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Convener
Social Justice and Social Security Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

14 July 2023

Dear Convener,

Thank you for your letter dated 17 May 2023 on behalf of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee sharing your report *Scrutinising Social Justice*.

The Committee's report raises a number of helpful issues as well as highlighting some key cross-cutting and long-standing barriers to Social Justice which the Scottish Government also recognise. I thought it may be helpful to point to some recent developments in relation to cross-cutting issues such as Tackling Child Poverty, Equality and Human Rights, Digital Inclusion and Homelessness. I will also seek to address the Committee's specific queries on the Fairer Scotland Action Report and the Minimum Income Guarantee.

Tackling Child Poverty

The [Tackling child poverty delivery plan: progress report 2022 to 2023](#) was published on the 13th of June 2023 and sets out the progress made to deliver the components of *Best Start, Bright Futures*. The report highlights that 40 of the 101 actions in the plan are complete or delivery is ongoing, 39 actions are in progress, 19 are in the early stages of development. Work on two of the actions in the delivery plan has not yet started, and one action has been aligned with other commitments and will be delivered through them. We estimate that over financial year 2022-23 £3 billion was invested across a range of programmes targeted at low income households, with £1.25 billion directly benefitting children.

The report recognises that transformational change is needed to meet our statutory child poverty targets and that we have taken key steps necessary to deliver this change. In 2022-

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23, for low income families this included delivering the planned expansion and further increase in the value of our Scottish Child Payment. In 2022, we increased the Scottish Child Payment by 150% from £10 per week per eligible child to £25 and extended it to under 16s. In 2023-24 around 370,000 Scottish children will be eligible for this Scottish Government benefit which is unique to Scotland.

We also raised the incomes of thousands of families hardest hit by UK Government welfare changes and cuts. Working with local authorities, we invested around £84 million in Discretionary Housing Payments to support people with housing costs and mitigate the UK Government's bedroom tax, this included £2.6 million to mitigate the UK Government's Benefit Cap as fully as is possible within the scope of devolved powers. We introduced legislation to freeze rents in the private and social rented sector and increase protections for tenants in response to the cost of living crisis.

Additionally, we strengthened the protections for the lowest income households in the face of the cost of living crisis, allocating almost £3 billion to support policies which tackle poverty and protect people as far as possible. This included taking decisive action to double investment in our Fuel Insecurity Fund to £20 million in 2022-23 and tripling investment to £30 million this year. We doubled the final December Bridging Payment made to low income families with school age children to £260 per child meaning that ahead of the extension of Scottish Child Payment our bridging payments provided almost £170 million in direct financial support over two years to families.

We made the first Whole Family Wellbeing Funding investment of £32 million. Working with Children's Services Planning Partnerships we will support earlier intervention with families, ensuring families get access to the right support at the right time, moving towards prevention and reducing the need for crisis intervention. We are further investing in systems transformation in our continued work on new pathfinder approaches focused on delivering whole system change, bringing services together to provide more targeted and person-centred holistic support to build more trusting relationships between services and those who need them most. We will continue our activities across the full range of actions in *Best Start Bright Futures*, with an emphasis on the six priority family types, underpinned by robust evaluation of our actions.

Equality, inclusion and Human Rights

The First Minister's prospectus reaffirms our commitment to embedding equality, inclusion and human rights into everything we do. The Committee may have noted that on 15 June the Scottish Government [published a consultation on ambitious proposals for a new Human Rights Bill for Scotland](#). On the same day [I wrote](#) to the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee informing them of publication. The Bill will give effect to a wide range of internationally-recognised human rights belonging to everyone in Scotland within the limits of devolved competence, and strengthen domestic legal protections by making these rights enforceable in Scots law. In particular, the Bill aims to bring an enhanced focus to the implementation of social and economic rights which are central to addressing inequality. The consultation will run for 16 weeks, closing on 5 October 2023. I encourage as many people as possible to engage with the proposals and help shape development of a new, progressive human rights framework for Scotland.

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In April this year we published our statutory [Equality Outcomes and Mainstreaming Report](#) providing an update on the progress we are making to mainstreaming equality, inclusion, and human rights as an employer and decision-maker. By the end of 2023 we will consult on an equality and human rights mainstreaming strategy to drive forward our commitment to equality and human rights throughout government and the public sector. This work will align with and support delivery of the proposals for the Human Rights Bill and will further our ambitions to be a global leader in equality, inclusion and human rights.

