



PRACTICE REPORT

**An exploration of the Wallsend Children's Community's Emergency
Response Grant as an Emerging Necessity**

Project Team

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Dated: 30 November 2022

Introduction

The effect of Covid-19 (and subsequent national lockdowns) has been felt across the Globe on a Macro level with organisations such as the World Health Organisation advising Nations; to the Micro level of individuals working from home and keeping a social distance. This research explores and discusses what led families to apply for Emergency Response Grants (ERGs) from the Wallsend Children's Community (WCC), funded by Save the Children. By using a biographical interview approach producing rich data, common themes became acutely prominent using thematic analysis. Such themes identified were: Indirect Domestic Abuse (DA), Child Disability and Inflation. All of which were found to be foundational upon a subtheme of insufficient welfare support.

Literature Review

At the time of writing, whilst the rest of the British nation has benefitted from a longer life expectancy, the region of the Northeast of England has plateaued. As it stands, those who live in the Northeast are expected to live approximately two years less than that of the rest of the country (Corris et al, 2020). Furthermore, the widening of the life expectancy gap between areas of affluence and deprivation have consequently highlighted trends of higher health inequalities across the region, increasing preventable morbidity and Infant mortality rates (IMR's). Health inequalities are predominantly linked with measures of socioeconomic status (Abel et al, 2012: Marmot, 2020: McCartney et al, 2019). The correlation between higher socioeconomic status and better health subsequently predetermines those who live in impoverished areas to face an economic disadvantage, which continues through generations (Baker, 2014). In effect, children growing up in deprivation are more at risk of developing mental health issues, social problems, obtaining lower educational achievements, being exposed to violence and many other risk factors (Deighton et al, 2019; Houtepen et al, 2020; Foster et al, 2007: McLoyd et al, 2009: Santiago et al, 2011).

According to national statistics, the level of absolute poverty for children has remained stable at 17% between 2019 and 2020. However, the level of relative poverty has risen from 20% to 23% for children nationally (DWP 2021). Relative poverty is defined as the status of a family receiving insufficient income to meet a society's average living standard, which has been observed to have the most significant impact in the Northeast compared to any other region in the UK in recent years (Jenson, 2010; Northeast Child Poverty Commission, 2021). Sadly, this failure to meet the requirements of eradicating child poverty by 2020 outlined in the Child Poverty Act 2010 (as set out by the previous Labour Government) has been consistently subjected to amendment, thus impacting the expected outcome. Most significantly, these amendments came in the form of recommendations from the Department of Work and Pensions as the focus became less about those children living in poverty and more about children living in workless and troubled families, apparently to tackle the 'root cause' of children in poverty (DWP, 2017). This is most notably emphasised in the *Improving Lives Helping Workless Families* report which stated, "just how stark the difference is between outcomes for children in workless families and those in lower-income working families", stated in 'the case for change' (DWP, 2017: 4). Furthermore, this was followed by highlighting troubled families, parental conflict and dependency as the primary areas to tackle in the 'next steps for action'. Conversely, the austerity measures enacted by the coalition government from 2010 have seen increasing reforms, cuts, capping of benefits, and reductions to tax

benefits which have progressively placed families in a precarious financial paradox (Jupp, 2017).

Further to austerity measures and cuts to local governments causing reduced funding for children and young people's services, there has been the unprecedented implications of Covid-19 and its impact on service provision. The ensuing Government's Lockdown initiative to reduce the effects of Covid-19, saw approximately seven million households encountering a substantial loss to their earned income (Round et al, 2020). The Government's response to support those who were unable to continue working resulted in a grant for 80% of monthly income for those who were furloughed and a capped grant of trading profits for the self-employed, subsequently causing a large proportion of people to fall back on to an already flailing welfare system. A welfare system, which has gradually been moving away from the six separately administered 'legacy benefits' such as job seekers allowance, to a more streamlined Universal Credit (UC) system since the Welfare Reform Act 2012. The criticisms of the system are vast in their findings, suggesting the 'disability-based discrimination' (Disability Rights UK, 2012), delayed access to funds (Cheetham et al, 2019), along with conditionality and punitive actions placed by the system for defaulting on protocol being considered as a type of 'social abuse' by Wright et al, (2020). Subsequently, this coincides with the uplift of £20 a week top up of UC being given to those already on UC or who had newly found themselves jobless, and *not* those who were on any legacy benefits (Machin, 2021).

