



Social Security Scotland
Tèarainteachd Shòisealta Alba

Social Security Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP


Social Security Scotland
Second Floor
Dundee House
50 North Lindsay Street
Dundee DD1 1QE

SocialSecurityCommittee@parliament.scot

0800 029 4794

www.socialsecurity.gov.scot

 @SocSecScot

 Social Security Scotland

21 September 2020

Dear Convener,

Thank you for your letter of 19 August 2020, asking for an update on the issue of representation by third parties and our contingency planning for a potential increase in workload and longer-term different working arrangements for Social Security Scotland staff. I have responded to these specific points below and provided updates on other areas for your information, including the announcement of our new head office in Dundee. I trust that this information will be of interest to you and your members.

Representation by third parties

Since I last updated you about this matter in December 2019, we have developed a policy which is now used by our Client Advisers, to ensure that our clients can benefit from representation by third-parties in as wide a range of circumstances as possible. This policy was introduced following extensive input from a wide range of stakeholders and takes into account our legal obligations under GDPR.

In brief, we know that there are a range of circumstances where an individual will ask a third party representative e.g. a family member/friend or welfare rights organisation, to support them, and we want to ensure that our clients are able to access the right advice and support that meets their individual needs.

Our policy allows clients to give a third party representative consent to help them at any point during the processing of their application and lifecycle of their claim. Clients must give explicit consent, verbally or in writing, to allow a third-party to fully act for them and have access to their information.

Where the client has been unable to give explicit consent, our policy allows their third party representative to call one of our client advisers and, provided they are able to answer questions that will allow us to verify they are a genuine third party representative, we can share some limited information with them, to help with their enquiry.

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As you'll be aware, this limitation on the level of information that can be shared without explicit consent is a requirement of data protection legislation.

We will continue to refine the policy as we receive feedback from our clients and through engagement with key stakeholders. This will ensure that our policy and our guidance is fit for purpose - both for current circumstances and for use with the more complex future benefits.

Contingency Planning

As the Cabinet Secretary said, in her letter to you of 26 August, our main priorities have been to continue to deliver our live benefits, which now sits at eight following the successful introduction of the Job Start Payment on 17 August 2020, and preparing for the launch of new benefits, particularly the Scottish Child Payment and Child Winter Heating Allowance.

For the time being, the majority of our workforce continue to work at home. We have provided them with the equipment, training and support they need to deliver their roles from home and we have put measures in place to ensure that our services can be delivered effectively in this way.

We are keeping these arrangements under careful review and have made improvements to our service, increasing our functionality. At the beginning of lockdown, we introduced an interim call back service, as we did not have the technology to handle inbound calls while working from home. On 3 July, we were able to reintroduce an inbound call facility, replacing the interim call back process and allowing client advisers to help and support clients from home.

While maintaining delivery of our live benefits, we have also continued to redeploy people from some teams to other priority areas including to support the SG response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Our people have also adapted their existing ways of working to ensure they can still carry out their roles. For example, some of our local delivery colleagues have been able to continue with their engagement with stakeholders, using digital tools to help them to do this. They have worked across several platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and social media. This has allowed them to progress their engagement plans by attending meetings and holding seminars to promote the benefits currently delivered by Social Security Scotland.

Although there was a necessary freeze on recruitment activity at the start of the Covid restrictions, those recruited for Scottish Child Payment who had start dates agreed pre-lockdown have now been able to join which has helped maintain service levels during this challenging time. We are now able to bring more new colleagues into our organisation, offering 74 people who were on the client adviser reserve list permanent positions.

Live Benefits – Potential Increased Workload

As you know, there have been regular fluctuations in the number of applications received and payments made for each of our live benefits since their respective launches, particularly for Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods. While there has been an increase in applications across some benefits in recent months - for example in June, we saw the highest monthly total of applications for Funeral Support Payment to date, these increases have not been to the same scale as increases seen in some of the qualifying benefits, such as Universal Credit.

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This means that, at this stage, it is difficult to know if changes in demand for some of our benefits are related to Covid-19 or if further impacts will be seen in future months.

What this means is that any current impacts of Covid-19 may be masked by the impact of other natural fluctuations in our benefits. For example, the application window for the School Age Payment opened on 1 June 2020 and we would normally expect to see a large increase in applications for Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods at this time, as a consequence of the window opening, so it will be difficult to identify whether changes are an impact of Covid-19, or part of the regular yearly pattern of variation in demand.

Invitation to Apply

As part of the Scottish Government's approach to maximising the uptake of Scottish benefits, we launched the Invitation to Apply initiative throughout August. Based on information provided by the Department of Work and Pensions and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, we actively wrote to people who are on certain benefits or tax credits who have families with children of the appropriate age to qualify for Best Start Foods and/or Best Start Grant Early Learning and School Age Payments to tell them about their potential entitlement and encourage them to apply.

This is a first time for such benefit in Scotland and demonstrates the commitment of the Government to the principles of the Social Security Act which includes a commitment to contribute to reducing poverty in Scotland as well as our duties to promote the take-up of social security and taking appropriate steps to ensure people are advised of what they are entitled to. We will be reviewing the effectiveness of the letters and this will inform future use of Invitation to Apply.

Social Security Scotland Satisfaction Survey

Since 17 August, we have invited over 165,000 people to complete our satisfaction survey. The survey invitation went to everyone who has applied for (and reached decision stage) or received a Social Security Scotland benefit between September 2018 and July 2020. It includes clients whose application was unsuccessful and clients who applied on behalf of someone else. The survey asks questions about their overall experience with Social Security Scotland.

The survey will be a main data source for measuring our Social Security Charter commitments. We will also use the survey to recruit clients for further research, which will form the Client Panels. This will allow us to continue the Experience Panels approach with people who have direct experience of our service to inform continuous improvement.

Our recently published statistical information

Statistics relating to our organisation and clients are available on the Scottish Government website at www.gov.scot/publications. New statistics can be found in relation to:

Workforce information

The statistics cover the period from April to end of June 2020 and provide details of the following:

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- numbers of directly employed staff by category
- numbers of non-directly employed workers by category
- staff sickness absence
- staff diversity information
- location information.

Client diversity and equalities analysis

This is the second publication of Social Security Scotland's client diversity and equalities data. It covers clients applying for Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods, Funeral Support Payment, and Young Carer Grant during the period 9 December 2019 to 31 May 2020. The method used to collect equalities information was improved from 9 December 2019 by making these questions mandatory. This has meant that the data in this publication is more robust than the first publication released on 31 March, which covered less than 5% of clients.

Future Benefits

We have continued to work closely with our colleagues in the Social Security Programme to make sure that we prioritised Scottish Child Payment and Child Winter Heating Assistance later this year.

Taking applications from November for the Scottish Child Payment will allow Social Security Scotland to start processing the expected tens of thousands of forms before the first payments are made by the end of February. People will get a letter then advising them of the outcome of their application and, if successful, when to expect a payment.

As we prepare for these future benefits, we are now in a position to recruit more staff and have put processes in place to undertake recruitment virtually, while prioritising business critical posts.

Future working arrangements and our new head office

All but a handful of our people are currently working from home due to coronavirus restrictions. However, we are starting to think ahead to the new benefits that we will start to deliver from later this year and how we make sure that we are able to support this. Recovery work is ongoing and how we utilise this new building while physical distancing is in place will be considered as part of this work

As the Cabinet Secretary announced on 15 September, we have now taken a 20 year lease with Dundee City Council for Site 6. This building will be our new head office and will give us space to potentially employ as many as up to 900 people in the City. It is estimated that Social Security Scotland's presence in Dundee alone has the potential to contribute up to £100m to the wider Scottish economy, when supply chain and spending of wages effects are taken into account. The building needs to be fitted out and the work to do this is expected to begin in October with the first parts of the building expected to be operational in the spring of 2021. This work will ensure that there are further benefits for Dundee through providing placement opportunities for young people and through the use of local suppliers and contractors

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2019-2020 Annual Report and Accounts

Our 2019-2020 Annual Report and Accounts will be the first publication to cover a full year of operation - as last year's report only covered our first seven months. Despite the impact of Covid-19, we have worked closely with our auditors to ensure the audited Annual Report and Accounts for 2019-2020 will be laid before Parliament on time to meet our statutory commitments. We expect the audit to be complete and the Annual Report and Accounts to be laid before Parliament in the Autumn.

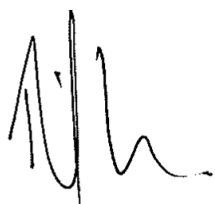
Social Security Scotland - second anniversary

On the 1 September, it was the second anniversary of Social Security Scotland's formal establishment as an Executive Agency of the Scottish Government. We have delivered a huge amount over the last two years, including adapting quickly to working from home in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This has allowed us to continue supporting and helping clients at this difficult time.

We are now delivering eight benefits. During 2019/20, we paid out over £345 million to around 91,000 people, who need it most. These benefits are supporting unpaid carers, low-income families, young people starting work, and people who need help towards paying for a funeral. We look forward to helping more people as we start to deliver more benefits including the Scottish Child Payment and disability assistance.

I trust that the Committee find this information helpful.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Wallace', with a stylized, cursive script.

David Wallace
Chief Executive
Social Security Scotland