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Dear Convener

I am writing to provide an update on the progress of ongoing work with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in relation to Winter Heating Payment.

As the committee is aware, in the initial year of delivery Winter Heating Payments were made from February. That timetable was substantially outwith our control given the dependency upon when DWP were able to share the required client data. It was also essential that Social Security Scotland were able to test the data and ensure the system was functioning as expected. In addition, all of this work was undertaken at a very busy time for Social Security Scotland since it coincided with the roll out of the extension of Scottish Child Payment.

The Government has undertaken extensive consultation and engagement with stakeholders and clients and we recognise the widespread preference for payments to be made earlier in the Winter if possible. We committed to investigating the feasibility of doing so, including engaging with DWP to press for the required client data to be provided earlier in future years.

I am pleased to be able to tell the Committee that we have been able to reach agreement with DWP for the first set of data on eligible clients to be provided earlier this Winter. We are therefore confident that we can respond positively to those concerns and make payments much earlier than in Winter 2022-23.

As the Committee is aware eligibility for Winter Heating Payment is based on data collected during the qualifying week, which runs from the 6 – 12 of November 2023. Payments are forecast to be made to approximately 400,000 eligible clients in winter 2023-24. As well as taking the time required to complete data assurance this volume of claims means that payments need to be processed and made in batches.

Subject of course to the data being provided by DWP on the dates and to the quality standards agreed, Social Security Scotland expect to begin processing payments this Winter

from mid-December. This means that those clients receiving payment in the initial batches can expect to receive their Winter Heating Payment before the end of December. This is less than 7 weeks after the qualifying week and almost 8 weeks earlier than in year one. Social Security Scotland anticipates that nearly all payments to the remaining clients will be made by the end of January 2024.

To ensure that as many eligible people as possible are identified and paid automatically, DWP will share a second data file at the end of January with details of people who became entitled retrospectively during the qualifying week, such as when a redetermination of entitlement to a qualifying benefit has been made. We anticipate that anyone identified as a result of the second scan to be paid automatically in February. Where further manual intervention is required, we expect the majority of payments to have concluded before the end of the winter period.

I hope the Committee will join me in welcoming this significant improvement to the timetable for Winter Heating Payments in Winter 2023-24. We will of course continue to review delivery to identify where any further improvements can be made but I expect this timetable to be the basis for delivery in future years as well.

Yours sincerely

SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE