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An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

## Social Justice and Social Security Committee

**32<sup>nd</sup> Meeting, 2022 (Session 6), Thursday,  
24 November**

### Support to access Scottish benefits

#### Introduction

The Committee will hear from VoiceAbility on their progress to date in providing independent advocacy under the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018.

The Committee will hear from:

- Jonathan Senker, Chief Executive
- Susan Douglas-Scott, Chair of Trustees; and
- Emily Johnston, Operations Manager.

#### Background

##### Statutory provision

Section 10(2) of the [Social Security \(Scotland\) Act 2018](#) requires Scottish Ministers to ensure that independent advocacy services are available to disabled people who require support to apply for Scottish social security entitlements. Parents and carers who are not disabled can get support if they are claiming for a disabled child and the child wishes to take an active part in the process.

Those providing advocacy must comply with service standards. [Service standards were published in November 2021](#). These include:

- Advocacy workers will meet you at a time and in a place which suits you and meets your needs. This location should be safe for both you and your advocacy worker so you can discuss sensitive and personal matters.

- Advocacy workers will have detailed knowledge of the Scottish social security system and advocacy services which can be provided.
- Advocacy workers will keep accurate and up to date written records of action taken, progress made, and outcomes achieved.
- Advocacy services will carry out self-evaluations and provide service updates, including complaints, to funding bodies as part of routine reporting.

## **VoiceAbility**

The contract to provide this service went to VoiceAbility, who provide advocacy across England and Scotland. They employ over 300 staff and in 2021-22 had an income of around £11m. That year they provided advocacy support to 26,000 people. Their largest contract, worth £3.35m was with Midlands and South East region.

### **VoiceAbility's Scottish social security advocacy service**

VoiceAbility's Scottish service started in January 2022 and by October they had supported 'over 200 clients' ([Benefit take-up estimates, 31 October 2022](#)). Their Scottish contract is worth £20.4m over four years. Of that, £572,200 was provided in 2021-22 ([annual report 2021-22](#)).

The recent [Scottish Government annual report on progress in implementing the Social Security \(Scotland\) Act 2018](#) summarised what had been achieved during 2021-22:

- recruited advocates to cover every health board area, "ensured national coverage"
- opened a bespoke training centre in Glasgow
- negotiated access to office space in other parts of the country, "which will primarily be used for meeting clients face-to-face where necessary."

Last September the Minister for Local Government and Social Security, Ben Macpherson described what would be provided:

"VoiceAbility is a charity with 40 years' experience of delivering independent advocacy services. It brings a deep knowledge of the sector and a wealth of experience in supporting people with disabilities to get the outcomes that they deserve. VoiceAbility's delivery model promises a number of positive impacts for the people of Scotland, including commitments to establish a new base and bespoke training centre in Glasgow; create up to 100 new jobs and three apprenticeships as devolved benefits are introduced; have a clear presence in all health boards at launch; recruit 75 per cent of its workforce from people who are long-term unemployed or economically inactive; sign the Scottish business pledge; and pay at least the real living wage." ([SJSS Committee Official Report 30 September 2021](#)).

## Suggested themes for discussion

The following three themes are suggested:

1. **Support provided to clients**
2. **Recruitment and training**
3. **Monitoring, reporting and evaluation**

### **THEME 1: Support provided to clients to date**

The service has provided support to over 200 clients since it was launched. ([benefit take-up estimates, 31 October 2022](#))

VoiceAbility's leaflet describes the service provided. It explains that an advocate will listen and help people understand their rights and navigate the process. An advocate does not offer counselling or legal advice or tell people what decisions to make.

The purpose of advocacy is to assist disabled people access Scottish social security. That there might be additional need is perhaps suggested by findings in Social Security Scotland's 'Client Survey' 2021-22 which noted that:

“Those with a long-term physical or mental health condition (87%) were less likely to rate their overall experience (of Social Security Scotland) as ‘very good’ or ‘good’ compared to those without such a condition (91%)” ([Client Survey, 2021-22, Table 3.5](#))

### **Members may wish to discuss:**

1. **Can VoiceAbility update the Committee on the number of clients supported so far?**
2. **What type of support has been provided?**
3. **How much of that support has been provided face to face?**
4. **How have VoiceAbility advocates helped to improve outcomes for clients in Scotland?**
5. **What is VoiceAbility's estimate of likely demand for advocacy in Scotland?**

### **THEME 2: Recruitment and training**

When Ben Macpherson explained the advocacy service to the Committee in September 2021, he said that it would:

“create up to 100 new jobs and three apprenticeships as devolved benefits are introduced; have a clear presence in all health boards at launch; recruit 75 per cent of its workforce from people who are long-term unemployed or economically inactive; sign the Scottish business pledge; and pay at least the real living wage.” ([SJSS Committee Official Report 30 September 2021](#)).

[Voiceability's 2021-22 annual report](#) refers to a:

“Training Manager in Scotland, to oversee these functions and ensure quality in our social security benefits advocacy service.”

And that VoiceAbility will:

“Continue to support the implementation of our new contract in Scotland, in particular as new benefits come under the remit of Social Security Scotland.”

**Members may wish to discuss:**

6. **How many advocates have been recruited to the Scottish service and where are they based? Are they paid at least the [real living wage of £10.90 per hour](#)?**
7. **How many of those advocates cover more than one health board area?**
8. **What plans are there to expand provision as more Scottish benefits start?**
9. **Can VoiceAbility update the Committee on progress in “creating up to 100 new jobs and three apprenticeships”? Given the current tight labour market, is VoiceAbility experiencing any issues with recruitment?**

### **THEME 3: Monitoring, reporting and evaluation**

The Scottish Government's benefit take-up report (which will be an annual publication) includes advocacy client numbers. It's not known whether this will be included routinely.

VoiceAbility's [annual report 2021-22](#) covers all their services rather than giving a detailed breakdown for Scotland. However, at the end of that reporting period the service had only been running for two months.

The advocacy service standards include provisions on quality assurance, including that:

“Advocacy services will carry out self-evaluations and provide service updates, including complaints, to funding bodies as part of routine reporting”

**Members may wish to discuss:**

- 10. What has been learnt so far over the first 10 months of providing this service?**
- 11. What formal reporting and monitoring arrangements are in place between VoiceAbility and Social Security Scotland and/or Scottish Government?**
- 12. What plans are in place to evaluate the service provision? How do you involve those with lived experience when considering how to improve your services?**
- 13. Do you plan to include more detail on service use in Scotland in future annual reports?**

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SPICe  
14 November 2022