The impact on families from the lockdown initiative meant that approximately 16,637,000 people claiming benefits in 2019 (not including child support or state pension), were left without the benefit of the uplift (DWP, 2020). As such, those both on legacy benefits and the new UC are likely to be on low income and less able to cushion the blow of any unexpected expenses, such as a 20% loss of pay and/or the increased expenses of home schooling (JRF, 2022). Furthermore, single parent families, larger families with three or more children, and ethnic minority groups such as Pakistani or Bangladeshi families are more likely to be subjected to higher poverty rates compared to their white and/or cohabiting counterparts. Reasons for such disparities vary from simply having the benefit of two incomes, and for others, restricted access to child benefit for more than two children (DWP, 2021; JRF, 2022). However, for BAME communities (Black and Ethnic minorities), the pandemic reflected the inequalities within the social determinants of health, predisposing those in densely populated areas of deprivation to higher covid-related mortality rates (Oto et al, 2020). Nevertheless, with the decreasing levels of mortality rates due to the measures enacted by the government and subsequent development of the vaccine, restrictions have slowly lifted, bringing some sense of normality. However, with the return to pre-covid life, people are left with the prospect of being back to insecure employment with zero-hour contracts and cuts to UC payments which coincided with energy increases (NACAB 2021).

During the lockdown not only was a financial strain hitting families, but also the stresses of the constraints of daily life working from home and/or home-schooling children. Whilst gender has a large role to play in domestic abuse with a third of women suffering it at some point in their lives; socioeconomic factors are closely correlated with a high prevalence of domestic abuse (Gulati & Kelly, 2020). Poverty and homelessness are such factors however, when combined with the Covid-19 restrictions making freedom of movement difficult, the

risk of encountering DA increased substantially (Van Gelder et al, 2020). Subsequently, calls for help increased by 25% as many more victims found themselves in social isolation, undergoing increased surveillance at home, and an increased risk of depression whilst being unable to escape the abusive environment, hindered further by the reduced health services available (Usher et al, 2020). Consequently, due to growing concerns for victims' safety, the World Health Organisation and the UK Government enacted a safety measure of supplying emergency shelter for those fleeing, alongside screenings for domestic abuse at Covid-19 testing sites (Anurudran et al, 2020).

Adapted protocols improved accessibility to certain domestic abuse services which included telephone consultations and remote hearings. However, whilst this overcame some challenges of face-to-face meetings, issues of safety arose with clients not having opportunities to talk without risk of intrusion (Riddell & Haighton, 2020). Likewise, alongside women's refuges within the Northeast declining to take in new clients, many other services were forced to close their doors resulting in many families who relied on Health and Social Care services to go without appropriate access to resources (Riddell & Haighton, 2020; Crawley et al, 2020). Additionally, the restrictions of health and social care services meant that families of children with learning disabilities faced withdrawn support in outpatient assessments, delayed support plans and closure of respite care (Crawley et al, 2020). The reduced services and funding subsequently placed struggling families with an increased burden economically, but also contributed to children particularly vulnerable children, at increased risk of facing detriment to mental and physical wellbeing (Van Lancker and Parolin, 2020).

The Emergency Response Grant

Funding was made available by Save the Children, during the pandemic to provide Emergency Response Grants (ERG) of £340 per family for those in need who had children under the age of six. A total of 355 grants were distributed through approximately ten referral partners, including schools, health visitors, domestic abuse services and family support services. Surveys were completed with referrers by the WCC, independently of this research, to understand the reasoning behind the need for ERGs.

WCC commissioned this extended piece of research to understand, in more depth some of the stories behind these experiences. Findings from the WCC surveys were not shared with this research until the themes of this report were established. Whilst the themes were independent of the surveys, they did share similarities which are presented in the findings of this report.

Study Design

The research undertaken utilised a qualitative biographical narrative method (Wengraf, 2011), asking participants to tell the story of their lived experiences. The study carried out a three-phase interview process: Stage one and two took place in one face-to-face sitting and stage three took place after initial analysis. The initial stage began with an open question encouraging a narrative biographical account, the second stage consisted of a semi-structured interview based on issues arising from the biography and the final stage had been used for clarification purposes in the form of semi structured interviews. The intention in using this

approach was to give participants the opportunity to identify the key parts of their story – prior findings were not shared with them, thus the themes that emerged were independent of the initial survey.

The findings were recorded, transcribed and analysed by process of thematic analysis. Once themes became prevalent through the identification of reoccurring patterns and significant events, they were compiled and synthesised with the literature and the WCC's reported statistics of ERG allocations.

Ethical Approval

The study received ethical approval from the University of Sunderland ethics committee on 11th August 2021. All participants provided informed consent to all three stages prior to the commencement of stage one interview. To protect the participants and maintain their confidentiality, all names have been changed and any identifying information (e.g. referrer information) has been removed.

Sample

The study used convenience purposive sampling to identify potential participants through an invitation poster (Bryman, 2012). The poster was placed within ten partners local to Wallsend which acted as referrers for the ERG. The participants who self-identified as being in receipt of the ERG were invited to contact the researcher at their discretion. At the start of this research there were 283 grants allocated which increased to a total of 355 by the conclusion of participant recruitment. Out of the 355 grants allocated to families in need, five participants responded to the invitation, providing rich data, to perform a pilot study, investigating the stories behind the applicants.

Summary of Participants		Frequency
Gender		
	Female	4
	Male	1
Ethnicity		
	White British	4
	Black African	1
Age		
	18-24	0
	25-34	2
	35-44	3
	45-54 +	0
Income		
	-10K	1
	10-24K	2
	25-49K	2
	50-99K +	0
Education		
	GCSE	0
	NVQ	4
	A-LEVEL and above	1

Relationship Status	
Single	1
Cohabiting	2
Married/Civil Partnership	2

Table 1: Summary of Participants

Findings

Theme 1: Indirect Domestic Abuse

From the findings, domestic abuse had been the most prevalent event to occur in the participants' life stories. The impact of this whilst not directly the cause for the need for the ERG, each interrelated with events leading up to the necessity for it. In 4/5 cases domestic abuse was mentioned as a significant impact in their life stories. In most cases the outcome of surviving the domestic abuse meant that nearly all participants had to flee their home and relocate at some point in their life. This occurred not just on a local level but on a global level, with one participant seeking refuge in the UK from Nigeria.

bringing them here to live a life of poverty was hard but then I had to choose between staying here letting my children grow in a home you know that is not toxic [...] so that they can experience love and know what that was. I had to choose between that and so yes I chose to stay (Kira)

The notion of fleeing from domestic abuse was echoed by all bar one of the participants from the study. For one participant, the abuse occurred after becoming pregnant as illustrated by Louise, "[I] fell pregnant at 19, as soon as he found out I was pregnant, he had me head kicked in" and again on a separate occasion "then he started kicking the living daylights out of me when I was pregnant and everything and he kind of made out it was my fault". Often the participants indicated the need to flee had been the last resort with many of the women staying with their partners for years despite the abuse. One participant stated "I was with him for about 9 years... I suffered a lot of domestic abuse, but the first three years, it wasn't too bad" (Lexi). In some cases, the cycle would repeat itself with women often finding themselves in another similar relationship. However, due to the circumstances reminiscent of domestic abuse such as isolation from family members and exploitation (Usher et al, 2020), participants had lost their independence which is illustrated by one participant stating "I gave up my life ... I gave up everything. I gave up my job, my house, everything" (Lexi).

The impact of Covid-19, increasing social isolation, reduced services and loss of independence meant that displaced mothers found themselves being made homeless, starting from scratch or struggling financially during the pandemic. This is demonstrated by the following quotes:

he got in touch with the Council and the Council had said we had to move.... I was starting to find myself again and start to get things, you know, like back to normal for the children and then we had the bombshell of being made homeless (Lexi).

...we are just being granted our status in the country here and so we had to start from scratch it was like starting our life from the beginning... we didn't live in our own house so to say we stayed in a government accommodation so every piece of furniture in that house was theirs I was not allowed to bring anything else into the house that belonged to me apart from the clothes (Kira).

As such, mothers who found themselves in this situation were also more likely to have more than one child which is suggested by the DWP (2021), to increase the likelihood of predisposing families to a disadvantage and impoverished environment. Furthermore, the experience undergone by Kira is indicative of the literature finding ethnic minority groups more at risk of facing poverty (JRF, 2022). That said, each of the participants found themselves having to rely on third sector aid to make living environments a little more comfortable whether that be from the Church to supply clothing, the schools to supply lunches or Organisations to supply financial help for electric.

