

WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

THE FUTURE DELIVERY OF SOCIAL SECURITY IN SCOTLAND

WRITTEN SUBMISSION RECEIVED FROM SCOTTISH DISABILITY EQUALITY FORUM (SDEF)

Scottish Disability Equality Forum (SDEF) works for social inclusion in Scotland through the removal of barriers to equality and the promotion of independent living for people affected by disability.

We are a membership organisation, representing individuals affected by disability, and organisations and groups who share our values. Our aim is to ensure that the voices of people affected by disability are heard and heeded within their own communities and at a national and political level.

Call for written evidence from Scottish Government

The purpose of this call for evidence is to find out how people feel about the Smith Agreement and how the Welfare Reform Committee can use the proposed devolved powers to better deliver benefits in Scotland.

General points

- Our members' response to the proposals is that they rely on these benefits and feel they should not change.

Response

Before completing this response, SDEF polled its members, made up of individuals, organisations and Access Panels, with a shorter version of this consultation. We have used these to help develop our response.

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

SDEF has carefully considered what is a very complex matter and conclude that given that it becomes a devolved set of issues as part of the Smith Agreement any inequity that currently prevails in/with the UK model can be addressed without influence from other than our national democratic process.

Our members' response to the proposals is that they rely on these benefits and feel they should not change. , These benefits are necessary for disabled people to live an independent life, for example, to have a car and be mobile within their community.

The majority of members feel that independent assessments should be carried out by individuals or GPs who are qualified to carry out assessments appropriately and respectfully. Where assessments are being carried out, the buildings need to be accessible. When being communicated to, information needs to be accessible and fully inclusive, catering for the specific communication support needs of the individual.

Our members do not agree that people with proven long term conditions who currently receive high rate care should have to attend medicals twice and three times or more per year.

It is felt that where it is clear that a long term condition will not improve, and that the person is likely to need assistance on a permanent basis, this should be taken into account when considering ongoing assessments.

Furthermore, members are concerned that the system itself is having an adverse affect on the wellbeing and confidence of disabled people. Many disabled people live in fear of losing the very benefits which allow them to access to a level of independent living.

It is suggested that a wider promotional campaign needs to be undertaken so that disabled people can understand what benefits they are entitled to. Many disabled people continue to be in receipt of inadequate support for their needs due to a lack of awareness of what is available to them.

Our members feel that the current Carer's allowance is insufficient and fails to compensate for the personal and financial sacrifice which carers make.

Regarding Carer's Allowance, our members feel strongly that people are receiving inadequate support. People are receiving inadequate support to:

- earn a good salary / career, the carer's allowance does not pay nearly enough
- find additional care for person when seeking employment
- get paid allowance when person has to go into hospital

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

Our members tell us that the structure and process by which housing payments are made needs to be investigated. This payment needs to ensure it covers all the rent, only covering part means putting people already on a low income deeper into poverty. Payment should be direct to the landlord. This will ensure that the landlord is paid and the person does not face an uncertain future because they have used housing benefit for other things.

Our members feel that the departments delivering Universal Credits and Discretionary Housing Payments, should all be linked together (online) and the same with Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefits. This could speed up processes and limit fraud.

Members suggest that Community Planning Partnerships (CPP) engage more proactively across sectors, they could be in a position to direct these benefits, not directly but by using the Housing teams direct knowledge of residents situations. A Housing Officer will have a far better understanding, through discussions with other agencies of a persons wellbeing and ability to handle Universal Credits, thus ensuring that their tenancy is stable.

Again, members feel more information should be available and widely promoted about these benefits. Information should be available in an inclusive way to make sure everyone understands in detail to ensure those eligible know what they are and how to apply.

c) the Work Programme and Work Choice

Our members tell us that the programme could be improved to ensure that disabled people who sign up to the programme are fully supported and provided with the information they need.

With regard to payments it is suggested perhaps a graded system be used - 75 per cent, then 50 and 25 per cent on as sliding scale, rather than payment for a finite number of weeks

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

Our members are telling us that more support is needed with the process of applying for benefits or when they wish to inform about changes to their situation.

It is suggested that by interlinking the computer systems of all DWP offices and Council Offices dealing with benefits would improve the process. Dealing with all claims well and quickly should be the aim rather than the penalising and denial of rightful claims. There are another few points that need careful consideration on the fair application of rules to the Scottish public, who do have to claim benefits:

1. The vast difference in geography in Scotland does mean that in order for some claimants who live in the remote rural places, that in order for some disabled people to claim, they must overcome additional barriers such as the lack of transport or access to support in their area.
2. Staff in the local offices should be given far greater discretion to alter appointments to enable better participation in any projects and to adhere to the rules.

3. Again because of geography rural claimants often do not have access to telephones, either landlines or mobile, and internet because of lack of signal.

Claiming online can pose as a significant barrier for many, and further consideration must be given to providing more inclusive and accessible routes to claiming. In these cases paper applications should be made possible and times given for the postal service to deliver the mail for appointments etc.

4. All information and forms should be accessible and available in all formats as requested.