Dear Convener,

Please find attached a submission from Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS) in advance of the evidence session into welfare and benefits that the Scotland Bill Committee will hold on Tuesday 4 October and at which CAS looks forward to attending.

As you can see the submission is in four parts:

The impact that the reforms being proposed will have on the people of Scotland

The impact that the reforms being proposed will have on services provided by both the public and voluntary sector in Scotland

The impact that the devolving of various benefits to the Scottish Government will have on both people and services

The impact the proposals in the bill will have on devolved areas that have not been considered or taken into account.

It is for these four reasons that we also recommend that the Scotland Bill Committee recommends the Scottish Parliament establish a specific Welfare Reform Bill Committee for the lifetime of this Parliament.

CAS believes that MSPs must have the opportunity to give due consideration and scrutiny to a bill that will have a major impact on people, services, and organisations across Scotland. Whilst we understand that the Legislative Consent Memorandum would be scrutinised by the Health and Sport Committee, we believe that the changes the Welfare Reform Bill will introduce are wide ranging, varied, and cross cutting and impact on the work of various committees and government departments including local government, housing, justice, and equality. That is why four leading children’s charities - Action for
Children; Barnardo’s Scotland; Children 1st; and One Parent Families Scotland - have also recommended the idea of such an ad hoc committee.

As our submission shows the Welfare Reform Bill will have a major and damaging impact on people, services and the economy of Scotland. As the current welfare system is dismantled, it is Scotland’s public and voluntary services that will need to pick up the pieces - at a time when they are facing huge cuts themselves. This double blow for the people of Scotland should be addressed by the Scottish Parliament.

That is why CAS is also of the opinion that this Welfare Reform Committee should be established for the lifetime of this parliament, so that it can analyse and scrutinise the welfare reform changes as they are introduced and implemented. As the reforms are introduced over the next two to three years, there must be a role for MSPs to oversee how the changes affect Scotland’s citizens and services.

We also believe that a Scottish Parliament Welfare Reform Bill Committee could 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 that it does not believe that the UK Government has provide sufficient detail on the implementation of its reforms on either the Scottish budget or local government budget - despite repeated requests – and that there is a need for the Scottish Government to look at repeals and changes in existing legislation and entitlement criteria. CAS would argue that a Welfare Reform Bill Committee could ask UK Government Ministers for evidence/submissions on the impact to Scotland that the planned welfare reforms will have and work with the Scottish Government on looking at the areas of legislation that will require change.

CAS would like to point out that we urge the Scottish Parliament to introduce such a Committee to allow for greater and wider scrutiny of the Welfare Reform bill, not because we do not believe either the Scottish Government or Scottish Parliament Health & Sport Committee cannot do so. CAS is well aware that the Scottish Government is keeping a close eye on the welfare reform changes and indeed CAS is a member of the Scottish Government’s Welfare Reform Scrutiny Group. This is an important Group which has played a key role in assessing the bill and should be maintained.

However CAS believes there is also a role for the Scottish Parliament to play in scrutinising the changes that will have such a major impact on Scotland’s people, services, and organisations. We strongly urge the Scotland Bill Committee, MSPs and the Minister for Parliamentary Business to establish a Welfare Reform Bill Committee.

Yours sincerely

Susan McPhee
Director of External Services