

Scottish Campaign on Welfare Reform

Scottish Campaign on Welfare Reform
c/o the Poverty Alliance
162 Buchanan Street
Glasgow
G1 2LL

22 October 2008

Dear Mr Purnell

We are writing as members of the Scottish Campaign on Welfare Reform (SCoWR) to express our concern at some of the proposals outlined in the UK Government's recent Green Paper, *No one written off: Reforming welfare to reward responsibility*.

SCoWR was set up in 2006 to highlight the concerns of a broad coalition of organisations working with people experiencing exclusion and poverty in Scotland. We shared the view that the 2006 Green Paper did not provide either enough support for those wanting to move into work or enough protection for those who are unable to work, and that some aspects of the reforms may lead to people experiencing even deeper poverty. We also raised similar concerns in 2007 about subsequent government proposals regarding welfare reform and lone parents.

We welcome some of the proposals outlined in the Green Paper, such as the full disregard from means tested benefits of child maintenance and the increase in the 'access to work' budget. However, many of our fears have not been allayed by the proposals, and we continue to have particular concerns about the following aspects of welfare reform:

Increasing conditionality: the latest raft of proposals continues to ramp up significantly the level of conditionality attached to benefit entitlement. Once again, the proposals focus almost exclusively on the responsibilities of individuals, without commensurate attention paid to the responsibilities of Government and employers in helping people from welfare into work. There is also little attention paid to the often significant structural barriers that impede progress into and retention within labour market. SCoWR does not believe that conditionality and sanctions are either a necessary or effective mechanism for encouraging people into work. Proposals such as full time work for benefits treat claimants in a punitive and undignified manner. Quite simply, the evidence suggests that if the right support is available at the right time and the right level, people will be empowered to move into or stay in work.

Adequacy of welfare provision: current levels of benefit provision are inadequate, meaning that thousands of people in the UK struggle to get by on poverty level incomes. Raising the general level of benefit rates is critical if the UK Government is serious about tackling social exclusion and child poverty, and providing people with a secure financial basis from which they can move into sustainable work. SCoWR is concerned that the current proposals make no mention of benefit rates and believes that, until this issue is tackled explicitly, welfare reforms will continue to leave people financially unsupported.

Adequacy of resources: the consultation paper is almost entirely silent on the budgetary impact of the proposed changes and fails to identify where the additional money necessary to implement the changes will come from. Furthermore, ongoing staff cuts within the DWP and the closure of JCP offices leave us questioning whether the necessary infrastructure is in place to support these reforms. SCoWR is concerned that both existing services and the new proposals are significantly under-resourced, with demand far outstripping available funds. It is claimants and their families who will continue to bear the brunt of this in terms of insufficient support and declining customer service.

Devolved issues: the consultation paper does not fully take into account devolved aspects of welfare reform, such as the key policy areas of childcare provision and skills development, as well as the different demographics of Scotland. Consequently, some of the proposals are unsuitable as they do not fit with the wider policy and service framework currently operating in Scotland. In many instances, the lack of detail in the green paper, particularly around implementation in a Scottish context, makes it hard to comment on how the proposals will work in practice.

SCoWR is very supportive of the need for reform to welfare provision - but we cannot champion proposals which are unsuitable and under-resourced, treating citizens in an undignified way and leaving them financially unsupported. Instead, we call for a welfare system that is:

- **Dignified** - treating citizens with respect and compassion, valuing unpaid work and caring roles and recognising the responsibilities of employers and government as well as the public benefits of welfare
- **Supportive** - lifting people well out of poverty, so that everyone is financially protected, whatever their circumstances
- **Well resourced** – providing adequate financial and human resources to ensure the smooth introduction of any reforms
- **Suitable** –taking full account of Scotland's differing institutional framework from the outset, so that any proposals enable a joined up approach to tackling poverty across the whole of the UK

Furthermore, reforms to welfare provision need to ensure that there is an adequate safety net regardless of the economic outlook. Many of the organisations supporting this joint letter will also be making detailed individual responses to the consultation. However, we wanted to write jointly to demonstrate the level of consensus across civic Scotland, aware as we are that these reforms will have a significant impact on our members and service users.

We would be grateful for a response on the points we have raised and would be happy to meet with you to discuss our concerns further.

Yours sincerely

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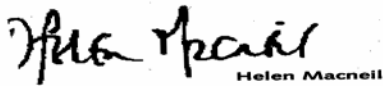
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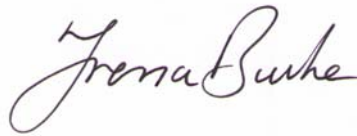
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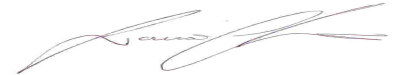
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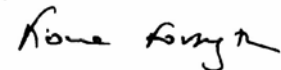
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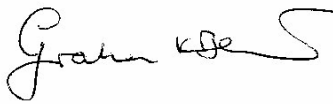
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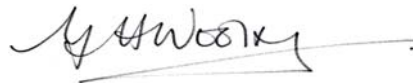
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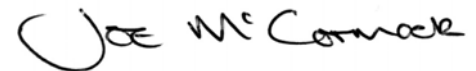
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