Theme 2: Child Disability

Of the participants, 4/5 have a child with some form of disability/learning difficulty which they felt had contributed to the need for extra financial help. Families mentioned the increasing costs which are not met by the UK's welfare system prior to Covid-19, as illustrated by one participant (Kira) who stated "The Home Office gave us some money weekly which obviously didn't do anything because having a child with special needs means you have to spend more"; which subsequently worsened since the lockdown despite the £20 uplift. Furthermore, whilst two of those families were unable to work due to care commitments or immigration restrictions, the remaining two were forced into unemployment due to the Covid-19 disruptions. This is demonstrated by Louise and Vera in the following statements:

You could get the £500 off the Council if you had stopped working. So when I first got it and had to self isolate, they won't let me have it because I haven't had enough [self-employment] books from the previous year. When I put in for it again and they said no by the third time I was on the phone going 'Are you having a [Laugh] bubble?' ... I had to stop working for the lockdown. Another lockdown, but I couldn't get any help off the government because it hadn't been in business long enough. It was the first year trading. (Louise)

He's been looking, he's been applying for the driver and delivery but there's nothing out there he lost his job through the pandemic from [company] he got made redundant... the pandemic hit and they contacted him in the April ... and said there was no more work for him and they had to let some drivers go and he was one of the best drivers always in on time and went everywhere they asked him to go but yeah. (Vera)

In contrast to the 'case for change' created to tackle 'joblessness' as the root cause for poverty, each family found themselves with at least one parent unable to work due to increased responsibility which comes with caring for a child who needs extra care, or unwillingly forced into the position of unemployment (DWP, 2017). Furthermore, families with children who had been receiving legacy benefits prior to the pandemic were also not part of the demographic who received the uplift, supporting the notion of 'social abuse' as

suggested by Wright et al, (2020). The WCC report (Figure 1.0), identified 81 families in receipt of child tax credit out of 355 who applied for the ERG between May 2020 to September 2022. As child tax credit is a legacy benefit becoming replaced by Universal credit, this would imply that nearly a quarter (22.8%) of families applying for help did not receive any uplift during the crisis of the pandemic.

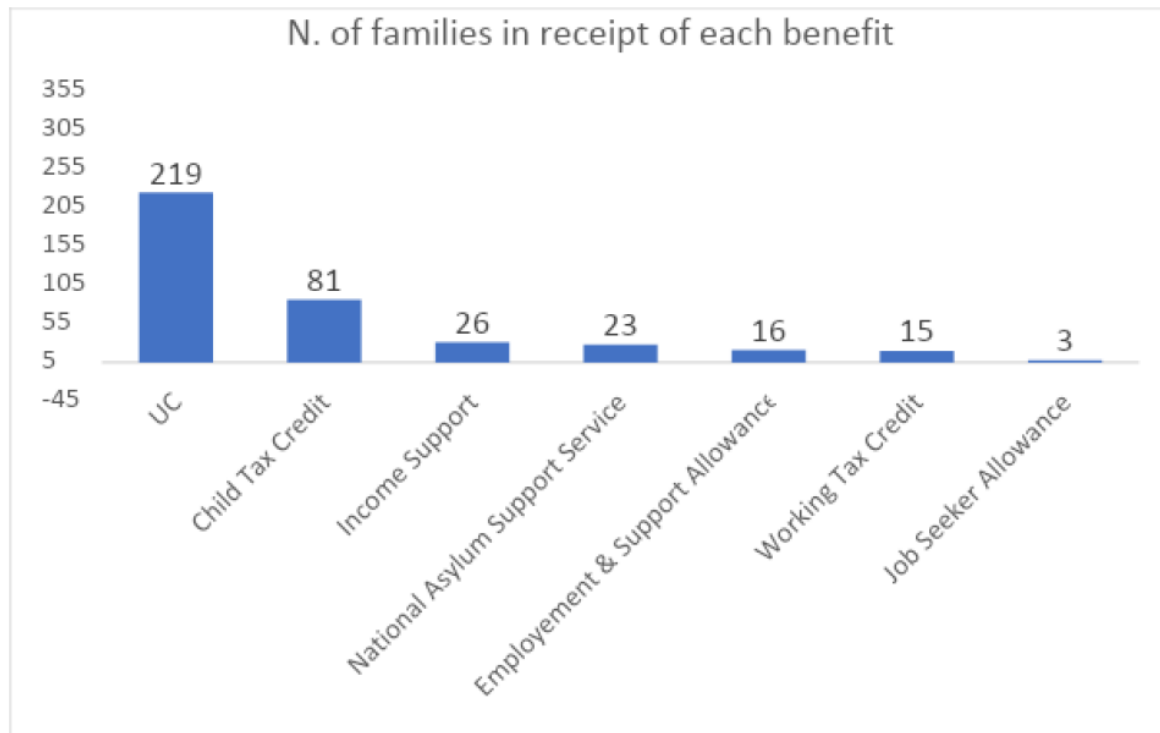


Figure 1.0

Remarkably, whilst some families did not claim for all they were entitled to, stating “We just don’t like to feel like were taking from someone else” (Ricky), they also found themselves in further deficit with the DWP after having no choice but to claim as illustrated by the following:

my partner wants to get back into work but it's covering everything making sure everything is covered because like he said UC takes everything off you as hit over the threshold so he needs to make sure that he's bringing in the money that will cover the rent the council tax all the bills ... car insurance obviously car tax and everything else he needs to make sure that he's bringing enough money in a month to cover everything because otherwise there's no point in working. (Vera)

