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An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

**10th Meeting, 2021 (Session 6), Thursday,
11 November**

Benefit Take-up Strategy: Suggested Themes

Introduction

The Committee will hear from:

- Ben Macpherson, Minister for Local Government and Social Security
- Dr Ruari Sutherland, Supporting Access to Social Security Team Leader, Scottish Government
- Vana Anastasiadou, Economic Advisor, Scottish Government
- Kirsten Sweeney, Strategic Communications and Marketing Lead, Scottish Government.

The Scottish Government published its [second benefit take-up strategy](#) on 21 October. This strategy is required under the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. The [first strategy](#) was published in October 2019 and the third is due in five years' time – 2026.

The previous Committee did an inquiry in to benefit take-up, publishing its [report](#) in March 2020. Its recommendations are included at the end of this paper. The [Scottish Government responded](#) in June 2020.

On [4 November the Chamber debated](#) 'accessing Scottish social security benefits'.

This paper provides some background on the new strategy, the previous strategy and the previous Committee's report before suggesting themes for discussion with the Minister.

The Strategy

The strategy is set out under the following five principles:

1. Prioritise person centred approaches
2. Communicate and engage effectively
3. Bring services to people
4. Encourage cross-system collaboration
5. Continuously learn and improve

There is a heavy emphasis on engagement activity. For example, the Scottish Government consulted key stakeholders on the barriers to take-up, and held a series of 'round table' events focusing on stakeholders from protected characteristics and seldom-heard groups. The strategy states that: "this learning will be applied to policy work going forward". Themes raised in engagement include: impact of COVID, digital exclusion, trauma-informed approaches to staff training, inclusive communication and stigma.

Existing Social Security Scotland policies that should promote take-up are discussed – for example, multi-channel applications, 'invite to apply' letters and the local pre-claims support service.

The strategy provides initial estimates for take-up of Social Security Scotland 'low income' benefits (see Theme 3). Estimates for disability and carer benefits are not provided – and the difficulties in establishing these are discussed.

The first strategy in 2019

The [first strategy](#) had a similar emphasis on taking a collaborative approach, rooted in the social security statutory principles and the Charter. The Charter sets out what people can expect from Social Security Scotland – and full implementation of the Charter ought to help people access the Social Security Scotland benefits they are entitled to.

The first strategy set out the barriers to take-up (social barriers, costly or complex access and lack of information). It included new funding of £500,000 for 2020 to help organisations prepare for Scottish Social Security and a further £100,000 for organisations that work on income maximisation.

A stakeholder reference group was established, and engagement work explored stigma, barriers to access and the human rights-based approach. Work continued with the experience panels, seldom-heard groups and those who have protected characteristics.

Session 5 Committee Report

The [March 2020 report by the previous Committee](#) reflected many of the issues in the first Scottish Government strategy and which are picked up in the 2nd strategy. [Most recommendations were accepted in full by the Scottish Government](#) including:

- Research to establish eligibility for disability benefits
- The statutory duty to promote take-up must be monitored to ensure it delivers
- Joint working between Scottish and UK governments on benefit take-up
- The strategy should address barriers to getting support in rural areas and areas of deprivation
- Keep a ‘close watch’ on referral pathways between DWP and Social Security Scotland to ensure people are directed to the correct agency
- Work with local authorities to identify ways to improve take-up, including promoting the Best Start Grant when someone registers a birth – as happens in Glasgow.
- Consider further scope for automation of benefits passported from reserved benefits.

Recommendations partially accepted included:

- Increased funding for welfare advice. (The Scottish Government said funding is kept under review. Local authorities are the largest funder of welfare rights advice and have discretion in how they meet local needs).
- A more joined up approach to co-located projects to ensure best practice is shared, funded and rolled out across Scotland. (The Scottish Government reply stated that work was underway to identify best practice but noted that “local authorities should be able to flex their offer.”)
- Explore further the role of statutory services in providing basic welfare advice citing ‘Healthy Wealthier Children.’ ([The Scottish Government response](#) stated that: “We will continue to engage with the Take-up Stakeholder Reference Group and internal Cross-Government Income Maximisation Working Group to explore existing and emerging best practice with statutory service providers.”)

A recommendation on using Council Tax Reduction as a passport to Social Security Scotland low income benefits was rejected.

The Committee’s recommendations are included in full as an annex to this paper.

