

WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

THE FUTURE DELIVERY OF SOCIAL SECURITY IN SCOTLAND

WRITTEN SUBMISSION RECEIVED FROM LOUISE SMITH

In response to your call for evidence, I'd like to make the following points/suggestions:

Greater understanding of the effects of Welfare Reform on vulnerable benefit claimants is needed, relating particularly to those with health issues and mental illness. I think this is an area that is greatly neglected, and from my own experience of having mental health issues (alongside M.E) and dealing with the DWP, it is definitely something that needs to be addressed. The advisors on the DWP phone lines don't have the first clue how to speak to or deal with the issues of vulnerable claimants and further training is needed asap to ensure you are providing the right level of support to these claimants and to ensure that all your guidelines for dealing with those with mental health issues are strictly complied with.

I think those assessing claims need to have a greater understanding of invisible illnesses like M.E and just how debilitating they are. I try to send in guidelines and further information to help the assessor understand my daily needs and how affected I am, but not everyone is able to do this and it really should be the job of those training the assessors to make sure they have a wide berth of knowledge when assessing illness claims.

M.E is a really misunderstood area of medicine/health and I know a lot of fellow sufferers struggle to get adequate interest/care from their GPs and consultants. This makes it very difficult for those with M.E to obtain all the evidence required for claiming benefits like DLA and leaves us at a disadvantage. A lot of fellow sufferers in a group I am part of have given up visiting their GPs because they just don't understand our illness and it becomes frustrating and upsetting. This could be taken into account when assessing claims and it might even be beneficial to have some assessors with a speciality in such conditions assessing, even someone who has suffered the condition themselves? It's very hard to put across to someone who has no idea what it is like to be chronically ill how bad things are, they don't understand what our fatigue is really like and we face a lot of stigma for our condition daily, so having an assessor with experience of ME would be hugely beneficial.

Easier ways to contact DWP/Benefits offices – I find it very difficult to use the phone, and I am mostly housebound, so this limits me being able to post a letter. So I am continually stumped when trying to contact the DWP. If we were able to fill in a form online to update you on small changes like change of GP or change of address etc. this would be a whole lot easier and considering those with M.E really struggle with energy, this would be a lot less demanding on our very limited stores of energy. It would also be beneficial and a whole lot easier to be able to submit claim forms and evidence online? Surely in this day and age this is a possibility? It would save the hassle of all the forms that seem to get lost in the post

From what I see being part of online M.E groups, the DWP seem to reject a lot of claims and either expect the claimant to give up or to go to appeals – which takes a

LONG time. There should be a much more simplified process in regards to appeals; it comes across like you are trying to prey on the vulnerabilities of ill people, hoping they will not be well enough to appeal/fight back and that's another person towards your targets.

I think there needs to be a lot more clarity from the DWP and Government in relation to targets for benefits – there have been a lot of rumours about incentives and memos encouraging staff to sanction claimants or to get people off a certain benefit. This shouldn't be the case as individuals are not all the same and these targets are about real human beings. Its fine to have general targets but everything needs to be looked at on a fair, case by case basis and the assessor needs to be as impartial as possible and not under pressure to meet targets. This is people's lives you are dealing with and it is something that really needs to be looked at.

I think there should be more help for those, like myself, in ESA Support Groups and on high rates of DLA, in regards to housing and council tax help. Because my husband works full time (he earns no more than £16,000 per annum), we are not entitled to any help from our council, because our disposable income is, according to the Council, "too high". However, they only take into account basic expenditure not all reasonable outgoings such as insurance, debt repayment etc. I think the whole idea of this needs to be overhauled and simplified – applying for council tax reduction is an absolute nightmare, so many pages and so much evidence and then you find out you aren't entitled at all, even though a benefits calculator said you would be! It needs to be able to be done online (a lot more things should be online, the government needs to move with the times), done quicker, and made clearer and simpler. I think that in houses where a member of a family is on certain rates of certain benefits i.e. high rate of either care or mobility DLA, there should be a reduction, for example 25% so that the family can afford adjustments to the house etc.