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Dear Convener,

Thank you for your letter, dated 14 January 2021, informing me of two of the overarching concerns that have come out of the Committee's inquiry into the social security response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I look forward to reading your report in March.

I would like to provide my assurance that we are equally motivated to ensure that both of the concerns that you identified are fully accounted for within the Scottish Government's efforts to provide effective assistance to people in Scotland, both during and after this crisis. I shall expand upon these points below.

How lessons learned during the response to the pandemic will be embedded and carried forward to ensure services are more agile

The pandemic has seen a range of new challenges that we face, as well as fundamentally changing the environment that we work in. As such, we have had to adapt our approach to developing and delivering social security and we will make sure that we continue to review the lessons learned throughout the rest of the pandemic and into the recovery.

We have been required to work quickly and nimbly support people across Scotland through the extraordinary circumstances that people have found themselves in. This was demonstrated in our ability to deliver the Self Isolation Support Grant at an extraordinary pace, providing eligible carers with an additional Coronavirus Carer's Allowance Supplement payment in June, increasing the Scottish Welfare Fund by £22 million and providing a further £20 million to local authorities to use as a flexible fund to tackle financial insecurity over the winter months, and support people unable to afford essentials such as food and fuel.

Our adaptive and agile approaches have also enabled us to continue to deliver nine benefits, which despite the pandemic has included the introduction of two entirely new benefits – Job Start Payment in August and Child Winter Heating Assistance in November. We also opened

applications in November for the game changing Scottish Child Payment. This was achieved not only in an unprecedented timescale – under 18 months from announcement to delivery – but also in extraordinary circumstances.

COVID-19 had a major impact on both the Social Security Programme and on our delivery partners, as I set out to Parliament and Committee members in November last year. Face-to-face user research was suspended; staff were redeployed from the Directorate to support the wider Scottish Government response to the pandemic; the remaining staff had to work from home, with Programme staff doing their best to replicate face-to-face Agile methodologies remotely; and a government-wide recruitment pause meant that a number of key posts could not be filled as planned.

There was also a still greater impact on our delivery partners in local authorities, the NHS and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), whose capacity to support the development of the Scottish disability and carer benefits was understandably reduced by the demands of the pandemic upon their services.

However, the experience of the pandemic and the need to work in different ways to design and deliver the new benefits has provided some valuable learning opportunities, upon which officials used the June sessions as an opportunity to reflect.

The move to remote working, supported as it was by increased use of IT tools such as Skype, Webex, Trello, Slack, JIRA, Confluence, Miro and Mural proved surprisingly smooth. This in turn allowed the productivity of staff who remained in the Directorate to remain higher than had been anticipated at the start of restrictions, despite the need in many cases to juggle work and caring responsibilities. The increasingly widespread adoption of a wider variety of technological platforms which the pandemic has embedded should continue to have positive effects on productivity even after restrictions are lifted.

Similarly, while face-to-face user research has not been possible under COVID-19 restrictions, our researchers have been adopting modified methods of user engagement including web conferencing, online and phone surveys, and planned telephone interviews to allow the Programme to continue to benefit from lived experience in shaping the design of our services. These are methodologies which, where appropriate, we can continue to deploy after the pandemic to ensure that we are able to engage with the widest possible range of users.

From an operational perspective, there were a number of reorientations that Social Security Scotland made that have proved to be effective. Social Security Scotland was pleased to be able to move the majority of its staff to home working within a week when COVID-19 restrictions were put in place. This was in part down to decisions made when establishing the organisation, like giving all operational colleagues laptop computers. They have been able to utilise technology to make our service more flexible and adaptable – including via the introduction of web chat and the ability to manage telephony services remotely. Prior to the pandemic we were developing a function to allow people to upload evidence online when applying for benefits with us. We were pleased that we were able to expedite the go-live of this functionality, in order to address some of the constraints that COVID-19 may have had on people's ability to interact with our service.

Social Security Scotland are planning to make our face to face service available from launch of Child Disability Payment. This will initially become available in summer in the three identified pilot areas (Dundee, Perth and Western Isles). They are already reviewing the impact that COVID-19 may have on the delivery of this service, not just in terms of the

practicalities of working within COVID-19 restrictions but also taking into consideration how the pandemic may impact on client expectations and behaviours. Social Security Scotland are exploring the feasibility of services like video appointments to further improve our support offer in line with what people may want from our service.