Suggested Themes for Discussion

The following seven themes are suggested for discussion:

1. New commitments in this strategy
2. Funding
3. Take-up of low-income benefits and reserved benefits
4. Establishing eligibility for disability and carer benefits
5. Automation
6. Referral pathways and partnerships
7. Monitoring and evaluation

Theme 1: New commitments in this strategy

The strategy summarises a lot of work already done and describes, sometimes in quite general terms, the approach to improving benefit take-up.

Much of what is set out in the strategy is continuation and extension of existing approaches. In particular there is a strong emphasis on continuing to listen to stakeholders and work with partners to remove barriers to take-up.

Lessons from the first strategy include: avoiding 'glossy' leaflets, using plain English, working with 'intermediaries with established audiences' and the effectiveness of Facebook.

Future action includes:

- Evaluation of Scottish Child Payment communications strategy
- A single campaign for disability assistance, in addition to separate campaigns on introduction of each benefit.
- Commissioning further research on how to reach specific audiences
- Marketing campaign on broader financial well-being – covering benefits, debt advice and affordable credit

The Committee may wish to discuss:

1. **What evaluation of the success of the first strategy has been conducted and what lessons have been learned?**
2. **How does this strategy take forward and further develop the first strategy?**

3. **Who is the audience for the new strategy and how do you expect it to be used by them?**
4. **How has COVID-19 affected the Scottish Government's approach to improving benefit take-up?**

Theme 2: Funding

The first strategy included £600k Benefit Take-up and Income Maximisation funds.

This second strategy refers to the £10m 'over the Parliament' that was announced in the [Programme for Government](#).

This £10m includes money to expand the Welfare Advice and Health Partnerships (advisors in GP surgeries).

As [announced 19th March 2021](#) the funding to expand these partnerships was £3.17m, and was due to launch in September 2021:

"150 GP Practices will be able to refer patients directly to an in-house welfare rights officer for advice on increasing income, social security eligibility, debt resolution, housing, and employability issues as well as helping with representation at tribunals."

In the debate on 4 November, the Cabinet Secretary referred instead to £2.9m funding over three years:

"expansion of welfare advice and health partnerships through funding of £2.9million over three years and the placement of welfare rights advisers in up to 150 general practitioner surgeries in Scotland's most deprived areas."

In addition to the £10m the Programme for Government referred to:

- £20.4m for the new advocacy service
- £12m for frontline and second tier advice and debt services 'this year'.

The bulk of funding for rights advice is provided through local authorities.

The Committee may wish to discuss:

1. **Whether funding for Welfare Advice and Health Partnerships is £3.17m or £2.9m and whether the expansion started in September as planned**
2. **Further detail on how the remainder of the £10m will be spent and what amount is expected to be allocated in each financial year of the parliamentary session.**
3. **Why the £600k benefit take up and income maximisation funds in the first strategy have not been continued**

4. **What is the balance between funding provision of basic information and funding more expert welfare rights advice**

Theme 3: Take up of low-income benefits and reserved benefits

The strategy includes the following initial estimates of take-up rates of Social Security Scotland's 'low income' benefits. The strategy emphasises that these are initial estimates only.

- Best Start Grant – early learning - 84%
- Best Start Grant – school – 81%
- Best Start Grant – baby 79% (first births – 71%, subsequent births – 83%)
- Best Start Foods – 77%
- Scottish Child Payment – 77%
- Funeral Support Payment – 59%

[Initial Scottish Government modelling](#) of the Scottish Child Payment estimated that, once fully rolled out, it could reduce child poverty by three percentage points. This was based on an assumed take-up rate of 83%.

The benefits listed above can only be claimed if someone is also claiming certain DWP benefits such as Universal Credit.¹ If take-up of the qualifying benefits is low, then the Scottish benefits will not be able to reach all those it is aimed at.

The UK Government has confirmed that the terms of the fiscal framework do not prevent the Scottish Government promoting these reserved qualifying benefits. In [response](#) to the previous Committee's report the Scottish Government said;

“This much-needed clarification marks an important milestone as we advance our commitment to promoting benefit take-up, and one that could pave the way for more joint working on the promotion of benefit take-up.”

In the Chamber debate on 4 November the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government, Shona Robison said:

“In October last year, the then Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People joined Welsh and Northern Irish counterparts in writing to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to urge a more strategic approach to maximising the

¹ Except for young parents claiming the Pregnancy and Baby Best Start Grant

take-up of reserved benefits. To date, unfortunately, no response has been received.”

On [23 September](#) the Cabinet Secretary told the Committee that:

“Although Social Security Scotland does not directly promote reserved benefits as a matter of course, as we would regard that as the role of the UK Government, we fund advice services that give advice on all benefits, whether they be devolved or reserved.”

