

SCOTTISH ANTI POVERTY REVIEW



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A collage background. The top part shows a close-up of a five-pound banknote with the text 'FIVE Pounds' and a portrait of Queen Elizabeth II. Below the banknote is a brick wall. In the foreground, a green sign with the text 'job centre plus' is visible. The sign is tilted and has a slight shadow.

WHAT NEXT FOR SOCIAL
SECURITY IN SCOTLAND?



EDITORIAL TEAM

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DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in the Scottish Anti Poverty Review do not necessarily reflect those of The Poverty Alliance.

ABOUT THE POVERTY ALLIANCE

The Poverty Alliance is a network of community, voluntary, statutory and other organisations whose vision is of a sustainable Scotland based on social and economic justice, with dignity for all, where poverty and inequalities are not tolerated and are challenged.

Our aim is to combat poverty by working with others to empower individuals and communities to affect change in the distribution of power and resources. To do this we:

- Work with people and communities experiencing poverty to empower them to address poverty
- Work with organisations to build a strong anti-poverty network in Scotland
- Support the development of policies which promote social justice and combat poverty
- Raise awareness about poverty and encourage debate

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WELCOME

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EDITORIAL

Seizing the Social Security Moment

Scottish devolution has often rightly been referred to as a process, not an event. Well the process is currently undergoing its biggest change since 1999, with the implementation of many of the recommendations contained in the Smith Commission report, published in November 2014. Central to the changes that are now taking place, it is the new powers over welfare, or social security as we now refer to it, that have been subject to the most debate – perhaps even more than our new powers over taxation. This is not surprising: as our welfare system has been ravaged by years of cuts through austerity, it makes far more sense that many powers over social security should be devolved to Scotland in order that there was an opportunity to develop some more long awaited ‘Scottish solutions to Scottish problems.’

Like many civil society organisations and networks across Scotland, the Poverty Alliance has been actively engaged with consultation process around how we use our new social security powers. We organised a members meeting with more than 40 organisations taking part, addressed by the Minister for Social Security, we organised 20 workshops with members of community groups to discuss what dignity and respect meant to them, all this on top of the usual community engagement meetings and campaigning activity.

As can be seen from the contributions to this edition of SAPR, organisations across Scotland have been enthusiastically engaging with what has been a very open consultation process. Some common themes begin to emerge, even looking at just the contributions contained in this edition: the need to make more lifetime awards of PIP, a single national delivery agency, some kind of social security charter that clearly outlines individual rights. These are just a few issues, there were many more raised by organisations across Scotland.

As Sandra White MSP highlights in her piece, this will be a critical and complex piece of legislation. There will much time needed over the coming 18 months to ensure that the detail of the legislation is correct and that the system operates effectively.

Perhaps one of the most heartening elements of the debate about social security in Scotland is that the issues of dignity and respect have been so central thus far.

How people are treated by the social security system has been key issues of the Poverty Alliance since we were set up. As we mark our 25th anniversary in 2017, it is pleasing to see that what was once a minority concern now is the focus of how we design the new elements of our social security system. Lynn Henderson of PCS shows that creating a dignified system of social security is not only a priority for claimants, but for those who work in the system too. So there is now an opportunity to be seized when it comes to new powers coming to Scotland. We will have an additional almost £3bn to help support some of the most disadvantaged people in Scotland. We have a degree of consensus across political parties and civil society that should give us some optimism about the chances of creating a different kind of social security system in Scotland.

However, before we start advancing towards the sunny uplands of Scottish social security, we need to remember that there are countervailing forces at work at the same time. There has been no real change in direction with regards to social security from the UK Government – the chancellor is pressing ahead with almost £13bn of cuts, Universal Credit, despite the delays and problems, continues to be rolled out. Rob Gowans from CAS reminds us that more people than ever are coming to CABx for advice on crisis support. John McKendrick highlights in this edition of SAPR that public opinion in Scotland cannot be assumed to be fully supportive of a progressive, generous social security system. It should also be noted that there has been relative silence from the Scottish Government on how we could use our new powers to create new benefits in devolved areas or top up benefits that are reserved to help tackle poverty.

So whilst there is some consensus, there is still much to be done to put in place the elements of a social security system in Scotland that makes a bigger impact on poverty. We will need to maintain pressure on the UK Government as well as ensuring that the Scottish Government using all of its new powers in a creative and dynamic way. As the Poverty Alliance enters its 25th year, we will be working hard to seize the opportunities that exist and to campaign for further change. We hope you will join with us.

Peter Kelly, Director, Poverty Alliance



TRADE UNION COMMENT

The Need for a fairer social security system in Scotland.

Lynn Henderson, PCS National Officer, outlines the need for a fairer social security system in Scotland.

In the late 1970s, my sister began working for the as-then DHSS, and my family was proud that she had secured a good civil service job. Like her, many went into the DWP or its predecessor bodies with a pride in their role in the welfare safety net, helping people when they were out of work, disabled or sick. Job Centres, were once as described – a place where you could find a job. As an unemployed teenager in the 1980s, I picked up my first job as a Photography Assistant from a card in a job centre. Later, as an unemployed young person, I was encouraged by an advisor to return to education part time and continue to claim unemployment benefit, under the 21 hour rule. I was assumed to still be actively seeking work, studying and also able to live independent of my parents with the support of housing benefit. This was in Thatcher's Britain.

Filmmaker Ken Loach's "I, Daniel Blake" shows how far the system has travelled from safety net to sanctioning. Where once, staff were able to provide advice and assistance to claimants navigating their way through the system, now DWP workers merely process their part of the claim. The claimant is dehumanised and the worker is disempowered. And let's not be mistaken that the film is not just a work of fiction. Ken Loach and screen writer Paul Laverty spent hours speaking to PCS representatives in Glasgow and Newcastle researching in detail the interface between worker and client, the failures and inflexibilities of the processing system, the frustrations of the call-centre telephony and online application challenge for many claimants who are not computer literate, the target-driven cruelty of the sanctioning system, and the referral to foodbanks in place of state support.

Further, with the slashing of welfare budgets, massive jobs cull in the Department, the workforce delivering benefits are increasingly anxious and stressed in carrying out these functions. The UK government has also slashed pension rights, stripped down redundancy terms and real term wages have declined by up to 20% through successive below-inflation pay freezes and pay caps. Ironically, PCS evidence shows that 40% of those delivering universal credit are now dependent on it themselves to make ends meet.

It doesn't have to be like that. As the trade union representing welfare workers amongst other civil servants, PCS advocates an alternative vision on welfare. Our union, as part of the Scottish Campaign on Welfare Reform, has been pressing for a better fairer way for years. Our joint statement with DPAC and Black Triangle links the rights of claimants to the rights of workers in presenting a welfare alternative.

With the devolution of work-age benefits, there is a real chance that working in co-production with our union, claimants and other stakeholders, the Scottish Government can design a Scottish social security system which places dignity, respect and progress at its heart. Linked to fair treatment of claimants, must be fair work. PCS is seeking a system where both claimant and worker have dignity and respect, which is a massive culture shift from that represented in "I, Daniel Blake". Of course, it is just the tip of the iceberg, with 85% of benefits remaining reserved to Westminster, but it does afford a chance for those who believe in an alternative vision of welfare to lay the foundations for a better fairer way.



THIRD SECTOR COMMENT

A look at the changing public attitudes toward social security in Scotland

Carla McCormack, policy and parliamentary officer, outlines the recent work done by the Poverty Alliance on social security

Much of the debate around the devolution of new powers has been focused on social security issues. While not as comprehensive a package as many would have liked, these powers do provide an opportunity to think about the type of Scotland we want to live in and how we achieve this. The Poverty Alliance is clear that these must be used to help those on the lowest incomes. We know that for many people benefit levels are too low to live a decent standard of living and therefore we would like to see the Scottish Government commit to topping up child benefit and means tested benefits for working age adults. With new tax raising powers on the way now is a time to be ambitious and think creatively about how we can best tackle poverty.

Over the past number of months we have worked with people with direct experience of poverty to ask them what we can do in Scotland to make sure that we have a social security system based on the values of dignity and respect, and works for the people that rely on it. Suggestions varied from the very high level e.g. increasing benefit levels to seemingly very small things which make a big difference to how people feel including choice over how to be addressed and format of communication. There was a strong consensus that people with direct experience must be included in designing the new social security agency, and that there must be a proper reporting and review mechanisms.

Our response to the social security consultation can be found on our website but it is important to remember that this is only the beginning of the process, not the end. Throughout the coming months we will continue to engage with our members and people on low incomes to get their views on social security and we will feed this into the legislative process wherever possible. We know that people with experience of the system are the experts, and should therefore be treated as such.

“My plea to Scottish politicians and officials as we start to take forward new benefits powers is this -please examine your own attitude to benefit claimants. You may not be as compassionate as you think you are and remember, this could be you”.

Social security should be there for us all, and yet there has been a hardening of attitudes towards the welfare state have hardened over the past thirty years. In order to gain support for greater investment in social security we need to get across the message that tackling poverty and inequality is good for us all, and any of one of us could find ourselves reliant on it. We must tackle the stigma that surrounds the social security system, and this means that we all need to think about the language we use and our own attitudes. The Poverty Alliance is working with organisations across Scotland to ensure that people are provided with dignity and respect when accessing services. The Scottish Government must also work to ensure that these are meaningful values in the provision of social security in Scotland.



RESEARCH COMMENT

Does Scotland want a radically different social security system?

Glasgow Caledonian University's Professor John McKendrick examines whether Scotland want a radically different social security system?

It is a big question. This edition of Scottish Anti Poverty Review is reflecting on the possibilities of a new approach to social security that could result from the devolution of powers from Westminster to Scotland. Of course, many outcomes could transpire under the new arrangements; social security could be strengthened, weakened or maintained. Although government does not always deliver what the majority of the people want (given the diversity of opinion on such matters, it could never deliver what all of the people want), there are limits to how far government can depart from public opinion in a democracy. Therefore, it is worthwhile reflecting on what the Scottish people want from their social security system and to consider whether public opinion in Scotland is sufficiently different to that in the rest of the UK to legitimise a different approach to that being pursued by the UK government at the current time.

The British Social Attitudes Survey does exactly what its title suggests. Since 1983, it has been canvassing people's opinions on social, political and moral issues. Here, we list some key findings from recent surveys (2012-2014). What people in Scotland think about social security is deserving of further scrutiny and the data presented and issues raised in this research comment will be discussed at greater length in a Poverty Alliance Briefing Paper. Three-year averages are used where possible. For now, here is some food for thought:

- Deserving claimants? One third of people in Scotland either disagree or strongly disagree that there are "many who get social security who don't deserve help"
- Social security as a priority for extra government spending? Little more than one in every twenty Scots identify 'social security' as a priority for extra government spending.
- Spend more on benefits for the unemployed? Almost one-half of Scots opine that they would spend less or much less on benefits for the unemployed
- Would cutting benefits damage too many lives? Almost one in five Scots do not think that cutting benefits would damage too many lives.



- Should we spend more on welfare even if it means higher taxes? Just over one in four Scots think that we should not spend more money on welfare even if it means higher taxes.
- Would people would be more independent if welfare benefits were less generous? Almost one half of Scots think that people would 'stand one their own two feet' if welfare benefits were less generous.
- Does the welfare state make us less likely to help others? Just over one in four Scots agree that the welfare state makes us less likely to help others.

On the other hand, (i) more Scots agree than disagree that social security claimants are deserving; (ii) almost one in five Scots would spend more on benefits for the unemployed; (iii) almost thrice as many Scots opine that cutting welfare would damage too many lives, as compared to those who do not; and, perhaps most significantly of all, (iv) more Scots would, than wouldn't spend more on welfare, even if it meant higher taxes.



POLITICAL COMMENT

Tackling the root causes of poverty

Annie Wells, Regional List MSP from the Conservative Party, believes that tackling the root causes of poverty should start in the early year. In this article she discusses closing the wealth gap amongst young children in Scotland.



Born and bred in Glasgow I know only too well how poverty can affect families and individuals and the strain it can put on relationships.

After all, my home city has the misfortune to be known as one of the most deprived in Scotland.

According to the Scottish Government's own statistics – the gap between life expectancy between those living in its more affluent neighbourhoods and those in its poorest is wider than anywhere else in the UK.

But it's not just Glasgow's problem. It affects every part of Scotland, with more than one in five (220,000) of Scotland's children officially recognised as living in poverty, a level significantly higher than in many other European countries.

Nowadays it is far too easy to criticise the centre-right when it comes to reducing poverty. No doubt some of that criticism is merited but we also must recognise success where it arises.

Since the Conservatives took office in 2010, millions of low paid people are better off and employment is at its highest ever level.

More low earners have been taken out of tax, the minimum wage is about to have its biggest ever rise – the state pension already has – and that's why, as well as the lowest level of child poverty since records began; the GINI coefficient which measures inequality has also dropped.

But this aside, in May this year the Scottish Conservatives managed to become the official opposition in Holyrood. It's now our chance to follow in the footsteps of the UK government and offer real solutions to make poverty a thing of the past.

We believe a major way of tackling the root causes of poverty should start in the early years.

Given the gap that opens up among children from poor and wealthy homes before the age of three, we think action is required earlier in life.

We argue that instead of extending that provision across the board for three and four year olds, we should provide more high quality childcare for more one and two year olds, starting with those in disadvantaged homes would help a lot.

We also believe more funding will be required to train up a more highly qualified professional workforce to carry out that childcare.

It has to be about offering proper early years skills to children, developing literacy and numeracy, so that the gap that opens up at this young age is closed.

And once children are at school, we need to continue this work.

Professor Sue Ellis from the University of Strathclyde has produced some excellent work in this area. She focussed research on literacy in disadvantaged areas and how this had a huge effect in boosting pupils' performance. Her findings are something we can all learn from.

As the SNP continue to obsess about separation they have taken their eye off the ball when it comes to a widening attainment gap and disadvantages in early years.

But we want to work together to tackle the root causes of poverty. Tackling disadvantages in early childhood might just be key to making poverty history in Scotland.



Over the course of two days young delegates exchanged ideas about youth-related issues, with each person bringing their unique perspective to Strasbourg. Most importantly they developed innovative solutions to critical questions for the future of the continent and met with decision makers ranging from locally elected officials, European Parliament Vice Presidents to European Commissioners.

The biggest achievement of European Youth Event was the creation of a report which contained ideas proposed by delegates which in September 2016 was presented to the European Parliament. This report contains 50 ideas and policy suggestions that were formulated during a series of seminars, workshops and interactive sessions back in May. Some of the ideas will go forward to the various parliamentary committees, starting in October, with MEPs expected to discuss them with the young people involved.

