



The Church of Scotland  
Church and Society Council



## Official Response

**SUBJECT:** Welfare Reform – The Committee wants to hear from you  
**REQUESTED BY:** Scottish Parliament Welfare Reform Committee  
**REFERENCE:** OR-05  
**DATE:** 12 March 2012  
**SUBMITTED BY:** The Church of Scotland – Church and Society Council  
Faith in Community Scotland

### About Us:

We are writing on behalf of the Church of Scotland (Church and Society Council and Faith in Community Scotland).

The Church of Scotland is one of the largest organisations in the country. We have over 500,000 members, with more regularly involved in local congregations and our work. Within the organisation, we have around 1200 ministers serving in parishes and chaplaincies, supported by more than 2,000 professional and administrative staff. The Church and Society Council's remit is to engage on behalf of the Church in the national, political and social issues affecting Scotland and the world today. Our Priority Areas Committee is responsible for the support, development and coordination of the Church's work within its poorest 58 communities. [www.churchofscotland.org.uk](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk)

Faith in Community Scotland is an anti-poverty organisation founded in 2005. Our board, staff and volunteers are a dynamic team from across the Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh communities. We have a huge level of experience within the public, private and voluntary sectors. We share a commitment and passion to reducing poverty in Scotland. We give training, resources, advice and support to faith groups (churches, mosques, gurdwaras, synagogues etc), developing their potential to make a difference in Scotland's poorest communities. We do this because poverty and inequality ruin people's lives. And as Scotland changes, with people of different faiths and cultures living alongside each other, we believe it's essential to work together to reduce poverty and make our communities better places in which to live and work.

[www.faithincommunityscotland.org](http://www.faithincommunityscotland.org)

The Poverty Truth Commission was been a two year project bringing together some of Scotland's civic leaders with people at the sharp end of poverty. They have worked together to discover the truths about poverty, and explore real solutions to it. Despite

hundreds of charity reports and government strategies poverty continues to worsen in the UK. Their motto, taken from the South African post-apartheid process, is 'nothing about us without us is for us'. We believe that just as women's rights would never have been won without women at the helm, poverty will never be truly addressed until those who experience it firsthand are at the heart of the process. The Poverty Truth Commission was formed in March 2009 after a group of people from disadvantaged communities in Glasgow testified on poverty in front of 400 people. That day a group of Scotland's decision makers decided to join with the testifiers, accepting that they could not address poverty without those affected. Since then the Commission has focused on three main areas of particular relevance to the Commissioners;

1. **Overcoming Violence** - Violence is not just a poverty issue, but it is exacerbated by poverty. Violence is directly linked to levels of inequality – the greater the disparity between the richest and poorest, the greater the fear and frustration that cause violence. Our Alternatives to Violence working group has included an academic, a senior police officer and people with direct experience of poverty and violence in our poorest communities. We have explored topics including domestic violence, early intervention, gang culture and community disempowerment.
2. **Kinship Care** - Kinship Care involves relatives (usually grandparents) who become permanent carers for children whose parents are unable to look after them. This is usually due to addiction or bereavement. 2,990 children are recognised to be in 'formal' kinship care in Scotland and an estimated 17,500 more children are in this situation 'informally'. Most of them receive little or no financial, educational or psychological support. This leaves many of them in extreme poverty and struggling with physical and mental problems.
3. **Stereotyping Poverty** - Politicians, the media and wider society still find it acceptable to describe people from deprived communities as scroungers and benefit fraudsters. There is a demand for scandal and bad news about people and communities in poverty. Negative and stereotyped reporting can make people feel hopeless and ashamed of where they live as well as deepen divisions such as racism and fear of young people. It also creates a culture which blames those without resources for their problems rather than accepting that we have a shared responsibility to create a more just society. People want to be proud of their communities and promote them as good places to live rather than feeling ashamed of them. There are incredible stories of community spirit, mutuality, courage and resilience in deprived communities but they don't make the papers. As a Commission we have continually sought to work with members of the media to promote positive examples. We have seen the beneficial effect that this has had.

As people from vastly different backgrounds, learning to work together properly has not been easy and it has taken time to build trust and shared commitment.

[www.povertytruthcommission.org](http://www.povertytruthcommission.org)

## Message to the Committee:

1. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute. We appreciate being able to share our work and ideas and hope that the Welfare Reform Committee is able to work to improve the lives of the most vulnerable people in Scotland.
2. We appreciate that timetables are very tight for the first few months of the Committee's life and work. We found last year that the stunted timetable around the passage of the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2011 prevented individuals from community organisations with direct experience of the issues involved from participating fully in our or the Scottish Parliament's consideration of issues. The Poverty Truth Commission has reminded us that 'Nothing About Us Without Us Is For Us', and we'd urge the Committee as far as possible to engage directly with individuals who will be affected by the Welfare Reform Bill and its implementation.
3. We would be happy to arrange meetings or visits for the Committee as a whole or for individual members to see some of our projects and meet with some of the people we live and work alongside to hear from them how they feel the impact of the welfare changes will have on their lives.
4. We appreciate nonetheless the need for legislation from the Scottish Parliament in this area to be completed and ready for implementation in order that the most vulnerable people are protected and do not lose out further from their rights and entitlements. When legislation is being passed faster than normal the need for the Committee to provide close scrutiny and to challenge the Executive is even more important.
5. Given the size, range of work we undertake and the learning we have gathered from the Poverty Truth Commission, we are very keen to remain fully involved with the work of the Committee, and would be happy to receive information about roundtable meetings and other stakeholder engagement processes. We would also be happy to give oral evidence to the Committee if required.
6. In terms of issues, consistency across Scottish Local Authorities in their treatment of kinship carers was one of the key issues that was raised by the Poverty Truth Commission. We have real-life human stories, links with support groups and individuals, and have regularly raised the issue with MSPs, the media and others in recent months. We believe that support for kinship care should be the Committee's and the Government's number one priority in this area.
7. We would also like to draw the Committee's attention to ideas we expressed to MPs in advance of the Second Reading of the Welfare Reform Bill in March 2011

when we outlined the key principles of welfare provision that we would want decision-makers to keep in mind:

### Principles of Welfare Provision

Our nation comprises of people who care for one another.

It is important to remember what the welfare system is intended to achieve. It is the means by which we, as a nation, pool our resources to support the most vulnerable members of our society and ensure that everyone has access to adequate resources to live a dignified and healthy life.

Change should not be about cutting costs, but making the system work better and for more people.

The goal of welfare reform has to be to make the lives of people who need help easier and we urge the Government to seek to take steps through its planned reforms of the welfare system to seek to reduce the levels of inequality in our country – an inequality which we believe damages all parts of society.

Dependency is not a sin for which requires penance in order to spur people into laying it aside.

Dependency is a fact of life, for us all; we depend on each other, rich and poor, disabled or able-bodied. This is what makes us human. Perpetuating the myth that only those in receipt of benefits are dependent – and using that as a basis for policy – is divisive and undermines the social cohesion which the Government seeks to foster.

The goal of welfare reform must not be to reduce the cost of the welfare system or to reduce dependency but to enable all members of society to contribute as they are most able.

We would urge all politicians and those involved in the public discourse about welfare reform to think very carefully before speaking with particular caution not to imply dependency on or receipt of benefits is a bad thing. Political leadership, we hope, will help to improve the standard of debate in the media.

### **Contact**

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