The complexity of the landscape for those seeking support and how both Governments can work together effectively to promote benefit take-up and sign-post people to a single first point of contact for support (financial support and support in getting back into employment).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of financial resilience and a robust financial safety net. I acknowledge that the landscape is complex – not least because the partial devolution of social security means that people must navigate two benefits systems. We are working closely with the DWP and our stakeholders to reduce this complexity as far as possible.

However, it is clear that the UK government must do better to support people to claim the reserved benefits they are due, and I have consistently urged the DWP to do more in this area. In November of last year I joined Ministers from Wales and Northern Ireland in sending a letter to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, urging a more strategic approach to maximising the take-up of reserved benefits. In the letter we highlighted the need for a UK Government benefit take-up strategy. As devolved benefits rely on the receipt of some form of reserved assistance, maximising levels of devolved take-up is reliant on the promotion of DWP benefits, for which there is currently no published approach.

The Scottish Government's second benefit take-up strategy will be published in October this year, and will provide a detailed and updated approach to supporting people in Scotland to access all of the support to which they are entitled.

Officials are currently exploring options for the provision of welfare rights advice and support, including the alignment of services across a variety of public and third sector settings. Our Benefit Take-up and Income Maximisation Funds are providing £600,000 to 26 third sector organisations to support hard to reach groups who will be applying for Scottish benefits and to ensure people are aware of the financial support available to increase their household income. Due to the impact of COVID-19, officials have worked closely with the organisations to ensure projects remain viable. Where proposed projects were no longer possible in their original form, the Scottish Government have helped organisations to reframe the work in the context of the current Coronavirus crisis.

We know that the pandemic is disproportionately affecting families on low incomes and so it is of the utmost importance that people claim all the benefits they are entitled to. That is why we launched a £250,000 multi-media platform income maximisation marketing campaign specifically aimed at low income families. The campaign was launched on 8 January 2021 and is reaching people through radio, TV and social media, encouraging families to access the Money Talk Team service. Funded by the Scottish Government, the Money Talk Team service is delivered by the Citizens Advice Network in Scotland and provides free, confidential and holistic income maximisation advice ranging from benefit take up and council tax reduction to free school meals and making sure people aren't paying more than they need to for services such as energy, utilities and broadband costs. It is worth noting that our campaigns do not privilege benefits delivered by the Scottish Government over those delivered by the UK Government, as we are driven to ensure that people are aware of all available help.

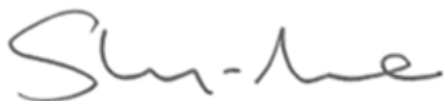
The role of employability services is pivotal in supporting those who are most at risk from the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, and will be essential in supporting Scotland's economic recovery. Scottish and Local Government are committed to No One Left Behind, which sets out our ambition to create a more joined up and aligned employability system in Scotland with employability services aiming to deliver aligned, flexible, person-centred employability support, in partnership with local government, private and third sector partners. The Scottish Government recognise that the employability response to COVID-19 must address the needs of individuals of all ages and circumstances, and build on the well-established services managed by Scottish and Local Government and others across the Scottish employability landscape. We continue to work closely with the DWP to ensure that individuals are signposted to the provision that is most appropriate for them.

The transfer of benefits to the Scottish Government is being delivered as part of a joint programme of work with the DWP. As part of this joint programme there are established forums for planning communications with clients. These forums ensure that people are getting the information they need at the right time and in the right place. It also enables the governments to work together to make sure that information on benefits is clear and consistent to avoid any confusion and anxiety for shared clients. This has worked successfully for the introduction of the first tranche of Social Security Scotland benefits. However, we acknowledge that this will become more complex with the disability benefits, especially as the two governments will share clients until the transfer of all existing devolved benefits cases from the DWP to Social Security Scotland is complete. Work is underway to define the approach for signposting clients of Disability Assistance benefits to wider support provision. This will include work with DWP and also with local authorities, health and social care, wider public services and the third sector.

Social Security Scotland includes signposting in its communications to organisations including the Citizens Advice Scotland Money Talk Team, who are able to provide financial advice on benefits available through both governments and at a local authority level – as well as wider advice on income maximization and debt management. We have supported the Third Sector through this pandemic, in our Programme for Government 2020-21 we announced a £25 million Community and Third Sector Recovery Programme.

I hope this helps to clarify our position on these matters and provides reassurance for the Committee.

Yours sincerely,



SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE