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24 December 2020

Dear Brian

Action Plan for Winter – Supporting Older People in Scotland

Thank you for your letter of 1 October 2020 regarding a Scottish Government winter action plan for older people. Please accept my apologies for what feels like a very delayed response, however I wanted to make sure that I was able to respond substantively on the wide ranging, cross-portfolio issues your letter raised.

As you know, the Scottish Government has been working hard to deal with the multitude of challenges the pandemic has brought and continues to bring, given more virulent strains of the virus recently emerging. I have appreciated the ongoing and regular engagement you and your team have had with my officials and how this has led to wider policy engagement on matters including health and social care and vaccinations. I see this regular engagement as a priority as we head into 2021 and as we work through plans including our vaccination programmes and of course, the winter period more generally. This intensive engagement has actively helped older people across communities in Scotland.

Your letter of 1 October covered a number of topics and I have grouped them for ease. Officials have of course worked with you and your team across many of these areas so this will not all be new.

Information and Advice, Loneliness and Isolation, Digital Support

At pace, we set up and have maintained the freephone National Assistance Helpline along with a textphone alternative, which connects callers to teams in the relevant local authority who can assess need and arrange provision of support. We have provided funding to several organisations who operate advice, support and friendship helplines to older people. Those include not only yourselves, but Hourglass, Chest Heart Stroke Scotland, Befriending Networks and many more with initial support coming from our £350 million Supporting Communities Fund.

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We have delivered marketing campaigns that cover TV, radio, social media and printed press as well as a produce a national leaflet drop with key sources of information. Accessible and inclusive communications is important and our five level framework <https://www.gov.scot/publications/covid-19-scotlands-strategic-framework/> is also available in [BSL, Mandarin, Gaelic, Arabic, and Polish, as well as Easy Read and audio versions](#). I recognise that improvement here is required.

Earlier this month I was delighted to announce nearly £6 million from our £100 million Winter Plan for Social Protection, was being used to promote equality, tackle social isolation and loneliness and help 5,000 older and disabled people get online with over £4 million added to the Connecting Scotland digital programme.

Shielding Support, Physical and Social Distancing Measures

Critical to keeping people safe was the development of a nationwide marketing campaign which clinical advisers and officials identified five key behaviours that were vital in reducing the spread of coronavirus. That became the **FACTS** campaign (**F**ace covering, **A**void Crowds, **C**lean hands, **T**wo meter distance, **S**elf-isolate) which of course continues to be used.

On 21 December the Scottish Government published updated guidance aimed at those shielding on the mygov.scot website: [Coronavirus - support if you've been shielding - mygov.scot](#) This information and link has been circulated with OPSAF members and is the latest guidance which now includes changes to festive bubbles. Contained within the page is a link to a shielding survey, the results of which will help us understand more about the best ways to support people on the shielding list. Answers will be anonymous and I would encourage you to share with your members.

[Take part in the shielding survey here.](#)

The Scottish Government has also developed a digital and physical face covering exemption card for those who are exempt in the regulations and guidance. These cards were available for people to request from 29 October 2020 and feedback from the Age Scotland helpline helped to shape this action. Cards will be delivered by Disability Equality Scotland (DES) on behalf of the Scottish Government and are available online by through [NHS Scotland](#) or via the free helpline on 0800 121 6240.

Access to Food

Food insecurity has been a cause of concern for many people, for a varying number of reasons. We have listened to feedback from yourselves and other OPSAF members and Scottish Ministers have engaged with food retailers. We have produced guidance that contains helpful information around shops, priority hours and quieter shopping times. More information can be found at [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance on support, information, food and other essentials - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#) And of course, individuals who need further support can call the National Helpline.

Social Care and Access to Healthcare

GP services and hospitals have remained open throughout the pandemic but of course services have been impacted by the pandemic. Our yearly flu vaccination delivery programme has been altered and extended this year which has also been challenging, but I

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am pleased that feedback from the Age Scotland helpline has contributed to our discussions on improving the delivery of that work. Our work with you around flu vaccinations has helped shape the development of the covid vaccination programme which is underway.

Many opticians and dentists are now operating on an appointment basis and where additional assistance is required, a patient or their representative should phone a local practice who will help find the most appropriate service.

We are also extremely aware of the pandemic's impact on mental health and the ongoing and adapting Clear Your Head campaign has been designed to help look after mental health and wellbeing. The campaign has been refreshed for December and we will look to do that again in the New Year. This campaign is of course backed up by information on NHS inform the NHS24 Mental Health Hub and [Breathing Space](#)

Access to personal finances

Your letter mentions access to cash and support for those on low incomes. Of course one of the important services Age Scotland offers is the free benefit and entitlement checks which can support older people with pension credit claims. Your guide I'm sure has been valuable for many and we strongly encourage older people to claim what they are entitled to. You are of course aware that we continue to challenge the UK Government on their decision to scrap free TV licences which will continue to cause hardship for many older people nationwide and is particularly unpalatable during a pandemic where we ask people to stay at home.

But people who are experiencing financial hardship may be eligible to receive help from the Scottish Welfare Fund. It provides Crisis Grants to individuals on low incomes who are in financial difficulties because of a disaster or an emergency. It also provides Community Care Grants to individuals on low incomes who need help to establish or maintain a settled home as well as a self-isolation grant if you've been asked to self-isolate by Test and Protect because of coronavirus (COVID-19) and will lose income as a result. The grants are made by local authorities and information is at [Scottish Welfare Fund - mygov.scot](#)

An income maximisation service funded by Scottish Government and delivered by the Citizens Advice Network in Scotland continues to operate and will help people find out whether there are other benefits or grants they may be entitled to receive. This free service can be contacted on 0800 085 7145 or by visiting the [Money Talks website](#).

Turning to your comments on domestic energy use, Home Energy Scotland are a network of local advice centres covering all of Scotland. Their expert advisors offer free, impartial advice on energy saving, keeping warm at home, renewable energy, greener travel, cutting water waste and more. They also provide information on insulation and information can be found at [Home Energy Efficiency Programme](#). Alternatively, individuals can call free on 0808 808 2282 and speak to an advisor.

Workplaces

I agree that older workers must of course be supported and extensive information and guidance for employers and employees has been published and updated. This covers guidance for many specific sectors, retail and leisure venues, employment rights, homeworking and safer workplaces [Coronavirus in Scotland - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#).

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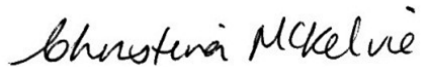
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I fully appreciate that this is a lengthy response, and yet it does not cover the extent of work being carried out by the Scottish Government and its many partners.

We have never had to work quite this way before and I believe it has demonstrated how well we can all work together in times of crisis. It has been said many times, but this is indeed a marathon not a sprint, and I look forward to our continuing partnership, working for the interests of older people in an inclusive, fair, Scotland.

Yours faithfully,



Christina McKelvie
Minister for Older People and Equalities

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