

WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

WOMEN AND WELFARE INQUIRY

WRITTEN SUBMISSION RECEIVED FROM FIFE GINGERBREAD

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

Fife Gingerbread is a voluntary sector organisation operating independently in Fife. We support and empower lone parent, vulnerable and disadvantaged families through early intervention and partnership working. We facilitate positive change by being accessible, inclusive and flexible in our approach.

In the last year we have supported in excess of 500 families, many of whom live in the most challenging of circumstances, mostly existing on benefits, with two-thirds lone parent families. Across all of our services with lone parent, vulnerable and disadvantaged families, our parents are predominantly female.

In the past year, we have directly supported 16 families who have been sanctioned, this numbers directly impacts on 21 children. Rational behind the sanctions in general are failing to meet the Claimants Commitment requirements. One parent had a daughter who has disabilities and she had a period of increased absence from school meaning the mother could not fulfil her job search commitments, and another case of a mother who had been in court that week giving evidence against her husband in a domestic abuse case and again did not comply.

In general terms, since 2010, women have been disproportionately affected by austerity, through job losses in the public sector and cuts and changes to benefits. If the Conservatives win the General Election, this is set to continue. Only last month it was reported that under George Osborne's freeze on tax credits and benefits 75 per cent of the savings will come from women, only 25 per cent from men.

This is partly because many benefits are paid directly to women as the primary carers of children: Child Benefit, Child Tax Credits and the Childcare element of working tax credit are currently paid to the main carer, so inevitably when benefits are cut it is women who are hit harder than men.

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

All families have felt the squeeze of the welfare reform, which has been exasperated by the continued trend of benefit bashing on sensational TV shows like Benefit Street etc. It would seem the British/Scottish public have an appetite for such drivel – I suppose it's the modern equivalent to watching Christians being thrown to the lions in Roman times.

So at a time when its acceptable to scoff at families who are struggling to make ends meet and Food banks become an acceptable solution and a normal way of life for so many, people on benefit have to learn to dance to the tune of the many changes. Lone parents shipped onto JSA and agree to Claimant Commitments that are ridiculous, for example there is a basic expectance for the lone parent to travel 90 minutes each way to a part time job on minimum wage – the equivalent of traveling from Fife to Glasgow.

The focus of our organisations work **used** to be about supporting parents to access existing services and supporting them to be the best parent that they could be – being a parent was then considered to be a valuable role.

Today, we all know the importance of good parenting as well as a sound, safe, secure and reliable environment to bring up children. The Scottish Government has invested millions in the Early Years Collaborative and implementing GIRFEC, yet our welfare system is working directly against the principles that drive these initiatives. Children don't know if they will eat at the next meal time – so where does that fit with SHANNARI indicators? This is an impossible environment for our disadvantaged and vulnerable families to live in far less focus on nurture and provide good parenting to their children.

So our organisational role has stepped into a new world, and not a better world. One where we are very much about ensuring they can feed and nourish their children, keep a roof over their head - the very basic needs in life - before we can even begin to work with them on building their capacity as parents and thereby become positive contributors to their local communities.

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

We have testimonies from many parents in relation to JSA and the relentless regime:

“I have been degraded, labelled as lazy, forced to go to food banks and depend on Charity.... Taking the dignity from anyone has to be the worst part”

“We have all to respect the advisors in the job centres (clearly marked with posters) yet we are not treated with the same respect...”

“If I had a choice I'd be working ... it's important not to feel like a beggar... and left in tears because we can't feed ourselves or keep ourselves warm”

“Unfair sanctions –with no apology for degrading a lone parent... kids ashamed of their mother...”

Women are more likely to be in a low paid job, and the increasing numbers of low paid, part time, zero-hours jobs which have characterised our economic 'recovery' do nothing to help their situation.

However, what is of main concern to us is the fact that under Universal Credit, all household benefits will be paid to one individual, into one bank account, meaning that women who stay at home or work part-time may lose all independent income, while their partner becomes the main 'breadwinner'. Concentrating all the financial resources and power in the hands of one person in a household is very worrying. Less household income could be spent on children as women are more likely to spend money on children's needs than men.

In February 2015 Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights published a report that said Universal Credit could leave women more vulnerable to domestic abuse, exposing them to financial control – a coercive form of domestic abuse in which men limit their partners' access to money.

