

Scottish Parliament Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Budget scrutiny 2026-27, Future Social Security Spending in Scotland

Written submission by RNIB Scotland

Introduction

The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) Scotland welcomes the Scottish Parliament's Social Justice and Social Security Committee call for views on future social security spending in Scotland.

RNIB Scotland is the country's leading charity working with blind and partially sighted people. We support children and adults with sight loss and help them to live full and independent lives, campaigning for their rights.

Around 183,000 people are currently living with a significant degree of sight loss in Scotland. Our ageing population and the rise in sight-threatening conditions such as diabetes, mean that this figure will rise, with estimates suggesting that by 2030, there may be 214,000 people in Scotland living with sight loss.¹

We have compiled this response based on anecdotal feedback from blind and partially sighted people from across Scotland and the UK. We have also referred to a RNIB Scotland statement contained within the UK sight loss sector response to the recent UK Government Green Paper, "Pathways to Work", in response to Question 6 of this call for views.

Based on our experience of supporting blind and partially sighted people in Scotland, we are responding to the questions listed below:

1. To what extent do you welcome the growth in devolved social security spend? Please explain your reasons.
2. To what extent are you concerned about the growth in devolved social security? Please explain your reasons.
3. What is the evidence that spending on devolved social security is effective in supporting those who need it?
6. To what extent is the Scottish Government's ability to manage the devolved social security budget affected by UK Government policy choices?

For more information or to get in touch regarding information contained in this call for views response paper, please see contact details for RNIB Scotland at the end of this document.

¹ Country report for Scotland (March 2023) available at download latest from - <https://www.rnib.org.uk/professionals/health-social-care-education-professionals/knowledge-and-research-hub/sight-loss-data-tool/>

Questions

1. To what extent do you welcome the growth in devolved social security spending?

RNIB Scotland welcomes the growth in devolved social security spending, particularly on benefits which exist to support blind and partially sighted people.

The Scottish Parliament has seen the transfer of increased social security and employment support powers via the Scotland Act 2016, and the subsequent Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. This has created a distinct Scottish social security system with its own approach. This includes seventeen benefits (some replacing Department for Work and Pension equivalent benefits). This includes the disability benefit for working age adults Adult Disability Payment (ADP), which has replaced Personal Independence Payment (PIP) for people living in Scotland.

Social Security Scotland figures for ADP suggest people with sight loss are more likely to be in receipt of a disability benefit. For example, “The Diseases of the Eye and Adnexa” category had the highest proportion of both care and mobility awards (87 per cent) (excluding categories where the number of clients on the caseload is very small due to the likelihood of outliers) [Table 19]. This category also had high rates of receiving the enhanced rate of each component with 74 per cent receiving the enhanced rate of care [Table 20], and 84 per cent receiving the enhanced rate of mobility [Table 21].²

These figures suggest that blind and partially sighted people receive higher points when assessed across various activities for both daily living and mobility components of ADP. This could point to a higher need for assistance and the aids which blind and partially sighted people require to enable them to live independently.

Expenses for blind and partially sighted people over the last few years have risen starkly. For example, services such as cleaning are recurring expenses and have increased substantially over time: the cost of domestic services (including cleaning) increased by about 15 per cent between 2016 and 2022 according to Consumer Price Index (CPI), and by a further 5 per cent between 2022 and 2024. For severely sight impaired pensioners, the increases in the cost of household services accounts for around £20 to the overall increase in additional costs.

The substantial cost of extensively using taxis brings an added cost to all budgets – as much as £38 a week for a severely sight impaired working-age adult in 2024. As one person said in an RNIB UK paper:

“Paying for taxis can add significant costs that people with sight loss need whether it’s for travelling to unknown places, destinations not on a bus route, hospital appointments, after dark and when carrying items.”³

² <https://www.socialsecurity.gov.scot/reporting/publications/adult-disability-payment-statistics-to-31-january-2025>

³

https://www.rnib.org.uk/documents/2958/Sight_loss_sector_response_to_the_Pathways_to_Work_green_paper_June_2025_-_final.docx

Social activities outside the home allow people to take part in society and to feel included. However, costs have increased, adding between £5 and around £7 a week to minimum household budgets for severely sight impaired singles of both working- and pension-age, the groups who are most likely to incur extra costs.⁴

Therefore, spending on social security is essential. It not only helps to meet some of the additional costs when living with sight loss but has far greater benefits for society. We explore this point further in response to Question 3.

