

Scottish Women's Convention response to:

The Scottish Government:

Consultation on a Ministerial Statement for Modifying Local Connection Referrals in Scotland

October 2020

Introduction

This consultation invites comments on the content of a Ministerial Statement to set out the circumstances in which, and the general criteria by reference to which, the power of Scottish Ministers to modify local connection referrals between local authorities in Scotland is to be exercised. It also invites comments on the proposal to suspend local connection referrals between Scottish local authorities to remove barriers people face to accessing the support they need.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of Parliamentary, Governmental and organisational consultation papers at both a Scottish and UK level.

The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to women's equality.

The SWC is currently engaging with women through digital roadshows, online surveys, asking women to comment by email and by telephoning those who want to talk. We are also using our wide network to ask women to collate views in their local communities and forward these to us on a regular basis. We are continuing to review innovative ways of engaging with women throughout Scotland using whichever medium is appropriate to them.

We are proposing to suspend local connection referrals between Scottish local authorities to remove barriers people face to accessing the support they need. The analysis of the 2019 consultation demonstrated that there is support for this position, although there are concerns about the potential for increases in homelessness applications and subsequent impact on statutory services. Please give us your current views about the proposed suspension of referrals.

Women in consultation with the SWC are on the whole supportive of the decision to suspend local connection referrals between different local authority areas within Scotland. Many have spoken of the barriers they have faced when trying to gain new accommodation. This is often exacerbated for those with intersectional characteristics or complex support needs, who are often the most at risk of homelessness. Suspension of local connection referrals may remove a major obstacle for many women wishing to start over with their lives. This is particularly crucial if there is potential dangers or risks to women where they currently stay and who believe a fresh start is needed.

Further benefits of the proposed suspension of referrals includes, but is not limited to:

- Allows more autonomy for women within the decision-making process when making major judgements about where to settle their lives.
- It may allow many women to make a fresh start and turn away from complications within their current lifestyle. This includes removing them from other individuals that may place them or their families at risk.
- Accounts for some women who may feel pressured into disclosing issues such as domestic abuse before they are ready. This may ensure they do not have to go through further trauma by having to provide such information when moving to a new area.

However, we are aware that a number of issues remain in terms of the ability of certain local authorities to rehome individuals where their own housing stock may already be depleted. This, coupled with the potential for increased demand that the suspension of local connection can bring could see some councils unable to meet their statutory duties.

This may be a particular problem for women within local authority areas who are in need of social housing and have been waiting for years. Overcrowding, for instance, is a serious issue, particularly in more urbanised areas within Scotland. This can be an acute problem for women who may be juggling multiple caring responsibilities within the one household with accommodation not suitable for such situations. Further demand within their own local authority area may see them having to wait longer for homes that meet their needs. It is imperative that these women and their families are not put at a detriment when new policies are introduced.

Considering the core content proposed for the Ministerial Statement (see section 2 – paragraphs 31 - 33), please give us any suggested amendments with regard to the:

i. circumstances for modifying local connection referrals (see paragraph 31)

Increasing access of choice for those experiencing or threatened with homelessness should always be seen as a positive move forward. However, the ability of local authorities who may already be struggling to meet their statutory duties for women within their own areas must also be underlined. This will potentially be further exacerbated as Scotland transitions through the current Covid-19 pandemic.

One of the key issues that is currently lacking within the Ministerial Statement is to account for the impact of equality issues in relation to housing and homelessness for women. This should be subject to rigorous Equality Impact Assessments and data collection to ensure women presenting in areas where they have no local connection are given adequate support and are not overlooked.

ii. general criteria, by reference to which, the power to modify local connection is to be exercised (see para 32)

Amendments that should be actively considered for inclusion to the general criteria could potentially include:

- That where capacity cannot be met, protocols will be put in place to ensure people are aware of their rights and are rehomed in another appropriate authority that is suitable for their needs.
- Detailing why exactly individuals may apply to an area outwith their own local connection to ensure public awareness of such issues.
- Accounting for women and the unequal challenges they often face, including complex and additional support needs.
- Laying out accessible and transparent appeals processes for individuals to navigate the system. This should include appropriate signposting to other organisations for support by local authorities.
- Ensuring that where accommodation is unavailable, individuals are dealt with in a way that fosters dignity and respect.

Please let us know about any suggested amendments you have to the factors proposed in paragraph 33 for assessing whether the capacity of a local authority to meet its homelessness and housing duties is being adversely affected by any modification to local connection.

To ensure any potential issues can be highlighted as soon as possible, certain measures must be taken including:

- Ongoing monitoring per local authority area to analyse how the suspension of local connection is working in practice. This should also highlight specific areas which are seeing increased demand and target support as appropriate.
- Ensuring support from relevant organisations and advocacy services is signposted to for women when being placed in a new home outwith their current area.
- Recognition of the connection between housing policies and other priorities for women including health and employment inequalities.
- Ensuring rigorous Equality Impact Assessments are in place to account for women's inequality within the housing process. This should also note the impact of other intersectional characteristics that women present with and which may see them face further obstacles.

Conclusion

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government Consultation on the Ministerial Statement for Modifying Local Connection Referrals in Scotland. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences of equality at both a reserved and devolved level to ensure that this is accounted for.

For further information, please contact
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