The Committee may wish to discuss:

1. **Why the strategy does not include targets to improve take-up**
2. **Reasons for the relatively low take-up of Funeral Support Payment and how this is being addressed**
3. **Whether a take-up rate of 77% for the Scottish Child Payment will be sufficient to reduce child poverty by three percentage points**
4. **Whether the Scottish Government should directly promote take-up of those reserved benefits that qualify people for Scottish social security benefits.**

Theme 4: Estimating eligibility for disability and carer benefits

The strategy doesn't give estimates for disability and carer benefits and discusses the difficulties in establishing eligibility for these.

The previous Committee's inquiry recommended research in this area and in response (June 2020) the Scottish Government stated that such work was “already underway” and that analysts were examining the: “feasibility of enhancing existing surveys to improve the estimates of eligible population in order provide take-up estimates for the disability benefits.”

The new strategy states that work on disability benefit eligibility includes:

“adding or amending questions to existing household surveys, as well as exploring the feasibility of using health record data.”

However: “Given the element of assessment in disability benefits” [...] “eligibility would be difficult to infer without the actual assessment.”

The Committee may wish to discuss:

1. **To what extent is it feasible to estimate eligibility for disability and carer benefits**
2. **If it is not, how should a baseline be established from which to measure success in improving take-up**

Theme 5: Automation

Automation would deliver 100% take-up.² For example, Carer’s Allowance Supplement and Child Winter Heating Assistance are paid automatically to all those receiving the qualifying benefits. When Scottish Child Payment was being developed in 2019, the possibility was considered of paying it automatically. This was decided against as being too complex, particularly before full roll-out of Universal Credit is complete.³ In response to the previous Committee’s inquiry the Scottish Government said:

“We recognise the benefits of automation – but we need to balance this with the fact that it is complex, costly, and can’t be delivered quickly. Furthermore, timescales for introduction of such functionality are currently unclear as we work to respond to the impact of Covid-19 on the Social Security Programme. At the moment, our focus continues to be the safe and secure introduction of devolved benefits, so people get the right payments at the right time. We are very happy to look over the longer-term at whether there is more that we can do around automation of social security.”

The new strategy says little about automation, only noting the Programme for Government commitment that:

“we will explore systems of automatic payment for devolved social security benefits, to maximise take-up. This includes linking Scottish Child Payment with Best Start Grant.”

A [Scottish Government paper in October 2020 on maximising take-up of Scottish Child Payment](#) said that automation of SCP would be considered further after full-roll out of SCP.

“The principle of automating benefit payments, where appropriate and feasible, is one which we support. Whilst we have been unable to introduce automated payments of Scottish Child Payment for launch of the benefit, we remain committed to automation where possible, and we will review the feasibility again as part of the wider review of the Scottish Child Payment when it is fully rolled out, though it is important to note that an automated service would still be complex and require substantial work, as well as a significant level of support from the DWP.”

The Committee may wish to discuss:

- 1. Further detail on current work to pursue automation of benefits – particularly those ‘passported’ from reserved benefits**

² i.e everyone eligible gets the benefit – but only those actually in receipt of a qualifying benefit are eligible. Eg. CAS take-up is 100% regardless of what the take-up rate of Carer’s Allowance is.

³ See Scottish Government (2019) [Scottish Child Payment Policy Position Paper June 2019](#)

2. **Whether the long-term aim is still to automate benefits such as Scottish Child Payment ‘where appropriate and feasible’**

Theme 6: Referral pathways and partnerships

The strategy has a strong emphasis on working in partnership with stakeholders. ‘Principle 4’ is ‘encourage cross-system collaboration’. Under this theme commitments include:

- Strengthen cross-portfolio working in government. The strategy refers to an ‘income maximisation strategic working group’ within government.
- Work with partners across welfare, health and social justice
- Deliver holistic packages of support – developing “a coherent overarching approach to policies supporting income maximisation”

Some stakeholders will be able to signpost and possibly refer people to Social Security Scotland. The strategy notes that signposting and referral partnerships:

“will take time to deliver but our ultimate vision is that people are automatically referred to Social Security Scotland when things happen to them that could make them eligible for our benefits.”

The previous Committee’s inquiry emphasised the importance of referral pathways, picking up on the ‘[Healthy Wealthier Children](#)’ project⁴. It also heard about [practice in Glasgow](#) since 2019 which informs new parents about the Best Start Grant when they register a birth.

