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Convenor
Social Justice and Social Security Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
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By email to: sjss.committee@parliament.scot

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Dear Collette,

Following my recent appearance at the Social Justice and Social Security Committee on 31 October in relation to the Winter Heating Assistance (Pension Age) (Scotland) Regulations 2024, I offered to respond in writing to specific questions raised by committee members.

An area of particular interest was in relation to Social Security Scotland's systems, including the flexibility of these systems to adapt to change, such as those that we have faced following the UK Government's announcement to make significant policy changes to Winter Fuel Payment.

I would like to reiterate that, given the timing of the UK Government's announcement and the lack of consultation, Social Security Scotland were significantly limited in what could be delivered in the timescales available. Urgent consideration was required on the revised policy and as I have outlined previously, my priority was ensuring relevant legislation was in place to ensure the most vulnerable pensioners in Scotland were not left without support because of the UK Government's late change in policy. As I have also noted previously, given the significant decrease in expected budget to deliver our planned universal payment, I had to take the difficult decision to reflect the UK Government's policy.

As I reflected during the evidence session, officials are expected to design systems which reflect the policy intent and Social Security Scotland were on track to deliver our universal payment prior to the UK Government's announcement.

The systems to deliver Pension Age Winter Heating Payment have been designed and developed in line with the Digital Scotland Service Standards reusing the existing technology where possible. This ensures value for money when developing systems. The service design and the digital systems developed in preparation for the launch in Winter 2024/25 will be

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reused when Social Security Scotland delivers Pension Age Winter Heating Payment next winter (2025/26), although some changes will be required to reflect the new eligibility rules.

Systems can of course be changed to reflect policy changes, however the time which that takes is entirely dependent on the specific variables, including the complexity of the changes required, whether information or agreement is required by other governmental departments, such as the Department for Work and Pensions, and the resource available to make those changes.

Changes in eligibility can be complex to implement since they often necessitate changes to the foundations of the system and to the application process, all of which require detailed development and extensive testing. Extending eligibility, for example, to people who are not in receipt of specific qualifying benefits and where no other data is available to identify them, would certainly require an application process and substantial system development and would be costly to develop and administer. Changing eligibility would typically require around 12 months for development but could take longer depending on the variables involved. In the case of winter benefits for older people, extending eligibility beyond receipt of a qualifying benefit would also require primary legislation and careful consideration of value for money and feasibility given the likely volume of cases and the complexity and cost of development and administration.

Following the UK Budget on 30 October, officials have been working closely with the UK Government to understand the expected level of consequentials. It is estimated that around £41 million will become available through Barnett Consequentials as a result of the extension of the Household Support Fund from 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025. As with all consequential funding, Scottish Ministers and officials are considering how best to utilise these and an update will be provided in due course to the Parliament.

I hope that this information is helpful.

Yours sincerely,

SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE