

Eilidh Dickson, Engender, notes:

Firstly, the devolution of a limited raft of social security powers post-2014 has meant that there is a new commitment to a Scottish way of doing things, with a new agency established to administer payments and the Social Security Scotland Act 2018, which includes a set of principles for the delivery of social security including dignity, fairness, respect and importantly equality and non-discrimination and continuous improvement. However, speed of transfer is very slow.

The devolved powers cover around 15% of total welfare spend in Scotland, with further powers to top up or create new entitlements, which we have seen already with carers allowance supplement.

Secondly we have recently seen the new Domestic Abuse Scotland Act 2018 come into force. The Act introduces a criminal offence for physical, sexual and psychological abuse within a coercive control framework that can take place over a sustained period; and changes criminal procedure, evidence and sentencing. This includes financial abuse. The act further sits within Equally Safe, Scotland's violence against women strategy, which establishes violence against women as a cause and consequence of women's inequality.

Due to time, I'm going to focus the rest of my remarks on just one aspect of policy change however this equality principle runs through all of the Scottish Government's devolved responsibilities in respect of social security, including responses to aspects of the UK welfare system discussed so far by others.

Financial independence is crucial for gender equality, and the household model of universal credit reinforces an outdated 'male breadwinner model' which prioritises men's needs, compromises women's safety and creates huge imbalances of power within households. Independent rights – and responsibilities – to income are vital in individual realisation of human rights including equality and dignity.

The Scottish Government has committed to using its devolved powers over the administration of universal credit to bring in individualised payments after women's organisations including Engender and Scottish Women's Aid campaigned for this pretty much immediately from the outset of the Smith Commission in 2014. That policy intention has translated into the devolved flexibilities in the administration of split payment and ultimately into the Social Security Act itself. Important to note, cannot change the policy or the amount.

Our discussions with the Scottish Government have been ongoing and we are at the stage where a formal request has been made to the DWP by the Scottish Government to do formal impact assessment of options. The Scottish Government has frequently restated its commitment to the principle of individualised payment and indicated that its policy intention is that split payments be introduced at the point of application with the objective that each party in a couple has a right to an individual income that meets individual need, ruling out – in their view – a 50/50 split so that for example disability payments or childcare elements reach the party that is entitled to them.

However from there things are a bit unclear as to when, how and if individualised payments will be introduced in reality, whether they will ultimately be automatic as we believe is vital to ensure women's security and equality. Payment will ultimately be dependent upon DWP IT systems capability. However the Scottish Government's pledge that "new powers will be founded on dignity and respect" will be undermined from the outset if social security cannot be accessed equally by women. We wait with baited breath for updates about the full design of the policy and the practicalities necessary to give effect to it from both governments.