Social Security Scotland is linking in to relevant local networks as part of its local delivery pre-claims service. This [started in July in the CDP pilot areas](#) and will be available nationally this autumn. It will eventually involve around 400 staff in providing local support with Social Security Scotland benefits. The ‘local delivery relationship leads’ have identified venues for co-location with other services. The current service is appointment only and will be at a local venue, at home or by video or phone call. The strategy for the coming year is: “to become embedded and known in the local community.”

There is a difference between giving people information about benefits and making an active referral for them to get support in claiming. The recent [SCOSS report on Adult Disability Payment](#) recommends a focus on active referrals rather than just ‘sign-posting’.

“Social Security Scotland should aim to set up active referral systems with advice agencies trained to help with benefit claims, as well as active referral systems, with client consent, to advocacy and local client support services.”

⁴ Since 2010 a partnership approach to tackling child poverty across NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, including setting up referral links between health and advice services.

The Committee may wish to discuss:

1. **What work has taken place so far to link ‘life events’ to referral/ signposting to Social Security Scotland benefits (eg promoting the ‘five family benefits’ when families register a birth, start nursery or school).**
2. **What lessons have been learned from the Child Disability Payment pilot about how to deliver local pre-claims support and establish effective partnerships with local services**
3. **Whether work on developing local partnerships will focus on active referrals between agencies as well as ‘signposting’**

Theme 7: Monitoring and evaluation

The fifth principle in the strategy is ‘continuously learn and improve’ (Chapter 8).

The strategy refers to evaluations of the following benefits:

- Further evaluation of Best Start Grant (to report 2025, interim evaluation published 2020)
- Best Start foods, evaluation to start ‘shortly’
- Funeral Support Payment (no date)
- Adult Disability Payment independent review 2023
- Interim evaluation of Young Carer Grant completed
- ‘extensive consultation’ on employment injury assistance
- ‘wider stakeholder engagement on pension age disability assistance

The strategy doesn’t specifically mention the evaluation of the Scottish Child Payment or Child Disability Payment. Nor does it give specific plans for monitoring or evaluating the impact of the strategy itself, although it does talk in general terms about learning from initiatives funded, learning from the first strategy and learning from successes in collaborative approaches.

The strategy does not include timelines for action nor targets for improving take-up. It is: “an evolving document which guides us to fulfil our aim of increasing benefit take-up but that as we learn we will adapt based upon that learning.”

The next strategy is due to be published in five years’ time.

The Committee may wish to discuss:

1. **How will we know that this strategy is a success**

2. **How will we know that changes to take-up are due to actions in this strategy rather than change that would have happened anyway**
3. **Plans for evaluating Scottish Child Payment and Child Disability Payment**
4. **How will progress in the strategy be monitored over the next five years**

Camilla Kidner, Senior Researcher, SPICe Research

05 November 2021

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Annex: Previous Committee's Recommendations on Benefit Take-up

Executive Summary

We heard about many of the difficulties with estimating take-up, the reasons why people do not claim and what some of the possible solutions are. Surprisingly, much of this information was already known, yet very little appears to be changing. Our recommendations throughout this report set out what action we think needs to be taken next by the UK and Scottish Governments.

Our recommendations are:

Difficulties in estimating take-up

Whilst we acknowledge that there are difficulties in estimating take-up, especially for the disability benefits due to uncertainty about the eligible population, we believe there is an opportunity for more to be done to undertake more research in this area.

As disability benefits will form the largest part of the Scottish Government social security budget, we recommend that the Scottish Government undertake research to establish the number of people likely to be eligible for Scottish disability benefits in order to inform their take-up strategy.

We recommend that the UK and Scottish Governments commission joint research to improve the available data on eligibility for the reserved benefits that will be 'passports' for Scottish social security.

Whilst we acknowledge that the first set of statistics for take-up of Universal Credit are yet to be published, we believe that its objective of increasing take-up should be tracked as it is rolled out.

Government take-up strategies

UK Government take-up strategy

We know that take-up campaigns can and have made a real difference to increasing the amount of benefits that are claimed. A Government strategy ensures sustained focus. We were concerned that the UK Government does not have one for reserved benefits. We recommend that the UK Government develops a strategy that aims to maximise take-up of reserved benefits across the UK.

We welcome that the Scottish Government has a statutory duty to promote take-up, but this must be monitored to ensure it delivers its aims.

A joint effort

The Committee recommends that joint working between the UK and Scottish Governments, to consider how best to encourage take-up of all benefits, should be discussed formally between both Governments.

Take-up strategies should be an ongoing and continuous priority for both the UK and Scottish Government. Consequently, both Government's should make appropriate funding available on a similar ongoing basis. The Committee welcomes the funds made available for the Scottish take-up strategy but asks that it is kept under review to ensure they are sufficient.

The Committee believes there should be a holistic approach to take-up of devolved and reserved benefits. This strategy could be led by Social Security Scotland with appropriate funding from both the UK and Scottish Governments.

Barriers to take-up

Different barriers impact on different groups or sectors of society. Care needs to be taken to ensure a one-size fits all approach is not taken, as acknowledged in the Scottish Government's benefit take-up strategy.

We welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to deliver Scottish social security with dignity and respect and hope this leads to reduced stigma and higher take-up levels. We recommend that in addition to protected equality groups, the Scottish and UK Government's analyse take-up by rurality and by using deprivation indicators such as the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation.

We recommend that the Scottish Government's next take-up strategy addresses the barriers to getting support in rural areas and areas of deprivation.

What needs to happen to increase take-up

Benefit administration

We agree that there are different key stages in the social security process, including establishing eligibility, making an application and having a decision made about entitlement that create barriers for a potential claimant.

We again recommend that the digital by default application process for Universal Credit should be reviewed, with the aim of providing multiple application channels that enable applicants to use the method that best suits. The Committee believes this is the appropriate approach for all benefits.

We welcome Social Security Scotland's commitment to deliver devolved benefits with a simplified application process in multiple formats, but recommend that the process is kept under review, to always ensure it meets the clients' needs. The Committee looks forward to further details of this in due course. The Committee intends to continue to scrutinise the ease of accessibility and quality of claimant journey for both social security systems operating within Scotland.

We recommend that the Scottish Government looks again at whether Council Tax Reduction can be used as an additional qualifying benefit for those Scottish social security benefits which are 'passported' from reserved benefits.

We recommend that both Social Security Scotland and the DWP must keep a close watch on the referral pathways between agencies to ensure that claimants are always directed to the correct agency to make a claim.

We welcome DWP's commitment to provide additional training to its JobCentre staff. We hope this results in more decisions being correct first time and an improved understanding of the interaction between the Scottish and UK benefit systems. However, this must not create an additional burden for staff and the Committee notes concerns raised previously by PCS regarding DWP workload and staffing levels. We recommend that an evaluation is undertaken to ensure that appropriate resources are in place.

Partnership working and welfare rights advice services

It is clear that a lot of good work is taking place in Scotland by welfare advice services. However, some initiatives and projects struggle from a lack of funding or a lack of continuity of funding. We recommend that the UK and Scottish Governments acknowledge the positive impact that these services have by providing increased and sustained funding to meet current and future needs. The Committee believes this should be done in partnership with third sector and local authorities and should be kept under review.

The Committee notes that 71% of social security and child support appeals had the initial decision revised in favour of the claimant. This suggests that there are potential changes that could be made to the benefits system that could help to alleviate pressures on advice services and reduce the number of appeals. This would also improve the claimant journey.

Co-located projects are taking place across Scotland, however sometimes in isolation, in a specific city or health board area. We recommend that a more joined up approach is taken by the Scottish Government, UK Government and local authorities, to ensure best practice can be shared, appropriately funded and rolled out across Scotland.

The Scottish Government should further explore the potential role of all statutory services in providing basic welfare advice, including knowing when to refer people to specialist advice workers. Healthier Wealthier Children is an example of where this process has worked well and as noted above has been referred to as a 'gold standard' in embedding routine inquiry and referral to advice agencies.

We recommend the Scottish Government does all it can to ensure local authorities promote best start grant when someone registers at birth. The Scottish Government should work closely with all local authorities to identify other ways to improve take-up of this and all other forms of Scottish social security.

ICT and data sharing

ICT has a place in the benefit system. It can enable the automatic payment of awards without an application and can help to target potential claimants to encourage them to take-up their benefit entitlement. However, care must be taken to ensure that a two-tier system is not created with people who are IT literate and those who are not.

We believe that the Scottish Government has the opportunity to automate those benefits that are passported from reserved benefits. Whilst we understand this might not happen immediately, and take-up can only be as high as the reserved benefit from which the Scottish benefit is passported, we ask the Scottish Government to consider the further scope for this as it continues to roll-out the new Scottish social security benefits.

GDPR should not be used as an excuse to block the sharing of data between agencies. We recommend that the DWP, Social Security Scotland and local authorities increase their efforts to find ways to share information that will be beneficial for claimants.