



Making universal basic income transformational for everyone ALLIANCE session at BIEN Congress 2021 Event report

Introduction

The Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) held their 20th Congress, digitally hosted in Glasgow¹, from the 18th to 21st of August 2021. BIEN is an organisation dedicated to raising awareness and promoting discussion around the concept of a Basic Income (BI). Their Annual Congress brings together knowledge, expertise, and activists from around the world to discuss and advance the cause of a BI.

As part of the Congress, the Health and Social Care Academy (the Academy) hosted a session on the 19th of August, with approximately 40 attendees, entitled 'Making universal basic income transformational for everyone.' The Academy is a programme of the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE), aiming to promote transformational change within health and social care, underpinned by the 'Five Provocations for the Future of Health and Social Care'².

The purpose of the session was to explore how universal basic income (UBI) can be transformational and provided space to reflect on the barriers which could prevent UBI from being transformational for disabled people, people living with long term health conditions and unpaid carers.

The event was chaired by Jamie Cooke, Head of RSA (Royal Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce) Scotland, who in his opening remarks stated if BI is an abstract policy that doesn't involve real people and their breadth of experience, it'll be a policy that fails. He therefore believed as many people as possible need to be involved in shaping the development of a UBI.

Panel contributions

The session opened with contributions from a panel of speakers:

- Rob Gowans, Policy and Public Affairs Manager (the ALLIANCE)
- Susie Fitton, Policy Officer (Inclusion Scotland)
- Fiona Collie, Policy and Public Affairs Manager (Carers Scotland)

¹ [BIEN Congress 2021 website](#)

² [Five Provocations, ALLIANCE website](#)

- Lynn Williams, Unpaid Carer

Rob Gowans (the ALLIANCE)

BI forms part of two different areas of ALLIANCE work. The first is the Health and Social Care Academy, which is rooted in principles referred to as the 'Five Provocations'. The Five Provocations require new and different ways of thinking. One of those provocations, 'Emphasising Humanity', highlights the need for systems and structures to value equality, individuals' talents and skills and their ability to flourish. Rob highlighted that the Academy previously published a provocation paper³ which explored how BI could transform the relationship between disabled people, people living with long term conditions, and unpaid carers with the state. Work is ongoing to reissue an updated version of this paper.

The other area is policy activity to shape Scotland's social security system, which is complicated by a unique mix of taxes and entitlements split between the UK and Scottish Governments. As part of this the ALLIANCE has been working with partners in the Scottish Campaign on Rights to Social Security (SCoRSS) on a rights based system, as outlined in their 'Beyond a Safe and Secure Transition' report⁴. Rob argued there is a pressing need for world leading rights based social security system for disabled people.

Rob emphasised it was important that even if there was a BI or broad reform of social security, continued disability assistance would be required to provide adequate support. Disabled people generally need more support to flourish than their abled counterparts.

Any reforms should be coproduced with disabled people, as well as others most likely to be impacted, including people with long term conditions and unpaid carers. However, that involvement needs to be across the whole social security system, not just limited to disability or carer specific entitlements.

Susie Fitton (Inclusion Scotland)

Susie from Inclusion Scotland stated they are still in the process of developing a stated position on BI and will need to survey their membership. In 2019 they held an event and published a discussion paper on the topic, 'Basic Income: Friend or Foe?', to consider some of the key issues. Discussion revealed a split opinion between support and scepticism.

The role of Inclusion Scotland has been to try and ensure that disabled people are included in discussions around BI. This is seen as particularly important as society emerges from the pandemic, during which we have seen greater calls for radical reforms to income distribution. Given the heavier impact of the pandemic on disabled people, their voices must be heard.

³ [Citizen's Basic Income Provocation Paper, ALLIANCE website.](#)

⁴ [Beyond a Safe and Secure Transition, Citizens Advice Scotland website.](#)

Susie suggested that at the most fundamental level, the vision of BI where paid and unpaid work are put on an equal footing and everyone is valued can be appealing. However, some fear BI may be insufficient to help disabled people in greatest need whilst being a generous gift to people who don't need it. Many feel that reforms to the current system, removing eligibility criteria and means testing, would be more advantageous for disabled people.

