

WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

THE FUTURE DELIVERY OF SOCIAL SECURITY IN SCOTLAND

WRITTEN SUBMISSION FROM THE SCOTTISH WOMEN'S CONVENTION

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to Scottish and UK Government consultation papers.

Purpose of the Consultation

The Committee is tackling this inquiry in four workstreams and wants to know:

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

- a) Personal Independence Payments, Disability Living Allowance Attendance Allowance and Carer's Allowance
- b) Universal Credit (housing element and administrative arrangements) and Discretionary Housing Payments
- c) The Work Programme and Work Choice
- d) The Regulated Social Fund, new benefits, top-ups and delivery of benefits overall.

Under these workstreams the Committee would particularly welcome:

- Practical suggestions to ensure that the principles of dignity, respect, support, equality and common sense are embedded in the new system.
- Views on the integration of Scottish devolved benefits with existing devolved powers and any unintended consequences of changes.
- Systems of intergovernmental working in relation to benefit delivery.

Introduction

Overall, it is clear that welfare reform measures are having an adverse impact on women. The SWC has been consulting with women throughout Scotland on the issue of welfare reform for a number of years and in a recent survey on women and welfare, over 70% of respondents agreed with this statement.

“Women, who still manage household budgets and support children’s day to day lives proportionately more than men, are bearing the brunt of austerity cuts and demonising of those on benefits.”

It therefore stands to reason that women’s experiences must be taken into consideration when looking at the future delivery of social security.

Key Issues of Concern for Women

It is hoped that the devolution of certain aspects of welfare will give Scotland the opportunity to be a “leading light” in terms of supporting those who need help the most. It will also allow account to be taken of the unique social and geographical nature of Scotland.

“The raft of welfare reforms have not been supported electorally by the Scottish people. Women are disproportionately affected by social security changes. They continue to experience occupational gender segregation which further marginalises their contribution to significant areas of industry or commerce.”

Giving the Scottish Parliament more powers over the way in which welfare payments are administered and paid are welcomed, however not without some reservations over potential confusion and conflict.

The way in which the UK Government administers Universal Credit (UC) caused significant concern amongst women throughout Scotland. Previously, each person in a household made an individual claim, however under the Welfare Reform Act 2012 the benefit is paid to the household overall. The likelihood is that in many cases the man will receive the money. This has the potential to put women at risk of having little or no financial independence, particularly if they have an abusive or controlling partner.

More often than not, women control very tight household budgets, which run to the dates upon which small pockets of money will be received. The changes to UC mean it will be paid on a monthly basis.

“If we have another bad winter I won’t be paying my rent. The money will go towards my gas and electricity instead. I can’t cope with my kids being cold again.”

Despite the fact the Scottish Parliament has no power to alter the amount paid to claimants, having the power to decide when the payments are made will benefit many women. The power to split payments between members of a couple is also extremely positive, particularly for those who would suffer financial hardship and dependence as a result of a single household claim.

The devolution of benefits for carers, disabled people and those who are ill is an extremely positive step. The power to make decisions about the administration, payment and amounts of such benefit will ensure that the often unique needs of

those who claim this type of support are considered and met. This will particularly be the case for carers, the majority of whom are women.

The devolution of the above benefits and initiatives to the Scottish Government will mean that women will not be as adversely affected. Rather than attempting to mitigate the effects of legislation, policies and practices already handed down, it will be possible to design a system that best reflects the needs of those seeking work in Scotland as a whole. It is hoped that the transfer of this power will also allow the Scottish Government to allocate specific funding to services which offer advice and support to those involved in the welfare system. At the moment, these are “stretched to breaking point”. Staff are struggling to meet demand and many are off sick with work related stress. The majority of workers in this type of employment are women, who are attempting to assist claimants as much as possible against a backdrop of cuts to staff and resources.

Practical Suggestions for Change

There are a number of ways in which the devolution of further powers to the Scottish Parliament could be beneficial for women accessing the welfare benefits system. A number of women have informed the SWC that, in their opinion, the proposed powers do not go far enough.

