

PE1683/A

Scottish Government submission of 19 April 2018

Thank you for your email of 19 March 2018 about Petition PE1683, calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide better support for multiple birth families, including both financial and non-financial support. Your letter was forwarded to the Child and Maternal Health Branch in the Improving Health and Wellbeing Division for response.

The petitioner raised a number of issues which I have tried to address below. Namely they are :

That the Scottish Government: increases child benefit for each multiple born; provides more funding earlier for childcare for families with multiples; and supports improvements in maternity leave, maternity pay and paternity pay.

In relation to the petitioner's first request, the Scotland Act 2016 devolved certain powers for social security to the Scottish Parliament, but certain key powers remain reserved, including Universal Credit, Child Tax Credits and Child Benefit. The UK Government has now restricted Universal Credit and Child Tax Credits to the first two children in each family, with certain exemptions. The Scottish Government is fundamentally opposed to the two child limit policy in its entirety. The 'rape clause' exemption in particular is completely unacceptable, deeply harmful to women and their children and a fundamental violation of human rights. We believe that the UK Government must, as a matter of urgency, change this policy.

The Scottish Government is committed to exercising our new powers under the Scotland Act 2016 in order to build a fairer, transparent and person-centred social security system for Scotland. In the first wave of benefits to be introduced is the Best Start Grant (BSG), which will replace the Department for Work and Pensions Sure Start Maternity Grant by Summer 2019. It will increase provision for low income families for the first child from £500 under the UK Sure Start Maternity Grant up to a total of £1,100, over three payments in a child's early years. Subsequent children, who receive nothing from the UK Government, will receive a total of up to £800.

The additional costs of a multiple birth have been acknowledged and therefore, in addition to the normal BSG award, a multiple-birth supplement will also be made. For example, in the case of twins, there would be a payment made of £600 for the first birth, £300 for the second and an additional multi birth supplement of £300. A consultation on the BSG Regulations is currently underway and can be found at: <https://consult.gov.scot/social-security/best-start-grant/>.

Best Start Foods will also form part of the first wave of benefits in Scotland and will replace the UK Healthy Start Vouchers. Best Start Foods will continue to provide targeted financial support for low income pregnant women and families to purchase milk, fruit and vegetables with an increased range of eligible foods under the new scheme. Multiple births will continue to be supported through Best Start Foods, with an increased weekly payment of £4.25 payment paid per child. Children under one will receive the value of two payments per week totalling £8.50.

Best Start Foods will be delivered through a new smartcard system to make it easier for families to use. A consultation on these proposals is currently underway and available at: <https://consult.gov.scot/health-protection/welfare-foods/>.

Whilst the devolved powers for social security are welcome, partial devolution prevents us using social security along with other public services to tackle long-term poverty and build sustainable economic growth.

With regards to childcare, as was discussed by the committee, the entitlement to funded early learning and childcare is being increased from 600 hours to 1140 by 2020. This will be for 3 and 4 year olds, as well as for eligible 2 year olds (around a quarter of 2 year olds are eligible). Local authorities can also offer additional provision – whether additional hours, or from an earlier age – at their own discretion, as happened with the Clackmannanshire example that was given to the committee.

We also recognise the difficulties that families can face with affording early learning and childcare prior to becoming eligible for the funded entitlement, particularly with upfront costs. We will therefore shortly be trialling a deposit guarantee scheme to help families with these upfront costs.

Some help with childcare costs is provided at a UK level, as this is linked to reserved benefits. Depending on the family circumstances, this might include:

- childcare vouchers (up to £933 a year in tax and NI savings);
- tax free childcare (up to £2,000 per child per year);
- the childcare element of tax credits (up to 70% of costs); or
- Universal Credit (up to 85% of eligible childcare costs).

Information about this support is available on the mygov.scot website: <https://www.mygov.scot/childcare-costs-help/tax-credits-and-other-help/>

We are also keen to challenge outdated assumptions about men's and women's roles in relation to work and childcare. Legislation and regulation can play an important part of that. However the legal powers governing maternity and paternity leave and pay are reserved to Westminster and are UK Government policy, but there is also a provision set out in European law. The Scottish Government is lobbying the UK Government to ensure that, as a minimum, existing provisions are maintained and there is no erosion of existing workers' rights.

