



Scottish Women's Convention response to the Scottish Government: Coronavirus (COVID-19) - Compensation for Self-Isolation

September 2021

Premise

This Bill seeks to remedy a legal liability that arises as a result of the temporary modifications made to the Public Health Etc (Scotland) Act 2008 ("the 2008 Act") by the UK Coronavirus Act 2020 ("the UK Act") expiring or ceasing to have effect. The 2008 Act includes a duty on Health Boards to pay compensation to a person who receives a written request from the Board to be quarantined, be excluded from entering or remaining in a specified place or refrain from carrying on any activity or type of activity. This duty was changed to be discretionary during the pandemic by the UK Act because it was intended for small-scale outbreaks, rather than a mass pandemic like COVID-19.

The Scottish Government is proposing to keep these temporary provisions in place until Autumn 2022, although this date could be changed if:

1. people were still being asked to self-isolate under public health guidance
2. changes were made to alternative financial support for people self-isolating (e.g. the Self-Isolation Support Grant)
3. expiry of the provisions would present a significant resource burden on Health Boards

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 several 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.

Q1. Do you agree with proposals to modify the duty on Health Boards to make the payment of compensation related to self-isolation for Covid-19 discretionary?

Yes

While we agree that compensation from Health Boards should remain discretionary, we believe that the Scottish Government should be doing more to support people through self-isolation.

All but one of the women we heard from reported that self-isolating had a negative effect for them financially.

- One woman explained how she had to use up much of her savings, and if she had not been fortunate enough to have these, she would not have managed.
- Women reported increased costs for heating, electricity, medication and also for food (delivery fees and the fact that the cheaper supermarkets do not deliver).

Of all the women we spoke to, none of them had successfully accessed the Self-Isolation Support Grant or the Local Self-Isolation Assistance Service, despite all having had to isolate at some point during the pandemic.

- Many highlighted that they had not heard of these schemes and did not know that they may have been entitled to support.
- Those who had heard of it, did not have enough information to ascertain whether they would qualify - "I didn't think I'd be eligible".
- Although some women noted that they had not faced a loss of income as a result of their self-isolation, the increase to their living costs during this period meant that they faced a loss in real terms.

It has also been raised that the application process can be daunting and confusing. The pandemic has seen many people fall on hard times and reach out for benefits for the first time in their life, so they have not been familiar with many of the processes. Moreover, while libraries, job centres, Citizens Advice, and other public services have been closed (some as part of restrictions, but many on a permanent basis due to cuts), people are not getting the support they need to apply for grants and social security.

- "Naïvely, claiming benefits and redundancy weren't things I'd ever expected for myself."
- "It should be as easy as possible for self-isolation payments to be claimed."

Women expressed that they would like information about these schemes to be made more widely available and in more accessible formats so that more people can get what they are entitled to.

- "A phone number should be available to ask what's needed. Websites are hard to negotiate."
- "[The Scottish Government] could look at how people have to ask for help, and not have to fill in multiple pages on a form both paper and online. It would be good to have a helpline service that is free to call. You could also have help desks with info in places like health centres."

One woman explained that her application for the grant was denied because her employment contract was not due to start until the day after her self-isolation period had already begun.

- We know that the labour market has become increasingly volatile during the pandemic, and there are likely to have been many women who have been moving between jobs for whom this may have also been an issue.

- We would urge the Scottish Government to release the information of how many claims for the Self-Isolation Support Grant have been rejected and for what reasons. We encourage them to meaningfully engage with the reasons why people are being turned down, to better understand how more people can get the support they need.

Consideration also needs to be given to how the Scottish Government can better support people who are shielding.

- One woman explained that, despite being vulnerable, her condition was not on the shielding list, so she was unable to access any support.
- “Find out who has to self-isolate for practical health reasons, and financially support them. If I had caught covid, it would cost the NHS much more!”

Fundamentally, people experiencing hardship need to be treated with dignity, and the Scottish Government has a responsibility to protect everyone through this pandemic.

- “There's always going to be a shortfall in any system, but when these are highlighted, there should be a specific department to deal with them and not have vulnerable people passed from pillar to post and made to feel like beggars.”
- “I feel people on zero contacts or in lower wage brackets working for private companies may fall through the net with the self-isolating, only because they have unscrupulous employers.”

Q2. Do you agree that the Scottish Government should be able to vary the expiry date of these provisions?

Yes

Women felt that there are still “too many uncertainties” for an end date to be set in stone, and it should therefore be kept “under review”.

Q3. Do you agree that these are the most appropriate considerations for the Scottish Government to take into account when considering extending or bringing forward the expiry date for these provisions?

Yes

Women are concerned that there is a misconception that the lockdown is already over, when that is not the case. While many have welcomed the easing of restrictions, there are still many women who are worried about the virus and are diligent in following the rules because they are fearful for their own health or the health of those they care for. Their Scottish Government needs to acknowledge these valid concerns and avoid withdrawing support mechanisms too early.

- “[These provisions] will have to continue until pandemic is contained. Not yet!”
- “There are some really strong, active women who are now scared to go back out there, and it’s quite worrying that they’ve basically just been ignored, they’ve just been left behind”

Conclusion

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government's consultation on Self-Isolation Compensation. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences relating to such legislation and the effect of this on women's equality.

For further information, please contact

The Scottish Women's Convention

Email – info@scottishwomensconvention.org

Telephone – 0141 339 4797

www.scottishwomensconvention.org

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