

The draft Scottish social security Charter

Social Security Committee consideration

31 January 2019

Written evidence from Citizens Advice Scotland

Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS), our 60 member Citizen Advice Bureaux (CAB), the Citizen Advice consumer helpline, and the Extra Help Unit, form Scotland's largest independent advice network. Advice provided by our service is free, independent, confidential, impartial and available to everyone.

In 2017-18 the Citizens Advice Service network helped over 295,100 clients in Scotland and dealt with almost 800,000 advice issues. With support from the network clients had financial gains of over £138 million and our self-help website Advice in Scotland received approximately 3.2 million page views.

Summary

- The Social Security Charter has the potential to improve the experience of using the social security system for people who need support from it.
- CAS believes the most important role of the Charter is to embed the Social Security Principles into the system to empower those using it to challenge substandard service and seek redress, and to train all staff who come into contact with system users.
- CAS suggests the Committee may wish to explore with the Scottish Government how the Charter can be embedded in staff training; publicised; used to encourage and respond to complaints and feedback; and monitored and evaluated by the Scottish Government, Parliament and Scottish Commission on Social Security.
- CAS welcomes the Charter being co-designed with people with lived experience of the social security system, which we would consider essential to it being meaningful.
- CAS would recommend the Parliament consider how it might enable any other individual or organisation with an interest to be consulted, as part of its scrutiny of the draft Charter.
- CAS broadly welcomes the content of the draft Charter. It is essential that these commitments are embedded into the system in practice, and go beyond 'words on a page'.

Role of the Charter

Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS) supports the creation of the Charter as part of the new system as it has the potential to improve the experience of using the social security system for people who need support from it. **CAS believes the most important role of the Charter is to embed the principles into the system to empower those using it to challenge substandard service and seek redress. Fundamental to achieving this aim is the training of all staff who come into contact with individuals who use the system.**

It is of utmost importance that the Charter is ensuring that it is “not just words”. The Charter must strengthen the guiding principles by embedding them into the system in a practical sense. The Charter should be used for training all staff who will come into contact with those needing support from the system. It should ensure staff are aware of the rights and responsibilities of all parties involved, and that they undertake, from the outset, to provide people with a dignified service where their rights are respected.

To empower people the Charter must be clear, accessible, and well-advertised. People who do not receive the service they are entitled to should be able to use the Charter to challenge substandard service and seek redress. Empowering people who require support is in the best interests of the whole system. When service falls short of the necessary standard, people who know their rights can challenge this, which in turn helps to ensure that a high quality level of service delivery is maintained.

CAS welcomes the clarity and accessibility of the language in the Charter. The Committee may wish to explore with the Scottish Government how it plans to:

- **Embed training on the rights set out in the Charter in staff training**
- **Make people using the social security system aware of the Charter and its role**
- **Encourage people using the system to provide feedback and complaints if they feel the service they have received falls short of the standard set out in the Charter**
- **Identify and handle complaints and feedback based on the Charter**
- **Monitor and evaluate how the expectations set out in the Charter are being met, in order to meet their requirement to report annually to the Scottish Parliament on progress**
- **Suitably resource the Scottish Commission on Social Security (SCoSS) to carry out its duty to report on how the Charter is being fulfilled, and make recommendations for improvement.**

Co-designing the Charter

CAS welcomes the Charter being co-designed by people with lived experience. It is essential that the views of those who interact with the current social security system on a frequent basis are at the heart of the development of the Charter. Additionally CAS has

previously recommended a wider group of interested parties could be invited to provide feedback on a draft Charter.

The Scottish Government recruited a 'core group' of 30 people from its Experience Panels to draft the Charter, which enables it to be co-designed by people with lived experience. In addition, a stakeholder group of wider organisations (which includes CAS) commented on proposals from the core group, as well as providing expert advice and input.

Whilst it would ideally have been better to include a larger number of people with lived experience to contribute to the co-design of the Charter, as well as allowing any organisation with an interest to be consulted on its contents, CAS recognises the requirement in the Act to bring forward a Charter within six months did not allow a long period to do this. **Nonetheless, CAS would recommend that the Committee consider how it might enable any individual or organisation with an interest to be consulted, as part of its scrutiny of the draft Charter.**

Content of the Charter

Citizens Advice Scotland broadly welcomes the content of the draft Charter.

Between August and October 2016, CAS consulted with 65 CAB advisers and clients on what might be included in a Charter, resulting in more than 165 ideas which we have previously published as a summary of suggestions for what could be included.¹ Advisers and clients were on the whole supportive of the charter including both rights and responsibilities and being aimed at users of the system and those providing services. However, they did raise concerns about how this would work in practice, and were keen that the system would be designed and delivered with these principles in mind, to ensure that the social security charter would not be "just words on a page".

The draft Charter mirrors the style, tone and many of the rights and responsibilities that emerged from CAS' consultation, which we believe is an indicator that the content produced by the Scottish Government's core group is reflective of the priorities for people who have experience of the social security system more widely.

CAS particularly welcomes the commitments in the Charter to simple, clear and accessible communications and processes; making consistent and accurate decisions that are right first time and paid on time; to listen to, trust and treat people as individuals; reduce face-to-face assessments; and refer people to independent advice and support.

Evidence from CAB clients consistently shows these to be amongst the causes of problems in the current system, and if the Charter can contribute towards addressing these issues then it will be a mark of success. It is however essential that they are embedded into the system in

¹ See appendix to 'Building a Social Security System Together: Co-designing the Social Security Charter' briefing – Citizens Advice Scotland, October 2018 https://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/cas_briefing_-_social_security_charter_debate.pdf



practice to ensure they go beyond 'words on a page' and set the foundation for delivering social security in practice.

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