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Bob Doris MSP
Convener
Social Security Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

28 March 2019

Dear Convener,

As you will recall, I wrote to the Committee on 18 January 2019 to provide an update on progress with delivering the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. I was pleased to hear in response that you found this update helpful, and committed to providing you with regular quarterly updates, with the first falling due at the end of March. I am accordingly writing to update you on key developments in this area since January 2019.

Scottish Commission on Social Security

21 January saw the Scottish Commission on Social Security come into being, with the inaugural Chair and Members taking up their posts from 23 January. The Commission signalled to both yourselves and Scottish Ministers that it was 'open for business' on 8 February. While there is still has a great deal to do before the Commission is fully operational, it is nevertheless ready to deliver its functions as set out in the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. I will therefore be looking to submit the draft Young Carer Grant regulations to it over the coming weeks (the first regulations which fall under its scrutiny remit as part of the 'super-affirmative' procedure).

Timetable for delivery of the next wave of devolved benefits

As you are aware, on 28 February I also set out to Parliament the timetable for delivery of the next wave of devolved benefits, including Disability Assistance and Carer's Assistance. I wrote to your Committee on the same day, to draw your attention to my statement and the rationale underpinning it.

The timetable that I presented was the result of careful consideration, including research with our User Experience Panels, discussions with stakeholder organisations and officials from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and a tremendous amount of work by

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Scottish Government officials, some of which was captured in the 11 policy position papers which I published on 28 February alongside my statement.

I am satisfied that the resulting delivery plan is ambitious and challenging but also realistic. My primary concern has been to ensure that we safeguard people's existing entitlements as powers transfer, so that those who rely on the devolving benefits continue to get paid the right amount at the right time. We know from our research with people who have lived experience of the current system that this is their top priority – and the lessons from previous programmes show us that it is all too easy for people to “fall through the cracks” if governments attempt to rush through major changes to social security at an unrealistic pace.

I have been pleased by the supportive reaction of key stakeholders to the proposed timetable. I would direct the Committee's attention in particular to comments by the CEO of Inclusion Scotland and on the day of the statement, and to an [excellent piece](#) by the Chief Executive of the Scottish Commission for Learning Disability which he published the following day in response to that statement. These stakeholders speak for the people whose quality of life will depend on the effective functioning of Scottish social security: they remind us of the onus on us, as MSPs, to look past our political differences in order to deliver a system that truly works for Scotland.

To that end, I was also pleased that two members of the Committee, Bob Doris MSP and Jeremy Balfour MSP, took the time to visit the Scottish Government's office at Victoria Quay, to see our Agile approach in action and meet key staff working on the Social Security Programme to implement the new Scottish social security systems. I welcomed feedback from both Committee members that the visit was instructive, and trust that it illustrated some of the complexity and challenge involved in the programme of work that we are undertaking.

I would urge other Committee members who are interested in doing so to take advantage of the opportunity to undertake a similar visit; my officials will be very happy to make arrangements should the Committee wish it. Social Security Scotland would also be pleased to welcome further visits by Committee members to its offices in Glasgow and Dundee: I am aware that several members have visited Dundee House since January, and hope that the experience was useful and enjoyable.

As I said at the time of my statement, I am very open to discussions about how we can design and deliver Scottish social security in a way that best meets the needs of the people of Scotland, both with Committee members and with other Parliamentarians and stakeholders more widely. I wrote to the social security spokespeople of the various Parties on 7 March with an offer to meet and discuss these matters: so far I have had a positive discussion with Alex Cole-Hamilton MSP, and I look forward to meeting Michelle Ballantyne MSP next week.

I would welcome further meetings with any other members of the Committee who would like them. Please contact my Private Office to arrange this if desired.

