

PE1683/F

Cabinet Secretary for Social Security & Older People submission of 2 August 2018

Thank you for your letter of 4 July, regarding the above petition and requesting further views on the social security related issues that have been raised during your consideration of it.

As set out in the Scottish Government's initial submission, we are committed to exercising the powers we have to deliver a social security system that is built on dignity, fairness and respect. Following the passage of the Social Security (Scotland) Act ('the Act') we are taking forward a number of reforms and initiatives to deliver that.

As noted in the evidence you have received, we have consulted on further regulations related to our Best Start Grant – which will take account of, and provide additional payments for, multiple births. These are in the process of being analysed, and I would encourage all those with an interest in this area to continue to engage closely during that process. Additional support for multiple births will also be provided for through Best Start Foods, with increased weekly payments.

I have noted the specific recommendation regarding additional, higher child benefit payments for twins, triplets and Higher Order Multiples, through a top-up of child benefit. Our priority for this Parliamentary term is the safe and secure transition of the 11 benefits that have been newly devolved through the Scotland Act 2016 and which we have committed to deliver over this Parliament following the passage of the Act, for the 1.4 million people who rely on them. This includes additional support for multiple births, as set out above.

While the Act provides legislative competence for Scottish Ministers to top-up reserved benefits, the operation and delivery of those benefits remains the responsibility of the relevant UK department – in the case of child benefit, that is HMRC. As such, any reforms in this area would require further legislation, to establish the regulations for the top-up, along with complex and detailed discussions with HMRC to agree the delivery of it.

Moreover, as we set out in response to amendments during the passage of the Act, while we recognise the rationale for providing a top-up to child benefit, as a universal benefit it does not necessarily present the greatest value for money, or provide the maximum impact we would want to secure, particularly as we look to meet our ambitious, statutory targets to reduce and ultimately eradicate child poverty.

We do, however, fully recognise the pressures that many families face, particularly those with unique and specific circumstances. That is why, through our recently published Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan, we have set out a range of actions designed to increase household incomes and reduce costs. Those will help to support children and families here and now, as well as tackling the longer term impacts of poverty, and improve life chances. Included in those actions is a commitment to develop a new income supplement, designed to provide financial support to low income families.

The delivery plan sets out two key tests for the income supplement – that the additional income is targeted on families who need it most, therefore helping to lift the maximum number of children out of poverty, and that there is a robust and viable delivery route to get the additional income to them.

That work is in the early stages of development, and a significant undertaking. During the development of the supplement we will engage closely with stakeholders, to better understand how we can best target support where it can have the greatest impact. As part of

that we would welcome any views on how the supplement can best meet the needs of families with multiple births, and with consideration to the issues raised by the petitioner.

Ultimately, we are committed to ensuring Scotland is the best place for children to grow up, with the best start in life. Along with the reforms we have already put in place, together with those we are committed to taking forward over the course of this Parliament, I am determined that we do all we can for children and families, including those with complex and unique circumstances, and a need for additional support. I hope this clarifies our actions and our commitment to deliver on that.