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Welfare Reform Committee

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Welfare Reform Committee

To monitor the implementation of the UK Welfare Reform Act 2012 and other social security legislation as it affects provision in Scotland and to consider relevant Scottish legislation and other consequential arrangements.



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Introduction

1. This report covers the work of the Welfare Reform Committee during the parliamentary year from 11 May 2015 to 23 March 2016.

Inquiries and reports

2. During the parliamentary year the Committee produced 6 reports. Two reports were the subject of inquiries into 'Women and Social Security' and the 'Future Delivery of Social Security in Scotland'. A third report was an exploratory analysis produced by Sheffield Hallam and Glasgow Universities into the 'Impact of Welfare Reform on the Scottish Labour Market'.
3. Two reports were on the subject of legislation. One considered the Welfare Funds (Scotland) Regulations 2016. The other looked at a Legislative Consent Memorandum (LCM) on the UK Welfare Reform and Work Bill. Detail on the LCM and the subordinate legislation will be dealt with later in this report. The final report was a 'Legacy' report which contained suggestions for any future committee dealing with social security issues. All reports are available on the Committee webpages.

Women and Social Security

4. The Committee heard evidence which suggests that there is an existing inequality for women which has been aggravated by the recent reforms to the social security system. The Committee believes that the cumulative impact of the reforms has had a damaging and disproportionate impact on women.
5. Based on the written and oral evidence received, the Committee made a number of conclusions and recommendations. The Committee welcomed the devolution of further social security powers to Scotland. It considers that this represents an opportunity to rectify some of the systematic inequalities that women face. However, it recognises that, as with any new change, there will be challenges.

Impact of Welfare Reform on the Scottish Labour Market

6. This report, produced by Sheffield Hallam and Glasgow Universities, examines the impact of welfare reform on the Scottish labour market. It explored whether there is any merit in the claim that welfare reform increases overall levels of employment and reduces unemployment. It set out detailed analysis of the link between employment figures and the various welfare reforms. It found "little support for the view that welfare reform is having important and positive impacts on the labour market in Scotland".

Future Delivery of Social Security in Scotland

7. The report set out the principles and key points for the Scottish Government and others to bear in mind during the development of a Scottish social security system.
8. The Committee's report called for a significant overhaul of the current approach and suggested that the provision of social security in Scotland should be about preserving the dignity and respect of those using it, similar to the way people are normally treated if they need to use the NHS.
9. The report set out a set of principles that the new Scottish system should adhere to. For example, the system should be person –centred, non-punitive, simple and transparent and human rights based. To implement this, strong leadership will be required from both the Department of Work and Pensions and the Scottish Government. However, the Committee recognised that a huge cultural shift will be required if Scotland is to create a better welfare system.

Legacy Report

10. The Committee made a number of suggestions for any future Committee that may deal with the issue of social security in session 5.

Invitations to UK Ministers

11. During the parliamentary year the Committee continued its correspondence with UK Ministers to invite them to give evidence at a formal Committee meeting. In total UK Ministers have declined 11 invitations over the current session.
12. It had a private meeting with the UK Minister for Employment, Priti Patel MP, in October 2015 at which a public meeting in Edinburgh was agreed to. However, the Committee expressed its disappointment that the Minister for Employment was unable to provide a date for the meeting before the dissolution of parliament.

Legislation

Legislative Consent Motion

13. The Committee dealt with a memorandum which related to the provisions amending the Child Poverty Act 2010; specifically, those relating to child poverty strategies, and those dealing with the Child Poverty and Social Mobility Commission.
14. The Scottish Government did not support the changes that the Bill, as introduced, proposed to make to the Child Poverty Act 2010. In light of this the Scottish Government requested an opt-out from the UK Government's approach, securing

amendments that remove the 2010 Act's duties on Scottish Ministers. As the opt – out was secured the LCM recommended that that the relevant provisions relating to child poverty strategies and the Child Poverty and Social Mobility Commission should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Welfare Fund (Scotland) Regulations 2016

15. The Committee was appointed as the lead Committee in the consideration of the Welfare Funds (Scotland) Regulations 2016. This followed the detailed examination the Committee has made of the interim scheme and the Welfare Funds (Scotland) Bill 2015.
16. The Regulations set out who may make applications, procedures and what may be provided by way of assistance. Provision is also made for the details of internal review procedures. The Committee approved the regulations and set out a number of issues for the government to take into account for the guidance. For example that the guidance should contain case study examples of what 'exceptional' circumstances may look like to aide front line workers in exercising their discretion.

Communication and engagement

17. In May 2015 the Committee participated in a mini parliament day in Craigmillar, Edinburgh. An open invitation was issued to local residents to come to an informal, round table discussion with Committee Members to share their views of the changes to the social security system. Over 50 people were present and the event was well received by all attendees.
18. The Committee also continued with its 'Your Say' initiative. In September 2015 the Committee invited all of its previous 'Your Say' witnesses back to the parliament to update it on their situations and provide them with an opportunity to share their views on the 'Future Delivery of Social Security in Scotland'. Witnesses reported to the Committee that they felt valued and that their contributions had been heard.
19. The Committee also heard directly from people with experience of the UK Government's 'Work Programme' as part of its enquiry into the Future Delivery of Social Security in Scotland. .
20. The Committee has been active in utilising social media to promote its work. This has especially been the case with Twitter, where the Committee now has 1558 followers. Twitter has been used to promote 'Your Say' and inquiry work as well as give regular updates on Committee business.

Committee updates

21. In August Committee members visited Inverness to investigate the progress of the implementation of the Universal Credit pilot project in the Highland Council area. They also visited a range of ethnic minority representative organisations in Glasgow in September to seek their views on the 'Future Delivery of Social Security in Scotland'. These visits directly involved members of the community with experience of the social security changes. Information gained in these visits was important in crafting the recommendations made to the Scottish Government.

Equalities

22. As noted above the Committee focused an inquiry into the impact of welfare reform on women. As part of the recommendations from the inquiry it was agreed that the Committee would also focus its budget scrutiny on the impact on women. The Committee reported to the Finance Committee on the budget in the form of a letter.
23. The scrutiny that the Committee has conducted over the year also recognised the particular impact that the changes to the social security system have had on disabled people.

Meetings

24. The Committee met 19 times during the Parliamentary year. 3 meetings were held entirely in private and 13 meetings included items in private. Items included consideration of Committee reports, work programmes, reflecting on oral evidence received and approaches to UK Ministerial correspondence.