Consultation on Disability Assistance

On 5 March I published a [consultation](#) on Disability Assistance in Scotland, to seek the views of the public on whether our proposed approach will meet the needs of those it is intended to help. I am keen to gather such views to ensure that we have identified the best possible approach to delivering this assistance, and to influence the drafting of benefit regulations

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which will be scrutinised independently in due course by the Scottish Commission on Social Security (and of course subsequently by your Committee when they are laid before Parliament).

I would encourage responses from a wide range of stakeholders and members of the public with an interest in Scottish Disability Assistance, and my officials are undertaking a programme of events to raise awareness of the consultation and invite contributions. I would be grateful if Committee members could also make mention of the consultation to anyone in your networks to whom it is likely to be of interest. The closing date for responses is 28 May 2019.

Joint working with the Department for Work and Pensions

At the time of my statement, I set out the crucial importance of close working with DWP for effective delivery of the devolved benefits to the agreed timescales. My officials have been engaging with their DWP counterparts for many months to discuss the detail of our shared challenge and unpick the complexities and joint dependencies involved. I wrote to the DWP Secretary of State on the day of my statement to emphasise the need for us to continue to work closely together as we move into delivery of the second wave of benefits.

I must admit that I was disappointed to be made aware of a letter sent from the Secretary of State to Scottish Conservative MSPs, including members of your Committee, on 4 March, in which she suggested that she had been unaware of the Scottish Government's delivery plans. Given the extensive engagement which has taken place between our officials, and indeed a number of attempts on the part of my office to set up a ministerial meeting to discuss our plans, I was somewhat surprised at the content of this letter, as I made clear in my response to the Secretary of State.

However, I have since (on 14 March) received a letter from her committing to work constructively with the Scottish Government to effect the safe and secure transfer of powers; and I am hopeful that the meeting of the Joint Ministerial Working Group on Welfare, which is now scheduled for 1 April, will be an opportunity for us to reaffirm these commitments and progress our joint programme of work.

Up-rating of Carer's Allowance and the Carer's Allowance Supplement

During the recent debate in the Chamber and in the Social Security Committee on the up-rating of Carer's Allowance and the Carer's Allowance supplement, I gave a commitment that this Government would keep alternative methods of up-rating under review. As we move towards the next financial year, more benefits will be delivered by Social Security Scotland, such as Funeral Expense Assistance and the Young Carer's Grant, and I will engage with the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Commission on Social Security in the consideration of the up-rating measures that may be applied by Scottish Ministers. I will also take into account existing evidence on the suitability of different measures and the forthcoming UK Government response to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee report '[Measuring Inflation](#)'.

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Development of the income supplement

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government will give an update to Parliament in June 2019 on progress against the actions in the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan.

In advance of this, I understand the Committee has indicated that they would welcome more information on progress towards developing the income supplement. I understand that the Committee is particularly interested in the discussions taking place around delivery, potential eligibility and take-up. An appraisal of the policy and delivery options is currently underway and, as requested by the Committee through their Social Security and In-Work Poverty report, the Scottish Government will provide an update on the progress of the income supplement before Easter recess.

Next steps

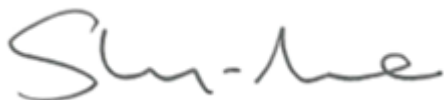
As the Committee will be aware, this year we plan to launch a further five benefits: the Best Start Grant Early Learning and School Age payments, Best Start Foods (replacing Healthy Start Vouchers) and Funeral Expense Assistance (which replaces DWP's Funeral Expenses Payment) in summer, followed by our new Young Carer Grant in the autumn.

We are also continuing with the consultation on our new Job Grant, to help young people back into employment. We intend to implement the grant as soon as possible after the consultation closes on 9 April.

We are also continuing to meet regularly with Audit Scotland to keep them up to date with our progress in implementing the devolved benefits and give them the opportunity to scrutinise our plans.

I look forward to discussing these and other matters with you when I appear before your Committee on 9 May to give evidence on the delivery of the first and second waves of devolved benefits.

Best Wishes,



SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE