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Bob Doris MSP
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By email:
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cc: Councillor Shona Morrison, President,
CoSLA (shona.morrison@moray.gov.uk)
John Cunningham, Social Security – Policy
Manager, CoSLA (johnc@cosla.gov.uk)

28 November 2024

Dear Bob,

Thank you for your letter dated 7 November 2024 and for the interest that the Committee has taken in the Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF). I agree with the comments made on the importance of the SWF and the role it plays in supporting some of the most vulnerable people in society. I believe that we can be proud that in Scotland we have a national service in place to provide a lifeline to people in need.

I have outlined below where we are in relation to the SWF Action Plan and am pleased to confirm that a majority of the actions will be completed over the course of this financial year. My officials have provided an update in relation to the three specific actions that the Committee were interested in and I provide some additional detail. These three actions form part of a workstream focused on updating the SWF statutory guidance, which will come to me for formal approval.

SWF Action Plan

To aid the delivery of the 22 actions contained within our SWF action plan, my officials set up two key delivery mechanisms. A new *SWF Practitioners Forum* was launched in February 2024, with representatives from the 32 local authorities that deliver the SWF and CoSLA. The Forum has met regularly, shared practice, had input from other organisations and used meetings to discuss and progress actions related to Workstream one (Actions 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 & 12). At its most recent meeting on 12 November, the forum noted completion of 7 of these actions.

We have also set up a standing Statutory Guidance Review Committee in March 2024, made up of key stakeholders including representation from CoSLA, Local Authorities, the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, Scottish Prison Service and Third Sector

(CPAG, Citizen Advice Scotland). Further, to ensure the lived experience voice, Officials have also engaged with the Poverty Alliance and its Get Heard Citizen Panel. The committee's programme of work around Workstream two (Actions 5, 6, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19) ran from March until October 2024 and a revised Statutory Guidance has been drafted. Associated work is being completed by officials before it comes to me for Ministerial Approval as noted. This revised statutory guidance will be ready for the new financial year, 2025/26.

Workstream three (Actions 20, 21 and 22) is also underway with improvements made to the annual reporting and gathering of equalities information.

Actions 5, 14 & 15

- *Action 5: Provide clearer definitions on eligibility and what constitutes 'exceptional circumstances'.*

The committee's work in the revised Statutory Guidance has attempted to make clearer the policy intent and decision making process for decision makers who make awards and determine eligibility. The revised Statutory Guidance also defines what is meant by 'exceptional circumstances'. This is particularly pertinent when determining award when an applicant makes more than three Crisis Grant applications within a 12 month period and also in certain residency rule cases.

- *Action 14: Restructure to improve accessibility and ease of use.*

The committee's work and that of discussions with the Poverty Alliance Get Heard Citizen Panel has focused on making language and the policy intent clearer. A plain language introductory section has been added to the statutory guidance, to help make the statutory guidance a useful resource for applicants as well as decision makers.

- *Action 15: Review income thresholds for applicant eligibility.*

The Scottish Government will produce tables to help decision makers determine eligibility under low-income criteria where a qualifying benefit is not under payment, with rates for all local authorities.

I hope you find the above information helpful.

Yours sincerely



SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE