Dear Presiding Officer,

We write to you as Chair of the Committee Conveners Group, and to all members of the Group, to outline our position on the establishment of a Scottish Parliament Welfare and Benefits Committee.

As you may know, the organisations represented in this letter all gave evidence at the Health and Sport Committee session held this week, on Tuesday 15 November. At that session we outlined our support for the establishment of a specific Welfare and Benefits Committee to be set up for the lifetime of this Parliament. This is a position previously sought by our organisations in other submissions and letters and we wanted to take the opportunity here to explain our call to all Scottish Parliament Committee Conveners.

Our organisations firmly believe that MSPs must have the opportunity to give due consideration and scrutiny to welfare reform changes – introduced through UK policy and legislative changes - which will have a major impact on the people, services, and economy of Scotland. While we understand that currently welfare sits within the Health and Sport Committee’s portfolio, we believe that the changes being introduced are wide-ranging, varied, and cross-cutting, and impact on the work of nearly all committees and government departments, for example: local government, education and young people, finance, housing, justice, rural affairs, and equality.

We envisage such a Welfare and Benefits Committee having a role in analysing and scrutinising the welfare reform changes as they are introduced and implemented and assessing how the changes affect Scotland’s citizens, services, and economy. This Committee could also help steer a way through the unanswered questions that have been posed by the proposals in the bill, such as how it will affect Scotland’s different policy positions, particularly in social care and housing policy; how will the benefits that are being devolved be run at both national and local level; will there be any obligations and duties placed upon these levels of government as a result; what will the transitional arrangements be as benefits are devolved?

The Scottish Government has stated in written answers and in its Legislative Consent Memorandum that it does not believe that the UK Government has provided sufficient detail of the impact on Scotland and devolved services of the proposed UK
Welfare Reform bill. At the Health and Sport Committee session, and elsewhere, we have stated that much of the detail of the changes has been left to regulation or secondary legislation. This has constrained analysis and impact assessments for Scotland and this is an area of dissatisfaction for many in the voluntary sector. This lack of detail is an area of concern to us and further reason why there is need for continuing scrutiny from the Scottish Parliament.

All our organisations are concerned about the impact that welfare reform changes are already having on the people we represent, and have expressed strongly our concerns about aspects of changes that will come into force between now and 2017. These changes must be addressed by MSPs over the next few years which is why we are recommending that such a Committee be set up for the lifetime of the current Scottish Parliament. However, it would not necessarily require a standing time and meeting schedule, but be expected to meet as and when necessary over the next four years.

We would reiterate that our call to the Scottish Parliament to introduce a Welfare and Reform Committee is to allow for greater and wider scrutiny of the welfare reform changes due to be introduced and to allow for joining the links between all the different but cross-cutting areas the bill will impact on.

We strongly urge the current Committee Conveners Group members to support our position and would appreciate this issue being discussed at the next meeting of the Group, and hearing views and feedback from that discussion.

Yours sincerely

Susan McPhee
Director of External Services
Citizens Advice Scotland

Mark Ballard
Head of Policy
Barnardo's Scotland

Louise Warde Hunter
Strategic Director of Children Services
Action for Children Scotland

Alison Todd
Director of Policy and Practice
CHILDREN 1ST

CC: Committee Conveners Group Members

Claudia Beamish
Gavin Brown
Nigel Don
Joe FitzPatrick
Kenneth Gibson
Rob Gibson
Christine Grahame

Hugh Henry
Stewart Maxwell
Christina McKelvie
Duncan McNeil
David Stewart
Dave Thompson
Maureen Watt