Digital Inclusion

Connecting Scotland has been one of the most ambitious and comprehensive national programmes aimed at tackling digital exclusion and promoting digital inclusion, unmatched elsewhere in the UK.

Connecting Scotland has delivered internet enabled devices and internet connections, as well as providing training and support to individuals and communities who are digitally excluded. The programme has issued over 61,000 devices, initially as a response to the pandemic, since 2020. Officials have undertaken extensive work with delivery partners to develop a full business case that details proposals for the next phase of the Connecting Scotland programme, which is planned to launch later in 2023 following Ministerial approval.

Published evaluations on Connecting Scotland's impact can be found here:

- [Connecting Scotland - evaluation: qualitative research - implementation and early impact;](#)
- [Connecting Scotland: phase 1 evaluation](#) and
- [Connecting Scotland: phase 2 evaluation](#).

Minimum Income Guarantee

The [Minimum Income Guarantee Expert Group Interim Report](#) was published on 24 March 2023 and highlights the need for a robust safety net and long-term action to tackle poverty, financial insecurity and broader inequalities across Scotland. The report also sets out early considerations for the Scottish Government which could prepare the ground for a Minimum Income Guarantee, including calls to reform work, social security and reduce household costs. The Scottish Government welcome the interim report and thank the group for their work so far. We are of course already taking action in a number of areas highlighted by the report, such as support for childcare costs, automating benefit entitlement and promoting fair work practices, and we will continue to consider the recommendations as that work progresses. We remain ambitious in looking at innovative ways to tackle poverty and inequality so look forward to seeing the full report in 2024.

Fairer Scotland Action Plan

The [Fairer Scotland Action Plan](#) was published in 2016 and set out 50 actions that Scottish Government committed to taking across the last parliamentary term towards creating a fairer, more equal society. Four progress reports were published which set out progress towards delivery of the actions (and those in linked reports). This included ending child poverty; a strong start for all young people and fairer working lives. The [Fairer Scotland Action Plan: Progress Report](#) published in December 2020 was the final progress report on the Plan. By the time of

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publication, 8 months into the Covid Pandemic, many of the actions were completed or were ongoing pieces of work. Following the publication of the 2020 Progress Report we entered a new Parliamentary term, and the report from the Social Renewal Advisory Board, and the Covid Recovery Strategy which followed, further developed the narrative around policy and practice changes that have shown the potential to be genuinely transformative and can help deliver a fairer and more equal Scotland, in the context of the changes we have seen across society since 2020.

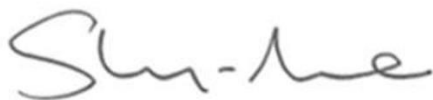
Transparency

On the broader topic of scrutiny and transparency I can assure you that these are a priority for this government. The First Minister's prospectus sets out three key missions which will define the success of the Government, alongside the outcomes that will be achieved in each Cabinet Secretary's portfolio by 2026. The First Minister made clear that transparency underpins the Government's approach to delivery and committed to publish annual updates on the Government's delivery against the three missions. The first of these annual updates is expected to be published in spring 2024. Additionally, as you will be aware, progress towards our National Outcomes is published regularly on the National Performance Framework (NPF) [website](#).

The Scottish Government is equally committed to financial transparency as part of our Open Government Action Plan and we have a well-established budget process where all Scottish Budget changes are notified to, and scrutinised by, Parliament with the Scottish Government publishing a minimum of two Scottish Budget revisions each year. After our Spring Budget Revision in February, the cross-party Finance & Public Administration Committee commended the Scottish Government for providing "more detail than ever before" to support its scrutiny. To maximise impact across the National Outcomes, our priorities do not look to one outcome in isolation. The 2023-24 Scottish Budget details in the portfolio chapters, the key primary and secondary National Outcomes. The Scottish Government remains committed to working with Parliament, and its Committees to continuously improve the information available to support its scrutiny of the annual budget and its associated spending.

I look forward to working with the Committee over the Parliamentary session. If the Committee would like further detail of any of the work detailed above, or on any other Social Justice issues, I will be more than happy to provide additional material. As a Government we are unapologetic about supporting those in greatest need and, as Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, my aim is for people to live fulfilling, happy and healthy lives in a society which supports them to do so.

Yours sincerely,



SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE

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