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20 October 2026

Follow up to Social Justice, Housing and Local Government Committee Session on 16 September 2026

Dear Convenor,

Thank you for the opportunity to attend the Social Justice, Housing and Local Government Committee on 16 September 2026. During the session, I committed to providing further information on several topics, which is enclosed in this letter. For completeness, I have also included an update on Social Security Scotland's error rates following your subsequent session with the Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform.

Homelessness

This summer, I instructed my officials to work with key stakeholders in the homelessness sector to develop a statement of intent that would set a clear and focused direction for the work towards ending homelessness during this parliamentary term. This co-produced statement was included in the Programme for Government in September this year:

Our vision is for a Scotland where homelessness is ended for good. We want to shift from crisis management to preventing homelessness and rapid rehousing so that everyone has a safe, secure and affordable home in which they can thrive.

We will transform how public services work together and embed housing stability as a shared responsibility. This will ensure that people receive the right support at the right time.

As part of our plan for housing reform, we will increase the supply of social and affordable homes where they are needed most. This will help us end homelessness and rough sleeping for everyone.

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The statement of intent describes the future we are striving for. The Scottish Government, in partnership with the Ending Homelessness Delivery Group (previously known as Homelessness Prevention Strategy Group), is now in the process of developing an outcomes framework that will allow us to track our progress towards delivering on this vision. The framework will consist of a small number of measurable outcomes, underpinned by metrics and indicators. This will allow us to provide more meaningful annual reporting to parliament on Scotland's progress towards ending homelessness. I intend to have a finalised framework I can share with the Committee by the end of this year.

Asylum Policy

During the session on 16 September, I informed the Committee that I had asked Home Office Ministers to discuss matters relating to the asylum system. I wrote to the Minister for Border Security & Asylum, Anna Turley MP, on 14 August and received a response on 14 September. Although the response did not agree to a meeting, the UK Government Minister recognised the importance of early engagement with local authorities, devolved administrations and operational partners in relation to asylum accommodation.

Separately, the Home Office has also agreed to engage earlier with local authorities on asylum accommodation proposals going forward and to share notification of formal proposals that issue to local authorities with the Scottish Government.

The Scottish Government supports widening of asylum dispersal in principle and is clear that the UK Government must engage with local authorities and COSLA on operational planning. Engagement must be meaningful and respond to local circumstances and issues raised. The UK Government should also provide adequate funding to local authorities to ensure that people seeking asylum and communities can be supported effectively.

First-Tier Tribunal for Scotland

In relation to the points raised about the First-Tier Tribunal for Scotland (Housing and Property Chamber) and determining cases without a hearing, Rule 18 of the Chamber Rules allows the Tribunal to determine proceedings without a hearing in certain circumstances. Whether a hearing is required in any individual case is a matter for the independent Tribunal and its judiciary.

While Scottish Ministers cannot direct the Tribunal on how powers should be exercised, we recognise the importance of ensuring that cases are progressed efficiently. We are aware that the Chamber is working to ensure that all appeals are processed as quickly as possible.

The Scottish Government is currently working with Judicial Office and the Judicial Appointments Board for Scotland to deliver planned recruitment of further tribunal members. Scottish Ministers have requested that the Judicial Appointment Board for Scotland undertake an ordinary member recruitment exercise for persons with housing, property or surveying experience. A larger pool of members will enhance overall scheduling capacity and reduce wait times.

The Scottish Government continues to regularly engage with partners across the Justice system on a range of current issues and we are grateful to you for raising this matter. My officials will ensure that the issues raised with me at Committee are included in those discussions.

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Social Security: fiscal sustainability

Regarding the Committee's question on the work being undertaken in relation to the fiscal sustainability of social security, you may be aware that during the last Parliamentary session, as part of the Scottish Government's Fiscal Sustainability Delivery Plan, we committed to:

- refine and strengthen how data can be legally, accurately and safely shared, where appropriate, with other public sector organisations;
- invest in systems and improvements in technology to identify fraudulent activity and recover funds;
- ensure readiness to implement new legislative powers to measure the monetary value of fraud and error;
- invest in critical digital services and platforms to support safe and efficient delivery of benefits;
- identify and implement improvements in processing and delivering benefits, with operational delivery improvements focused on improving productivity; and
- assess whether the disability benefit award review process is working as intended and if any changes may be required.

The next Scottish Government Benefit Take-Up Strategy, due for publication this month, will address how to enable more effective data-sharing so people can be connected earlier to the right support, including wider income maximisation, financial wellbeing and other advice and services relevant to their circumstances. Social Security Scotland data is also being utilised as part of the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan, for example sharing Scottish Child Payment data with local authorities to better target additional support for families experiencing council tax debts. Using data like this is one way in which Social Security Scotland can sit at the heart of smarter public services which serve the people who rely on them more effectively.