Wider factors are also at play. The rates of sight loss are increasing, due in part to an ageing population, and a rise in other sight loss related conditions. It is essential that existing and future governments acknowledge this. The devolved social security system must continue to respond to the needs of people with sight loss, now and in the future.

2. What extent are you concerned about the growth in devolved social security? Please explain your reasons.

Whilst the Social Security Budget will increase in the coming years, it is important to consider wider factors.

For example, a Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) briefing published at the end of 2024 suggested that “the rate of growth is expected to slow down over the next five years” stating:

“Social security spending is increasing by 11 per cent (£693 million) in 2025-26. This is considerably less than the £984 million increase last year. The main factors contributing to this £693 million growth are:

- “£428 million additional spend on Adult Disability Payment, reflecting a UK-wide trend in increased disability benefit spending.
- “£94 million additional spend on Child Disability Payment.
- “£68 million additional spend on Pension Age Winter Heating Payment – £67 million of which reflects the new policy to provide a payment to all pensioner households.”⁵

The largest elements of additional Scottish spending above UK funding in 2025-26 are:

- £471 million on the Scottish Child Payment.
- £314 million additional spend on Adult Disability Payment (ADP) compared to its UK equivalent, Personal Independence Payment (PIP).
- £103 million additional spending on winter payments. Most (£67 million) of this is for extending Pension Age Winter Heating Payment to give at least £100 to all pensioner households).

⁴ See <https://www.rnib.org.uk/professionals/research-and-data/reports-and-insight/sight-loss-and-the-minimum-cost-of-living-2024-update-paper/>

⁵ <https://spice-spotlight.scot/2024/12/17/social-security-budget-2025-26/>

- £100 million additional spending on carer benefits.⁶

So, whilst there is additional spending required to fund benefits which only exist in Scotland, such as the Scottish Child Payment, and additional spending on Scottish equivalent benefits such as ADP (which replaced PIP), other factors could also have an impact in the longer term.

For example, the UK Government's U-turn on Winter Heating Payment in June 2025, may adjust funding available to the Scottish Government to fund Pension Age Winter Heating Payment.⁷

We consider the extent UK Government policy choices impact on the Scottish Government's ability to manage the devolved social security budget in response to Question 6.

Nonetheless, growth in devolved social security spend should not detract from the statutory duty which Scottish Ministers have to ensure that as many people as possible apply for the devolved benefits to which they are entitled.⁸

3. What is the evidence that spending on devolved social security is effective in supporting those who need it?

RNIB Scotland believe increasing spending in devolved social security can help to protect the independence of blind and partially sighted people by providing a means for them to participate in society, whether that be for work, education, health, or social opportunities.

Costs associated with sight loss are often essential and unavoidable, and can include support in the home, such as tasks like cleaning, household repairs, and dealing with paperwork. Specialist technology is vital for independence and accessing information. For example, text-to-speech software like JAWS costs between £735 and £1,150 and requires the purchase of regular updates as well as updating computers or laptops to allow for the best functionality.

According to a 2024 University of Loughborough paper, being sight impaired adds an additional £65.20 to a minimum weekly budget for a single working-age adult; being severely sight impaired adds £156.44 each week.⁹

Understanding the longer-term outcomes associated with social security spending is methodologically challenging. It may take several years for changes in outcomes to be observed.

Ergo, it may be helpful for the Scottish Government to conduct a full cost-benefit

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nine-million-pensioners-to-receive-winter-fuel-payments-this-winter>

⁸ See benefit take up strategy: <https://www.gov.scot/policies/social-security/benefit-take-up/>

⁹ See "Sight loss and the minimum cost of living": 2024 update paper. Available from https://www.lboro.ac.uk/media/media/research/crsp/downloads/Sight%20loss%20and%20the%20minimum%20cost%20of%20living_2024%20Update.docx

analysis of spending on devolved social security when the case transfer of key devolved disability benefits like ADP is complete. This has already been suggested in the Scottish Government paper, “Social Security investment helping grow the economy”.¹⁰

Some work already exists in this area, albeit at a UK level. For example, in 2015, RNIB commissioned the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the Government's Access to Work (AtW) scheme. The research found the overall benefits of Access to Work to society outweighed its costs by a considerable margin, and that the scheme is a beneficial form of public spending. Every £1 spent on blind and partially sighted individuals via AtW was estimated to generate £2.48 of economic and social benefits.¹¹

In addition, other factors may come into this, such as the monumental contribution unpaid carers save the economy in Scotland. Estimates suggest £15.9 billion is saved each year because of unpaid carers providing support to family members, friends and neighbours who could not get by without their help.¹²

6.To what extent is the Scottish Government’s ability to manage the devolved social security budget affected by UK Government policy choices?