“This level of devolution is not enough to allow welfare benefits in Scotland to be redesigned to adequately support those most in need in a joined up way. Westminster will still be able to undermine support and budgets at any time with serious impact on families and communities, resulting in pressure on other public costs. It’s a good start but simply not enough has been devolved to make a meaningful difference.”

Where the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government have powers, however, the following suggestions have been made by women.

Welfare Rights Advisors

Access to appropriate and informed welfare rights advisors is essential. Training for trainers programmes, whereby members of the community are given the necessary tools and information to provide sound and sensible money matters advice and guidance would be of great assistance.

“We need to look at legislating for the provision of more welfare rights advisors. They provide a truly essential service and at present are struggling to cope with ever increasing workloads. The pressure they face has caused many to suffer from both physical and mental ill health. Support for those who work in this field is so important.”

There is very little additional support or information around personal and household budgeting. More needs to be done at a local level to assist women and their families

so they are not at risk of severe financial hardship. It is hoped that the transfer of this power will allow the Scottish Government to allocate specific funding to services which offer advice and support to those involved in the welfare system.

Health

“I hope the Scottish Government can deliver a much more compassionate system that understands the difficulties that people face when coming to terms with their own illness and disabilities. Often they will play down symptoms and strive to be ‘alright’. There needs to be more medically minded people making decisions about those with new, long lasting or evolving disabilities and illnesses.”

Those with mental health issues are often assessed as ‘fit for work’ because they are able to carry out the tasks asked of them in interviews. The nature of their illness, however, can make it very difficult for them to even get out of bed some days.

“We need to look at supporting those with mental health issues like depression to allow them to work part-time rather than working full-time. It is often difficult to sustain full-time work so the individual has to leave and claim benefits. That cycle needs to be broken.”

Payments

UC will be paid monthly in arrears. Previously, individual payments were made on a weekly basis to claimants. Under the old system, housing and council tax benefits were paid directly to the landlord. These will now go directly to the claimant. There is a real worry that families will end up in debt as a result of these imposed changes.

“People should be given the option of having rent paid directly to their landlord at the start of their claim. Women are used to managing their money in a certain way, getting small payments throughout the month which spreads their finances. There will be so many who fall into rent arrears or who have to rely on pay day loans because they don’t know how to handle a lump sum once a month.”

The Work Programme

The Work Programme has also come under criticism in the past. It is not designed around the needs of women and is very gender specific. Rural women in particular face significant barriers in accessing and participating in the programme. The policy is designed with a complete disregard of the geography of Scotland. Rather than attempting to mitigate the effects of legislation, policies and practices already handed down, it will be possible to design a system that best reflects the needs of those seeking work in Scotland as a whole.

It is hoped that in implementing the Work Programme, the Scottish Government will ensure that those seeking employment are not encouraged to take up exploitative

zero hours contracts, which make it very difficult for women to access additional support through tax credits and top up benefits.

“Parents trying to bring up their families are being abused by zero hours contracts and are being forced to access foodbanks in order to feed their children. Companies are using these to their own advantage, rather than to benefit the employee.”

Reserved Powers

The Scottish Government may be able to take positive steps with the powers being transferred to them. Despite this, women remain concerned about the potential risks and conflicts which could arise as a result of certain aspects being devolved but some remaining reserved.

For example, one of the biggest issues around welfare reform is the imposition of sanctions on those who do not comply with work-related requirements. As sanctions and conditionality are to remain reserved, serious tensions could arise between policies put in place by the Scottish Government with regards to the Work Programme, and the sanctions that can be imposed by the Jobcentre Plus, a UK-level institution. This could be particularly problematic given the findings of the Scottish Parliament Welfare Reform Committee in its report on sanctions. The Committee found a number of flaws in the system, including a lack of flexibility with regards to appointments, no matter the circumstances, which often include childcare and transport issues.

It seems somewhat at odds that on one hand, the Scottish Government can create a Work Programme which best suits the needs of Scottish people, yet on the other hand the sanctions associated with that remain with Westminster. Those seeking work could be at a detriment as a result.

