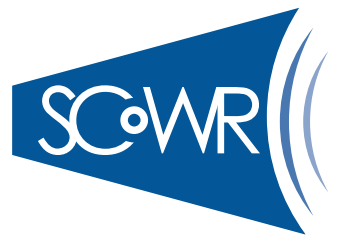


Scottish Campaign
on Welfare Reform



HOLYROOD MANIFESTO 2016

A SUPPLEMENT TO THE SCoWR 'MANIFESTO FOR CHANGE'

HOLYROOD MANIFESTO 2016

This document supplements the SCoWR 'Manifesto for Change' published in 2013. It sets out SCoWR members' views of how new social security powers to be devolved through the Scotland Bill 2015 could be used to make progress towards a social security system in line with our Manifesto principles of adequacy, dignity, simplification and investment. SCoWR members recognise the limits of devolved social security and tax powers and the challenges the next Scottish Government will face in the context of unprecedented UK welfare cuts. Nevertheless we believe that an important opportunity will exist to use new powers to promote a positive approach to social security, and to better prevent poverty and inequality. We challenge politicians of all parties to set out how they would use new powers to make that progress. As SCoWR members we set out a series of specific actions for the use of new powers that could boost

household incomes, protect vulnerable claimants and remove some of the barriers and stigma associated with existing benefit administration.

The calls detailed in this document are grouped under the five key principles outlined within the 'Manifesto for Change' and agreed by all of our members. However, many proposals below are relevant to several principles. SCoWR is a diverse coalition of organisations working across Scotland with collective expertise across a range of different aspects of the welfare system. Whilst coming from different areas of expertise, all members of SCoWR are united in our belief in a social security system that prevents poverty and supports those in need whilst also protecting their dignity. We urge politicians to act on the recommendations below and work toward delivering this vision.

1

Increase benefit rates to a level where no one is left in poverty and all have sufficient income to lead a dignified life

2

Make respect for human rights and dignity the cornerstone of a new approach to welfare

3

Radically simplify the welfare system

4

Invest in the support needed to enable everyone to participate fully in society

5

Make welfare benefits work for Scotland



Increase benefit rates to a level where no one is left in poverty and all have sufficient income to lead a dignified life

Top up means-tested benefit rates for adults

It is clear that the current social security system fails to protect too many of those on the lowest incomes from poverty.¹ This problem will only be exacerbated by the plans to freeze most UK benefit rates for the next four years.² There should be a general increase in benefit rates with the aim of moving towards meeting Minimum Income Standards.³ This process should be accelerated in relation to under 25s who have been subjected to particularly low rates of benefit.

Top up Child Benefit

Child Benefit has a high take-up rate and provides near-universal support with the costs of raising children. Increasing its value and increasing the rate of payments for second and subsequent children could protect family incomes from erosion due to continuing cuts to the UK social security budget. This would strengthen the role of universal benefits within the Scottish social security system, and has the advantage that Child Benefit is already disregarded as income for the vast majority of other benefits, meaning it would not be 'clawed back' through means testing. This would ensure the poorest claimants receive the full benefit of any extra investment made by the next Scottish Government, and also reduce consequential administrative costs.

Invest in better financial support for carers

The level of support provided by Carer's Allowance and the arbitrary entitlement rules excluding those balancing caring with work or study are in urgent need of reform. However, it is important to ensure that any additional social security payments provide a real increase in income for carers on the lowest incomes. Currently, any increase in the rate at which Carer's Allowance is paid reduces income from other benefits for those on the lowest incomes as a result of means testing. A potential solution would be to both invest in Carer's Allowance itself, and to top-up the premiums within the means-tested benefits system that those eligible for Carer's Allowance are able to access.

1. For example, in 2013/14 the relative poverty threshold for a couple with no children (after housing costs) was £232 a week. The same year, a couple with no other income was entitled to jobseeker's allowance of £112.55 a week.
See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-1994-1995-to-2013-2014>
2. See: <http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/7448> and <http://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/a-poverty-of-information-assessing-the-governments-new-child-poverty-focus-and-future-trends/>
3. For more information, see: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/minimum-income-standard-uk-2015>

2

Make respect for human rights and dignity the cornerstone of a new approach to welfare

Take an approach to Universal Credit flexibilities that gives claimants control

Where a couple has a joint award of Universal Credit (UC) the default position should be that payment is split between the claimants to ensure that individuals have access to independent resources. The use of the UC flexibilities must also allow claimants to choose the frequency of payments and to whom housing costs are paid. Research suggests that the majority will prefer payments to be made to their landlord directly,⁴ but people should have the right to choose what works for them.

