



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

Lord Freud  
Minister for Welfare Reform  
Department for Work and Pensions  
UK Government

T1.01  
The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
EH99 1SP  
Direct Tel: 0131 348 5228  
Fax: 0131 348 5184

[WelfareReformCommittee@scottish.parliament.uk](mailto:WelfareReformCommittee@scottish.parliament.uk)

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Dear Lord Freud,

I am the Convener of the Scottish Parliament Welfare Reform Committee. As detailed in the recent letter from Jamie Hepburn MSP, Deputy Convener, the Committee is currently taking evidence on the Welfare Reform (Further Provision) (Scotland) Bill.

As is to be expected given the subject matter, the Committee is hearing a lot of evidence that relates to the approach being taken to implementation of reforms overall by the Department of Work and Pensions. Members have agreed that I should write to you highlighting two issues in particular which have been raised by witnesses at our last two meetings.

The first was explored at the Committee meeting on 17 April and relates to modelling the cumulative impact of changes to benefits. We heard that Inclusion Scotland, amongst others, have undertaken some valuable work assessing the impacts of changes to benefits on their client base in order to identify which individuals will be most impacted upon when changes are made. The *Official Report* of the meeting is available in full via the following link—

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=6966&mode=pdf>

The work being undertaken by service providers and advocacy groups is doubtless going to be valuable in anticipating where support resources can be most effectively targeted. However this modelling is being undertaken on a piecemeal basis by relatively small organisations, which often represent one particular vulnerable group.

The Committee considers that it would be very valuable for those implementing reforms, including ourselves, to have at their disposal over-arching modelling on the cumulative impacts of changes to benefits. The Committee would invite you to consider initiating such a piece of work.

If there is no such piece of work underway, and no intention to undertake such work in the near future, the Committee would appreciate an indication of the rationale for this course of action. In addition, any information on other work being undertaken by the DWP to measure the likely impacts on individuals and families dependant on their circumstances, condition and age would be very much appreciated.

The second issue that I wish to raise with you is that of online applications by those seeking to claim benefits. This was raised at our meeting on 24 April and the *Official Report* is available by the following link—

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=6986&mode=pdf>

As you will note, the Committee has heard from a number of witnesses how stressful and confusing the benefits system can be for those seeking eligibility. The intention to increase the number of people completing applications online is therefore an area of concern. Many of the individuals in need of benefits may not have access to a computer, or their impairments or circumstances may mean they are physically not able to, or have had no support to learn how to, use a computer. There is a concern that individuals who would be eligible, and very much in need of benefits, will not apply for them as the process for application will prove too daunting.

The Committee would very much appreciate it if you could provide assurances as to any work being undertaken to support individuals in making online applications or whether any thought is being given to exempting certain groups from targets for online applications. Any information on other work underway by the DWP to explain the new benefits system and ensure it is accessible to those in need would also be very much appreciated. The Committee is well aware of the crucial role that advice services such as the Citizens Advice Bureaux will have in supporting individuals, but considers that this should be a second port of call for individuals, the first being advice and support from the DWP.

In addition to your response to Jamie Hepburn MSP, Deputy Convener to the Committee, I should be grateful to a response to the issues raised in this letter at your earliest opportunity. I am copying this letter to Nicola Sturgeon MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy, for reference.

The Committee concludes its evidence on the Bill next week and will seek to publish its report on the general principles of the Bill by mid-May. I will ensure you receive a copy of this report as soon as it is published.

Yours sincerely

Michael McMahon MSP  
Convener  
Welfare Reform Committee