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10<sup>th</sup> May 2024

Dear Collette

Thank you for your letter of 28 March regarding research commissioned by the Committee into the additional costs of disability. I read the report with interest and welcome its contribution to the important discussion on the cost of living challenges disabled people are currently experiencing.

It is especially helpful in highlighting the limitations of the data available to inform robust estimates of the specific additional costs disabled people incur to achieve the same standard of living as non-disabled people. I understand this is primarily due to the significant variation in the nature and extent of these costs, depending on a host of factors, such as type of disability, or whether the person lives in an urban or rural setting. As such, there is no agreed way to consistently measure the additional financial burden impacting disabled people.

There is, however, substantial evidence demonstrating that disabled people do face higher living costs, and that this is currently being exacerbated by the cost of living crisis. The Scottish Government's Tackling Child Poverty Progress Report 2022-2023 found that households with a disabled adult or child were likely to have higher ongoing living costs, particularly in relation to energy and food. Latest official statistics, published in March 2024, show that, across all ages, households with disabled people continue to be more at risk of poverty (24%) than those where no disabled people live (18%). Households with disabled people are one of the six household types identified as priority groups in the Tackling Child Poverty Strategy.

A holistic approach to tackling barriers faced by disabled people is therefore essential, and why I have championed the implementation of a plan co-produced with Disabled People's Organisations to help with some of these significant challenges. This plan will inform our Scottish Ministers, special advisers and the Permanent Secretary are covered by the terms of the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016. See [www.lobbying.scot](http://www.lobbying.scot)

future work that will be aimed at tackling the systemic barriers that affect the daily lives of disabled people. Secondly, our evidence on outcomes for disabled people across the full range of government policy is being informed by improvements in data set out in Scotland's Equality Evidence Strategy 2023-25.

Central to my commitment to improve the lives of disabled people is the delivery of our social security system, one built on the foundations of dignity, fairness and respect. In their December 2023 publication, the Scottish Fiscal Commission forecast that the Scottish Government will invest a record £6.3bn for benefits expenditure in 2024-25, including around £5bn to support disabled people through Adult Disability Payment, Child Disability Payment, Scottish Adult Disability Living Allowance, Pension Age Disability Payment, Employment Injury Assistance and Severe Disablement Allowance. The total investment is £1.1bn more than the UK Government gives to the Scottish Government for social security, and includes an additional investment of over £320m for disability related payments. Also, in recognition of the challenges people face due to the increased cost of living described in this report, we uprated all Scottish benefits in line with inflation, by 6.7% in April, at a cost of around £370m.

The Scottish social security system provides a wide range of financial support to disabled people and actively and vigorously encourages people to apply for the benefits they may be entitled to. We strive to make applying as accessible as possible through unique initiatives such as a free and independent advocacy service which supports disabled people to access and apply for Social Security Scotland benefits. Short-term Assistance is available to people while they are challenging a decision after a review, providing the same amount of money they were getting before a decision was made to lower or stop their payment.

We have introduced a new person-centred definition of terminal illness for all our disability benefits ensuring that terminally ill people receive the assistance they are entitled to, as quickly as possible. The journey from child to adult disability benefits in Scotland is a much better experience in comparison to the Department for Work and Pension's (DWP) approach, ensuring continuity for young people and their families. Our compassionate person centred approach to disability assistance will be reflected in Pension Age Disability Payment, when it is introduced as a phased pilot later this year. It is of course central to our approach to disability assistance that it is neither means-tested nor intended as a form of income-replacement. However, the Scottish Government is keen to ensure that we support disabled people as effectively as possible. The Independent Review of Adult Disability Payment will consider the current eligibility criteria and disabled people's experience of delivery of Adult Disability Payment in its first year of delivery. The purpose of the Independent Review is to ensure that Adult Disability Payment continues to meet the needs of disabled people. When the Review concludes in July 2025, I will consider the recommendations carefully.

The broad range of support we provide to disabled people, and the people who care for them, includes more targeted support to help people with specific costs, such as Child Winter Heating Payment. This payment is provided to families of severely disabled children and young people. Carer Support Payment, which replaces Carers Allowance in Scotland, will also be available nationally from autumn this year.

As the committee is aware, the Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) Expert Group published their interim report in March 2023, in which they expressed an interest in the additional costs faced by disabled people and an intention to consider this as part of their current programme

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of work. I look forward to the Expert Group's full report later this year and remain ambitious to explore innovative ways to tackle poverty and inequality experienced by disabled people. While income replacement benefits such as Universal Credit remain reserved to the UK Government, the DWP has a vital role to play in ensuring the financial wellbeing of disabled people. The Committee will share our concerns that Universal Credit is failing the people it is designed to help and is pushing more people into poverty.

I wrote to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Mel Stride, in March, urging him to introduce an Essentials Guarantee, to ensure Universal Credit enables people to adequately cover the cost of essentials. I have also raised my significant concerns about planned reforms to the Work Capability Assessment. Proposed changes will put more sick and disabled people at risk of benefit sanctions and remove the safety net for people with short term illnesses, leaving them unable to manage their condition and live a dignified, independent life.

The UK Government's Cabinet Office Disability Unit, has commissioned the Research Institute for Disabled Consumers to carry out a cost of living survey of disabled consumers. The survey will include a representative Scottish sample and the Scottish Government will closely consider the findings, and how they might inform our future work in this area.

I will continue to put pressure on the UK Government to listen to the voices of disabled people. It is also essential the Scottish Government maintains the effective working relationships we have established with the DWP, necessary to deliver our social security system, which truly puts the needs of disabled people front and centre.

**SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE**

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