Use employability powers to reduce the number of sanctions

Notwithstanding the fact that conditionality remains reserved, any Scottish employability programmes must meet an individual's needs and expectations. One way of achieving this would be a clear statement of the right to appropriate support (and redress if it is not provided) that binds providers. If done effectively, this will go some way towards reversing the recent surge in the number of sanctions imposed in Scotland,⁵ as fewer claimants would struggle to engage with inappropriate conditionality requirements. Research suggests that sanctions are one of the drivers of increased food bank use.⁶

Rethink the assessment process for disability benefits

One feature of the introduction of Personal Independence Payment is a focus on 'independent' assessment and re-testing of all claimants. This makes no sense in the case of stable or progressive conditions where it is known the condition is not going to improve. Resources should be invested in disability benefits themselves, rather than the expensive process of face to face assessments. Where an assessment is genuinely needed, it should offer a meaningful choice of location (including at home) and actively involve the claimant and someone with detailed knowledge of that person's condition. Moreover, the assessment process must incorporate flexibility and a greater understanding when assessing those with fluctuating conditions.

4. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/388561/rr889-direct-payment-demonstration-projects-longitudinal-survey-of-tenants.pdf

5. For evidence, see: <http://www.cpag.org.uk/david-webster>

6. <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/emergency-use-only-understanding-and-reducing-the-use-of-food-banks-in-the-uk-335731>

3

Radically simplify the welfare system

Keep disability benefits universal and end needless reviews of claims

It is vital that a Scotland-wide system of non-means-tested cash disability benefits is retained, and that these are not clawed back in care charges or reductions to other benefits. Almost as important is to carefully consider when claimants of disability benefits should be reassessed. Someone with a progressive or stable condition should not be subject to repeated assessments. Consideration should also be given to using some conditions as a proxy for determining a level of need, in order to improve efficiency and consistency of decision-making.

Ensure that social security support with housing costs covers all rental charges

In addition to abolishing the under-occupancy penalty/'Bedroom Tax' for Universal Credit payments, the next Scottish Government must ensure that private tenants on the lowest incomes are not also left with a shortfall in rent. Groups at risk here include: parents who care for their children only a few days a week, for example after divorce or relationship breakdown, and who are not given an allowance for a bedroom for a child who may stay three nights a week; younger adults in private rented accommodation; and disabled people who require adaptations to their homes that are not recognised by the Local Housing Allowance rules.⁷ Where this cannot be achieved through amendments to the regulations, Discretionary Housing Payment budgets must be adequate to plug the gap.

Carefully consider interactions between devolved and reserved benefits, including passporting arrangements

Introducing a third level of responsibility for the social security system – one which sits between the UK Government and local authorities – risks further complicating the existing benefits system. However, it also presents an opportunity to improve the claimant's experience of interacting with different parts of the system. The most appropriate way of improving the existing system may vary by benefit: for example, automatic payment of maternity grants may be possible using information provided by the UK Government, or a decision awarding a Scottish disability benefit could be automatically notified to the DWP, HMRC and local authorities to ensure the correct premiums are put into place. All opportunities to simplify the experience of users of the system should be grasped.

7. Single claimants under 35 who are not considered responsible for children (this does not preclude equally shared care) are currently awarded a 'single room rate' of Housing Benefit if they are in the private sector, manifestly inadequate to rent a suitable tenancy in which to raise a family.

4

Invest in the support needed to enable everyone to participate fully in society

Use new taxes and spending commitments to tackle inequality and realise human rights

Investment in a better system must come from somewhere, and SCoWR members are clear that the sort of system we want to see will not be possible without additional resource. In addition to the current and new tax-raising powers in relation to Income Tax, the Scottish Government already has control over local taxation. The next administration should consider how it can use its tax powers to tackle poverty and inequality and recognise that social security is a key lever to achieve this.⁸

Invest in childcare support for parents both in and out of work

In the short-term one straightforward option suggested by SCoWR members is to top up the levels of childcare support within Working Tax Credit to (at least) match the level within Universal Credit. However, this should take place within a broader strategy to move towards universal, flexible childcare that is free at the point of delivery.

Invest in independent advice and advocacy to help claimants to secure their rights

SCoWR members concerns relate not only to the design of the social security system, but also to ensuring those accessing it have access to advice and advocacy.⁹ In any time of change the potential for confusion will increase and therefore measures should be taken to mitigate this risk. Ensuring the right of claimants to be accompanied to benefits assessments or meetings about conditionality requirements is just part of this picture – there must also be a well-resourced advice sector to ensure support is accessible to everyone. Investment in advice services will help ensure the take-up of benefits – both devolved and reserved – is increased.

