

## **WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE**

### **THE FUTURE DELIVERY OF SOCIAL SECURITY IN SCOTLAND**

#### **WRITTEN SUBMISSION FROM THE POVERTY ALLIANCE**

##### **Introduction**

The Poverty Alliance is the national anti-poverty network in Scotland, formally established in 1992. We are an independent organisation with more than 200 members drawn from the voluntary and public sectors, trade unions, researchers, faith groups and individuals with direct experience of poverty. Our aim is to work with others to enable communities and individuals to tackle poverty. We have a number of key policy areas that provide the focus for our activities; these are addressing low incomes, supporting services to address poverty, enhancing the participation of people with direct experience of poverty in policy development processes, and addressing attitudes to poverty.

##### **The Future Delivery of Social Security in Scotland**

Alongside our colleagues on the Scottish Campaign on Welfare Reform, the Poverty Alliance has called for a welfare system based on 5 key principles:

1. Increase benefit rates to a level where no one is left in poverty and all have sufficient income to lead a dignified life
2. Make welfare benefits work for Scotland
3. Make respect for human rights and dignity the cornerstone of a new approach to welfare
4. Radically simplify the welfare system
5. Invest in the support needed to enable everyone to participate fully in society

In order to ensure that the future delivery of social security in Scotland works for those who need it most, our society security system must be based on these principles.

We believe that people with direct experience of poverty must be consulted on any proposals and their voices must be reflected at all stages of the policy making process. It is people who have experience of accessing these benefits who will know best what works for them.

Like many colleagues in the third sector, the Poverty Alliance was disappointed with the speed that consultation took place at during the Smith Commission and we would have liked to have seen more time for engagement exercises. However, we welcomed, and continue to welcome, new powers coming to Scotland, and there is now a need to think about how these new powers can be used alongside existing powers to tackle poverty and achieve a more socially just Scotland.

##### **Keeping respect at the heart of the welfare system**

The Poverty Alliance is concerned by the hardening of attitudes in recent years to people experiencing poverty and to the welfare state more generally. We have

noticed a marked increase in the use of stigmatising and divisive language both by politicians and by the media. We are concerned that this is at least partly a result of changes in our welfare system and we hope that any further changes in Scotland work to reverse this trend. Our social security system must operate in ways that values all people, not just those in employment. Some people may not be able to take paid employment but will contribute to society in other ways, and they should be valued, not demonised, for this.

For disability benefits, this means putting trust back into the system. If we base our system of disability benefits on rights, then we must start from a position of trust and this means the way we assess people for disability benefits must change. Assessments must be done in a way which respects the individual and keeps their dignity at the heart of the process. It must be compassionate and take into account that people can experience things differently at different times. Assessments should not simply be a snapshot of people's lives and should perhaps monitor people's conditions over a longer period of time to develop a better understanding of their lives. We should not have a system where terminally ill people are losing their entitlement to benefits and dying without having any money.

We must also remove the mistrust of jobseekers. The current sanctions regime starts from a position of mistrust. The future delivery of the Work Programme must move away from this towards a system where people are rewarded for their efforts, and not punished for being poor.

Dignity and respect are closely linked to choice. We have seen this in the delivery of the Scottish Welfare Fund with people feeling that they have been stigmatised by the lack of choice in how grants are awarded i.e. vouchers rather than cash. We believe that choice should be an integral part of the social security system. The devolution of the housing benefit element of Universal Credit allows us the opportunity to think about how we deliver this in practice. We are supportive of allowing people the opportunity to decide for themselves the frequency and method of payment i.e. whether they would like the benefit to be paid fortnightly, monthly etc.

#### **Recommendations:**

- **Change assessments for disability benefits to start from a position of trust, and ensure that the system reflects the changing nature of disability.**
- **Ensure trust is a key part of the security system by building choice into Universal Credit.**

#### **A personalised service**

There has to be an inbuilt acknowledgement in the system that people are complex, and will all have different needs. This means taking a personalised approach. Services must work for the people accessing them. We have to think about where people lives – people in rural and urban areas will have very different experiences of service delivery, and employment.

Some people will find it easier to enter the labour market than others, and some will require additional support. We need to ensure that services work with people to identify their needs and how they can best be supported. This should not be a top down process. It is essential that we listen to what people are telling us they need.

There cannot be a one size fits all approach to the future delivery of social security in Scotland. We must think about how we work with people to ensure that social security delivers for them and is able to respond to their needs.

#### **Recommendations:**

- **Services to be built around people, and people who rely on services to be included in design and delivery.**

#### **A joined up approach**

We often hear of the need for a more joined up approach but frequently it either is not clear what is meant by this. With new powers on the way it is more important than ever to consider what joined up working means and how we use new powers alongside existing ones to achieve the best possible outcomes for people.

In terms of disability benefits we need to think about the interactions between health, social care and the benefits system. If we are to make the most of additional powers how we can support people into employment where appropriate, and support people to make the most of the opportunities available to them. We also need to think about how we support carers and look at a joined up approach in employment and social security policies so that carers too are able to provide for their families but also pursue their own careers while providing caring responsibilities.

People with complex needs should have a key person that they can contact, rather than relying on a number of individuals all for different things. It is without this central contact that people begin to fall through the cracks.

Young people have been particularly negatively impacted by recent cuts to welfare announced in the UK Summer Budget. Again we need to look at how powers over employment and new welfare powers can support these people to ensure that are given the best possible opportunity to realise their potential.

There also have to be consideration given as to how devolved benefits will work alongside reserved powers. For example, we need to consider how policy makers in Scotland can change the Work Programme (or successor programmes) when the conditionality regime remains reserved at UK level.

#### **Recommendations:**

- **Further consideration to be given as to how new powers will work alongside existing powers.**
- **The establishment of a work programme that provides holistic support for people entering the labour market.**

## **Keeping it simple**

It is essential that our social security system is accessible. Too often people are unsure of what benefits they are entitled to and when. The process for claiming is complex and the often the language used on forms is often difficult to understand.

Our social security system has to work for those who need its support rather than those who administer it. This means that there must be suitable support in place to enable people to access the benefits they are entitled to. Not everyone has access to a computer and access to support should not be dependent on this. There must be flexibility built into the system to allow individuals to interact with the social security system in a way which works best for them.

There must be more awareness raising of the help that is available for people. If we are thinking seriously about social justice, then part of this must include how we increase benefit take up and ensure that in areas like the Scottish Welfare Fund there is no underspend while people are struggling to get by.

### **Recommendations:**

- **A wide range of application methods for social security benefits including online, in person and over the phone.**
- **An income maximisation programme designed to ensure that everyone is claiming the benefits they are entitled to.**

## **Conclusion**

As a society we need to think about what our priorities are. If our goal is to achieve a more socially just Scotland then we must put people first. The future delivery of social security in Scotland must be built around what works for people, and all decisions must be based around how we achieve the best outcomes for people reliant on the system. This means trusting people, allowing people a voice in decisions which impact on them, and making sure the social security system is joined up both within itself and with other services.

Of course there are limitations in what can be achieved without the full devolution of the social security system but there are choices we can make now to improve the lives of people with direct experience of poverty.

For too many years the decisions which we have made in the delivery of social security have been about cost, and not about what works best for those reliant on the system. We have to stop telling people what is in their best interest, and ensure the design and delivery of any new system is around what people have told us is needed.

There is a need to stop looking at areas of social security policy as silos. We must take a holistic approach and think about how different services can work together.