The ideas in the report include a whole range of suggestions to improve the state of democracy and participation among young people, at both a European and domestic level.

For example there are detailed proposals for introducing e-voting in elections and notes that this was introduced nationally in Estonia back in 2007, which was a world first. Another policy proposal concerns the need to train and upskill young people to become political leaders and draw on the success of other international initiatives such as the UN Development Programme Youth Strategy and the establishment of the UN Special Envoy on Youth in 2013.

In the foreword of the report, Mairead McGuinness and Sylvie Guillaume, the Parliament's Vice-Presidents responsible for communication, stated "We are confident that these ideas can be a source of inspiration for all MEPs. Young people can make a difference and we are sure their contribution will lead to an increasingly vibrant European democracy. It is now up to MEPs to take their lead and to continue this important dialogue with the youth of Europe."

Of course the real challenge will be to see how far these ideas progress but with the enthusiasm and commitment the young people at the event had, they now have a genuine means of participation to bring about the change they want to see.

Allowing young people to be the drivers in participation is hugely important and the template of the European Youth Event is one that Scotland's policy makers should give real consideration to. Although various organisations have used the Scottish Parliament building and chamber to host events and conferences, the success of the European Youth Event lies in ensuring participation is not merely a one-off exercise but is actually the start of a longer engagement journey.

Next steps for Scotland

Unlike the vast majority of other delegates at the European Youth Event, I did not leave Strasbourg in May with the prospect of returning to the continent not as an EU citizen. I recently spoke at a policy seminar alongside youth work practitioners and experts and about the very issue of how to engage with a section of society that was already becoming ever-increasingly disillusioned with politics and now more so following the EU referendum. The key to overcoming this huge obstacle must lie in participation. Currently Scotland has wealth of expertise on how to engage with its young citizens but this challenge has become even greater as politics is moving at an increasingly fast pace, with young people at risk of being left behind.

However, as demonstrated, leaving the EU – in whatever shape or form that may be – must not result in leaving the vast opportunities that are available by working internationally. Formal organisations such as the European Youth Forum and grassroots movements such as the Young European Movement, demonstrate the real benefits to working across borders. When looking at avenues for participation, this must not start and end at Gretna Green.

As Scotland enters these uncharted waters, with constitutional questions being asked both in regards to the future of the United Kingdom and our place within the European Union, the very people who will live with the consequences of these decisions for the longest, must have a clear and defined means of being involved. Failure to do this does not just leave a generation disempowered but risks the very health of our democracy.

We have an opportunity to turn the disappointment felt among young people after the 23rd June into a catalyst for political engagement and participation. Let's seize it.



SOCIAL SECURITY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Eddie Follan from Barnardo's Scotland outlines why we need to get social security right for children and young people.

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How new social security provisions are organised in Scotland will be central to the way in which services supporting low income families can be delivered. The experience of Barnardo's Scotland is that under the current system, and as result of budgetary pressures, there is growing evidence of need among our service users, and services themselves have to deal with more crisis situations facing the families we work with

In this article I will highlight the increasing pressure on families living on low incomes. These experiences are drawn from those that are supported by our family support services. I will also mention the situation faced by young people that we support into employment or training and how we need to find a way of working that does not force these young people 'off the radar' because of the way they are treated when they have to access the benefits system.

The opportunity to design a new social security system is significant. This should be done in a way which eases the financial pressures on low income families offering security on the basis of entitlement. A situation where families lurch from one crisis to another is damaging to children and young people's life chances, their ability to do well at school and their overall mental and physical well-being. As part of this there needs to be a recognition that third sector organisations have a key role to play in supporting access to a new system.

Background

Barnardo's Scotland provides support to around 26,500 children and young people each year. This involves work with children and young people in or leaving care, families affected by substance misuse, children and young people who have been, or are, at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse and those who are involved with the justice system. Many of the children, young people and families we work with have mental health problems or are affected by them in some way. In short, the people that Barnardo's support, have a wide range of challenges. However, our service staff report one thing that many of these families have in common: low income.

Many of the difficulties faced by the children, young people and families that our staff see every day are a result of living in poverty and trying to make ends meet with very little money.

Barnardo's Scotland in conjunction with NSPCC Scotland carried out research which aimed to understand how austerity and welfare reform affected the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. In this context we also sought to see what was happening to face to face services being delivered to children and families with the most complex needs. The findings from the report – Challenges from the Frontline: supporting families with multiple adversities in a time of austerity – are important because they demonstrate the difficulties faced by these families, the services that support them and thus the scale of ambition required in designing a social security system for Scotland which makes it a better place to live for these children, young people and families now and in the future.

From the Frontline – the growing severity of need

The context for developing a new social security system for Scotland could not be more challenging, making it all the more important that whatever is put in place is designed to take the increasing pressure off low income households.

At the macro level the most recent poverty map of Scotland produced by End Child Poverty shows that 1 in 3 (220,000) children live in poverty in 2016. These figures come at the same time as the UK Government put a cap on the amount of benefits people with children can claim leading to estimates families stand to lose up to £115 each week, with more than 300,000 children living in households across the UK set to be affected.

As an organisation supporting some of the most vulnerable children, young people and parents Barnardo's Scotland is very concerned about rising levels of poverty and the impact that the reduction in benefits has for these families.

It is worth exploring what our services tell us about the day to day reality of living on a low and reducing income.

Across the services, there is a consensus that basic material needs are not always being met amongst the children and families they work with. Poverty is at the core of the issues experienced by the families concerned.



“It is not the case of families not getting what they are entitled to, it is a case of what they are entitled to is not enough”. – Service manager

Our services are witnessing increased stress levels and mental health issues for service users, with benefit problems exacerbating the issues people already have .

Services described how the number of families subject to benefit sanctions in their area was ‘going through the roof’.

Service Managers are referring families to food banks in their local areas, and stepping in with practical support such as money for fuel meters, furniture donations and clothing. One Service Manager said that visits to families’ homes often reveal a lack of basic necessities such as warm clothing, bedding, toothbrushes and toilet rolls. As a result the service is increasingly using money which was previously used to fund extracurricular or more developmental activities to provide basic necessities. Other Services reported that they were increasingly funding basics such as food and bus tickets.

The families we work with experience multiple, overlapping issues. Families are presenting with increasingly complex issues and service staff have noticed a greater incidence of particular issues within the families they work with. One Manager expressed the view that the number of families referred with three or more issues has risen time and time again,

“You could surmise that cases are more complex and there is an increasing level of multiple disadvantages within families”. – Service manager

Employability and young people

Many of the young people that Barnardo’s support into training or employment are those who are furthest from the labour market. This is in the context of 414,000 young people who are unemployed and not in full time education.

The young people we work with often lead chaotic lives and find it difficult to adhere to the rules imposed by the Department of Work and Pensions. This is reflected in the fact that the proportion of unemployed young people (not counting students) who are not claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance and therefore are not receiving official help with job search is now 59.7% and has risen by more than 20 percentage points since October 2012 .

In our experience this is because young people, when faced with a problem arising with their benefits such as the threat of a sanction, an actual sanction, or even a simple administration issue are likely to disengage from the system and go without help and support.

