Welfare Reform Committee

3rd Report, 2014 (Session 4)

Annual report 2013-2014

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Welfare Reform Committee

Remit and membership

Remit:

To keep under review the passage of the UK Welfare Reform Bill and monitor its implementation as it affects welfare provision in Scotland and to consider relevant Scottish legislation and other consequential arrangements.

Membership:

Annabelle Ewing
Linda Fabiani
Iain Gray (from 18 September 2012 - 3 September 2013)
Jamie Hepburn (Deputy Convener)
Alex Johnstone
Kenneth Macintosh (from 3 September 2013)
Michael McMahon (Convener)
Kevin Stewart

Committee Clerking Team:

Clerk to the Committee
Simon Watkins

Assistant Clerk
Rebecca Lamb

Committee Assistant
Kevin Dougan
The Committee reports to the Parliament as follows—

Introduction

1. This report covers the work of the Welfare Reform Committee during the parliamentary year 11 May 2013 to 10 May 2014.

Inquiries and Reports

2. During the parliamentary year the Committee produced two reports regarding the ‘Bedroom Tax’ and one regarding the Scottish Government’s Draft Budget. The Committee’s work programme during the parliamentary year also included inquiries into food banks and benefit sanctions.

Bedroom Tax

3. The Committee’s first report was research it commissioned from Professor Kenneth Gibb from the University of Glasgow on the impact of the ‘Bedroom Tax’ in Scotland. The research was published on 19 October 2013 and Professor Gibb appeared before the Committee on 5 November 2013 to present the findings.

4. On 31 January 2014, the Committee produced its own report on the ‘Bedroom Tax’. This interim report set out the Committee’s findings and recommendations on the ‘Bedroom Tax’. The report called for the abolition of the ‘Bedroom Tax’, as it was iniquitous and inhumane and may well breach tenants’ human rights. On 13 March 2014, the Committee held a Chamber debate which focussed on its report and the wider impact of welfare reform.

Budget Report

5. The Committee produced a report to the Finance Committee on the 2014-15 Draft Budget. The Committee’s budget process was informed by the appointment - for the first time since the Committee formed - of a Budget Adviser, Professor Paul Spicker from Robert Gordon University. The two main areas of focus for budget scrutiny were the Scottish Welfare Fund and the Council Tax Reduction scheme. The report was published on 9 December 2013.

Alex Johnstone notes his dissent to the use of the term ‘Bedroom Tax’
Your Say
6. The Committee continued to run ‘Your Say’, an initiative which it started in March 2012, to hear views and personal experiences of welfare reform. In this parliamentary year the main focus of ‘Your Say’ has been on people’s experiences of the ‘Bedroom Tax’ and how welfare reform is affecting those with long-term conditions.

Invitations to UK Ministers
7. During the parliamentary year the Committee wrote on several occasions to UK Ministers to invite them to give evidence at a formal Committee meeting. Invitations have been issued to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the Minister for Welfare Reform, the Minister for Employment and the Secretary of State for Scotland. None of the invitations were accepted except for the Secretary of State for Scotland who is due to give formal evidence to the Committee on welfare reform before the summer recess.

Expert Group
8. The Committee held an evidence session with the Expert Working Group on Welfare and Constitutional Reform on 1 October 2013 to scrutinise the findings of a report published in May 2013 by the Expert Group relating to welfare reform in an independent Scotland.

Direct Payment Demonstration Project
9. On 3 December 2013 the Committee took evidence from Dunedin Canmore Housing Association on the outcomes of its Direct Payment Demonstration Project.

Food banks inquiry
10. The Committee conducted an inquiry into the issue of food banks and possible links to the UK Government’s welfare reforms. The Committee held two round-table discussions on 4 March and 29 April 2014. Witnesses included those who run food banks, local authorities, medical professionals and a number of third sector organisations. Committee members visited food banks in their local areas to gain a greater understanding of the issues. To conclude its inquiry the Committee will produce a report of its findings on the topic of food banks in the summer of 2014.