In addition, disabled people are more likely to be excluded from the labour market and to be reliant on social security for some or all of their income. Living costs for disabled people are also £632 per month higher on average, but with many facing costs of more than £1000 extra per month. There are concerns that a universal approach to social security may lead to a lower level of financial support than at present.

Susie questioned if, as some advocates of BI suggest, housing and disability should remain separate, wouldn't that still result in assessments and conditionality, thus detracting from the utopian nature of the proposal? The tax take for a sufficient BI for disabled people may be too high for it to be tenable or garner wider public support.

Fiona Collie (Carers Scotland)

Carers Scotland is an organisation led by and for unpaid carers. They estimated that pre-pandemic there were around 700,000 unpaid carers in Scotland, which rose to as many as 1.1 million as a result of the pandemic. One in seven workers have a caring role, and provision of care is massively gendered, with women providing the bulk of the work.

Fiona stated the role played by carers is "absolutely essential" and enables people to live independently – the cost of replacing unpaid carers with paid work would be over £10 billion per year. That's comparable to the healthcare budget, but support for carers isn't commensurate to that. Care has a huge impact on both physical and mental health, with carers reporting almost double the level of ill-health than the general population.

We heard that only around half of carers are in paid work, and the number of people leaving work to care has been increasing. This has both personal costs, and costs to the social security system and people providing care face more poverty.

BI offers the potential to better support carers, for example by addressing stigma and countering the 'shirkers versus strivers' narrative. Fiona suggested that too much of the focus of media and society is on fraud, and not that around 10% of the total cost of the welfare system goes unclaimed by those eligible for support. It has become less of a safety net and more of a poverty net, that traps people rather than lifting them up.

A BI could better include carers in their communities and help to maintain a minimum standard of living. For example, it could increase ability to socialise and have leisure

time. Similarly, it could enable carers to engage in the labour market if they wanted, but without compelling them to do so if they don't.

The big challenge with BI is the universality, however. It may not take into account the costs of caring. Fiona suggested there may be some sense to retaining carers allowance, though not in its current form, even with a basic income. Fiona concluded by adding it is important to be aware of potential pitfalls as well.

Lynn Williams (Unpaid Carer)

Lynn echoed many of Fiona's remarks. She gave up work in 2016 and lost a good salary, which was replaced with much lower carers allowance. Current system leads to both under and unemployment of carers. As with care, the effect of the pandemic is heavily gendered, impacting women more.

The pressures on social care and social security were huge before the pandemic and have only been magnified by it. A sense that Scotland is progressive isn't really reflected in experiences on the ground. The pandemic has however changed perspectives and made policies like BI seem more urgent, as well as showing we can do complex and difficult things. Lynn stated "the idea that BI is too hard doesn't wash anymore."

Where there's political will, we can do something in Scotland, but Lynn was worried the will wasn't there. For example, work has started on a minimum income guarantee, but it's starting from a perspective of affordability rather than outcomes. Further, for a BI to be transformational, it needs to be met by investment in public services. The Independent Review of Adult Social Care was welcome, but other areas of society are also in need of reform.

Lynn emphasised that Scotland isn't alone in facing these challenges and there is a lack of joined up policymaking here. For example, gains from a BI could be wiped out by social care charges if those aren't abolished. Social security powers have been devolved to Scotland, but the opportunity to revise eligibility criteria hasn't been taken. Lynn felt that a decision has been taken to live with COVID-19, despite the impact on disabled people and carers, and that was felt to indicate a valuing of business and money over people and wellbeing.

All that said, BI offers a bit of hope, as something that says you are valued regardless of who you are or what you do.

Question and answer session

Before moving to questions, the chair noted the importance of emphasising humanity had come through from all speakers, as well as BI's potential for both benefit and disbenefit. He also reflected that whilst the BI movement often uses well-meaning rhetoric, it may not always be informed by lived experience. Questions were then invited from the audience.

Income and public services

The first question related to how we can find the balance between the role of income and that of other services on people's lives.

Rob felt some of the discussion can put universal basic income in opposition to universal basic services, when they can in fact be complementary. The best way to improve lives is to increase incomes and lower costs, so provision of services that help to tackle issues such as higher energy and travel costs in rural areas would help in that aim.

