Best Start Grant Reference Group

13 October 2016

Attendees:
Poverty Alliance
Barnardo’s
Save the Children
Scottish Women’s Convention
One Parent Families Scotland
Maternity Action
COSLA
NHS Scotland
Tackling Poverty Team, South Lanarkshire
Early Years Scotland
Scottish Government
Engender

Non-Attendees
Child Poverty Action Group
Scottish Womens Convention
Action for Children
Children, Young People & Families Services, Dundee Health
SLGP

Item 1: Presentation on Best Start Grant and Healthy start

The Scottish Government presentation covered current thinking around the policy design of the Best Start Grant, and the proposed integration of Healthy Start and Best Start Grant administrative systems.

Item 2: Group Discussion

Policy Outcomes

The group started discussions by looking at the outcomes and impact of the benefit. It was agreed that it is important to embed this benefit into the wider work on-going in Early Years and it should be aimed at helping to achieve various outcomes related to health, education, finance and employment. Suggestions from the group included examining how health visitors could help promote this benefit.

Eligibility

There was clear agreement amongst the group that this benefit needs a clear and simple eligibility criteria, whilst ensuring that administration costs remain relative to the cost of the benefit. The group agreed that the broad timing for the payments (birth, nursery and school) were useful but some further consideration has to be
given to the second payment (nursery) and how this ties into wider government activity to improve outcomes during the Early Years and to tackle Child Poverty.

Other points raised included:

- Agreement it would be beneficial for this benefit to reach as many families as possible, this includes in work families, as they move from ‘out of work benefits’ into work they will still need to be supported.
- That the financial eligibility threshold should not be set below the level of the poverty threshold.
- Consideration should be given to the contribution that the BSG can make to the child poverty duty, with a read across to the measurement framework if possible and other work on-going in this area.

Payment Methods

Small discussion over whether the BSG would always need to take the form of a cash benefit. Feedback from various consultation events highlighted that potential recipients of the BSG often react positively to the idea of vouchers because they see it as being able to more directly benefit the child. However, it was noted within the group that vouchers can limit choice and access, for example preventing the purchase of re-used goods which allow people to get more value for their money. Other points raised in this discussion included:

- While the BSG is for the benefit of the child, it does not need to be limited to buying items for the child. Improving the financial circumstances of the family will ultimately benefit the child.
- Members agreed that in certain circumstances alternative payment methods can be useful, however choice over payment methods has to be paramount.
- Questions were raised in regards to uprating. The SSMG is not currently automatically uprated. Not uprating automatically would keep the payment at a round number. However, there is a risk that the amount will fall behind what is needed due to inflation without any requirement for regular review.

Communications

Throughout all discussions it was agreed that communication of this new benefit was going to be key for its success. This included working with stakeholders involved in welfare advice, and those who have contact with mothers and children in the early years.

User Reactions

Members reported that feedback from consultation events on the proposals for the BSG has been positive.
Some questions were raised in regards to the timing of the second payment because of the variations in timings that starting nursery can take which can be from a few weeks old. For this reason, it was suggested that this payment could be connected to age rather than take up of nursery payment. It was also reiterated that we need clear outcomes for each of the payments.

Although there is some clarity needed about the timing for the second payment feedback from consultation events suggested that the payment was welcomed as there is little other support at this point. There was a feeling that provision throughout early years gave a sense of on-going support and someone “having your back”.

Needs of Equality Groups

The group all stressed the importance of working closely with third sector, community groups and advice centres to help promote and educate people who work in this area and with those who are going to receive the benefit.

The needs of lone parents were also flagged, in particular where a couple has split and the benefits situation has not been resolved. These situations can be complicated and can take a long time to resolve. There is a need to include these kinds of cases in considering any exceptions to rules on qualifying benefits.

Members highlighted some of the issues which have been faced with the Scottish Welfare fund in this regard, it was acknowledged that vouchers won’t necessarily help those women who are in controlling or violent relationships.

Lastly, the needs of parents with no recourse to public funds was raised, an issue which had come up at a number of meetings with potential recipients. This is an area which is reserved to the Home Office but keeping applications open to both partners, means that, if only one has no recourse to public funds, the other can potentially apply.

Application

There was a discussion about the different options that the application process could take. In particular, whether there should be one application which captures all payments and all eligible children with details held over time versus a number of single applications. The former would mean fewer forms but could make for a complex application process and multiple contact points for checking changes of circumstances as well as data held over a longer period. The latter would place more of an onus on the applicant to understand their entitlement and apply in the relevant timeframe. Points made in discussion were:

- Anything which makes it easier for people applying would be welcome. This ranges from online chat to acknowledging the need for different forms and methods of applying.
• There was agreement that a joint application, if it helps simplify the process, would be for the better. This will have to be worked through and tested in practice.
• However, complex cases could be hard to track, this includes child moves, relationship breakdowns, family splits.
• Members touched again on Health Visitor Pathways. An example of good practice was highlighted form South Lanarkshire Council who had managed to get financial inclusion considered in universal pathway.
• It needs to be clear that the school payment is not a substitute for the school clothing grant.
• Group asked about automation and how possible this would be. The work of Glasgow City Council was highlighted as good practice as they are now automating school clothing grants for everyone receiving housing benefit.

Implementation

The group had a discussion around implementation and delivery of the BSG. The main points raised were that any opportunity to implement BSG early would be positive as this would pay more people more money at an earlier stage.

The group agreed that any early delivery system would need to be robust and at least as good as DWP’s delivery in terms of access and quality of service. Delivery would also need to be accompanied by clear communication not only for people eligible for the benefit but also for practitioners who work in this area.

The group also highlighted that in regards to implementation and design it will be important to look at what other changes are happening to the benefits system to try and minimise the amount of change being faced by people, such as shifts in eligibility criteria for other benefits.

Lastly, the group agreed that delivery would need to be accompanied by effective systems for complaints and appeals.

Healthy Start Food Vouchers.

The group had a short discussion around Healthy Start Food Vouchers. Points raised included:
• The inability of people on very low incomes to cook vegetables if they don’t have sufficient fuel.
• Expansion of vouchers to other foods beyond fruit and vegetables could risk diluting the aim, could also make it more difficult for shops to process.
• A sense that provision of vouchers is viewed differently for health/nutritional interventions than for social security, with a greater support for provision of vouchers.

Actions

➢ Scottish Government to look into the examples highlighted in the discussions
Scottish Government to continue scoping and modelling work on policy design and application process.
Scottish Government to re-look at the links with Child Poverty.
Scottish Government to look at links with Health Visitors Pathway

Item 3: Agreement on Remit and Membership

- The remit and membership were agreed in principle with a few additions to be made.

Actions

- Scottish Government is to amend the remit in regards to how we include people with experience of benefits.
- Scottish Government to invite representatives from Education, Health Workers and Early Learning and Childcare to join the Reference Group.

Item 4: Next Meeting

- The group will meet once the social security consultation report has been published, mostly likely January.