

WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

WOMEN AND WELFARE INQUIRY

WRITTEN SUBMISSION RECEIVED FROM PROFESSOR RONALD MCQUAID

1. What is the impact of welfare reform on women?

It is important to consider welfare reform on different groups and on each individual. One group that has been affected by welfare reform and the associated pressure to move into employment has been mothers. In order to make successful transitions from welfare into employment the perennial issue of suitable childcare has to be treated more seriously. As there is so much written on this I will not expand further.

2. What is your (or your clients) experience of being on benefits or employment support?

The implementation of welfare reform needs to be considered fully. Experiences of (largely female) lone parents suggest that their experiences of the Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) regime vary, but a number of problems include:

- Moving onto JSA comes slightly too early for those whose youngest child has turned five but not started school yet, particularly in the summer holiday before starting school, when free nursery provision ceases.
- JSA pushes lone parents into applying for and accepting jobs that are not necessarily sustainable or reconcilable with caring responsibilities, in order to meet their job search conditions.
- There is often an expectation that Jobseeker's Allowance clients are ready to move into work and have no problem with searching and applying for jobs, and little support is offered to those who are in fact somewhat further from the labour market.
- Jobcentre Plus advisors often do not take into account lone parents' specific needs, and the atmosphere when claimants attend is generally punitive and suspicious.
- Consideration should be given to making Jobcentres more welcoming (e.g. training of security guards and other staff); need for staff with specialist knowledge and understanding of issues facing groups such as lone parents (e.g. as attempted through former lone parent advisors).

Some evidence: Graham, H. and McQuaid, R. (2014) *Exploring the challenges and opportunities facing lone parents, with children over the age of five, in receipt of out-of-work benefits and moving into paid work as part of the UK government's welfare reforms*, Report for Glasgow Centre for Population Health http://www.gcph.co.uk/publications/497_impacts_of_welfare_reforms_on_lone_parents_moving_into_work_report

3. How has your (or your clients) experience with the benefit system changed in recent years since the introduction of the welfare reforms?

Based on a qualitative study for the Scottish Government:

- The experience of the transition from Incapacity Benefit to Employment and Support Allowance was stressful for some participants, particularly those who subsequently appealed the initial verdict. Sources of stress included: finding the process itself confusing; the waiting time involved; and unpleasant experiences of the medical or tribunal.
- There was limited support on offer to help recipients of out of work benefits move into work. Some respondents, including those who had moved into work recently reported receiving intensive, personalised and targeted assistance from third sector organisations, which they found more useful.
- Participants reported struggling to make ends meet, particularly in a context of prices of essential items rising faster than benefits.
- The way in which the UK Government has communicated the rationale for welfare reform had a negative impact on participants, who felt unfairly tarnished by stigmatising messages about benefit claimants not wanting to work.
- Communication of the detail of benefit changes by relevant agencies such as the Department for Work and Pensions was also cited as poor. Official correspondence was described as long, confusing, and sometimes conflicting with previous correspondence. This made it difficult for participants to understand the changes and their potential impact.
- There was some geographical variation in access to affordable basic items, which was particularly poor in rural areas. However, this was also an issue for those in urban areas who were not within walking distance of larger and cheaper shops, due to the high expense of bus fares relative to benefit income.

Graham, H., Lister, B., Egdell, V., McQuaid, R. and Raeside, R. (2014) *The Impact of Welfare Reform in Scotland - Tracking Study: Year 1 Findings*, Report to Scottish Government ISBN: 9781784129217

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0046/00463006.pdf> and

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2014/11/4167> (report)

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2014/11/2826> (research findings)

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2014/11/9839> (appendices)

Further reports are to be published later this year.

4. Are there any challenges involved in being in receipt of your (your clients) particular benefits?

See above reports.

5. What would be your priorities for change when certain benefits / elements of employment support are devolved to Scotland?

1. The Work Programme has had extremely limited success in supporting those with disabilities (both male and female) from welfare into employment. This should be one area of priority for developing suitable policies.

2. For mothers, where relevant, policy lessons from the Working for Family and other programmes should be embedded into employment support (which covered 25,508 clients, with 42,214 children aged below 18, received support from WFF from 2004-8), including the need to integrate childcare and employability support and avoid low delivery levels in the early stages of a programme.

McQuaid R.W., Bond, S. and V. Fuentres (2009) *Working for Families Fund Evaluation (2004-08)*, Scottish Government, Edinburgh (ISBN 978 0 7559 7298 2) <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/04/20092521/0>

3. For lone parents and other mothers seeking to move from welfare to employment, some policy issues are the need for:

Improving inter-departmental co-operation, and addressing the institutionalised 'silo' thinking that characterises different department's approaches to childcare.

Developing a realistic and sustainable funding model, review funding policies (e.g. tax credits) and overall funding of childcare to improve stability and development of childcare provision, as well as choice for parents.

Increasing the supply of childcare for all age groups, with attention and resources focused on the high cost of care for younger children (under 2s) and the limited pre- and after-school facilities.

Better aligning of childcare provision with the needs of working mothers, the government should co-ordinate and support a childcare sector that offers a range of affordable childcare options that cover the necessary hours that would enable all mothers to take up and sustain employment opportunities if they wish to do so.

There is a discontinuity between support for childcare while in training or education, and support for childcare in employment; the transition into employment would be smoother if mothers could expect some continuity in their childcare arrangements, at least for a temporary period.

Improving holistic support to find, maintain and progress in employment, including through sharing examples of good practice in providing employability services to parents that deal with the full range of issues facing parents (particularly those offering holistic types of service). Consider using 'key worker' support where mothers can liaise with one key worker who can link them to the various forms of support required (although a single key worker may not always be appropriate). Increase the availability of initiatives offering holistic, childcare sensitive services (both in existing initiatives and new initiatives).

Improving information on the supply of, and demand for, childcare, including an evaluation of the extent of demand for different types of childcare (e.g. nurseries, childminders, after school clubs, etc.) and how such demand can better be met.

Seek to ensure equal access for all, including those in rural areas, parents with disabled children, families with more than two children, low income and single parent families.

Promoting family- and child-friendly employer practices and policies, including giving consideration to how a large scale change in perceptions might be achieved, not just in working hours, but in employers' attitudes to flexibility and alternative forms and patterns of working.

Focusing on employability as well as childcare, and expanding current good practice in tackling unemployed or under-employed mothers' skill deficiencies in a way that is sensitive to their childcare needs, confidence issues and other factors that may vary from those faced other unemployed people. Skills and career development for those in work should also fully take into account childcare. The range of support for women returners, who often have high skills, which may need to be refreshed, should be considered specifically, from a perspective of their life-time career progression as well as their short-term re-entry into work.

Challenging gender stereotyping in parenting and employment, by increasing efforts to tackle gender stereotypes concerning childcare roles, to promote greater employment equality. Monitor and improve understanding of the position of mothers in the labour market and the role of childcare in this (including those in work, seeking work and not-seeking work). Give greater emphasis to both genders taking childcare responsibility (including parental leave) and building suitable childcare around this.

6. Do you have any suggestions of practical improvements that you would like to see when certain benefits / elements of employment support are under Scottish control?

See above reports.

Changes in welfare reform could be linked more specifically with how to improve health and wellbeing among those affected by reform.

There needs to be robust and effective joint working between the range of agencies that provide support to those claiming welfare.

Professor Ronald McQuaid
3 May 2015