

PE1677/B

Petitioner's submission of 1 April 2018

Thank you for sending us the Scottish Government's response to our petition.

It was useful to have the figure for the reduction in welfare spend confirmed as approximately £4 billion a year by 2020 to 2021, though we are still puzzled as to why the earlier document quoted in the briefing prepared for the committee gave a so much lower figure of £2.2 billion.

It was useful, too, to have a statement on the provisions being made for 18 to 21 year olds who no longer get housing support from the UK government.

However, the Government's response is simply a reiteration of what they are already doing or have already announced. We already know about this. The argument that we made in our petition is that this is not enough, and that the Government has both opportunity and obligation to do more. This response could have been written without looking at our petition or accompanying evidence. Perhaps it was.

Our petition asked the Scottish Government to look at providing further extra funding for welfare to help mitigate the impact of the welfare cuts. In particular, we asked them to look at providing:

- More money for Discretionary Housing Payments to compensate for losses due to the Benefit Cap and prevent evictions and homelessness.
- Extra money for child benefits to address child poverty and meet child poverty reduction targets.
- More money for the Scottish Welfare Fund to meet growing needs as a result of further cuts coming on line and the spread of Universal Credit. Also, to provide help for those suffering from cuts to disability benefits, including those who have lost help with mobility while we wait for the Scottish Government to take over PIP.
- A living wage for carers.
- Help for people whose benefits have been sanctioned (challenging the interpretation of UK legislation).
- More help for welfare advice so people get what they are due from the DWP.

We argued that money could be made available for this through a more progressive use of the Income Tax powers, and – in the longer term – by replacing Council Tax with Land Value Tax. And that money could also be freed up by scrapping subsidies for first time house buyers, which are widely recognised as pushing up prices for all.

We further argued that failure to provide further mitigation of the impact of benefit cuts could prove the much more costly option in the long run – financially as well as socially. Mitigating benefit cuts is an investment in society. It puts money into the economy of the poorest areas, and it helps to prevent numerous negative (and expensive) social consequences, including the current epidemic of poor mental health.

In the light of the announcement by the UK Government on 29 March, we would also like to add the following question.

Now that the DWP has reversed their earlier policy and will be paying housing subsidy to 18-21 year olds on Universal Credit, the Scottish Government will no longer need to provide extra help to this group, and the money budgeted for this can be used for other welfare cut mitigation. Can the Scottish Government confirm that they will be keeping this money for welfare, and can they tell us what other help they plan to give?

We hope that the petitions committee will be able to take these issues further.