

**Scottish Women's Convention response to:
The Scottish Parliament Social Security Committee:
Covid-19 and Social Security
October 2020**

Introduction

The Scottish Parliament Social Security Committee has launched an inquiry to understand how Scottish social security, and its part within the broader context of all UK social security, should contribute to the social and economic recovery from Covid-19 through support to those in or out of, or seeking, work with a focus on deliverable change from 2021 onwards.

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.

What will the economic downturn look like for different people in Scotland and how should Scottish social security support them through it? In the context of the UK social security and of other ways of providing support, what is the role of Scottish social security in an economic recession?

Women suffer disproportionately at the hands of rising poverty, inequality and austerity. This, coupled with issues such as precarious employment and low wages, all impact on the ways in which women access social security. The onset of the current Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown has exacerbated this problem. Given the scale of such issues, social security must aim to ensure women and their families do not face further hardship and acts in a way that promotes equality.

The unpredictability of the current situation has left little room for a concrete plan upon which to build recovery. This is particularly pertinent given the current rise in positive Covid-19 cases and the onset of tighter lockdown conditions. Establishing a remit, however, for strategic planning within a Scottish social security context to mitigate the impacts that have been and will continue to be felt is crucial. State support throughout this time, most notably in the form of assistance, must be viewed as a framework to offset the inequality impacts that will be felt.

For many women, the current pandemic and subsequent lockdown has severely exacerbated previous inequalities. This will ensure that the return to any form of “normality” will be doubly hard. Whilst this is a pressing issue, it is also an opportunity for a social security system to respond to these disadvantages and further equality.

Can, and should, Social Security Scotland do more than meet the expected increased demand for benefits and deliver on existing policy commitments? What should its ambitions be? Within the social security and borrowing powers available to Scottish Ministers what could be achieved and delivered?

Many of the problems coming to the forefront have increased the acute need for building on the delivery of existing policy commitments. For many women, this will be the first time they have navigated the social security system. Confusion as to how much assistance they are entitled to may be a daunting prospect and this must be taken into account.

For several women who require some form of social security, the main ambition when delivering support should be focused around being sensitive to their needs. For those individuals where intersectional discrimination plays a part, reliance on social security may continue to see a further rise. Women from BAEM communities, for instance, who already faced higher levels of poverty and inequality, will more than likely see a much greater need for support. It is therefore crucial that all frameworks implemented in future account for these specific inequalities when defining policy commitments.

Additionally, for many women, the current situation has exacerbated what were already very real problems in terms of poverty. Whilst women have commended the measures which were put in place during lockdown such as food parcel delivery to provide relief, these measures are mostly temporary. Ensuring structures are put in place on a permanent basis that seek to alleviate fundamental issues on the ground must feed into the design of policies at a strategic level. Other areas of focus should include:

- Addressing the absence of BAEM women at decision-making levels when designing social security systems.
- Ensuring frameworks account for continuous data gathering in order to monitor the effect of the current pandemic to direct assistance to where it is most needed.
- Accounting for the ongoing need to self-isolate for the foreseeable future for women and their families and the implications of this on lower-income households.
- Ensuring that separate mechanisms are directly built into all forms of assistance to account for individuals to know their rights at every stage of the process.
- Continuing to prioritise roll out of further assistance for those most in need to make sure access is available as soon as possible.
- Ensuring that delivery of assistance is implemented effectively at both a national and local level to account for differing factors within local areas.

If we look to do more, or differently, what are the relatively easier changes that could be made to Scottish benefits that would not require significant additional capacity in Social Security Scotland?

Changes made on a smaller scale must ensure that they are not simple tick box exercises but instead work as direct assistance to those who need it most. Social security should fundamentally be viewed as a safety net to offset some of the worst inequalities within society. This is particularly crucial given the fast-moving pace at which conditions are changing under the pandemic for many. Introducing a financial uprating in the amount of assistance given, for instance, is one way in which a change can be made quickly and with little work. Other issues for consideration may include:

- Ensuring equality mainstreaming is a thread running through all devolved social security.
- Supplementary payments to those already receiving assistance through Social Security Scotland similar to the approach taken with the additional Carer's Allowance Supplement in June of this year.
- Ensuring the general public are educated about the right to social security to reduce stigmatisation and false perceptions. This would include wider advertisement of the legislative frameworks in place which deliver social security assistance.
- Paying acute attention to the localised geographical spaces within Scotland and ensuring funding is diverted to such areas as is needed for delivery of assistance.

