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HOLYROOD EVENTS

THE WELFARE REFORM BILL 2009 WHAT WILL IT MEAN FOR SCOTLAND

MAY 09

A MENTAL HEALTH PERSPECTIVE

Hello

My name is Graham Morgan. I work with the Highland users group or HUG for short.

Our job is to represent the views of people with a mental illness in the Highlands and to reduce stigma and discrimination.

It is an honour to talk at this conference but I do feel a bit of a fraud. I have worked for the last 18 years and have only spent about three years of my life on benefits. However I spend all of my working hours with our members who all have a mental illness. I would guess that about 95% of the people I work with are on benefits, mainly incapacity benefit. I hope that through this knowledge I can represent the fears and views of those friends of mine who are undoubtedly going to be affected by welfare reform.

HUG is a project of:  Highland Community Care Forum
the voice of users and carers

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I could have researched this subject in much more detail but I have chosen to talk from my own ignorance and the ignorance of the people I live much of my life with and hopefully then it will become more real.

At every meeting for the last couple of years our members have been worrying about the changes that are coming. They look at the UK governments statement that they want a million of us off of benefit and back into work with blank incomprehension. There's this confused breathless statement of:

“So you want me to work do you? And how am I to do that? Where are the jobs that we will walk into ? How am I to work when for much of the time I can't face walking out the front door? When my greatest achievement recently has been to actually reach a drop in centres and have a friendly conversation? How do you expect me who hasn't worked for year on year to pick myself up and find the skill the confidence and the health to change my life around and work?” and you say that if you think I can actually work despite being ill then my benefits eventually will be cut. How am I to manage on even less money? And why is it that the poorest of us face the biggest losses in the name of a healthy economy?”

Yes, I don't understand and my friends don't understand and they are very frightened and very afraid of the future and the reassurances they are given seem like the skim of a very thin veneer that will fall away in no time at all.

We are suspicious and afraid and very worried and it seems like every time we open the paper or turn on the telly there is another story about benefit fraud and the cheats who seem to have dedicated their lives to taking money from the hardworking population just so they can live in idle luxury and I am so confused here because when I look at my friends I see the hurt and the guilt and you know deep in your heart that this cruel publicity is nothing like the life of most of the people that I know and admire in their struggle with life.

It makes me very very angry to see the glee with which a group of vulnerable and oppressed people are victimised and pilloried it just, how do I explain it? It makes me so angry to see good and decent people turned into ogres.

I knew I'd do this! I'm on a rant!

Do you know how much medicals are dreaded by our members? These regular reviews turn peoples hearts over in dismay as their entire future seems to be being judged by a faceless person they have never met before and who seems determined to catch them out in how ill they really are.

Do you know what it is like to adjust to the sudden drop in a tiny income when with almost no notice your benefits are cut? There you are, struggling but managing,

and then what has taken years to adapt to and live on disappears and the belt tightens again.

Have you any idea what it is like to be asked to go back to work, when you know that however good our anti discrimination legislation is that stigma and suspicion and deeply unhealthy practices are routine in the work place? You know, the sort of stress and anxiety that made our members get ill in the first place and yet despite this we are asked back into work.

I have to stop the anger and the ranting because those words are so well known and so predictable.

What I want to talk about are two themes: one is the difficulty of assessment when we are ill and the other is the ways in which contribution is measured.

I'll use myself as an example. I have a diagnosis of schizophrenia and at present I am on the maximum recommended dose of antipsychotic medication, I am also on medication for depression and have an addiction problem. Six months ago I was just days away from being put on a compulsory treatment order so unmanageable had my condition become. In many ways if I wished, with this background, it would be easy to get myself signed up to a whole raft of benefits, you know, become just a little less confident a little less tidy, slightly less organised, a little freer with the weird ideas I often have and there I would be, "sitting pretty" as some would say. And yet I am in work and fully intend to stay working I am living proof of all the statements that work is good for you and that if only we could, we would work.

I am lucky, I have a superb workplace, when I am ill I am very ill but in between times I tend to stay very well. I have a lifestyle and support from friends and family that keep my world structured, happy and well able to work and contribute that's me lucky lucky me! I wish my friends were so lucky.

