Benefits in Wales: opportunities and challenges for social security devolution

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Wales is currently the only UK country to have extensive devolved powers but almost no competence for social security. An inquiry by the Senedd (Welsh Parliament) Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee in 2019 showed that there is now greater appetite for this to change than was the case during the review of the devolution settlement concluded in 2014. This webinar, which took place on 24 November 2020, aimed to lend some momentum to this conversation by exploring the difference social security devolution in Northern Ireland and Scotland has made to its most important stakeholders – people who use the system. The specific focus was on parallel studies of universal credit in Northern Ireland (primarily greater Belfast), led by Ruth Patrick (York) and Mark Simpson (Ulster), and in Glasgow, led by Sharon Wright (Glasgow) and Laura Robertson (Poverty Alliance) with Alasdair Steward (Glasgow), both funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation throughout 2019 – reports available at <https://www.jrf.org.uk/>.

Researchers and benefit claimants involved in the two studies outlined the extent of devolved social security competences in each country, how these powers have been used to put in place different payment patterns and some additional payments compared to England and Wales, and the impact on universal credit claimants. The key finding is that, while take-up of alternative payment patterns has been much lower in Scotland (where claimants have to opt in) than in Northern Ireland (where they are offered by default), both these and the additional payments can make a big difference to people’s ability to stretch their benefit income across the month. However, the devolutionary differences cannot overcome the basic problems associated with universal credit: inadequacy, the near-inevitability of starting a claim in debt because of the five-week wait for a first payment and the problems some people face with online claim management. The presentations helped inform an open discussion on how developments in Scotland and Northern Ireland might inform decisions in Wales on whether to seek devolved social security powers and what use might be made of those powers in the future. This had a strong focus on the finances and operational delivery of the country-specific features of universal credit and related benefits.

Like many a research seminar, the event was profoundly affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Originally planned to take place at the Senedd in Cardiff for a relatively small audience of MSs and delegates from the Welsh voluntary sector, in this case the forced move online brought real advantages. Participant numbers were much higher than would have been possible for a face-to-face event and included several Scottish Government and Department for Communities (Northern Ireland) officials, who had invaluable insights to offer during the open discussion. Money saved on travel and subsistence was used for the design and illustration of a briefing for attendees and a post-webinar report – the latter will be publicly available in the near future. The organiser would like to thank the other presenters as well as Naomi Stocks (Welsh Parliament), John Griffiths MS, Victoria Winckler (Bevan Foundation) and Rod Hick (Cardiff) for their assistance and contributions.