

Poverty and Coronavirus in Edinburgh

Interim Report – Summary



May 2020

Edinburgh Poverty Commission has connected with citizens and organisations across the city in the last month to assess the impact of Coronavirus on people living in poverty.

Evidence shows that huge numbers of people in the city have lost or are at risk of losing their livelihood as a result of this crisis. Many of those who have lost their job have never claimed out-of-work benefits, do not know where to get help, and are struggling with the delay in receiving Universal Credit payments. Organisations working to support people recognise this as a significant individual and collective trauma for the city.

Feedback indicates that too many employers are not taking up the UK Government's job retention scheme. Some have insufficient resilience to manage short term cash flow challenges posed by the crisis, but we have also heard testimony from people whose employers have simply assumed that it will be easier just to lay people off and recruit again when business picks up.

Rapid and compassionate steps taken by City of Edinburgh Council and the Scottish Government to provide security for those concerned about rent arrears, those in temporary accommodation and rough sleeping have been welcome. One challenge for the city now will be to respond to real concern from people who fear storing up debt during this period, or reverting to previous insecurity when we return to normal activity.

For those struggling to get by on a low income there are significant additional pressures to life in lockdown and the current crisis is exacerbating difficulties. While those comfortably off save money staying at home, the cost of living has risen significantly for those in poverty as they are unable to shop around for affordable food and they need heating on for longer. Loneliness and isolation, loss of independence, impact of furlough, reduced hours and unemployment, the stigma of claiming benefits and using foodbanks and managing conflict in relationships all contribute to the significant distress witnessed by organisations providing support in our communities.

The measures put in place to mitigate the worst effects of economic hardship by the UK and Scottish Governments and City of Edinburgh Council have been undeniably bold and focused on providing a lifeline to those who need help most. At the same time the response of voluntary, third sector, and community groups across the city has been overwhelming, with hundreds of groups working together to make sure food, medical supplies, support and advice reach the people who need help to stay afloat.

The picture that has emerged from talking to a range of organisations providing immediate support is not primarily one of a lack of food or resources to help during the lockdown but rather a continuing challenge of co-ordination. It seems likely that if you are already known to a local (statutory or third sector) organisation then you will be able to access food, connections, and a route to other support you might need.

We know, however, that even in normal circumstances people struggle to find support with all the issues which are relevant to them and there is concern for huge and increasing numbers experiencing hardship who are not connected to local support organisations – and do not know where to get help. To a lesser extent, there are also concerns over the potential for duplication of effort amongst a range of organisations. As we return to activity, resources to support people who have lost their jobs and are struggling to get by on drastically reduced incomes will continue to be needed on an unprecedented scale.

It is all the clearer now, following the experience of the last month, that solutions to end poverty will be built together, in connections and relationships and in shared humanity. We need to ensure that the growing understanding of shared hardship, respect and value for low paid key workers, and those instincts which many of us are witnessing in the reaching out of neighbours to connect and help in their community are harnessed and not allowed to recede. As we rebuild, we should redesign our economy and services, not on independent twin tracks but tied together around our core humanity and shared values which are perhaps more evident now than they have ever been. We need to build on the compassion we are witnessing every day to create a just transition towards a city that is effective in ending poverty.

We believe the holistic, enabling support for people where they live, based on trusted relationships should sit at the heart of the city's approach **now**, as we **return to activity** and as we **rebuild**. In particular:

We need to ensure that measures which have been put in place to help people stay afloat through the lockdown period are not lifted prematurely. We need continued commitment from Governments at all levels to make sure that supports in place now can be continued no matter what course this emergency takes.

We must lock in the gains which have been made in providing security for those in temporary accommodation and rough sleeping. Significant steps have been made during this emergency to provide lifelines for people facing the most severe forms of poverty, but the fundamental pressures of Edinburgh's housing system have not changed and without commitment of new resources it cannot be assumed that these gains can be sustained once this phase of the outbreak is over.

Employers have a responsibility like never before to look after their people. We need to **act now to support and in some cases pressure employers to take up the UK Government's Job Retention Scheme** to make sure it reaches and sustains as many workers as possible. The city's approach needs to engage fully with workplaces as well as communities, the third sector as well as core public services.

In rebuilding our economy following this emergency, **we also need employers to make the changes now that will enable people to return to jobs that are fair and secure.** This means leadership and commitment from Edinburgh's employers to make sure no one needs in this city needs to be paid below the living wage or in conditions that do not provide security of income.

We must resist allowing the UK Government to revert to previous practice on social security. **We must take bold action to ensure a decent income for all,** whether that is building on changes to Universal Credit and legacy benefits or considering more radical changes such as a Citizen's Basic Income.

In rebuilding, **we must ensure we create a fairer economy** where people providing vital services are valued appropriately and enabled to live a life free of poverty.

Most importantly, **we must plan now for the redesign of our systems and our cultures** to ensure that the right supports are always available in the places people live. This means developing a phased approach to shift funding, planning, delivery and measurement more strongly towards whole system approaches designed to build capability and wellbeing of individuals and communities.

Contact us



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