Benefit Sanctions inquiry
11. The Committee conducted an inquiry on the issue of the revised benefit sanctions regime. The Committee conducted a fact-finding visit, hosted by Citizens Advice Scotland and One Parent Families Scotland, to a Citizens Advice Bureau in Glasgow on 25 March 2014 to hear first-hand evidence from people who have been directly affected by benefit sanctions. The Committee then held a round-table evidence session to discuss the issue of benefit sanctions. This was followed by an evidence session with Neil Couling, Work Services Director, Department of Work and Pensions (“DWP”). To conclude its inquiry the Committee will produce a report of its findings on the topic of benefit sanctions in the summer of 2014.
Subordinate legislation

12. During the parliamentary year the Committee considered five statutory instruments, one in relation to passported benefits and four in relation to the Council Tax Reduction scheme. These instruments included the appeals process for Council Tax Reduction and the uprating of Social Security Benefits for 2014/15.

Petitions

13. During the parliamentary year the Committee considered two petitions, both relating to the ‘Bedroom Tax’.

14. Petition PE01468: by Mike Dailly on ‘Evictions due to under occupation deductions’ called on the Scottish Government to prevent social landlords from using rent arrears caused by under occupation housing benefit deductions in eviction actions. The Committee took evidence from the petitioner, housing associations and local authority representatives at its meeting on 12 November 2013. Evidence taken on the petition was used as part of the Committee’s subsequent report on the ‘Bedroom Tax’.

15. Petition PE01496: by Alan Wyllie on behalf of No2BedroomTax Campaign on ‘Bedroom Tax Mitigation’ called on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to make approximately £50million available to mitigate all effects of the ‘Bedroom Tax’ in Scotland. The Committee considered the above petition at its meeting on 3 December 2013 and agreed to write to relevant stakeholders to seek their views on the petition. The Committee took evidence from the petitioner, housing associations and local authority representatives at its meeting on 28 January 2014. Evidence taken on the petition was used as part of the Committee’s subsequent report on the ‘Bedroom Tax’.

Engagement and innovation

16. During the parliamentary year, the Convener gave speeches at several conferences on the work of the Committee.

17. 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 844 followers, an increase from 401 at the end of the last parliamentary year. Twitter has been used as a way of promoting the ‘Your Say’ calls for views for those with long-term conditions, putting out daily updates of the Committee’s work including photos of Committee meetings and visits.

18. The Committee has also promoted photos on Facebook when the webteam has a gallery available after Committee visits. Facebook was also used when launching a ‘Your Say’ call for views for those with long-term conditions.

19. At the beginning of the parliamentary year the Committee completed its visits to local authorities who were conducting either DWP or Scottish Government-led pilot projects for the implementation of Universal Credit. Also included in the series of fact-finding visits was a visit to New Horizons Borders, a mental health service in the Borders which is concerned about the impact of welfare reform.
20. On 17 September 2013, as part of its consideration of Work Capability Assessments, the Committee visited DWP decision makers at Bathgate Benefits Centre. The Committee members who attended reported back their findings at a Committee meeting on 24 September 2014.

**Equalities**

21. Welfare reform has affected a wide range of people in society, including those with mental and physical disabilities. The Committee has been determined to hear from the organisations representing this section of society as well as directly from people through its ‘Your Say’ initiative.

22. The Committee has held two more ‘Your Say’ sessions at the Parliament. On 10 September 2013 three witnesses who made ‘Your Say’ submissions came to tell the Committee their experiences of the ‘bedroom tax’. On 18 February 2014 three witnesses who have long-term conditions and have been affected by welfare reform came into the Parliament after making a written submission to give their accounts of the impact the reforms have had on them. The witnesses were well supported through the process by the Committee and feedback indicated that they found it a positive and helpful experience. There was also positive media coverage which raised the profile of their situations.

23. As a result of the evidence gathered from ‘Your Say’, the Committee wrote to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions with a collaboration of the testimonies which people had submitted to ‘Your Say’ and a list of five key recommendations for improving the Work Capability Assessments.

24. To continue the Committee’s commitment to hear from those with disabilities who have been affected by welfare reform, a delegation of Committee members went on a fact-finding visit to Deafblind Scotland on 25 February 2014, to meet deafblind people and to learn about their experiences of the welfare system over the recent period of welfare reform. The Committee also conducted a fact-finding visit to Glasgow Disability Alliance on 22 April 2014, to hear from people with disabilities about how they have been affected by welfare reform.

**Meetings**

25. The Committee met formally 19 times during the parliamentary year. One meeting was held entirely in private and thirteen meetings included items in private. The reasons for taking business in private were mainly to consider draft reports and to reflect on oral evidence received.
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