



Social Security (Scotland) Bill
Social Security Committee Call for Views
Response from Crisis

August 2017

1. Crisis, the national charity for homeless people, welcomes the opportunity to respond to this Call for Views.
2. Crisis is dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering life-changing services and campaigning for change. We know that together we can end homelessness. Our innovative education, employment, housing and well-being services address individual needs and help people to transform their lives. We work directly with people with experience of homelessness in Edinburgh and the Lothians. Our eleven Skylight Centres across the UK offer holistic support across a whole range of issues, including support to secure access to adequate and affordable housing. We support local authorities and third sector organisations across Scotland to develop housing solutions for homeless people, with particular specialism in the use the private rented sector.
3. We strongly support the aims of the Bill to create a Scottish social security system which is founded on the core principles set out in the first section of the Bill.
4. This response focuses on Part 4 of the Bill on Discretionary Housing Payments.

Q. Do you agree that discretionary housing payments should continue largely as they are?

5. Yes, but with adjustments to the system in particular to ensure quick decision making and a clear appeals mechanism. We set out more details below.

Q. Do you have any other views on the proposals for discretionary housing payments?

6. Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) are an invaluable source of support for many people receiving support with housing costs through the benefit

system. It is important that all local authorities continue to have a DHP scheme in place so that all people across Scotland can continue to access this support, which can be an important protection against homelessness.

7. Originally a relative small fund providing discretionary support to cover housing benefit shortfalls to protect people from homelessness, increasingly DHPs are now used to cover long-term gaps between rent and the amount of housing benefit received as a result of welfare reforms. Despite being discretionary, these payments have become a necessary part of the social security system¹.
8. DHPs will never be able to counter the full impacts of welfare reforms, but a well-functioning Scottish system of support must ensure national consistency in how such support is provided. There is variation in how they operate across the country, and we would like to see a national scheme that gives a level of consistency and transparency across the country in how DHPs are allocated, while allowing for local circumstances.
9. We note that while there has been a major focus on the use of DHPs to mitigate the bedroom tax, there has been less attention paid recently to the more traditional use of DHPs to support people who need other kinds of support with their housing, including people who need help to move into a new home and exit homelessness.
10. We believe there are opportunities to use DHPs more innovatively to address homelessness, for example to support people who are homeless to gain their own tenancy in the private rented sector for example, through help with deposits or rent in advance.
11. The Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) provides a useful model for how this can work well in practice. Key elements include a **clear national framework, fixed timescales for decisions and critically, a clear appeals mechanism.**
12. This is an opportunity to ensure a Scottish network of support is available to people who are in vulnerable housing situations. Scottish Government should consider how DHPs should work alongside other schemes, notably the Scottish Welfare Fund and Council Tax Reduction, to provide a coherent system of support for households at risk of or affected by homelessness.

For more information, please contact Beth Reid, Senior Policy Officer, Crisis,
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¹ Meers, J (2015) The Localism-and-Austerity Hybrid: The case of Discretionary Housing Payments' U.K. Constitutional Law Blog (21st Oct 2015)
<https://ukconstitutionallaw.org/2015/10/21/jed-meers-the-localism-and-austerity-hybrid-the-case-of-discretionary-housing-payments/>