Within the powers we do have we provide funding to Family Friendly Working Scotland Partnership to promote family friendly and inclusive workplaces to employers and employees in Scotland. The Scottish Government is keen to encourage Scottish employers to work in partnership with their workforce to consider voluntarily offering enhanced maternity and paternity leave. We believe that using flexibility and enhanced maternity and paternity leave as an employee benefit will help companies to attract talent to their business; and that if fathers take greater responsibility for childcare it will help to enable women to re-join the workplace, which will ultimately contribute to reducing the gender pay gap. This issue is therefore important not only for families, but for the Scottish economy.

The petitioner may also wish to note that Mr Hepburn, the Minister for Employability and Training also chairs a Pregnancy and Maternity Discrimination Working Group. As part of its remit, the group has produced new guidance for employers and has been actively promoting this to encourage best practice. Working Group Papers including a summary paper of their work can be found online at <http://www.employabilityinscotland.com/key-clients/women-and-work/pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-working-group/>.

Further to the above support, on 29 March of this year, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, Shona Robison MSP launched the Neonatal Expenses Fund, which went live on 1 April. The scheme is designed to help parents of premature and sick new-born babies to offset the cost of traveling to and from hospital during the early days of their babies' life and the sustenance required to allow them to spend time with their child/ children in order to bond as a family during these early days. Parents are integral to the care of their child whilst in neonatal care in order to establish breastfeeding, secure bonding and allow parents to build the skills to care for their babies upon discharge from hospital. Provision has been made within the scheme for families with multiples being cared for in separate neonatal units.

The petition mentions access to the milk donor bank. The Scottish Government recognises that breastfeeding has many major health benefits, both in the short and longer term, for both mother and baby and that is why we are committed to its promotion throughout Scotland.

We have a strong focus on protecting, supporting and promoting breastfeeding as demonstrated recently by our commitment in the 2017 Programme for Government "to increase resources for breastfeeding to support mothers, particularly in the days immediately following birth" (see: <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0052/00524214.pdf>). Human milk for preterm and other high-risk infants either by direct breastfeeding and/or using the mother's own expressed milk is definitely the preferred option, but we also know that life doesn't always allow for ideal circumstances and that mothers are sometimes unable to express sufficient milk for a baby who is unable to feed at the breast; as a result donor breast milk can be the recommended alternative.

The Scotland-wide Donor Milk Bank first opened in 1978 at Queen Mother's Hospital in Glasgow, when they would handle milk from around 10 donors with up to 16 babies receiving donor milk but only for infants in the Neonatal Unit at Yorkhill Children's Hospital in Glasgow. It has since expanded considerably and in 2014 all of the Scottish NHS Boards agreed to support one Milk Bank for Scotland and a purpose built and expanded donor milk bank was officially opened by the then Minister for Public Health. The newly expanded milk bank enabled donor milk to be offered to an increased number of babies from across Scotland.

Sick, premature infants and those undergoing extensive surgery (e.g. cardiac) have significantly higher risk of developing Necrotising Enterocolitis (NEC)¹. Despite huge advances in neonatal care, NEC remains a major and increasing cause of mortality in preterm infants and is associated with long term health care costs amongst

¹ Necrotising enterocolitis (NEC) is a serious illness in which tissues in the intestine (gut) become inflamed and start to die. This can lead to a perforation (hole) developing, which allows the contents of the intestine to leak into the abdomen (tummy).

survivors. There is a decreased risk of babies getting NEC if they are fed donor breast milk rather than formula milk.

It is also worth noting that families who are expecting twins, triplets, or even quadruplets will receive a Baby Box for each baby. At its heart, Scotland's Baby Box strongly signals our determination that every child, regardless of their circumstances, should get the best start in life by ensuring that every family with a new-born has access to essential items needed in the first six months of a child's life. Scotland's Baby Box is a universal initiative and all boxes and contents are identical.

The petitioner will wish to know that there is already a facility for parents who have had a premature baby to contact our Baby Box managing agent and to arrange for a Baby Box to be sent out to them immediately whilst the clothing may be too large at this stage there are many other products that parents/carers can make use of.

I would like to take the opportunity of this petition to acknowledge the point made by the petitioner about emotional support for multiple births families, which goes beyond financial support. As mentioned in the official report, the Scottish Government has been working closely with TAMBA (Twins and Multiple Births Association) whose work with multiple births families has to be commended here. The Scottish Government is funding an event for health professionals later this year, which will look at promoting good practice and increase positive outcomes in the clinical treatment of multiples. We look forward to the event and more opportunities to work with TAMBA in the future.

The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that all children in Scotland get the best start in life. I trust this will provide you with reassurance that we take this issue very seriously and as a government, strive to provide the highest quality care for all women, babies and families, from the beginning of the pregnancy onwards.