We welcome the fact that the Scottish Parliament recently voted to make sure that the new Scottish Work Programme will be voluntary and that young people will not be mandated onto a programme and thus be at risk of losing benefits. Nevertheless a vote by the Scottish Parliament does not mean that young people will not be subject to conditions on their benefits which include participation in the Work Programme. As the Scottish Government develops a Scottish social security system there needs to be clear guidelines and protocols for situations where the intention of one part of the system is that participation is voluntary whilst the other part has the power to withhold benefits. Welcoming the principles set out by the Scottish Government on which a system should be based we argue in our response to the consultation on social security that in addition to a Claimant’s Charter and including the principles in legislation there should also be a statutory Code of Practice for staff working in the agency which is based on the underpinning principles.

Too many of the young people we work with have been left isolated because they have been unable to cope with a system which is not designed to support those with complex needs.

Social Security – entitlement, support, dignity and respect

The experience of low income families and young people who are unemployed and not in training are only two examples of where our service users are often the ‘victims’ of the social security system. This is either because it fails to provide adequately for their needs or because it can be complicated to negotiate and viewed as threatening and intimidating.

As an organisation Barnardo’s have had to change the way that we support people often having to deal with crisis rather than focusing on the developmental progressive work that can help those we work with make real and sustainable change to their lives. For many there is the constant fear that another crisis is just around the corner whether that is having no money or the fear of losing what little they have. This is why it is vital that any new social security system is truly based on the principles of dignity and respect and that those principles are turned into action.



Barnardo's Scotland welcomed many of the proposals in the consultation on a social security system for Scotland. We believe that serious consideration needs to be given to the adequacy of benefits including the way on which top up powers can be used to boost the incomes of those at the bottom. There is also a need to make sure there is support for families, children and young people at different levels on what benefits they can access and that they are getting the financial support they are entitled to.

The Frontline report highlighted the fact that service staff had received training as part of 'gearing up for Welfare Reform' in order to help families through the process. This included training delivered by the Child Poverty Action Group and funded by the Scottish Government. Citizens Advice staff have also provided training in up-skilling staff to deal with the impact of welfare reform.

With a new system there will be new rules and also new benefits. The proposed Best Start Grant for example is very welcome with additional payments for a child going to nursery and starting school as well as payments for subsequent children. It will be more complex to administer and there will need to be support for third sector organisations to make sure the information they are giving on new benefits or changes to benefits is accurate and timely.

Conclusion

In recent years Barnardo's Scotland services have found that there is an increase in the number and complexity of the adversities faced by the children, families and young people we support. At the same time, needing to focus on this crisis work has an impact on the services' ability to deliver the developmental support so badly needed if children are to progress in a way that is sustainable. At the other end of the scale young people who need intensive support to get into training and work often experience rejection or threat from a system that should be there to support them.

A new Scottish social security system is the chance to address some of these issues. The Scottish Government needs to be bold and ambitious in setting out what the system can do and how it will work. They need to consider the issue of adequacy but they also need to make sure that help is easily accessible and supportive and that the system does not chase away those who find it difficult to deal with. Working in partnership with third sector organisations will make this more possible. Our children and young people deserve no less.



TIDAL WAVE OF CHANGE

Rob Gowans, Policy Officer at Citizens Advice Scotland highlights ongoing issues of welfare reform, and what could be done differently in Scotland

Social security in Scotland faces yet another period of change. Since the Welfare Reform Act, citizens advice bureau clients have faced a 'tidal wave of change'. We are now seeing the human as well as financial cost of this wave, with a worrying number of clients struggling to cope with a gap in their income and requiring crisis support. With a second tidal wave of welfare reforms upon us, more of Scotland's citizens face the prospect of struggling to stay afloat. Part of this change includes the transfer of powers to the Scottish Parliament, which promises a new regime, hallmarked by 'dignity' and 'respect'. There is however, much work to be done if that is to become a reality and make improvements to issues that Scotland's CAB network deals with on a daily basis.

Gaps in income

Over the last three years, citizens advice bureaux in Scotland have seen a rise in clients presenting at bureaux with no money for essentials such as food, energy and rent payments and needing referrals to crisis support services. To illustrate this, during 2014/15, advice relating to food banks was provided on over 7,400 occasions by citizens advice bureaux in Scotland; an increase of 47% on the previous year. Another indicator is that between 2012/13 and 2014/15, advice regarding Crisis Grants increased by 134%, compared with the predecessor scheme (Crisis Loans delivered by the Social Fund). During the same period, advice in relation to Community Care Grants remained relatively stable, suggesting that demand for financial crisis support has more than doubled during that time.

These worrying trends prompted CAS to undertake research aimed at investigating the pathways into and out of crisis for our CAB clients, the profile of CAB clients in financial crisis and the causes of gaps in income. The research found that recent changes to the benefits system, benefit rates not keeping pace with inflation, low pay, insecure work and rising costs of living all contribute to people's increasing lack of resilience to income shocks. However, the research found that the most common causes of a period in which the client has no income to buy

essentials for themselves and their families were benefits-related. These key causes or 'triggers' of acute deprivation of income were: DWP administrative error; processing times and waiting days at the beginning of benefit claims causing a gap in payments; the time taken to transfer between benefits; having no eligibility for benefit during the mandatory reconsideration process; and benefit sanctions.

The research also found that CAB clients needing advice about food parcels in Scotland are younger than the average CAB client, and 26% more likely to be male. While the majority are single adults without children, almost one third have children, more than one third of those needing advice about food parcels are unable to work due to ill health.

Spending any amount of time without income can have serious consequences for an individual's relationships, stability, mental and physical health. In light of these research findings, CAS made a number of recommendations for increasing people's resilience to income shocks, preventing gaps in income and improving crisis support available to people when they do experience crisis. We are of the view that adequate statutory support needs to be available through the social security system so that people can resolve such crises with dignity. However, with the continued roll out of Universal Credit and the six week waiting period at the beginning each new claim, CAS is concerned that over the next year we will continue to see an increase in clients who present at CAB with no available income, unable to afford food and other essentials for themselves and their children.

Ongoing UK welfare reform – 'the second tidal wave of change'

Three years ago, Citizens Advice Scotland described the impact of the Welfare Reform Act on Scotland as 'a tidal wave of change'. Since the reforms began to come into force, benefits issues in Scotland's citizens advice bureaux have increased by 20%, with clients less resilient to income shocks, less able to meet household expenditure



and more likely to require emergency support from a Crisis Grant or a referral to a food bank. However, a second tidal wave of change is coming in the form of this year's Welfare Reform and Work Act, as well as original reforms that have yet to fully bite.

Universal Credit, the flagship of the original reforms is only just now becoming a reality for Scotland's citizens. Earlier this year, CAS published what we had learned from the early, limited rollout of Universal Credit in Scotland, raising a number of challenges that will need to be addressed if the new benefit is to live up to its original aims. In particular, the in-built six week wait for a person to receive any payment is already causing people to completely run out of money long before their first payment lands. This has the potential to be devastating if action is not taken.

Now in Musselburgh and Inverness, Universal Credit has gone 'full service' - fully replacing the six existing benefits for new claimants. Early feedback from local bureaux indicates a substantial increase in the number of UC issues, in particular a rise in the number of people who require support to make and manage a claim because of a lack of digital access or skills, which has the potential to prevent people in need for being able to access support.

Other changes, passed by the UK Parliament earlier this year are imminently about to kick in. November sees the reduction of the Benefit Cap from £500 per week to £384 per week - a loss of up to £6,000 per year in income. Currently just over 700 households in Scotland are affected by the Cap, however this is set to rise to around 5,000 according to official estimates. This is likely to have the biggest impact on lone parents and large families, with two-thirds of those affected estimated to be single women.

