

SUBMISSION FROM CHILDREN IN SCOTLAND

Children in Scotland welcomes the opportunity to submit further evidence to the Welfare Reform Committee. We are concerned primarily about the impact that the changes to the UK benefits system will have on Scottish children.

We will focus here on the changes to the current passported benefits that will be an inevitable consequence of the introduction of the UK's Universal Credit. Entitlement to many benefits provided through the Scottish Government, the NHS and local authorities has historically been dependent on eligibility for certain UK welfare payments. The Scottish Parliament now has the opportunity to introduce a scheme that effectively meets the needs of children and families in Scotland in a straightforward and accessible way.

Children in Scotland believes that a key principle underpinning the Committee's eventual conclusions should be that no Scottish family should end up being worse off as a consequence of these UK changes.

Most recipients of current benefits are expected to receive Universal Credit (and should transfer seamlessly to the new system). Thus, eligibility for Universal Credit should provide an automatic entitlement to passported benefits under the new system. Any current recipients of a passported benefit should continue to receive it, including those whose entitlement to Universal Credit has not been established at the point of the new system being introduced. The Scottish Campaign on Welfare Reform submitted evidence to the Social Security Advisory Committee in 2011 that sets out a detailed rationale for taking this approach.

Children in Scotland urges the Welfare Reform Committee to ensure that the new system is simple to understand and straightforward to access.

While the Scottish Parliament has made clear its disquiet in respect of the impact of much of the UK Welfare Reform Act, its objective of simplifying the benefits system is one with which few would disagree. The Welfare Reform Committee has the opportunity to develop a simple and accessible system in respect of passported benefits. Again, using Universal Credit as the 'passport' would seem to provide an obvious and manageable way of achieving this end. This has the advantage of not requiring multiple, complex and costly assessments.

Children in Scotland recommends that the Welfare Reform Committee prioritises the needs of children above other considerations.

One in four Scottish children is currently living in poverty, with children under three being the most impoverished group in our society. Poverty is not only a disadvantage in itself; it is highly correlated with other factors that limit children's potential and inhibit their wellbeing. It is not a child's fault that they are part of a family that depends on the welfare system for their income. Key policies of successive Scottish governments have sought to reduce inequality and support children's healthy development. The rights of children to be brought up in circumstances that help them do as well as possible should be respected and promoted. Any decision made by the

Committee should reflect this. Strenuous efforts should be made to look at, and plan for, meeting family needs holistically. Access to benefits should (in line with GIRFEC) facilitate signposting, referral and shared plans in respect of child and family wellbeing. This should include access to services such as childcare that support children's healthy development and enable parents to enter the labour market. The Committee should consider how it might encourage the Scottish Government to invest in such services. The forthcoming Children's Services Bill provides an ideal opportunity to ensure that each Scottish child and family has a specific entitlement to childcare. As well as no family losing out, no Scottish child should be left behind as a result of UK welfare reform.

Children in Scotland is the national umbrella agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children, young people and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that policies and services and other provisions are of the highest possible quality and are able to meet the needs of a diverse society. Children in Scotland represents more than 400 members, including the majority of Scottish local authorities, all major voluntary, statutory and private children's agencies, professional organisations, as well as many other smaller community groups and children's services. It is linked with similar agencies in other parts of the UK and Europe.

The work of Children in Scotland encompasses extensive information, policy, research and practice development programmes. The agency works closely with MSPs, the Scottish Government, local authorities and practitioners. It also services groups such as the Cross Party Parliamentary Group on Children and Young People (with YouthLink Scotland). In addition, Children in Scotland hosts Enquire - the national advice service for additional support for learning, and Resolve: ASL, Scotland's largest independent education mediation service.