

WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE
THE FUTURE DELIVERY OF SOCIAL SECURITY IN SCOTLAND
WRITTEN SUBMISSION FROM EAST AYRSHIRE COMMUNITY PLANNING
PARTNERSHIP

This response to the call for evidence has been prepared by officers of the Council and informed by multi agency discussion across a range of partners in East Ayrshire.

How should the new welfare powers proposed by the Smith Agreement be used to improve or change:

a.) Personal Independence Payments, Disability Living Allowance Attendance Allowance and Carer's Allowance

CARERS

The benefits system should be responsive to and reflective of the role and importance of carers. Opportunities exist to enhance the support provided to carers.

Many carers feel 'trapped' due to the current criteria for Carers Allowance. To qualify, carers are required to be effectively full time carers with little opportunities to continue/develop careers for themselves. This has consequences for not only the carer but the local economy as the carer is unable to reach their own economic potential and becomes 'trapped' in the benefits system.

The existing Carers Allowance system does not recognise young carers who as a result of their caring responsibilities at home, often find that their educational and economic potential is affected and can experience social isolation.

The opportunity exists to design a new carers benefit which would require a carers assessment, similar to that currently undertaken by local authorities when required by the carer. This assessment would take into account a number of factors; including the carers own employment record, their caring duties and their personal circumstances.

This assessment would confirm the level of care provided by the carer as part of a support package/personal life plan. A minimum period of care could be set at 16 hours with a maximum period of care at 35 hours. The hourly rate for the role could be set at the Scottish Living Wage level which would take in most cases, the carer out of the benefits system, recognise the role they are playing in society, increasing their self esteem and allow them economically to play a greater role in local economy. An imaginative approach would require to be taken to reflect the different

approaches to support and care promoted by implementation of Self Directed Support legislation.

This would also allow the carer some flexibility to enter further education to improve employment prospects, enter into full or part time employment whilst also giving them the opportunity for social activities, thus preventing social exclusion. It could also help prevent debt and other financial difficulties for carers who have either had to give up employment or reduce working hours to provide care for a loved one by ensuring a higher level of income if maintained rather than at present. It would also assist carers who may only be required to provide care for a loved one for a short period of time, such as the terminally ill.

Careful consideration of the administration of such a benefit would need to be undertaken to ensure national consistency of approach to assessment and delivery..

At present long term carers may have had their entitlement to State Retirement Pension affected as a result of their caring responsibilities but also there is a need to recognise the vital role that retired partners can play in the care of loved ones. There is an argument to be made for the existing age limit on entitlement to Carers Allowance to be abolished with their entitlement to the new benefit determined, as with others, via the review process.

For clarification, to be recognised as a carer will be those who provide a certain level of care (16 hours per week) for an individual who is in receipt of the appropriate disability benefit.

DISABILITY

The opportunity exists to design a new single disability benefit to replace the existing PIP/DLA/AA benefits, consequently streamlining the system and making it easier to administer:

- Passporting arrangements would need to be incorporated.
- Greater flexibility could be incorporated to support and encourage part time work.
- Timescales for application and review could be improved.
- Accessibility could be increased. A range of mechanisms should be retained for claiming including but not exclusively digital. (Access to digital resources is low in East Ayrshire).
- The design of forms both electronic and paper could be improved.

As health begins to fail, older people are more likely to be restricted in terms of mobility which in turn may affect their quality of life and consideration has to be given as to whether or not they should become entitled to some form of mobility component which could increase/maintain their personal health and wellbeing. The

existing mobility component of DLA/PIP could be reviewed. Under the present legislation, this benefit cannot be awarded to those over the age 65 but there could be scope for the Scottish Government to increase the age limit to bring it into line with retirement age which the UK Government is raising over a period of time to the age of 70, bringing it into line with working age.

There is also further opportunity to consider anomalies such as the eligibility for Attendance Allowance in relation to Free Personal and Nursing Care.

b.) Universal Credit (housing element and administrative arrangements) and Discretionary Housing Payments

Frequency of payment: whilst the thinking behind this (to make it replicate being in employment) is recognised, it is anticipated that many individuals will struggle to manage/budget monthly payments.

