

Scottish Campaign on Welfare Reform

Scottish Campaign on Welfare Reform
c/o the Poverty Alliance
162 Buchanan Street
Glasgow
G1 2LL

Dear MP

Welfare Reform

We are a broad coalition of organisations working with people experiencing exclusion and poverty in Scotland. We welcome the Government's commitment to tackling poverty in the Welfare Reform Green Paper, and its intention to provide more support to people too often excluded from the labour market. We accept that work can be a key route out of poverty, but believe that work is not a panacea and that the Government's anti-poverty strategy must also address the high levels of in-work poverty.

We are concerned that the current Welfare Reform proposals do not provide either enough support for those wanting to move into work or enough protection for those who are unable to work and that some aspects of the reforms may lead to people experiencing even deeper poverty.

We feel there are three areas of particular concern in the Green Paper:

- Compulsion of individuals
- Adequacy of benefit levels
- Resources available for reform

Compulsion of individuals

Compulsion and sanctions risk alienating people who genuinely wish to return to work and could force them into inappropriate and unsustainable jobs. The Government offers no evidence to support compulsion as either a necessary or effective mechanism for encouraging people into work. According to research supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, there are currently 800,000 disabled workless adults who want to work. We would contend that if the right support is available at the right level and at the right time, people will be empowered and enabled to move into and stay in work. Compulsion only adds an unnecessary, artificial barrier.

Furthermore, the reform proposals focus almost exclusively on the responsibilities of individuals to move from welfare into work. This is an unfair imbalance, since the Green Paper says very little about the responsibilities of employers or government itself in this relationship. Employers are often reluctant to take on lone parents, older people, disabled people or people with long term health problems, yet there is little mention of how they will be encouraged to change their attitude and practice as part of these reforms. Similarly, there need to be strict requirements on government agencies to honour their responsibilities towards benefit recipients, for example, by ensuring that all personal capability assessments are conducted within 12 weeks.

Adequacy of benefit levels

In the context of proposals that appear to create various new benefit rates, we are concerned that the Green Paper does not address the current inadequacy of benefit levels generally. Current benefit levels mean too many households live on poverty incomes and there appears to be no intention to raise these levels. Whilst there is a welcome proposal to increase income for people with “severe health problems and disabilities” who cannot work, we are disappointed that the Green Paper does not quantify this increase.

For many, a damaging spiral of hardship, poor health and low self esteem succeeds only in building up further barriers to work. Disabled people and lone parents in particular also experience many hidden costs. Research suggests that these costs mean substantially higher benefit levels are required in order for them to experience an acceptable standard of living and to provide a more secure foundation from which to move into work, where appropriate.

Resources available for reform

The government has stated in its five year strategy for the DWP that it is cutting 30,000 jobs, and some JobCentre Plus offices in Scotland have already closed. Our organisations are concerned that such an efficiency drive will not deliver the substantial additional staff and resources required to support people in moving from benefits into work.

Furthermore, we do not believe that £360 million is sufficient to roll out the Pathways to Work approach. If current spending levels within Pathways to Work pilots were rolled out nationally, the cost would be nearer £500 million. As it is, we are concerned that these pilots may have engaged easier to help groups, and that if all new claimants are involved costs will be higher. We are also concerned that there are currently no safeguards in place to protect claimants and their benefits should resources prove inadequate.

Many of the organisations supporting this joint letter to MPs will also be making detailed individual responses to the Green Paper. But we agree on these three main areas of concern. We are therefore writing jointly to demonstrate the level of consensus across civic Scotland, aware as we are that these reforms will have a significant impact on our members and service users. Unless these issues are addressed, the reforms risk becoming a missed opportunity to radically improve the benefits system and the lives of thousands living in your constituencies.

We would be grateful if you could raise our concerns with the Minister for Work and Pensions, John Hutton MP. We look forward to hearing from you.



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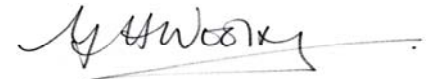
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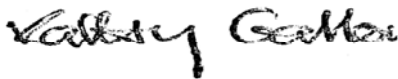
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