Within Social Security Scotland, there is an ongoing programme of improvements in technology to strengthen the prevention, detection and investigation of fraud and error. This includes new investigatory tools, improved case management systems, enhanced data matching and analytical capabilities, which will strengthen Social Security Scotland's ability to identify potential fraud or error through more effective data matching and analysis, supporting targeted investigations. Regulations to introduce new powers to gather information needed to estimate the monetary value of fraud and error are due be laid in Parliament in the coming months, as part of the implementation of the Social Security (Amendment) (Scotland) Act 2025.

Social Security Scotland continues to support delivery of essential services, such as delivering a programme to transition payment and account services to a Scottish Government-owned system, which will replace reliance on DWP systems.

Alongside this, Social Security Scotland is improving efficiency. It has expanded automated processing of many low-complexity tasks, streamlined manual processes, and replaced paper notifications with email and text messages in high-volume client communications.

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As mentioned during the evidence session, we have assessed the disability benefit award review process in full and are taking forward enhancements that will further facilitate fair and robust decision-making. This includes enhancing review forms to gather relevant information more effectively when there is no change in condition and improving decision reports with clearer explanations of review periods and information that may support future reviews. These changes will help clients better understand decisions and review requirements and will be developed with disabled people and stakeholders to ensure dignity, fairness and respect remain at the heart of the process.

Independent Review of Adult Disability Payment (ADP): Progress Update

As noted in my March letter to the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, our responses to a number of recommendations started within three months of receipt of the report. These included action to strengthen trauma-informed practice, enhance staff training and guidance to improve the consistency of decision making, and make communications clearer and easier for clients to understand.

That letter also indicated that the longer-term recommendations, which would involve more significant changes to the structure and operation of ADP, particularly those relating to the entitlement criteria, have required detailed consideration due to the complex policy, operational and fiscal implications they present.

Throughout this process we have remained clear that any reform of ADP must be sustainable, proportionate and focused on improving outcomes for disabled people in Scotland. It has been important to ensure that proposed changes build on the progress already made, strengthening the current system whilst also safeguarding its long-term stability and integrity.

I recognise the ambition that underpins these recommendations and the positive outcomes they seek to achieve for disabled people. However, noting the costs associated with changes to the entitlement criteria, we are not announcing any changes relating to eligibility at this time.

We are focusing now on the outstanding recommendations which propose a range of significant practical improvements. These include enhancing application forms and client communications, exploring the introduction of an application-tracking system, and providing clients with clearer information on the reliability criteria to enhance their understanding of how entitlement decisions are made.

As this work progresses, we will continue to work closely with Social Security Scotland to ensure that any changes are shaped by user insight and lived experience, while remaining deliverable in practice. This will include testing proposed improvements, assessing operational impacts and identifying opportunities to enhance the client journey while maintaining a sustainable and resilient service.

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Reducing Errors

Finally, I am aware the Committee directed questions to the Cabinet Secretary for Public Sector Reform on reducing errors, overpayments and Adult Disability Payment appeals.

The Scottish Government's Medium-Term Financial Strategy and Spending Review include commitments to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of social security delivery, including reducing levels of error within the system. This work is focused on ensuring clients receive the correct entitlement at the correct time and that public funds are administered appropriately.

As Scotland's social security system continues to mature, client volumes have grown across a number of benefits. Social Security Scotland continues to review operational processes to ensure increasing caseloads are managed efficiently while maintaining accuracy, improving the client experience and reducing avoidable error.

Errors can arise for a range of reasons, including within administrative processes, due to changes in client circumstances or inaccuracies in information held at the time decisions are made. Social Security Scotland continuously seeks to reduce error, improve accuracy and enhance the client experience.

The estimated savings associated with reducing error reflect improvements in the accuracy of benefit administration, process efficiency and payment accuracy.

Recovery of Overpayments

Social Security Scotland has robust processes in place to recover debt. The organisation assesses and researches every allegation of fraud and will always take steps to recover money where it's found someone has intentionally provided false or misleading information.

In 2024-25, robust investigations and error intervention resulted in the correction of £9 million in overpayments. Where voluntary payment plans cannot be reached with clients, Social Security Scotland is able to deduct from ongoing entitlements or seek recovery through Sheriff Courts.

Where an overpayment results solely from official error, Social Security Scotland will only seek to recover when a person could have been reasonably expected to notice the error.

Adult Disability Payment Appeals

The Scottish Government recognises the importance of ensuring appeals are progressed as quickly as possible. Adult Disability Payment appeal numbers have increased these represent a relatively small proportion of overall applications and decisions, with growth largely reflecting the size of the caseload and the corresponding increase in decisions being made.

Social Security Scotland has focused on improving performance within those parts of the appeals process for which it is responsible, including the timely preparation and submission of appeal responses and supporting evidence to the Tribunal. Once an appeal has been lodged and transferred, responsibility for scheduling and managing hearings rests with the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service.

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Social Security Scotland continues to work closely with the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service to monitor demand, review operational capacity and progress system and process improvements to support the efficient handling of appeals and improve the client experience.

I hope the Committee finds this update helpful, and I look forward to continuing to work with the Committee and Parliament as a whole as we progress this vital work.

Yours sincerely

SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE

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