- Committing to a significant undertaking of data collection to understand the specific needs of women within Scotland.
- Allowing for continual assessment of any legislation and policy impacts on women with lived experience of the social security system at all levels.

What changes could be made that would not require significant input from the Department for Work and Pensions (UK)?

The current transfer of powers to Social Security Scotland from the DWP will ensure that a much more extensive picture can be formed regarding how best to target increased funds to those already in receipt of social security. The fact, however, that the vast majority of powers remain reserved means that many of the stronger mechanisms cannot be used at a devolved level. It is therefore crucial that Scotland uses whatever means it has to address this problem. Within this context, other areas that could be explored could include:

- Additional guidance and accessible information which details other forms of assistance to be rolled out nationally.
- Accounting for the impact of poor mental health on those claiming assistance and ensuring signposting is available at all steps.
- Promoting a focus on the increase of in-work poverty and adapting limited social security powers to address this issue for women.
- Measuring the impact of other intersectional characteristics women possess, such as disability, on the ways in which they benefit from additional social security.
- Using mitigation where possible to offset cuts and austerity by topping up reserved benefits.
- Committing social security responses to account for the cost of living as well as inflationary and employment issues with appropriate safeguards in place for those at high risk of poverty.
- Placing emphasis on the need for greater food security for many families living in poverty including a commitment to universal strategies such as free school meals for all children.
- Committing to evaluating the use of Universal Basic Income as a means of bolstering the economy post-lockdown and the equality impact of this.

What are the constraints and barriers to doing more in Scotland?

As mentioned previously, the fact that the vast majority of social security continues to be delivered at a reserved level means that a lack of quality data, which could help determine where best to target assistance, may be unavailable. Systems such as Universal Credit, which cover a large number of people within Scotland, will continue to be administered by the DWP. This may have a severe knock on effect in any increased assistance by the devolved administration if this benefit is not uprated itself. The Scottish Government should commit to analysing all measures institutionalised by the UK Government regarding social security to ensure these do not have a disproportionate impact on women. Other issues include:

- The potential for failure where detailed Equality Impact Assessments are not carried out when implementing new social security models.
- Problems where cuts in funding for public and third sector services during economic recovery take place and the effect this may have for those seeking social security assistance. Not only are such services crucial in allowing women to know their rights, they present a major aid in helping women into employment and training.

Should the main focus be on discretionary funds or on entitlements? In terms of recovery from COVID-19, is it more effective to provide support through discretionary funds allocated to local authorities or through demand-led benefits delivered through Social Security Scotland?

Working in a way that allows for both demand-led benefits and discretionary funding should be looked upon as beneficial depending on the type of assistance being administered going forward. Practical solutions may fail to translate across different areas of Scotland if coordinated simply at a national level, leaving many women in need of assistance no better off. Local authorities are often in a unique position to deliver benefits in a way that a nationalised structure cannot. Councils may be able to administer certain funds more effectively given their access to local data and the high number of public services a person may interact with daily.

There may be a number of issues regarding local authorities administering discretionary funds, however. These would include:

- Cuts over the past number of years which have seen local authorities' resources laid bare. It is therefore imperative that any focus on council-led benefits and assistance is sufficiently financed to a high degree.
- Administration of such a system which relies on both councils and a national body may see issues where people are unaware of everything they are entitled to. This may also lead to delays in evidence sharing between different bodies when trying to establish new claims for individuals.

Conclusion

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Parliament Social Security Committee's call for evidence regarding the current Covid-19 pandemic and the impact on social security. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences relating to the pandemic and the effect of this on equality at both a reserved and devolved level.

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