When I spent my three years on benefits, it didn't even occur to me that I could get any health related benefits but there was no way that I could work. In those days I had a diagnosis of personality disorder which hardly even counted as an illness. At that time my world was a dark, sad and lonely place. It was a great struggle to speak, it was hard to get out of bed everything was hard to do except the being miserable bit the easy bit was razor blades and the soft skin of the insides of my wrists, the hard bits were paying the bills or doing anything sensible and organised. Getting it together to work was beyond my comprehension.

I had many people who were happy to tell me to pull myself together and stop scrounging off the state but it made no difference. Sticking me in work would have been a recipe for breakdown.

And so I pause, imagine I am being assessed today , frequent psychotic episodes and clinical depression then, yup, I am sure that it wouldn't be that difficult to get benefits and then imagine my younger self is being assessed ; little sign of illness but says he's miserable and can't work I think nowadays I would be packed off to work as soon as the words left my lips and that's my point: being fit for work depends on so much more than the clinical symptoms, it depends on your attitude, your wellbeing, your support structures, the culture you are a part of and when we see all this, when we acknowledge that despair whether it is a formal illness or a state of being can stop you working then we have to think what this is all about and why it is doctors at all who assess our ability to work.

So, first of all, being capable and willing to work is very much a state of mind and not being in the state of mind that allows you to work needs to be acknowledged and catered for with humanity.

Secondly, why all this emphasis on work as the measure of our value and worth? Is the only way in which we contribute to be measured by the wage that we are paid?

I often think that despite my desperate desire to work and to contribute in this way that when I sit down and look back on my life it will be family and friends and the society that I am part of that I will remember most.

In my mind a hug that takes away the unease of a horrible day, a text to cheer someone up, making someones tea for them, washing their clothes, writing a love letter, listening to a friend read a poem. Being there for someone whose heart is filled with sadness. Having a conversation with someone who hasn't spoken to another person in ages, taking a neighbours dog for a walk, building a piece of furniture cooking a meal for a crowd of friends , picking up the phone to talk to family, making a garden glow with the health of a host of flowers. All these things are the things that stick in our memories. These are the measure of how we contribute to society. These are the capital that make up our culture and none of them are work and none of them are rewarded with money but without them we would all collapse and the joy of our world would be lost and the point of work lose all its meaning. So why are we caught on getting everyone into work.

Why can't we celebrate the host of ways everyone contributes to our world? Some of us are lucky enough to get paid for our contribution but many of us contribute to the community we are a part of every day for no particular reward. We may do it by being pleasant to those around us, by allowing someone the privilege of looking after us, by giving someone a kiss or more formally through voluntary work. So for all those people who contribute despite being ill and sad for all those who contribute by sharing their humanity with us why is it so desperately important to get them into paid work? It may be great to make sure that the shops shelves

look great for the customers to buy their weekly groceries but it is also just as great to bring up a child well, to look after a partner and to celebrate friends and the host of acquaintances of our community. It is great to celebrate our common humanity and the gift we give the world by just managing to live rather than to boil everything down to the profit we can make for a business or the savings we can create by putting people into work that they possibly can't manage or don't want. Yes, for those of us that want to work, give us every opportunity to do so but don't demonise those of us who, for whatever reason, are no longer able to work.

I'll finish with a couple of examples to rid myself at the indignation I feel about the way all this reform is going.

In HUG we provide mental health awareness training to all sorts of people. This training relies on a group of HUG volunteers to have any chance of success. It is always evaluated excellently. Periodically we ask these volunteers who are nearly all unemployed if we should pay them and they always say no and one of the reasons they give is that they don't want to demean what they do by putting a price on what they give. We have people who travel for six hours to do work with us, they are also on benefits and do not claim any expenses because they would prefer the money stayed with HUG. We have people who get paid £300 pound a day for work they have been commissioned to do but because the benefits system is so inflexible they don't take the money instead they do the work and donate it to us.

These are the frauds and the cheats and the idle layabouts who if they just got off their arses could contribute properly to society. This is the reason I am so fed up with welfare reform.

I'll finish by thanking the hug members on whose behalf I spoke. Their desire to change the world and make it a better place for other people is what inspires me. The fact that they speak out and give of themselves daily despite horrendous lives and sometimes terrible poverty are the reason I have hope and know that changing our world means a great deal more than making everyone work. That is just silliness

Thank you.