8. David Bell, David Comerford and David Eiser have mapped the impact of various welfare spending options on the GINI coefficient: <http://scotfes.com/2013/09/15/constitutional-change-and-inequality-in-scotland-david-bell-david-comerford-and-david-eiser/>

9. See: <http://www.cpag.org.uk/content/hard-choices-reducing-need-food-banks-scotland>

Make sure we deliver the right amount at the right time

The Scottish Government must ensure the value of benefits devolved to Scotland is still considered annually with any top-up payments adjusted as required. Another area of concern is the impact of the rollout of Universal Credit on the number of claimants facing destitution whilst awaiting a decision or their first benefit payment. Budgets for the Scottish Welfare Fund must be kept under review to ensure this need can be met. A key driver of increased foodbank use is error and delay in assessing social security benefit entitlements.¹⁰ In addition to ensuring the entitlement conditions work for the people of Scotland, the next Scottish Government must commit to investing in appropriate training for staff who make decisions affecting the lives of claimants. There must also be sufficient staff capacity to minimise delays in the claiming and payment of benefits administered by or on behalf of the Scottish Government.

Ensure the voices of those who experience and understand the social security system continue to be heard

When deciding how to implement reforms to the system it is vital the whole of Scottish society is able to be heard. Once a Scottish social security system is operational, this work should not be considered finished. The role of the Social Security Advisory Committee¹¹ is a model that merits consideration, most importantly for its statutory function which means that UK Government Ministers must consider referring planned

changes to the Committee in advance of their implementation. Members of SCoWR range from organisations with a background in analysing and explaining the effects of detailed legal provisions to self-advocacy groups led by people with direct experience of the social security system. A statutory requirement to have regard to the views of both experts and claimants could build on the existing process of public consultation, but should not be seen as replacing it.

Do not rely on existing decision-making apparatus

Our members want a culture of fairness, respect and dignity to be placed at the heart of those elements of the benefits system which are devolved to Scotland. To ensure this happens, it should not be an assumption that benefits under the control of the next Scottish Government can continue to be delivered by the DWP.¹² However, the option of simply passing responsibility for delivering the new powers straight to local authorities is not supported by members due to the risk of unacceptable variations in practice across Scotland and the creation of perverse incentives in relation to disability benefits and social care budgets. There is likely to be a need for a national Scottish agency or directorate delivering at least some of the new responsibilities being devolved to Scotland. Transitional arrangements to allow rapid improvements to be made without disruption to existing claimants should be considered separately.

10. <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/emergency-use-only-understanding-and-reducing-the-use-of-food-banks-in-the-uk-335731>

11. See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/social-security-advisory-committee>

12. See written evidence submitted to Work & Pensions Committee inquiry into benefit delivery, found at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/work-and-pensions-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/inquiry-name/publications/>

SCoWR Manifesto Supplement 2016

This manifesto for the Scottish parliamentary elections, which is a supplement to the SCoWR 'Manifesto for Change', was developed by SCoWR members including:

The Action Group

AdvoCard

BEMIS

Capability Scotland

Children 1st

Children & Young People's Commissioner
Scotland

Children in Scotland

Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland

Energy Action Scotland

Engender

Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector

Glasgow Homelessness Network

HIV Scotland

Inclusion Scotland

The Iona Community

Irish Heritage Foundation

One Parent Families Scotland

Oxfam

Public and Commercial Services Union

The Poverty Alliance

Save the Children

Scottish Association for Mental Health

Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations

Scottish Federation of Housing Associations

Scottish Women's Aid

Shelter Scotland

Adrian Sinfield (Emeritus Professor of Social
Policy, University of Edinburgh)

Contact details and further information

If you require further information about any of the work of SCoWR (including the proposals in this manifesto), please contact one of the campaign's lead members:

Satwat Rehman
One Parent Families Scotland

13 Gayfield Square
Edinburgh, EH1 3NX

☎ 0131 556 3899

✉ satwat.rehman@opfs.org.uk

John Dickie
CPAG in Scotland

Unit 9, Ladywell, 94 Duke Street
Glasgow, G4 0UW

☎ 0141 552 3303

✉ jdickie@cpagscotland.org.uk

Peter Kelly
The Poverty Alliance

162 Buchanan Street
Glasgow, G1 2LL

☎ 0141 353 0440

✉ peter.kelly@povertyalliance.org

Find out more about our campaigning and our **Manifesto for Change** at:
www.cpag.org.uk/scotland/SCoWR