Fiona agreed and added it was also important to get the right balance between social care and health services. Access to human rights is also crucial and a sufficient income, even if via BI, is only part of that. Quality services must be available when people need them, and some of those need to be specifically targeted for carers and disabled people.

Rhetoric

The second question raised the issue of the negative rhetoric around social security and disability, and asked whether there were creative ways to respond to and challenge that rhetoric.

Lynn expressed that there are divisions even amongst carers on this rhetoric. Many still tend to think of paid work as the only route out of poverty, which she felt wasn't right. When the feasibility study was done, people were willing to engage with and explore the concept of BI, and the work of the RSA, for example, has been raising the profile of BI and getting people talking about it more. A focus on the contribution of carers and care work could help emphasise the huge value of what they do, and that might help shift views.

Fiona expressed her deep horror at the "poverty porn" TV that was dressed up as entertainment whilst massively contributing to stigma. But she also felt entertainment and culture can shift the narrative, so it could equally be used to move in the other direction too. People don't really understand caring until they have to start doing it, so communicating the realities could help. Using TV would also help to broaden the sharing of experiences to the wider population, and out of closed spaces where people already tend to agree with one another.

The chair added there had been discussion in Kilmarnock, which was where the TV show 'The Scheme' had been filmed, about a local basic income pilot targeting the same area.

Costs of disability

The final question related to the impact of the pandemic.

Lynn raised the issue of "pandemic penalties". The costs of disability are substantial in themselves, and then those were compounded by aspects of the pandemic such as the costs of getting food delivered and additional heating whilst spending more time at home. Additionally, for carers who were doing paid work, working from home

has reduced the separation between their paid work and their caring role, which has increased stress.

For Susie, it was important to think about why a BI alone would not be enough. Around 30% of disabled people who needed social care support had it reduced or stopped completely in the early lockdown. Many were left in desperate situations like having to sleep in their wheelchairs or being unable to make meals. In that sense, the pandemic supercharged existing inequality. It was felt income alone isn't sufficient and there needs to be consideration for services and increasing public support for social care.

Following the questions, the chair summarised the contents of the day's discussion, and reflected that the event had discussed many of the benefits and transformational aspects of BI, but it was clear that was just part of the picture and can't be considered in isolation. He concluded that human rights would need to be at the heart of its development.

About the ALLIANCE

The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE) is the national third sector intermediary for a range of health and social care organisations. We have a growing membership of over 3,000 national and local third sector organisations, associates in the statutory and private sectors, disabled people, people living with long term conditions and unpaid carers. Many NHS Boards, Health and Social Care Partnerships, Medical Practices, Third Sector Interfaces, Libraries and Access Panels are also members.

The ALLIANCE is a strategic partner of the Scottish Government and has close working relationships, several of which are underpinned by Memorandum of Understanding, with many national NHS Boards, academic institutions and key organisations spanning health, social care, housing and digital technology.

Our vision is for a Scotland where people of all ages who are disabled or living with long term conditions, and unpaid carers, have a strong voice and enjoy their right to live well, as equal and active citizens, free from discrimination, with support and services that put them at the centre.

The ALLIANCE has three core aims; we seek to:

- Ensure people are at the centre, that their voices, expertise and rights drive policy and sit at the heart of design, delivery and improvement of support and services.
- Support transformational change, towards approaches that work with individual and community assets, helping people to stay well, supporting human rights, self management, co-production and independent living.

- Champion and support the third sector as a vital strategic and delivery partner and foster better cross-sector understanding and partnership.

About the Academy

The Health and Social Care Academy (the Academy) is an ALLIANCE programme that helps drive positive and radical change in Scotland's health and social care, through the voice of disabled people, people living with long term conditions, and unpaid carers. The Academy's 'Five Provocations for the Future of Health and Social Care' was created based on the vision from the Think Tank of Scottish senior leaders from across the public sector, third and independent sector leaders, and people who use health and social care services.

Phone: 0141 404 0231

Email: info@alliance-scotland.org.uk

Twitter: @ALLIANCEscot

Website: www.alliance-scotland.org.uk

Address: Venlaw Building, 349 Bath Street, Glasgow, G2 4AA