

# The welfare state is not about dependency: it is about opportunity

CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME

Helen O'Brien

**J**UST a week after the Chancellor announced a further £12 billion further cuts to the welfare budget, CSAN (Caritas Social Action Network) launched its report on the impact the past five years' of reform has had on the lives of vulnerable people here in the UK. Through the words of key workers and clients, *Caritas reports: the impact of welfare changes* stated that welfare changes and the delivery of this reform have pushed claimants and support staff to the edge of their capacity.

Originally intended to be a report that would investigate the impact of specific reforms, we quickly found that charities were dealing not only with the impact of legislative change, but also the culture, communication and processes of the welfare system that was making it increasingly difficult for clients to survive, let alone progress with their lives.

Travelling to our members Caritas Anchor House in east London, Father Hudson's Society project Brushstrokes Centre in Birmingham

and Nugent Care in Liverpool, as well as surveying the Directors of our member charities, we saw not only the acute need of people living in poverty but also the great work Catholic charities are doing to alleviate the challenges of hunger, isolation and mental health issues.

Amongst many different voices, one story resonated in particular: Christopher – not his real name – was in his early sixties and had been coming to Brushstrokes to use the foodbank and for advice on his benefits situation. He has a heart condition and was awaiting major surgery. When we met him, he told us that he suffered from anxiety caused by the financial stresses that had developed since his benefits stopped. He was upset and deeply anxious.

The interactions with the benefit system of many of the people who spoke to us sounded immensely complex, characterised by poor communications and bureaucracy. People are asked to provide proof already given and changes to their support are not efficiently communicated. As one of our CEOs

pointed out, "the system belongs to the decision-maker".

But, in the face of this, we found our charities responding with creativity and resilience, employing specialist posts to liaise with the DWP, working with other agencies or creating informal partnerships within their local communities. We heard stories of renewed dignity for those clients who were able to become volunteers themselves.

Amongst our five recommendations, as a result of this grassroots exploration, was the development of partnerships between local authorities and social action charities, including outreach visits and shared training between JobCentre Plus staff and local charities.

We all find security in a safety net that will support us in times of need and we foresee developing problems if the welfare system continues to distance itself from those it exists to support. We commend and celebrate the work of our charities, and look forward to working together where possible with the Government agencies, so that we may all strive for positive change in

the situation of those needing help.

■ Helen O'Brien is the Chef Executive of

CSAN (Caritas Social Action Network). Read the report on the CSAN website: [csan.org.uk](http://csan.org.uk)

A neglected society?