April will see the abolition of the Work Related Activity component of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and an equivalent move in Universal Credit. This will cost people affected - who have been assessed as being unable to work due to ill-health or disability - £29 per week, which is currently provided to recognise additional costs associated with having greater needs such as additional travel costs to interviews or work preparation activity. According to the latest official figures, there are almost 66,000 people in Scotland in the Work Related Activity Group, almost three quarters of

whom have been in receipt of the benefit for more than two years, are far from the labour market, and in many cases may never be fit for work again.

Recent research by Sheffield Hallam University indicates that the two policy changes in the latest round of reforms likely to cost Scotland's citizens the most are the four-year freeze on the value of working age benefits with an estimated total loss of £300 million by 2020/21 (£450 per year for each household affected), and cuts to Universal Credit work allowances with a total loss of £250 million over the period (£1,050 per year). These changes are more subtle - rather than specific inquiries these are likely to result in more CAB clients seeking advice because they are simply struggling to pay for everyday essentials on their income. In the case of the work allowances the impact will be on low-paid workers, and in the case of the benefits freeze the impact could be worsened by sudden rises in inflation, such as we have begun to see following the vote for 'Brexit'.

The development of Scotland's new social security system

Devolution of certain powers over social security to the Scottish Parliament will create a unique opportunity and challenge over the next few years. Whilst not representing the majority of the existing social security system, Scotland's CAB network advised clients on over 74,000 issues related to the benefits due to be devolved, representing around one-third of all the benefits-related issues brought to a CAB in 2015/16.

The process of developing a new social security system for Scotland creates a unique opportunity to design out some of the problems that CAB clients face before they occur, and as such will be highly significant for Scotland's citizens who need support from the social security system.

This process will not be without its challenges however. The Scottish Government's wide-ranging public consultation on how the powers should be used closed at the end of October and was an indication of the scale of the task at hand, seeking views on issues as diverse as how overpayments should be managed, how complaints should be handled as well as the detail of applications for disability benefits.



These issues matter however – Citizens Advice Scotland’s evidence in response weighed in at over 80,000 words, given the sheer number of important considerations that will need to be worked through. These will take time to resolve, and there is a need to manage expectations of organisations, families and individuals who will expect current issues to be resolved promptly. Amongst the many important issues, Citizens Advice Scotland would consider a number to be high priorities to be addressed.

Making ‘dignity’ and ‘respect’ a reality for Scotland’s citizens

The Scottish Government’s commitment to ensure that people who use the social security system are treated with dignity and respect is welcome, and different from how many CAB clients view their treatment by the existing system.

However, it is important that these worthy principles are enshrined as meaningful rights that people who need support from the system can exercise if they feel that the service they have resolved has fallen short. As well as drafting a Charter of rights and writing the principles into law, it is crucial that this practically empowers people to be able to challenge substandard service and supported to seek redress from a suitable appeals system. These principles should also be at the heart of training for the staff of a new Scottish Social Security Agency to embed them into the culture and practice from day one.

Empowering people also means giving them a choice of how they communicate with the Agency about applications and ongoing claims. Consultation with CAB clients and advisers revealed a clear view that people should have a choice of communication methods, emphasising the importance of being able to deal with a claim face-to-face, as well as over the phone, by text message and online. Whilst a ‘digital by default’ approach may be administratively convenient, as CAB clients have repeatedly warned and early evidence of the implementation of Universal Credit has revealed, requiring people to make and manage benefit claims entirely online has the potential to exclude the majority of people who require support from the system from accessing it.

In general, involving the people who use the system in its design and development on an ongoing basis will be crucial to make sure their needs always come first. Users of the system, as well as also welfare rights advisers, advocates and carers should be present, and involved at all levels of service design and delivery.

The Scottish Government’s approach to involving people with frontline experience in the recent consultation exercise, as well as their intention to establish ‘Experience Groups’ to inform the process is also welcome, but this must not be the end of the story. There is a vibrant network of public and third sector services in Scotland who have excellent links with current users of the social security system. These organisations not only have access to users, but are also trusted by users and can help to facilitate a conversation that is accessible, comfortable and not alienating.

What should the new benefits look like?

In terms of the specific benefits that are due to be devolved, there are a number of key steps that the Scottish Government could take to significantly improve on the current system for Scots in need of support.

Disability benefits are one of the largest – and fastest-growing – issues that people visit their local CAB for advice about. Many of these relate to the assessment process for Personal Independence Payment, which is designed to provide much-needed support to pay for the additional costs associated with a disability or health condition. However, the process of often unnecessary face-to-face medical assessment with a stranger has had the effect of wrongly denying people an award, with the majority of cases appealed to a tribunal being overturned.

CAS has long argued for a tiered approach to medical evidence that would dramatically reduce the number of unnecessary and impersonal assessments for disability benefits. Making use of existing evidence from GPs, Community Psychiatric Nurses, carers, support workers, family as well as from the individual who knows best how their condition affects them – the person themselves – would remove the need for the vast majority of face-to-face assessments. This could also be used to make long-term or lifelong awards, giving people the peace of mind that they will not be required to re-apply in short order, when their condition will not improve.



The devolution of carer's benefits brings an opportunity to review and extend the criteria to make sure that Scotland's full-time carers are appropriately recognised for their efforts and that they do not face hardship as a result of being unable to work due to their labour of love. In particular, carers who work more than the equivalent of 13 hours per week at the Scottish Living Wage, young and student carers in full-time education, and carers who receive the State Pension are all ineligible to receive Carer's Allowance. CAS believes that this is unfair, and that those groups should be priorities for support in a new Scottish Carer's Benefit which seeks to equally act as recognition of the important role carers play, and to compensate them for earnings lost due to being unable to work due to their caring responsibilities.

CAS has raised the spectre of funeral poverty that haunts far too many Scots over the last two years, resulting in clients seeking CAB advice because they are unable to afford to pay for a dignified funeral for a loved one, due to rising burial and cremation charges. The average basic cost of burial fees in Scotland stands at £1,363, a 7% increase in the last year, and with costs varying by over £1,500 between the most and least expensive local authorities. With the Scottish Government acquiring control of Funeral Payments, an opportunity has been created to help ease this unexpected cost at a difficult time by speeding up the decision-making process on awards and give certainty to bereaved families of what will and not be covered by the payment.

And whilst it does not have full control over Universal Credit, the Scottish Government will acquire some administrative flexibilities over the way payments are made. CAB clients have previously told us they would be likely to run out of money with a monthly payment and would prefer a more regular payment. CAS recommends that the Scottish Government adds a weekly payment option – preferred by the majority – to its range of flexibilities to give claimants more choice and control.

How the new system operates

In setting the operational policy for the new system, there are opportunities to make improvements by reforming the complex review and appeal process for benefits to remove barriers to justice for people in need of support. At present, despite the 'mandatory reconsideration' having reduced the number of benefit appeals being

brought to tribunal, CAS is concerned that the process has discouraged people from appealing entirely, due to lengthy delays in receiving a decision during which time people do not receive any payments coupled with a restrictive timescale to submit additional evidence.

In a new system, CAS believes an improved internal review system should operate as part of an integrated, seamless process which sets clear timescales for decisions to be made, continues payments to individuals whilst their challenge is being considered, and automatically passes to a tribunal if a claimant is not satisfied with the outcome of the review.



