailored provision that draws on local knowledge to respond creatively and collaboratively to local demands and challenges. However, the first phase of our fieldwork also suggests a finite capacity and resilience of local actors and networks who are currently dealing with multiple, and ongoing crises. This underlines the need to effectively resource a devolved approach to welfare: it cannot be seen as an add on to the 'day job'. It has to be built into the workloads and institutional models of the way people and communities operate. We also need to be mindful of the potential dangers associated with regional devolution. Increasing regional autonomy presents an opportunity to adapt and transform local services in a way that responds to distinctive needs and opportunities. However, without corresponding mechanisms of accountability, whereby local citizens are able to feed into local governance deals, there is a danger of particular groups 'slipping through the cracks' and a new regional democratic deficit.

About the authors

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About the *Devolved approaches to social security in the UK – lessons for Greater Manchester* essays series

SHUSU
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Greater Manchester Poverty Action (GMPA) and the Sustainable Housing and Urban Studies Unit (SHUSU) at the University of Salford invited academics to set out what lessons Greater Manchester can learn from approaches to social security in devolved settings across the UK. Three essays in this series look at aspects of social security policy and practice in Northern Ireland (*Reflections on Northern Ireland's mirror image approach to devolved social security*), Scotland (*Social security in Scotland*) and Wales (*Taking an assets-based approach to Jobcentre Plus support: Lessons from Wales*). A fourth essay (*What can local responses to COVID-19 tell us about the potential and challenges for devolved 'welfare'?*) looks at the role of local actors (from within both the public and VCSE sectors) in supporting people to access and understand welfare provision in the context of COVID-19 and consider the implications for future devolution of the social security system to Greater Manchester.

The essays series is a joint project between GMPA and SHUSU to help inform the development of social security policy in Greater Manchester. Any views expressed in the essays do not necessarily reflect the views of GMPA or SHUSU. The essays series contributes to two of GMPA's core aims to:

- Equip stakeholders from across public, private and VCSE sectors across Greater Manchester with the skills, knowledge and expertise they need to tackle poverty.
- Promote innovative policy and practice-based responses to poverty that draw on good practice, that are evidence based, collaborative and scalable.

The University of Salford is a Principal Partner of GMPA.

ⁱ Dwyer, P., Scullion, L., Jones, K., McNeill, J., & Stewart, A. B. (2020) Work, welfare, and wellbeing: The impacts of welfare conditionality on people with mental health impairments in the UK, *Social Policy & Administration*, 54(2), 311-326.

ⁱⁱ Summers, K., & Young, D. (2020) Universal simplicity? The alleged simplicity of Universal Credit from administrative and claimant perspectives, *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 28(2), 169-186.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kaufman, J. (2020) Intensity, moderation, and the pressures of expectation: Calculation and coercion in the street-level practice of welfare conditionality, *Social Policy & Administration*, 54(2), 205-218.

^{iv} Welfare at a (Social) Distance is a major national research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of the UK Research and Innovation's rapid response to COVID-19.

^v For further details, please see: <http://hub.salford.ac.uk/welfare-at-a-social-distance/>

^{vi} Tomaney, J. (2016) Limits of devolution: Localism, economics and post-democracy, *The Political Quarterly*, 87(4), 546-552.