

Social Security in Scotland

Evidence to the Scottish Parliament

Social Work Scotland welcomes the opportunity to set out some key comments ahead of this committee session.

We welcome the principles-based approach which focuses on maximising the uptake of benefits, improving the experience of those who use the service and seeing social security as a social investment rather than unproductive public expenditure.

Our focus will be on disability and carer benefits in this instance rather than the full range of powers being devolved.

The current discussions led by Scottish Government have revealed some of the contradictions or tensions inherent providing benefits to 'compensate' for the additional costs of having a defined disability alongside wider social welfare systems.

- the move to PIP is ostensibly to promote 'personal independence' but is based on narrow competency-based tests which emphasise deficits in how an individual functions
- payment levels for DLA/PIP are based around components of 'care' when there is no requirement or expectation that the benefit will be used to fund care or support for the recipient
- for those in receipt of social work services all or part of a disability benefit may be impacted by local authority charging

It is understandable and laudable that the Scottish Government would wish to take full advantage of assuming new powers to fashion a system based on positive outcomes for its users not simply a continuation of cash transfers. The vision - since the publication of 'Re-thinking Welfare' - has been to 'maximise life chances' and that 'the identification and agreement of an individual's needs and goals should be the starting point'. 'A New Future for Social Security' aims for greater integration with other types of support such as Self-Directed Support.

Notions of empowerment, person-centredness and choice are core values for social work. However we would be cautious about any longer-term aspiration to gear a social security service towards personal circumstances and setting of outcomes for an individual which might involve a social (if not a social work) assessment.

We would favour a system which is based around fair, equitable and simplified access and as far as possible 'entitlement' retaining the ability of the recipient to spend their benefit how they choose and without pre-conditions (however benign). Unlike disability benefits Self-Directed Support remains subject to social work assessment, eligibility criteria and monitoring of outcomes. We would however be fully supportive of working towards a better alignment of social security with other services such as social work and health.

The proposal within the consultation to have a 'claimant charter' implies an expected but unspecified reciprocity from the benefit recipient (going beyond respect for staff) which again implies some kind of conditionality. The term 'claimant' has a negative history in a UK context and the term implies a continued supplication rather than a one-off application for support. The DWP use the term 'customer' and the report Re-thinking Welfare referred to a 'social security partnership'.

The issue of charging for social care services should form part of a wider debate around the respective levels of NHS and social care funding and the disparity with NHS services being largely free at the point of access.

Although 'Re-thinking Welfare' was a pre-referendum look at Scotland potentially taking over the entire system it still provides a helpful alternative vision based around social security as social investment, moving towards a community capacity-building or assets-based approach and away from one based on a medicalised and personal deficits or 'needs' model.

Whilst the current consultation naturally focuses on the benefits being devolved we would support the points made by the Minister in her letter to the Committee around also prioritising engagement with the UK Government around the interface with the remainder of the social security system notably the approximately 250,000 people in Scotland with some form of disability (including mental ill-health) receiving Employment Support Allowance and where sanctions may apply. The devolution of supported employment schemes - currently Work Choice and the Work Programme - present us with a significant opportunity both for a radical rethink (with DWP research indicating that the majority of those placed in work by contracted agencies have been those already nearest to the job market) and as a mechanism for influencing locally processes around sanctions and work-capability assessments.

Social Work Scotland
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