Finally, the new system must recognise independent advice and representation as a critical part of a successful social security system. Citizens Advice Bureaux are already a critical part of the existing social security system. Their independent and holistic advice supports hundreds of thousands of people in Scotland with entitlement, take-up, applications, complaints, appeals, access to information, outreach and continuous improvement. Ultimately, this advice supports many of the most vulnerable people in Scotland.



The development of the new Scottish Security System offers a unique opportunity to harness and support the key role of independent advice in Scotland, both to ensure access to quality independent advice through citizens advice bureaux, but also to support the aims of the new system. In order to achieve this role, sustainable funding must be in place to ensure that the existing CAB infrastructure of advice, outreach and partnerships continues to support the people across Scotland that rely on it.

Conclusion

Though complex – sometimes necessarily so – social security has at its heart a very simple concept – providing vital financial support to people in times of need. Changes to the system in the past five years have resulted in people slipping through the net and left without any support at all. With further change promised by both Scotland’s governments, Scotland’s CAB service remains unchanging in the role we have played for 77 years – providing advice to those in need, and using evidence from the frontline to draw attention to the impact of social policy changes on Scotland’s citizens.

Footnotes

1. Learning from Testing Times: Early Evidence of the Impact of Universal Credit in Scotland’s CAB Network – Citizens Advice Scotland, June 2016 <http://www.cas.org.uk/publications/learning-testing-times>
2. Written evidence to Work and Pensions Committee inquiry: Disability employment gap – Citizens Advice Scotland, May 2016 http://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/citizens_advice_scotland_written_evidence_-_disability_employment_gap.pdf
3. The Impact on Scotland of the New Welfare Reforms – Sheffield Hallam University, October 2016 http://www.parliament.scot/S5_Social_Security/General%20Documents/Sheffield-Hallam_FINAL_version_07.10.16.pdf
4. Response to ‘A New Future for Social Security’ – Citizens Advice Scotland, October 2016 <http://www.cas.org.uk/publications/designing-social-security-system-scotland-consultation-new-powers>
5. Bridging the Digital Divide – Citizens Advice Scotland, May 2016 <http://www.cas.org.uk/publications/bridging-digital-divide>
6. Cost of Saying Goodbye 2016 – Citizens Advice Scotland, September 2016 <http://www.cas.org.uk/publications/cost-saying-goodbye-2016>
7. Designing a Social Security System for Scotland – Citizens Advice Scotland, December 2015 <http://www.cas.org.uk/publications/designing-social-security-system-scotland-universal-credit-flexibilities>



DISABILITY & SOCIAL SECURITY

Layla Theiner outlines Disability Agenda Scotland's perspective on changes to social security in Scotland

DAS is an alliance of Scotland's leading disability organisations. The members of DAS are: Action on Hearing Loss Scotland, Capability Scotland, ENABLE Scotland, RNIB Scotland, SAMH (Scottish Association for Mental Health) and Sense Scotland.

Our views on social security reflects input from these focus groups and members' own focus groups or other activities with people they work with and support, as well as welfare advisers, policy advisers and other members of staff to gather views and expertise. We have also had discussions with other disability organisations and the broader third sector.

In focus groups DAS undertook with people supported by all six members:

There was a desire for the system of support to be clear and understandable.

"People need a clearer and simplistic benefit system so they know what they can get and what they can't get."
–RNIB Scotland focus group

"Things need to be clearer. The package that I was given needed to be fought for."
–RNIB Scotland focus group

"You're looking at all the negativity in your life on a piece of paper – then they're asking you how this affects your life? It's stripping you of your dignity."
–SAMH focus group

There were concerns about the cuts to benefits in recent years

"Lots of us have concerns that our benefits have been cut."
–Sense Scotland 'Our Voice' group

"You are relying on your benefits as that is the only income you have coming in. What are you going to do? You're snookered."
–ENABLE Scotland focus group

There was a desire for the system to be more easily accessible for people..

"You spend a lot of your time proving to social services that you can't do this stuff without someone coming to help you. You need a realistic process and an honest and transparent process." –RNIB Scotland focus group

"You can walk, you can talk, you can do lots of different things and because you can communicate really well then it gives you less ability to access things because people think you are more capable." –RNIB focus group

"Absolutely no account of mental health problems... Asking you if you can lift a cardboard box and how many stairs you can walk up." –SAMH focus group

For disabled people on benefits, there have been significant cuts, which have been well publicised. Yet, over half of the £1.63bn social security budget being devolved through the Scotland Act is currently spent on Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and Personal Independence Payments (PIP). This is a clear chance to improve key elements of the current system.

Reform of social security in Scotland must address the failure of the benefits system to adequately compensate disabled people for the extra financial costs they face to live an independent life. This is one of several reasons there are higher rates of poverty among disabled people. Another is that costs associated with disability average £550 per month. For instance, braille displays can cost thousands, £4,000 for a wheelchair, and/or additional costs for transport, cleaning, other support and equipment. A very recent report found that 39% of people in poverty are in a household with at least one disabled person.

The changes to the social security system in recent years have undermined disabled people's right to live independently and their right to family life in contravention of articles 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and Article 8 of the United Nations Convention on Human Rights (UNCHR). This affects disabled people, carers and others around them and the wider society and economy.



Disabled people being in work, where possible, can have economic and social benefits for individuals, the people around them and beyond. And many disabled people wish to, and are able to, work. Yet, due to a range of barriers, only 43.8% of individuals with disabilities in Scotland are employed, compared to 72.3% for the wider population. Social security is therefore vital to many disabled people

The level of poverty among particular groups, such as disabled people, is very high – 39% of people living in poverty have at least one disabled person in their household. Given that poverty is measurable, and that a key outcome for social security should be to ensure people do not have to live in poverty, DAS recommends this is an additional outcome. DAS also believes it would be helpful for all outcomes to be reported on in a transparent manner.

We recognise and welcome the difference in language and tone in talking about ‘social security’ and the laying out of key principles, in comparison to the UK Government. DAS believes the principles should be placed in legislation, and there should be a ‘Social Security Charter’ rather than a Claimant’s charter – with rights and responsibilities on both sides.

We believe that placing the principles in legislation is essential. The advantage of legislation is that it gives clear reference points. Where legislation can embody the values of dignity and respect it should do so, rather than placing a general duty that is open to interpretation. These principles should be about ensuring all people have the same rights and not just that those people who are able to get advice or advocacy can understand the system and get what they are entitled to, as is currently what often happens at the moment. We are aware that the Government wishes to move away from a culture of stigma for people on benefits. More could be done to achieve a greater culture of rights-based entitlement and reduce stigma. Much of this may be achieved through the new system but it will need reviewing and potentially more action in the future.

Delivering social security through a single national agency has a series of advantages:

- Promoting consistency and uniformity (in both front facing assessment

processes but also back office functions such as training, HR, IT etc.)

- Minimum standards can be established
- Reducing the opportunity for communication issues between agencies
- Allowing for specialist expertise to develop, particularly in relation to communications and support for particular groups’ needs.

To provide information that can be accessed by as many people as possible, and ensure dignity and respect, it will be crucial that a range of communication options should be available in accessible formats. The option for face to face contact can be the best and preferred option for some people, including the most vulnerable.

Greater automatic entitlement built into the social security system would assist people to access the support they are entitled to, and would save some resource and also the impact on people, compared to the current system.

A starting point might be to consider reinstating the automatic entitlements lost in the transfer from Disability Living Allowance (DLA) to PIP, such as for claimants undergoing dialysis. Factors to be taken into account in identifying additional automatic entitlements might include the predictability of a condition’s impact, the likelihood of an improvement in the condition over time and the severity of the condition. We do not want to undermine a culture of recovery, particularly in mental health where people may return to full health or experience years without any problems. However, automatic entitlement should be used where appropriate. Where an individual has been diagnosed with a condition, it does seem unnecessary to require them to undergo further assessment. Not all people will be covered by automatic entitlement, and some assessment would probably be needed to understand the level of impairment and/or the impact on that person’s life, but this would likely still reduce assessment. We have been considering this further as a coalition and certainly support greater automatic entitlement in principle but work would need to be done by the Government to work this through and develop the criteria and ways to ensure assessment for people whose impairments are not included in the list. DAS would be happy to be part of these discussions.



Along with automatic entitlement, there should be greater use of ‘passport benefits’ so that if someone is eligible for a benefit e.g. PIP or DLA, they don’t need to show evidence again for other relevant benefits, such as a bus pass etc. In practice, this means they could just tick a box for which eligible benefit they receive and can show evidence that they receive it.

There should also be a return to longer term and lifetime awards as for some conditions, whether physical disabilities like cerebral palsy, learning disabilities like Down Syndrome, or schizophrenia in terms of mental illness for instance, and other types of conditions, they are unlikely to change unless there is a significant technological or medical breakthrough. And longer awards would reduce assessments and the pressures this puts on people.

A single, whole-of-life benefit with age-related payments is worth further consideration. There may be disadvantages to having a single, whole-of-life benefit in the case of fluctuating conditions. However, more consistent criteria across the benefits and the life of a person would seem fairer as it can be confusing for people who move from one benefit to another, and this impacts the level of benefits they receive, simply because they are a year older. In addition, the advantages of a single, whole of life benefit would include:

- Greater consistency across the benefits in terms of criteria and who is eligible for what award
- There would not be the challenge of people having to transition at 16 and 65, for instance
- Reduce unneeded administration
- Along with greater automatic entitlements and lifetime awards, this would reduce some assessments and also stress for people and their families

There was a strong consensus across the DAS members that current assessments are not being undertaken by people with sufficient training to understand a range of conditions, from learning to physical to mental health to other disabilities including fluctuating conditions, and they should also be more able to better judge how impairments might impact on an individual’s life. Assessments should be more personalised to a person’s

condition and avoiding irrelevant questions and repeat assessments for long term conditions. This would also reduce the number of assessments and the negative impact this process can have on people and those around them due to stress etc. Some members supported a return to something like the former system of medical assessment by an Examining Medical Practitioner (EMP) in the claimant’s home although others had concerns about this, as there had been problems with this too.

There is also an opportunity for social security to be better coordinated with other systems of support and referral, such as the Welfare Fund; and signposting people to other forms of advice and support. This, of course, does not mean using benefits to pay for social care and similar costs.

Other opportunities for a better approach would be clear and respectful communications about the changes being made and the culture throughout the social security system being introduced. Accessible communications has to be a core part of this.

Through focus groups and a survey of 60 service users and staff, SAMH has identified and analysed particular issues with personal independence payments (PIP), which are supported by the findings of other DAS members:

- The application form (PIP2) and face to face medical assessment did not adequately assess the impact of mental health, with a focus on physical functionality
- Claimants felt disbelieved and at times stigmatised by assessors
- There was an overwhelming breakdown of trust in the application and assessment process
- Claimants’ rights were not communicated adequately
- The experience of assessment had a negative and often long term impact on claimants’ mental health
- The quality of evidence gathering and medical evidence

DAS supports the proposed changes to Carer’s Allowance and a new Scottish Carer’s benefit.

We also call for greater funding for independent advice and advocacy. The recent Health and Social Care Alliance report highlighted the evidence base for the benefits for people from advocacy.



It is important that we manage expectations about what can be undertaken by the Scottish Government with the devolved powers and how far things can be improved. The system is complex and there will be two systems, with different expectations and cultures. Improvements need to be made but in a well managed way, taking the time to get things right. The system is already complex and there will be two systems, with different expectations and cultures. There will also need to be ongoing coordination with Westminster and reserved powers and benefits. There needs to also be ongoing explanation of rights and the functioning of the system to people in Scotland as the system beds in, and indeed beyond to ensure clear understanding and in fitting with the principles outlined in the consultation document.

Any changes to social security should ensure there is no detriment to existing benefits. While there have been reassurances from Westminster and the Scottish Government, DAS would like to see this in legislation and a clear outcome to prevent unintended consequences in a very complicated system. We appreciate this would need further discussions between Westminster and the Scottish Government.

It has been difficult for all concerned to look at this with a 'blank slate' as only some powers are being devolved and we will be working with two systems but even so, it would be useful – as is suggested in the consultation document – to look at this in a more longer term way in the future. We recognise the challenges with the two systems, but DAS calls for a review of the system after three years of operation, including where possible, a longer term review of social security in Scotland. The benefits themselves are not being devolved, the powers to support them are. We need to not just replace like for like, but truly try to provide something better.

Footnotes

1. <http://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/extra-costs/what-are-costs>
2. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-causes-costs-and-solutions>
3. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/221668849_Economic_and_social_costs_and_benefits_to_employers_of_retaining_recruiting_and_employing_disabled_people_and_or_people_with_health_conditions_or_an_injury_A_review_of_the_evidenc
4. <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0048/00484492.pdf>
5. <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Labour-Market/LMTrends>
6. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-causes-costs-and-solutions>
7. Personal Independence Payment: what's the problem, SAMH, October 2016 <https://www.samh.org.uk/our-work/public-affairs.aspx>
8. ALLIANCE Evaluation of Welfare Advocacy Support Project Evaluation Report 2016



SOCIAL SECURITY & THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

COSLA President David O'Neill writes about the opportunities for better links between local government and social security

As COSLA president and a longstanding locally elected member, I believe there should be a creative and innovative approach in how the elements of social security transferring to Scotland should be used. This should be to address the longstanding inequalities that persist in Scottish society and limit individual, family and community well-being.

The approach must be informed by the ambitions of the widely endorsed Christie Commission. These require public sector reform to ensure the services in Scotland are reshaped, integrated and deliver better services to those who need them. While this is true across the public sector landscape, it is especially true for social security which provides assistance to many of those within our communities experiencing the greatest inequalities. I believe that rather than focussing on building a new 'Scottish' bureaucracy, it is imperative that Scotland takes this unique opportunity to develop real synergies with existing devolved services in ways which simplify access, reduce duplication, strengthen outcomes and provide more personalised services.

Local Government agrees with the visions and principles set out by the Scottish Government in March 2016. Respect for the dignity of individuals should be at the heart of everything all public services do. Social security is very much an investment in the people of Scotland. It is absolutely right that processes and services developed for the future of social security in Scotland are evidence based and designed with the people of Scotland – this chimes with the sentiments we heard during our evidence sessions held as part of the work on the 'Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy'.

Despite some claims by others to the contrary, there is little appetite within local government for unfettered discretion around the delivery of carers, disability and the other benefits being devolved. Neither are we suggesting access to benefits should be dependent on a social work assessment. I recognise that many people with disabilities will not need or want to engage with social work services. Rather, we are putting forward the view that we must develop a much more holistic approach to maximising the life chances of those with disabilities where all services and supports operate much more effectively at a local level. This would include services we currently deliver, those to be devolved and those which currently remain centrally administered but that may be devolved in future.