It is apparent that UK Government policy choices can impact on the Scottish Government’s ability to manage the devolved social security budget and will continue to do so in the future.

Changes in UK Government policy can change the level of block grant adjustment, which can increase or reduce the additional costs in Scotland. This is very much a live issue as the UK Government considers its approach to welfare reform and represents an area of uncertainty in the short term.

In June 2025, the UK Government proposed to change eligibility criteria for PIP, which could have seen around 370,000 current PIP recipients in England and Wales losing their entitlement by 2029-30.¹³

Widespread concern was expressed not just for benefit recipients in England and Wales, but also for benefit recipients in Scotland. Reductions in spending in England and Wales would have a profound potential impact on what the Scottish Government receives through the Block Grant Adjustment (BGA).

At present, most social security is covered by UK Government funding through the BGA. The BGA broadly reflects what it would cost the Scottish Government to provide social security benefits equivalent to those available in England and Wales.

¹⁰ See <https://www.gov.scot/news/social-security-investment-helping-grow-the-economy/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CA%20analysis%20published%20today%20shows%20that,boost%20to%20the%20Scottish%20economy>

¹¹ https://www.rnib.org.uk/documents/602/Access_to_Work_CBA_revised.docx

¹² <https://www.carersuk.org/press-releases/new-figures-show-the-staggering-value-of-unpaid-carers-in-scotland/>

¹³ <https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/labours-cuts-to-pip-will-drag-a-quarter-of-a-million-people-into-absolute-poverty-dwp-figures-show/#:~:text=This%20will%20see%2C%20by%202029,of%20%C2%A34%2C500%20a%20year>

At present, ADP broadly aligns with PIP. Both benefits have the same rates of awards based on a similar assessment which looks at a range of activities across daily living and mobility.

The specific proposals to change eligibility for PIP for new claimants were shelved by the UK Government in June 2025, whilst a review of the PIP Assessment now takes place.¹⁴ However, other factors could also come into play.

Should ADP diverge further from PIP in the future, then it is difficult to predict what the block grant adjustment for expenditure on both benefits would entail.

The Scottish Government must also respond to recommendations laid out in the “Independent Review of Adult Disability Payment”, published at the end of July 2025. Should the Scottish Government accept the recommendations from the Independent Review there may be costs involved. As laid out in the report, additional costs can be thought of in two terms:

1. “Benefit expenditure costs: these are the value of payments made to individual clients, so are likely to continue into future years and
2. “Benefit delivery costs: these are the costs associated with implementing changes to systems, processes and procedures.”¹⁵

Whilst some proposals in the original UK Government Green Paper have been removed for the time being, such as those changing eligibility criteria for new PIP claimants, others remain.

In June 2025, RNIB Scotland added a statement to the UK sight loss sector’s response to the UK Government’s Green Paper, “Pathways to Work”.¹⁶ In this paper we detailed other potential impacts for Scotland based on the Green Paper proposals but here we wish to highlight two key areas:

1. PIP acts as a gateway onto the health element of Universal Credit. Will the UK Government recognise ADP as a qualification benefit for the health element of Universal Credit?
2. There will be a package of tailored support to help disabled people into work. How will this transfer to devolved employment services in Scotland and work for blind and partially sighted people?

The devolved benefits play a vital role in the lives of blind and partially sighted people and the Scottish Government must find the means to continue to support existing and new claimants.

¹⁴ <https://qna.files.parliament.uk/ws-attachments/1817526/original/Timms%20Review%20of%20the%20PIP%20Assessment.pdf>

¹⁵ See <https://www.gov.scot/publications/independent-review-adult-disability-payment-final-report/>

¹⁶ See https://www.rnib.org.uk/documents/2959/RNIB_Scotland_statement_on_UK_Government_Green_Paper_Pathways_to_Work.docx