

## PE1683/O

Minister for Children and Young People submission of 18 December 2020

Thank you for your letter dated 1 December 2020, regarding petition PE1683: Support for families with multiple births. You have asked me to respond to the following:

- an update on what progress has been to work with Twins Trust to commission research in order to better understand the challenges facing families with multiples;
- your view on what support could be provided to mothers of multiples, who are unable to return to work following maternity leave when childcare costs for two, or more, children are prohibitive.

In response to the Committee's first point, I am happy to share that my officials have made contact with Twins Trust. Scottish Government officials from the appropriate policy areas have planned a meeting with Twins Trust on 21 January 2021 to discuss possible routes into developing research, with the aim of better meeting the needs of multiple birth families.

In response to the Committee's second point I have set out the current ELC entitlement below.

Both UK Government and the Scottish Government have a role in supporting families with childcare costs and providing access to high quality early and learning and childcare to all children in Scotland. This support comes through:

- **The benefits system** - for those receiving Universal Credit and Tax Credits, they can recover some childcare costs through their claims; and
- **Tax Free Childcare** – allows parents or carers to top up money they put aside for childcare costs.
- **Funded Early Learning and Childcare (ELC)** – for all children from age 3 and a targeted offer for 2 year olds who meet the eligibility criteria. This is a significant investment in children and families by the Scottish Government

**There are no plans to extend funded ELC for children under 3 who are part of a multiple birth, on the basis of this factor alone.** We understand there can be an impact on family circumstances as a result of a twin or multiple birth. Our targeted offer to eligible 2 year olds is based on evidence that suggests children experiencing the most disadvantage particularly benefit from access to high quality ELC. Eligibility criteria largely focus on qualifying low and no income benefits and care experience. We welcome suggestions and proposals to improve that targeting and will consider new evidence as it is published. Local authorities have discretion to provide funded ELC to any child they see fit. If families feel their children would benefit from early access to funded ELC, they can contact their local authority to discuss what is available locally.

We are committed to nearly doubling funded early learning and childcare hours. We know the pause in full implementation has an impact on families, and we are doing all we can to mitigate that impact. The closure of colleges and construction sites due to lockdown made it impossible to complete the building of nurseries and the recruitment of ELC staff in time for August this year. Having carefully considered the evidence together with local government colleagues, we are confident that all families will be able to access 1140 hours by August 2021, with around 80% of eligible children benefiting now from increased funded hours. Funded hours are worth between around £2,500 per child per year (for the current statutory 600 hours) up to £4,500 per child per year for the full 1140 hours.

## Grant Funding

I am happy to share with the Committee that the Twins Trust were awarded funding by the Scottish Government from Section 10 Improving Health and Wellbeing Grant Funding to provide services remotely to new and expectant families of multiples (twins, triplets and more) this financial year. The funding will enable and allow Twins Trust to continue to deliver their core work in Scotland supporting families of twins, triplets or more to continue to access the specific support and information they have previously provided in person, before COVID-19.

## Neonatal Expenses Fund

Recognising that twins and multiple births are more likely to require neonatal care, I can also provide the Committee with an update on changes to the Neonatal Expenses Fund. The Scottish Government implemented changes to the Neonatal Expenses Fund term and conditions from 1 April 2020, making it easier for families in need to access and benefit from the Fund. This has been welcomed by the neonatal community and we continue to work with Bliss, the charity for babies born sick or premature, to promote the fund and encourage uptake. Furthermore, we have relaxed the terms and conditions of Neonatal Expenses Fund (NEF) throughout the pandemic so that families who need to travel to care for their baby in neonatal care, can do so by taxi, preventing the need to access public travel in areas of high virus prevalence.

## Scottish Child Payment

The Committee may also wish to note that the Scottish Child Payment for under 6's opened for applications on Monday 9 November, our biggest benefit to date, and delivered to a timetable of under 18 months from announcement to delivery which is unprecedented in the UK, demonstrating the priority that the Scottish Government has put on tackling child poverty. It is the most ambitious anti-poverty measure currently being undertaken anywhere in the UK, with Scotland being the only place where this additional payment for families with young children will be available. Scottish Child Payment is the biggest benefit that we have introduced to date, and could support up to 194,000 children this financial year – an increase of 34,000 children since the pandemic began (Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts of February and September 2020).

**Scottish Child Payment will pay families £10 per week for every eligible child, with no limit on the number of children that can be claimed for.** Significantly more families are now relying on benefits due to the coronavirus pandemic – some perhaps for the first time – and this payment will help tackle child poverty head on. I am pleased to report that initial management information indicated, from Monday 9 to Sunday 6 December, over 48,000 applications for Scottish Child Payment were received. We committed to introduce this new benefit by the end of 2022 for children under 16 in June 2019 as part of the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan. This is subject to data on qualifying benefits being received from the DWP to allow us to make top-up payments.

## COVID Winter Hardship Payment

Further measures to reduce poverty and hardship have been provided to support households with children through the winter period we have announced a one-off COVID

Winter Hardship Payment worth £100 per child in receipt of Free School Meals on the basis of low income eligibility criteria. We anticipate that around 156,000 children and young people will benefit from this support and the previously announced continuation of Free School Meals over forthcoming holidays, inclusive of Easter 2021. **This additional support is available for each child in the household, with no limit on the number of children who can be supported.**

## **Maternity and Parental Leave**

I would also like to advise that Committee that Employment law, including the provision of maternity and parental leave and pay, is a matter reserved to the UK Government and as such the Scottish Government does not have the power to implement changes to provision. However, the Scottish Government supports a gender-balanced use of employee benefit and family-related leave.

In January 2020, the Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills wrote to the UK Government as a response to their 2019 Good Work Plan Consultation, Chapter 1 on Parental Leave and Pay, recommending an increase in maternity pay for all women workers over a 52 week period, and a review of eligibility for maternity allowance. The Minister also suggested an additional 12 weeks paid leave be available for fathers on a non-transferable 'use it or lose it' basis. This approach would help to promote paternal bonding with new children, encourage the uptake of parental leave by fathers, thereby supporting a more gender-balanced approach to such leave while protecting the 52 week maternity leave provision.

The UK Government responded in March to the [Neonatal Leave and Pay](#) section of the consultation, which may be of interest, but stated that their response to sections which focus on Parental leave and pay will be given in due course.

We established the [Pregnancy & Maternity Discrimination Working Group](#) in 2016, in response to research undertaken by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which highlighted the negative and discriminatory experiences women face during pregnancy and maternity. The group is chaired by the Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills and aims to increase positive experiences by sharing existing good practice, guidance and encouraging improved employment practices, communication and partnership working. Public, private, and third sectors are represented on the group. The group has completed its remit and the final group meeting will be held in January 2021.

I hope the Committee will find this information helpful.

Yours sincerely

**MAREE TODD**