



Citizens Advice Scotland Briefing Taking Scotland Forward – Dignity, Fairness and Respect and Disability Benefits debate 9 June 2016

Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS), our 61 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. Our self-help website Adviceguide provides information on rights and helps people solve their problems.

In 2014-15 the Citizens Advice Service network helped over 323,000 clients in Scotland alone and dealt with over one million advice issues. With support from the network clients had financial gains of over £124 million and the Scottish zone of our self-help website Adviceguide received approximately 5.4 million unique page views.

Summary

The CAB service has a unique role in Scotland. No other charity offers direct help to so many people over such a wide variety of problems and across the whole of Scotland.

This briefing focuses on the opportunities that the devolution of social security powers to Scotland with a particular focus on disability benefits – it is the chance to design a system that has the principles of dignity and respect at its heart. The following pages outline the challenges and issues that the Parliament needs to address to make this system a reality.

Advice on social security benefits are the largest area of advice provided by Scotland's Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) network. In 2014/15, CAB clients received advice on 220,000 new issues related to benefits and tax credits, 37% of the total. Our on-the-ground experience and extensive evidence base puts us in an ideal position to set out a vision for how Scotland should use its new social security powers.

Designing a new social security system for Scotland

The Scotland Act 2016 devolves a number of important social security powers to the Scottish Parliament. These include Benefits for carers, disabled people and those who are ill (currently covered by Personal Independence Payment (PIP), Disability Living Allowance (DLA), Attendance Allowance (AA), Carers Allowance amongst others)

CAS believes that the aim of the social security system should be to provide a coherent, fair safety net for the citizens of Scotland in order to achieve a more equal and socially just society. Ultimately, every Scottish citizen should be able to access the essentials for living and be treated in a dignified manner. Our on-the-ground experience and extensive evidence base puts us in an ideal position to set out a vision for how Scotland should use its new social security powers.

Of the 220,000 new benefits issues brought by CAB clients in 2014/15, 56,303 (26%) related to the disability benefits that will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament. By way of comparison, there were 8,963 new issues (4%) relating to the already-devolved Scottish Welfare Fund, illustrating the significance of the devolution of these new powers and importance of getting the new system right.

Designing a new disability benefits system

Between July and October 2015, CAS gathered views from bureau advisers and clients across Scotland on how these powers could be used to develop a Scottish system of benefits for disabled people and carers. From the views that we heard, CAS has identified features which we believe should form the core of a distinct Scottish system of disability and carers' benefits.

The system should be built on trust, dignity and respect. The focus should be on helping people to get the support they are entitled to, and language used should be positive and inclusive.

Appropriate support to claim disability and carers' benefits should be available to all who want or need it. This support should be available from multiple sources, and preferably independent from the decision-making process. There should be a targeted effort by the Scottish Government to raise awareness of entitlement to disability and carers' benefits.

A system of disability benefits should promote independence, participation and equality. The purpose of disability benefits should be to help with the extra costs associated with having a disability or health condition. Entitlement to disability benefits should remain universal.

The assessment process for disability benefits should be fair, accessible and proportionate. Much greater emphasis should be given to evidence from people who know the claimant, including health professionals, carers and family. A face-to-face assessment should only be carried out when absolutely necessary or when a claimant requests one.

Carers' benefits should properly recognise the contribution of carers and provide adequate support. The system should allow carers to participate more in education and employment. The level of benefit should properly reflect the contribution of carers and other support, such as sufficient respite care, should be consistently available.

For further information, details on the views of CAB advisers and clients and CAS recommendations for disability and carers' benefits see

<http://www.cas.org.uk/publications/designing-social-security-system-scotland-disability-and-carers-benefit>

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