Non-physical forms of domestic violence, such as financial and emotional abuse can be part of this ongoing tyranny of abusive and controlling behaviour and in most cases women experience years of different kinds of abuse before they feel able to seek help. It's therefore essential that the Government act to minimise the risks of financial abuse when introducing Universal Credit.

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

Removal of sanctions

Families who are living on benefits have no Plan B to fall back on and can barely survive through day to day expenses; they have no resources to deal with any unexpected expense or punitive gap in benefits. Resources would be better directed in a more positive investment to proactively support families to build their capacity and a better life for themselves. The current model of Job Centre Plus doesn't have a people centred approach and does little to support people into the right work for them.

5. 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?

Work against stigma:

Tighter controls on media portrayal – In Scotland in 2015 it is not acceptable to be racist, homophobic or bigoted so why should we think it is acceptable to portray vulnerable families living in poverty as some sort of 'circus entertainment'. Benefit bashing and the vilification of lone parents is fuelled by adverse TV and media

portrayal. This kind of activity results in many 'mainstream' and 'normal' people within the general public making ill-informed sweeping judgements based purely on this sort of sensationalised media coverage. This serves as nothing more than propaganda and isolates and damages not only the families concerned, but all who are on benefits are branded as some sort of 'underclass.'

Resources would be better served supporting families to have a better life and would make far better TV, should the broadcaster's feel they would have a gap in their schedules they could be encouraged to support and sponsor this activity - which would be far more productive to the families and the local community than the current divisive and damaging trend.

Much has been done in terms of campaigns in recent years to change the public's perceptions and raise awareness. Previous blights on Scotland have been addressed by campaigns on domestic abuse, smoking in public places, bigotry and racism. We would like to see a national drive to change the culture of it being perfectly acceptable to be 'a walk away parent.'

A campaign is needed to raise awareness about the changes in Child Maintenance and the move over to 'family agreements'. New claimants who cannot agree this means the burden is on the parent who have the children to pay for a service and both parents are penalised in monthly charges for the privilege of using the service.

The (Westminster) Government claim the driver is to change behaviours and all parents should invest in their children both emotionally and financially, for life, irrespective of parents' relationship breakdown. In our view, this is totally in line with the message we should be giving, but a cultural change requires some real backing and drive, publicity and a long running campaign behind it in order to effect real change.

The Scottish Government have a real opportunity here to do some positive work behind this change and take advantage of an opportunity to change perceptions and lift lone parents and their children out of poverty.

We have years of experience of challenging the stigma that marks lone parents. They are the ones who should be applauded as they are the ones who have taken full responsibility for their children whilst partners too often walk away and start a new life with no baggage or sense of shame.

Lone parents have suffered the hardships of poverty and negative image for too long and its time this injustice was stopped. In fact, it should be reversed and we should applaud them for their sacrifices and efforts.

Supportive Employability Support

We have great experience of employability support through our work in Making it Work (a lottery funded partnership project involving Fife Gingerbread as lead, Fife Council and Citizens Advice & Rights Fife) where we target support at lone parents to enable them become more job ready. The approach in this project is holistic and works with the family to tackle all the basics. It's not a quick fix approach and that is the secret of the success - parents are quite happy to begin the journey of ambition - they drive their journey and that often involves a mix of volunteering, training, education, work placement and employment. The main factor being that they drive progress at their pace. Working in this small pilot area of Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath over 20 months we have engaged with 300 parents and 78 are now in employment. The 78 were not employment ready and had many barriers and obstacles to overcome but they did so, again *at their pace* meaning that employment will be sustainable as they have addressed all the other factors in their life.

We hope to roll out this approach in Fife and include vulnerable families in the target group. We recognise that the approach works well - when you work with the parents as the centre of the focus there is no way the work could be other than positive.

Universal Credit (Due to roll into Fife in January 2016) Around 20% of working age households are currently in receipt of Working Tax Credit (WTC) due their low earned incomes and hence are now subject to UC's in-work conditionality. Our final request would be to remove 'in work conditionality'. Children and single parents (the vast majority of whom are women) will be particularly affected by this expansion of in-work conditionality: around three quarters of families receiving WTC have children and of these most are single parent households. At a practical level it is questionable how effectively, and certainly how consistently, front-line advisor discretion will resolve decisions of what counts as enough work effort, how hard to push already working claimants, and when to sanction.

Rhona Cunningham
Manager
Fife Gingerbread
16 April 2015