Even when we left work and had to go on universal credit ... we thought we'd be alright but it absolutely ruined us ... when you first go on universal credit you don't get paid for six weeks so what they do is give you your first month as a grant ... how are we meant to feed three or four kids for 6 weeks like this where ... you have to pay it back 200 odd pound a month, absolutely ruined us for about a year to help us out. (Ricky)

Theme 3: Inflation/Funding

All five individuals interviewed mentioned needing some form of support other than what is available from the UK's welfare system. This took the form of different types of support depending on the needs of the family as a unit at the time, and ultimately lent itself to providing a secure living environment for the children. For three of the families, the ERG had been explicitly referred to as effective in providing a more adequate living environment as illustrated by Kira, Vera and Louise:

We were moved into... we got you know a 3 bedroom house, empty house I was so lost, like I didn't know what to do with it because I was not allowed to work. I would have saved money to, you know, put the house together and then the only thing we had were just clothes that we had to take from the house so it's been like a year and I'm still buying stuff. Needs of the house you know we had to do the floors carpets in new furniture everything literally everything ... the grant actually he came good it came at the right time coz then I could use it to buy some stuff for the house it went straight into the house. (Kira)

*We do struggle a bit I just want to get the sensory stuff for his bedroom now we've moved but obviously with bills and everything else is stacking up it's just a bit of a pain in the *** for something always gets in the way. I don't get any help. Only help I get since I've moved is the school It's [them] that put me in contact with [ERG]. (Vera)*

The second lockdown we didn't get anything because we wasn't on child benefit because he wasn't on free school meals. So even though he should have been in school and he would have gotten free in school he wasn't allowed them. Because he wasn't on free school meals. We wasn't claiming free school meals, so I've got three kids at home. So the gas went up, the electric went up me. The food bill doubled, tripled it [the grant] went straight on the kids. Yeah, because, like, we could be bought like, stuff for him to do during the pandemic. It paid for extra money for the lunches and stuff like that. So, yeah, it was a massive help whilst they took away school dinner. (Louise)

In all three families, there is a common thread of necessities being picked up by third sector organisations. For the remaining two families (Lexi and Ricky), the financial support supplied by the Government was not enough to outweigh the extra economic stressors brought on by the financial insecurities accompanying Covid-19 restrictions. As such, the criticism of the welfare system become more apparent, particularly the 'disability-based discrimination' as witnessed by Vera (Disability Rights UK, 2012). Furthermore, the inability of cushioning the blow of any unexpected expenses by low-income families as reported on by JRT (2022), throws into question what measures are being taken to provide additional assistance given to those families for 'expected' expenses such as the substantial energy cap increase?

I was always going to the [organisation] for support. I had like family support worker and they were helping us, so then it started gradually building us up and then eventually I ended up getting a house. So I decorated it like just to get away, like, quickly decorate it and got in, and then I'll start building myself back up. (Lexi)

With what's going on with the electric and fuel costs, we don't get our first payment until May so we gotta go this entire month with less money because they base their

calculation on the prior month... I'm not gonna have that money because you haven't given me yet it really has gone up it it's just from £160 a month to about £240... I'm thinking I'm fighting to get a loaf of bread. (Ricky)

Summary

From the findings, there are three main themes which were either the most prominent or held significant emphasis with the interviewees. However, the three themes of indirect domestic abuse, child disability, and inflation/funding are multifaceted as they each contain subthemes which are entwined with the main findings and should not go unrecognised. That is to say, the destabilising element of having to relocate due to a violent relationship, or the forced redundancy on parents of children with special needs, appear to be equally contributing factors that have led to the necessity of the ERG. Furthermore, it would seem that the rate of inflation coupled with the abolition of the energy price cap by the current Government has caused a 'perfect storm' for those who have been placed in an already unsecure economic environment. Conversely, it appears from both the literature and the lived experiences of the participants, that the system designed to provide welfare has potentially been outweighed by the provision of services concomitant to an adjusting labour market in light of recent events.

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