The Cost of Change – Welfare Reforms
Case Study – Luton Irish Forum

REPORT SUMMARY

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The Cost of Change: The Impact of Welfare Reforms on the Irish community in London was launched in July 2013. It was written in partnership with Irish in Britain, London Irish Centre and Lasa.

The report sets out to explore how the welfare reforms will affect an established migrant community – the Irish community in London. To date, most research examining the impact of welfare reforms has been undertaken by the Department for Work and Pensions, local authorities and housing associations. There has been no independent examination of the potential impact on any specific ethnic community.

The report uses actual case studies provided by agencies working with Irish people in London to bring to life the issues case workers will begin to see over the coming months. Based on this information it makes recommendations to policy-makers, caseworkers and claimants.

Although the case-studies are London based the findings can be applied across the country.

We asked Mary Fitzmaurice, Welfare Worker with Luton Irish Forum who spoke about their work around Welfare Reform issues in Luton at the event to share a non-London case-study.

Mary attaches great importance to the Forum’s membership of the Job Centre Plus Beds and Herts Customer Representative Group (CRG). She feels, from speaking with organisations in other areas, that the situation may not be exactly as in their area, and it is true that the situation in other areas may well vary with local circumstances. However the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has a page on local partnership opportunities where you may be able to find out about your own local situation. It also contains the contact information for the District Manager who manages local opportunities. The DWP site tells you that if there is no District Manager for your area you should contact the Manager for the closest area to you.

Mary has listed for us some of the many advantages accruing to the Luton Irish Forum through membership of their area CRG:

1. A list of telephone escalation numbers where they can raise problems/complaints at a management level and get fairly quick responses. This helps reduce the amount of time and work it takes to resolve issues.

2. Through the CRG they have been provided with a direct Pension Service contact for their area, who deals with unresolved issues.

3. The Pension Service also have a designated person who is collecting information regarding the ATOS Healthcare contract with the DWP and the forthcoming Personal Independent Payments (PIPs), and who meets with ATOS Healthcare representatives to discuss on-going issues. Luton Irish Forum have been able to forward complaints regarding ATOS services direct to this person (in this instance the Pension Service require actual cases and the Forum can provide these as they attend most medical examinations with the claimants and have received permission from these to pass on the details).

4. Through their contact at the Pension Service they have also been able to obtain free training on PIPs which they hosted at Luton Irish Forum premises, inviting many of the other agencies in the town to participate: Mary points out that their handling of this training opportunity was beneficial to the project in a number of ways: (a) it provided a major networking opportunity for the Forum; (b) the training won kudos for them with the Pension Service which was very
pleased at being able to reach so many organisations in one session, and Luton Irish Forum 
had facilitated this; (c) it also strengthening their working relationship with the Pension 
Service.

5. Mary also stresses the importance of regular attendance at quarterly CRG meetings, which 
she describes as “very productive”, continuing: “Many of the other advice agencies, local 
authorities, charities, support groups, etc., attend these meetings so it is a good forum at 
which to air issues, network etc. It is an ideal forum at which to bring forward on-going 
problems concerning the Employment Support Allowance (ESA) and/or the Job Seekers 
Allowance (JSA) as the other attendees will normally experience similar problems and there 
will be power in numbers. On-going issues raised at these meetings are taken on board by the 
District Manager and dealt with.”

6. She also stresses, in the context of the above points, that the District Manager for the area 
is very proactive.

Mary also draws attention to another important local organisation, Luton Action Against 
Poverty (LAAP). This is a group consisting of many organisations in the town who deal directly 
with the vulnerable (CAB, Luton Law Centre, Luton Rights, Age UK, and many more). It was set 
up by the local council and is hosted by the council’s Social Justice Department. It meets 
bimonthly to discuss concerns such as the changes to Housing Benefit, Discretionary Housing 
Allowance, Local Social Fund (replacing parts of Social Fund previously administered by central 
government – you can see two local examples here and here) and the Under Occupancy Tax 
(bedroom tax). The Forum have been invited by the council to feed into the setting up and on-
going management of the Local Social Fund, the administration of the Discretionary Housing 
Allowance and other initiatives. LAAP invite various organisations/bodies to meetings in order 
to provide information and receive feedback and lobby on various issues. From LAAP the 
Forum have a direct line into various departments within the local council at a managerial 
level. Through LAAP also they are a collection point and referral agency for the Food Bank.

Representing disabled clients undergoing tests to establish their qualification for social report 
or clients engaged on the DWP Work Programme also forms part of Luton Irish Forum’s 
programme:

1. As Mary has explained above (3) Forum workers support disabled clients by attending most 
ATOS Healthcare medicals – so as to ensure that the medical examiner is aware of all the 
health issues of a client, and their implications; and has carried out a full investigation so that 
all relevant matters are covered in depth. This can increase the chances of a correct decision at 
an early stage. However, if this does not happen, the evidence of the worker can be extremely 
beneficial when a case has to go to appeal and/or a complaint needs to be made regarding the 
medical examination/practitioner, when the Forum worker’s representation will carry weight.

2. Forum workers attend most Tribunal hearings as representation is vital for the vulnerable. 
Forum workers prepare written submissions to form part of the Appeal Papers. Good quality 
of representation at the First Tier Tribunal makes it much easier In a situation where a case 
needs to be taken to a higher level, for example to the Upper Tribunal under an error in law. 
“It is our opinion” says Mary, “that, in many cases, work put into a claim can be worthless if it 
gets to Tribunal and is lost because the client was unable to express themselves.”

3. It is for the reasons set out in the two previous paragraphs that Luton Irish Forum prioritises 
the needs of vulnerable clients over situations where, in the opinion of the agency, a claimant
is capable of attending without support, or has insufficient health issues to be eligible for benefit.

4. When required, the Forum has submitted written complaints to ATOS Healthcare with copies to DWP. This, Mary tells us, has been beneficial - as, in some cases, ATOS Healthcare medical reports have been disregarded because of their quality, and, unless complaints are made changes may not be forced upon the provider.

5. Where such are required, Luton Irish Forum also make complaints to Work Programme Providers, with copies to DWP. Says Mary, “We have had many cases where the Work Programme Provider has been making unacceptable demands on claimants and this has needed to be addressed. For example claimants on ESA in a Work Related Activity Group (WRAG) being forced to do job searches and apply for work – which are not obligatory activities for this group. As a result of making a number of complaints they now have direct contact with the manager of the local provider for the Work Programme and they can discuss cases they are concerned about. They often prevent sanctions being applied or at least reduce the risk of sanctions.

Mary’s overview of the situation is, “Welfare Reform is here to stay but we who work with the vulnerable need to make the new system work. We need to challenge what is wrong in the system and in this area there is strength in numbers. The work that we do here at Luton Irish Forum needs to be done everywhere. If challenges are not made and lobbying not carried out, nothing will change. The new system can work but fundamental changes need to be made to the parts which are causing problems and directly affecting the most vulnerable. We need to get large bodies on board such as the GP’s, mental health services, Social Workers, not just as individuals but as representative bodies.”