

Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: [PE1683](#)

Main Petitioner: Jennifer Edmonstone

Subject: Families with multiple births

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide better support for multiple births, including both financial and non-financial support.

Background

The petition refers to a mixture of reserved and devolved powers. Of the policy areas mentioned, the Scottish Parliament has competence over:

- devolved social security (see below)
- provision of health services
- provision of early learning and childcare, school education
- support to charities which provide parenting support

Of the specific policies mentioned, the following are reserved:

- childcare vouchers provided through employers or the new HMRC 'tax free childcare system'
- employment law on provision for parental leave
- reserved social security (see below)

Multiple Births in Scotland

In 2016/17, 3% of births in Scotland were from a multiple pregnancy of two or more babies. Sixty eight per cent (68%) of these babies were born pre-term¹ compared to 6.4% of singleton births. The preterm birth rate in multiple pregnancies has been increasing over time, rising from 30% in the mid-1970s².

¹ Term is defined as 37 weeks gestation.

² ISD Scotland – Births in Scottish Hospitals

Gestation at delivery strongly influences a baby's health and they can face multiple difficulties in the days and weeks following their birth, including a higher risk of mortality. There can also be longer term consequences which can continue to affect health and development throughout childhood and adult life.

Research by the [Twin and Multiple Birth Association](#) (TAMBA) found that, of babies born prematurely, over two thirds (67.7%) had to spend more than a week in neonatal care, with more than 1 in 5 spending more than a month there (20.6%). In addition, [reports from TAMBA](#) refer to additional problems with maternity care for parents with multiple births, such as additional difficulties with breastfeeding.

Research by the [University of Birmingham](#) (2010), commissioned by Tamba, found lower incomes in families with multiple births and higher levels of financial stress.

Scottish Government Action

A [national parenting strategy](#) was issued in 2012 aimed at supporting parents and all those involved in raising children. It does not specifically address support for parents of twins or multiple children but it does aim to “provide targeted support to families facing additional pressures that impact on day-to-day parenting”.

[Relevant policies](#) in the area of supporting families with young children include the following, although these are not specific to families with multiple births:

- Proposal to increase free early learning and childcare to 1,140 per year by 2020. The petitioner refers to the high cost of childcare in families with multiple births.
- Provision of [baby boxes](#), which are provided to each child
- Proposal for a ‘Best Start Grant’ which provides payment at birth, starting pre-school and starting school. [Illustrative regulations](#) suggest that, in the case of multiple births, additional payments will be made (see below under devolved social security)
- [Book Bug and ‘Read write count’](#) and Play Talk Read to support parents with their children's early learning
- The Scottish government funds the core costs of a variety of third sector organisations that support families, although none are specifically for supporting families where there are multiple births. A list of organisations and funding to 2018/19 is [available here](#).

The [Children and Young People Improvement Collaborative](#) provides a mechanism for considering the effectiveness of services. It encourages existing services to improve their delivery, such as, for example, encouraging uptake and promoting joined up working.

A statutory Child Poverty Strategy is due to be published by the Scottish Government in late March.

Health services

In 2017, the Scottish Government produced a [5 year plan for maternity and neonatal care](#). The plan makes one specific reference to multiple births in saying that, where possible, twins and multiples should be kept together in neonatal services.

In addition, the Scottish Government also produced a [Universal Health Visiting Pathway](#) in 2015. The pathway consists of a core programme of 11 visits up to age 5, but health visitors can provide more support where needed.

Devolved social security

The [Social Security \(Scotland\) Bill](#) introduces “early years assistance” (s.15 as introduced). The Scottish Government published [illustrative draft best start grant regulations](#) in October 2017. These provide that, in addition to the new-baby grant for each child in a multiple birth, a single “multiple pregnancy supplement” of £300 is payable. However, these illustrative regulations do not reflect settled Scottish Government policy, and will be subject to further consultation.

As currently drafted, the bill will give the Scottish Government the power to top-up any reserved benefit (s.45 of the bill as introduced). At its meeting on 1 March, the Social Security Committee disagreed by division [O/R] to an amendment which would have required child benefit to be topped up by £5 a week for all children resident in Scotland.

Whether statutory maternity pay (SMP – as well as other statutory payments for adoption, paternity, etc.) is social security benefit (and so could be topped up) is not clear from the provisions of the Scotland Act 1998, as the definition of social security is not precise.³ The explanatory notes to that Act contain [the following statement](#):

“The reservation has been cast in this way to make allowance for changes over time in the exact scope and coverage of the UK-wide social security system, and the way in which benefits are delivered. For example, in recent years some benefits previously provided directly by central government (such as sickness or maternity benefit) have been replaced by a structure of requirements on employers to make defined payments to their employees.”

Whether SMP could be topped up would be a matter for discussion between the Scottish and UK Governments, should the Scottish Government propose to increase SMP. What is clear is that the length SMP is paid for is a reserved matter, so the entitlement period could not be extended.

³ Whilst payment is made by employers, SMP is underpinned by the Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992, is supported from central government funds, and maternity is one of the illustrations of “social security purposes” given by the Scotland Act 1998.

Scottish Parliament Action

The Social Security Committee considered what is now the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act. This Act sets up child poverty targets for Scotland and a system of reporting. It is currently considering the Social Security (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 which establishes the overarching system for delivery of devolved social security.

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7 March 2018

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