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2 June 2020

Dear Sally

Thank you for your letter of 24 April discussing the ongoing work of the Scottish Commission on Social Security (SCoSS) in the context of the disruption caused by the current Covid-19 pandemic.

Obviously, the current situation is unprecedented and it has meant making substantial changes to the planned delivery of benefits. However, work towards the roll out of these benefits is continuing at pace behind the scenes and it is hugely encouraging to see that SCoSS has already considered options on how to review its workplan in order to add value during this period.

I appreciate you taking the initiative to set out some areas where SCoSS may be able to add value in light of the revised legislative scrutiny timetable. I and my officials will keep your helpful offer in mind as we track a course over the months ahead.

As I stated in my announcement on 01 April, the main priority has been to ensure the delivery of existing benefits to our clients. I am pleased to say we are achieving this, through Social Security Scotland staff having the facility to work from home and through new initiatives like the introduction of a new method of telephony contact, a document upload facility and the successful launch of a webchat facility. I know that David Wallace has separately provided further details of these initiatives.

I am aware that SCoSS may be interested in providing a supplementary report on the draft of the regulations for Disability Assistance for Children and Young People. I will revert on this specific point, once we are clearer on the likely delivery timetable. As things stand, you might note that I don't expect any significant policy changes from the draft sent to you for scrutiny.

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In relation to the Scottish Child Payment regulations, you will be aware of the priority we place on the benefit's delivery - and our aspiration that we will be able to open for applications later this year. This means we might expect to lay the regulations in the autumn offering limited time for SCoSS to provide further input.

As you point out, there is the potential for us to use provisions in the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 to work to a revised affirmative procedure for SSIs. I can say that as things stand we don't expect that situation to arise for any social security regulations. Should it do so, however, we will explore with you what might be possible in terms of SCoSS's involvement.

Your letter also mentions the potential for SCoSS to undertake a review of action we have taken to date, in order to identify learning that could be drawn from it. I am of the view that it would be helpful for SCoSS to offer some reflections on this, particularly in the context of your work to assess our actions against the Charter.

On that subject, the Charter Measurement Framework will be pivotal in how we measure our performance against the Charter expectations. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 outbreak has forced the postponement of a planned all-client survey that will be a key source of data for populating the Measurement Framework. As well as wider ethical considerations relating to running research projects during this period, several practical factors resulted in the postponement. The first iteration of the survey is due to issue as a paper invite to an online survey, with the option to contact a dedicated research helpline to complete it over the phone or request a paper copy. During this period we have been unable to initiate the mail out of invites due to our mail contractor being required to prioritise the Agency's core operational outbound mail functions. In addition, research helpline staff and those who would have dealt with paper survey mail outs and returns were unable to fulfil these activities due to homeworking and illness.

It remains our intention that the survey will run as soon as practicable. While some things are not possible to progress during the crisis, I am confident that we are continuing to act in line with our principles and Charter, and that while the survey delay will affect the availability of client data to include in the upcoming Social Security Scotland Annual Report, we will be able to provide a report in the autumn against the Charter Measurement Framework. I would be happy to offer a meeting between SCoSS and relevant Agency and Scottish Government officials to discuss our work in this area.

As the pandemic passes and the picture becomes clearer, we will keep you and your fellow Board Members informed of updates on the introduction of Wave 2 benefits and the timetable for scrutiny of draft regulations by SCoSS. I have asked Policy officials and the Sponsor Team to engage regularly with your Secretariat to ensure that SCoSS are kept aware of emerging thinking on timescales. In the meantime, I would urge you to contact Ann McVie and your Sponsor Team if you have any specific queries.

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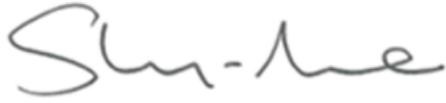
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Can I take this opportunity to personally thank you and your fellow Board Members for all the work you have done to date, and for your continued efforts, support and understanding at this unprecedented time.

Yours sincerely



**SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE**

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