

Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People
Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot

T: 0300 244 4000
E: scottish.ministers@gov.scot

Jim McCormick
Chair,
Disability and Carers Benefits Expert Advisory Group

27 July 2018

Dear Jim,

Thank you for your letter of 11 July 2018 and accompanying advice from the Disability and Carers Benefits Expert Advisory Group. I would be grateful if you could also pass on my thanks to the co-chair of the Disability Assessments workstream, Tressa Burke and colleagues, who have supported her in providing this advice. I am grateful for the views and recommendations provided by the workstream.

I note the recommendation made by the Group that the Scottish Government should not progress with a policy that will enable automatic entitlement to disability assistance in certain cases. As you will know from the background information provided to you by officials, your advice and considerations are consistent with what we have heard from stakeholders and individuals to date. This applies in particular in relation to the principles that a system of automatic entitlement allows no recognition of the impact a condition has on an individual. This is something which has been raised consistently when the Scottish Government has consulted on this policy change. I recognise that in making this recommendation the Group has taken account of the improvements that the Scottish Government intend to make, from application to award, when the benefits are delivered by Social Security Scotland.

You will be aware that my officials are working closely with current users of the system through our Experience Panels. This includes work to obtain further user views on automatic entitlement. I therefore intend to consider the recommendation made by the Group along with the outcomes of our user research, before reaching a final decision on automatic entitlement to awards.

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St Andrew's House, Regent Road, Edinburgh EH1 3DG
www.gov.scot



On sources of evidence, I wholeheartedly agree with the determination of the Group that there is a need for an empathetic and consistent approach which starts from a position of trust. This is consistent with our principle of treating people with dignity and respect throughout the process of applying for and receiving Disability Assistance.

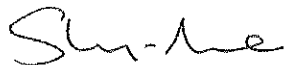
Moreover, I am keen to improve the approach to the use of evidence including how we can give more weight to different types of evidence, for example, evidence from family and carers. The Group's recommendation as it stands does not fully align with this approach. While I believe that an individual's account of how their condition effects their functionality is a crucial part of the decision making process, I can foresee some issues with decision makers having to make decisions as to whether a client's account requires supporting evidence or not. I am also aware from other consultation activity that people on disability benefits have not suggested this is an approach that they would necessarily support. I appreciate you have further work to do with officials on this and look forward to receiving further advice from you once you have carried out the work required.

Thank you also for confirming your views on the preferred delivery body for assessments in Scotland; I note that you are content with our decision that Social Security Scotland will be best placed to deliver disability assessments in Scotland.

I look forward to receiving full advice from you on the duration of disability benefit awards following your next meeting. This is an important policy change which will remove the stress and anxiety associated with unnecessary reassessments for potentially vulnerable clients.

I look forward to meeting with you in the future to discuss these issues and others which the Group is considering in more detail. Meantime, I wish you well in your continued consideration of these important matters.

Best wishes,



SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE