

# Locked Down

## A qualitative study of Covid-19 social policy issues and how the pandemic will likely influence the CAB social policy agenda in the future

### Executive Summary

August 2020

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#### Introduction and Background:

This qualitative study seeks to provide a general overview of social policy issues, which have emerged on part of the Covid-19 pandemic and to forecast what issues pertaining to Covid-19 are likely to steer CAB social policy work in the coming months.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> March the whole UK was 'locked down' to curb the spread of SARS-CoV-2 a new strain of coronavirus, which causes a potentially fatal respiratory disease called Covid-19. Citizens were legally required to stay at home; the most basic of civil liberties including socialising, shopping and exercising drastically restricted. Whilst services including essential retailers and healthcare facilities remained open, schools and workplaces closed with employers instructed to allow their staff to work from home if possible.

In response to the pandemic, the UK and Scottish Governments scrambled to formulate economic and social policies to mitigate the adverse effects of lockdown. The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) was introduced. Employers whose business had diminished due to Covid-19 could apply to the CJRS and have 80% of the staff's wages paid by the government as an alternative to lay off or redundancy. The Self-employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) offered grants to self-employed citizens to partially compensate for lost revenue. In anticipation of a high volume of Universal Credit (UC) claims, the DWP introduced numerous measures to hasten the claiming process. The Scottish Government utilised devolved competencies to support vulnerable households and sectors of the economy who would likely be hit hardest.

The findings of this research are taken from a series of micro case studies compiled between March 24<sup>th</sup> and April 24<sup>th</sup>, the first full month the UK was in lockdown.

#### Emerging Issues:

Cases were categorised across three themes: uncertainty, incompatibility and inaccessibility. The following were identified as amongst the most prominent issues, which emerged during the period sampled:



August 2020

- Lockdown restrictions resulting in complex support needs going unmet
- Difficulties accessing essential services, vulnerable groups the most adversely affected
- Protocols and procedures jarring with the circumstances of 'new' service users. 'New' users are those that, prior to the pandemic, would not feature amongst the regular beneficiaries of services such as UC and other income replacement benefits
- Covid-19 exacerbating existing weaknesses in services, i.e. the infamous 5 weeks wait for the first UC payment to be received
- In terms of the CJRS, a lack of clarity was apparent both in terms of whether or not an employer would put an employee on the scheme and the conduct expected whilst on it
- Poor clarity more generally over rights and responsibilities was observed, especially with regards to employment

### Issues likely to shape CAB work going forward:

The forthcoming is informed by evidence gathered but also by ongoing debates concerning poverty and income shocks and exclusion and inequality.

- Issues with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as the possible heavy cost to employers to provide PPE to employees
- Incorporation of social distancing measures into workplaces and the extent to which people can adhere to the guidelines whilst working
- Employer treatment of staff who abstain from attending work on part of health conditions may inform social policy work, especially if admonishment is deemed as discrimination
- Increased demand on UC and the social security system as the CJRS is dismantled
- Re-introduction of conditional arrangements for benefits claims. Before Covid-19 conditional was a social policy hotbed. How sanctions and the (eventual) re-establishment of the MIF will impact on financial wellbeing against a backdrop of Covid-19 induced economic hardship will be a key feature of the social policy agenda
- Whether UC and the social security system is able to adapt to accommodate the needs and circumstances of the 'new' users previously acknowledged
- Financial fallout from those who have fallen through the cracks in the CJRS in terms of eligibility, including the long-term consequences of diminished income
- Employers breaching the terms and conditions of the CJRS i.e. by requesting furloughed staff continue working, which is prohibited
- The economic aftershock from the pandemic will inevitably see a rise in redundancies. The general conduct of employers making staff redundant, especially furloughed staff will feature on the social policy agenda

- Possible adverse consequences attributed to the dismantling of the CJRS and households adjusting long-term to life on lower incomes are fertile ground for social policy issues. The Impact of 'income shocks' can be considered here. For instance, those who paid for holidays which they could not go on being refused refunds; money which is needed to cover essential expenditure. Households on low incomes and those just managing to maintain financial stability will be affected most
- The impact of Covid-19 on women. The consequences of the pandemic are 'gendered' to a considerable extent. By and large it has and will continue to be women who are obliged to fill the gaps in services such as childcare as restrictions have rolled back provision. Women also amongst those set to be most adversely affected by Covid-19 economic fallout
- Our evidence illustrates how restrictions have been a formidable barrier to EU citizens who require assistance to apply for Settled Status. The potential repercussions of delays to claims, etc. will likely feature in social policy feedback
- EU citizens are concentrated heavily in low paid insecure employment. Consequently, they will also be on the frontline of closures and restructuring as the long-term economic effects of Covid-19 materialise within these industries, social policy issues will be gathered from their experiences