Core components from local government's perspective would include:

- Local accessibility with consistent national policy development around entitlement and eligibility. This would provide consistency of support with local knowledge and service relationships being used to help those claiming assistance.
- A single Scottish application for each of the supports being devolved which would reduce confusion and increase take up. These should be designed in partnership with the new benefits agency, Scottish government, local authorities, representative groups and those with lived experience of claiming benefits.
- Local discretion would be centred on making effective links to relevant services offered locally. We will want to identify 'triggers' for onward referrals and/or signposting.
- Customers would be invited to agree to information sharing as part of the process. This will assist access to other (related) services – both local and national.
- Face to face engagement, where necessary would be offered in a local setting. In the longer term we would aim to have a single point of contact joining up other service provision, as appropriate.
- Adequate funding to ensure the principles, outcomes and services we all aspire to can be realised throughout Scotland.

Regardless of the final form devolved social security takes it will be challenging and complex. Local authorities are able to draw on a range of experience and established partnerships across key services which are and will continue to be relevant to those claiming assistance. If we want to develop a more holistic approach and benefit from the experience of professionals who know the circumstances of those living with a disability, locating some elements of delivery within a local setting will ensure services are better aligned and more effective in creating links that can assist individuals. The challenge before us is to achieve consistency across Scotland, whilst recognising what works well in one part of Scotland may differ from that in another. The way services are delivered must reflect these differences.



Turning to the specific supports being devolved to Scotland, whilst it is true much of the social security spend will not be devolved that does not mean there is not opportunity to achieve better outcomes with the 15% Scotland will have control over. We should not lose our ambition that more should be devolved, as reflected in our submission to the Smith Commission.

We need to consider the future of the disability benefits which includes Disability Living Allowance, Personal Independence Payments, Attendance Allowance, Severe Disablement Allowance and Industrial Injuries Benefits. Local government, like many others in Scotland recognise the importance of looking at those in need of assistance in the round rather than focusing on one issue or another. I believe far better outcomes can be achieved. Where people know an individual's condition and circumstances, and the effect these have on their day to day lives, they will be better placed to assist in the provision of evidence and information in support of claims to disability benefits. Doing this should lead to less need for face to face assessment and therefore cut down the negative effects such assessments have on those claiming disability benefits at present. Importantly it should also provide significant savings in the costs of providing medical assessments.

I believe the assistance being devolved to support carers need to be considered in the round taking in to consideration the ongoing work to implement the Carers Act. It is also important that financial support is integrated with other tangible assistance locally, to both Carers and those they care for. The challenge before all of us is making the journey more straightforward.

I, like many other elected representatives, frequently hear from carers and those they support, about how difficult navigating the various different parts of the system is. The challenge is to make the systems work seamlessly. This benefits those who need the services, but critically also ensures efficiency and value for money across the whole of the public sector. COSLA welcomes the commitment to look at those providing care and support at different times in their life. I particularly welcome the commitment to consider the support young carers require. Local government will work with all those involved to provide evidence to support policy interventions.

The assistance being devolved previously known as the regulated social fund which incorporates funeral payments, Cold Weather Payments/Winter Fuel Payments

and maternity payments present real opportunities to do things differently in Scotland. Work has commenced around funeral poverty already this year and significant work continues around fuel poverty. It is important tangible links to the work already underway are made and that we consider the opportunities to move in to prevention of fuel and funeral poverty. We need to avoid treating the symptoms. Significantly increasing incomes through wages, making homes more fuel efficient, and decreasing the cost of fuel are important aspects of fuel poverty. Another key point with all of these forms of support is that once transferred to us in Scotland they need to integrate with local services to simplify customer access and provide support when and where needed.

Another area that will be important in Scotland is that we use the powers being transferred quickly around the flexibilities in how Universal Credit operates here. Whilst we recognise they are limited in scope and do not fundamentally allow Scotland to change the design of Universal Credit, they do present an opportunity to minimise some high risk areas.

Universal Credit continues to be rolled out across Scotland. By the end of this financial year 'full service' will be available in five local authority areas. More local councils will come on stream the following year. We are all concerned that as roll out continues the risks associated with direct monthly payments, which include housing costs, will result in significant numbers of tenants falling in to debt. Rent arrears will increase as a result. Scottish Government has signalled their intention to ensure that the default position across Scotland would be that, the housing element of Universal Credit will be paid direct to social landlords, unless tenants decide to opt out of this. Safeguarding the ability of councils and other social landlords to provide social housing is absolutely vital. Scotland continues to have a more significant proportion of social housing than elsewhere in the UK. We need to take steps to avoid destabilising this provision. Access to good affordable housing is of course one of the many ways we can help address inequality. It is a priority for everyone in Scotland.



Before I conclude, it is worth mentioning the role publically funded advice providers play in social security in Scotland. I believe such providers should play a particular part in the development of the system. They have significant experience across the social security landscapes, both in terms of entitlement based system and discretionary payments. It is important that as we design social security in Scotland we understand the current landscape and consider the impact any changes are likely to have on advice agencies. Having a complete picture over what is currently available, what we can continue with and a frank understanding of what we will need across the agencies will be important as we face the continuing cuts. Only with this can we have a good understanding of the likely impact and a feel for the realistic actions needed to ensure advice services continue to be available locally to assist those affected by changes made.

In conclusion whilst the challenge before Scotland around devolved social security should not be underestimated, the importance of the vital assistance they provide to those who rely on them, mean taking time now to get it right is paramount. Success for us all must be a safe and secure transition from the current position in the short term and in the medium to longer term a set of arrangements that better meet the ambitions laid out clearly in the Christie Commission.

Local government in Scotland stands ready to work across Scotland to help achieve this – to ensure devolved social security tackles inequality, increasing integration of services and ultimately improves outcomes for those in need.



MEMBERSHIP:

JOIN US!

The Poverty Alliance is a national anti-poverty development agency for Scotland which seeks to combat poverty through collaborative action, bringing together workers and activists drawn from the public sector, voluntary organisations, community groups and other agencies.

The Alliance's wide range of activities provide many opportunities for members to exchange information and expertise which benefit the anti-poverty movement.

The benefits of membership include regular mailings, Scottish Anti-Poverty Review, opportunities to become involved in working groups and access to a wide range of organisations and activists who have the potential to influence the direction of anti-poverty policy in the future.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Name and designation of contact person: _____

Name and address of organisation: _____

Telephone: _____

Fax: _____

Email: _____

MEMBERSHIP FEES:

FULL MEMBERSHIP: OPEN TO CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS: INCOME LESS THAN £50K: FREE | £50,000-£75,000: £50 | £75,000-£175,000: £75 | £175,000-£500,000: £100 | MORE THAN £500,000: £200

ASSOCIATE MEMBERSHIP: OPEN TO INDIVIDUALS, VOLUNTARY AND STATUTORY BODIES, AND PRIVATE SECTOR ORGANISATIONS*: UNWAGED INDIVIDUALS: FREE | INDIVIDUALS: £25 | VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS: £25 | STATUTORY BODIES: £300

*PLEASE CONTACT THE POVERTY ALLIANCE FOR DETAILS

I/We wish to apply for *Ordinary/Associate Membership for the year: _____

* Please delete as appropriate. NB Membership of The Poverty Alliance runs from 1st April to 31st March. Applications for new membership received after April 1st are charged on a pro rata basis.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Please send the completed application form to the address below - thank you.