The time period of 8 weeks rent arrears accrual before direct payments to landlords can be made is too long and direct payments to landlords problematic for vulnerable people and those on low incomes.

Housing Costs under the new Universal Credit should be paid direct to the landlord with the Scottish Government reaching agreement with the DWP to administer this. This should not only provide ease of administration but also reduce administration costs when compared to the costs incurred by local authorities/housing associations/landlords when trying to recover arrears from tenants. This should be the default position with the tenants having an option to 'opt out' of this scheme and receive their rent payments direct via Universal Credit.

The 5 week waiting time should be eliminated and payment in arrears also reviewed.

The payment of benefits to one household member may impact adversely on women and should therefore be reconsidered.

Control over phasing of payments and treatment of households could be use positively to avoid some of the issues raised around rent arrears and help maintain tenancies.

Under occupancy regulations should be eliminated or fully mitigated on a permanent basis to provide certainty to landlords and tenants.

Housing Benefit legislation could also be changed to allow students to claim Housing Benefit. This would allow more students attending further educational establishment to remain not only in their own home, but also prevent the possibility of students being forced to leave further education because they can't afford to pay their rent

c.) The Work Programme and Work Choice

The current system is too process and target driven and has a 70% failure rate. It does not take account of local employment markets. Despite the best efforts of the Council, Community Planning Partners and local business partners there is a shortage of good quality jobs in East Ayrshire.

The landscape is too diverse for two work programme providers. Wider locally focused approaches could be developed. There is a need however to determine 'local' as some boundaries are artificial, such as local authority, with some towns and villages having a stronger links with nearby towns in other local authority areas. A possible solution would be for a local Work Programme agency to be based around the boundaries of two or three local authority areas, e.g. Pan Ayrshire. However flexibility would be required to afford claimants the opportunity to utilise the services of neighbouring 'agencies' if they lived within a reasonable 'travel to work' area which could be set at one hour via public transport?

Transport issues both in terms of cost and availability can often be a barrier to people gaining employment. The problems are exacerbated in rural areas. Creative solutions e.g. free transport or travel passes need to be considered.

An opportunity exists to further involve the third sector. A positive approach to volunteering as a route into employment should be recognised by the benefits system and work programme.

Programs should match the local economic landscape and infrastructure.

Learning could be gleaned from approaches to the delivery of Community Payback.

For 'vulnerable' client groups devolution of the Work Programme could support better alignment with policy objectives through flexibility of application.

Financial education should be a mandatory part of the school curriculum.

d.) The Regulated Social Fund, new benefits, top-ups and delivery of benefits overall.

Funeral Payments, mat grants/ winter fuel/cold weather payments could be delivered locally. However this approach would militate against economies of scale and could lead to a 'post code lottery' approach to access and availability.

National or local procurement could be undertaken with funeral directors.

Eligibility for winter fuel payments should be reviewed. Alternative delivery mechanisms could be considered e.g. fuel vouchers or credits. Cold weather payments could be measured on a more local basis. These two benefits could be amalgamated to form a single Winter Fuel Allowance, which could be paid monthly direct to the persons' fuel provider rather than being paid direct to the claimant, ensuring that the claimant is able to heat their home during the winter months. An entitlement to a winter fuel allowance could be used to prevent fuel providers from 'cutting off' fuel to a home.

Maternity grants should be made more flexible to reflect realities of family life.

Positive use of the fund could assist with better promotion of wellbeing among target care groups.

General comments

Benefits are interconnected and interdependent. Devolved responsibilities should be used positively to ameliorate any cumulative effect on people who are 'vulnerable' on the range of protected characteristics, particularly disability and gender.

Substantial numbers of people are affected in East Ayrshire. Local rates of benefit uptake are above the national level and therefore implementation of the Smith Commission proposals has a potentially greater impact on the population of East Ayrshire.

Devolution of these welfare elements requires to be viewed within wider context of the labour market, taxation and social policy and integrate with these.

Whilst there is scope for greater local approaches to delivery reflect local circumstances consistency also needs to be applied at a national level and the cost of delivery to the public purse also needs to be taken into account.

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