



## Briefing for Scottish Government Debate:

# Progress on the Automation and Take-up of Scottish Social Security Benefits

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- **Data sharing is the key first step to automation of low-income Scottish Social Security benefits, and other low-income payments, such as those delivered by local authorities.**
- **Aligning the eligibility criteria for low-income benefits would make automation and promotion of take up easier.**
- **Universal payments have higher rates of take-up and have a vital role to play in tackling poverty.**

### **The importance of automation and take up**

Scottish social security benefits have a critical role to play in preventing child poverty and ensuring statutory child poverty targets are met. Investment in additional social security support for families, not least in the Scottish child payment, is hugely welcome. It is vital all eligible families are able to receive the social security support they are entitled to without any difficulty, stress or stigma. The need for multiple applications for support can act as a real barrier to take up. The commitment to automation of benefit delivery and to maximising take up is therefore very welcome.

### **The importance of data**

The ambitions of the Scottish government to automate payments to low-income households, whether delivered by Social Security Scotland or local authorities is very welcome.

Without access to data, it is impossible to automate payments, so data sharing is key to automation. Even if full automation of payments is not yet possible, data sharing can:

- Identify individual households that are entitled to, but not claiming, the low-income benefits they could be getting;
  - Identify groups that are less likely to claim the support, and can be used, with other evidence, to understand the barriers these groups face and how they can be overcome;
- and*

- Help make decisions about spending and resource allocation to target support at those families that are most in need of support.

Without sufficient data sharing arrangements in place, that address the legal and technical hurdles, the potential for increasing take-up of benefits and automation of payments is limited. Putting such arrangements in place should be a priority.

### **Take-up of Scottish child payment**

The Scottish government should utilise data sets to ensure every family in Scotland gets the help they need. We should be aiming for 100% take up of Scottish child payment and the other low-income benefits.

Local authorities have individual household level data on many low-income families and are already delivering supports to these families on behalf of the Scottish government. As a matter of urgency, processes should be put in place to ensure this data is shared with Social Security Scotland to allow these families to be invited to apply for Scottish child payment.

*Example – Local authorities have data on the families that are currently receiving a bridging payment - this individual level data should be shared with Social Security Scotland to allow 'invites to apply' to be sent to these families - most of whom will be entitled to Scottish child payment.*

Social Security Scotland have access to DWP and HMRC data to allow for the processing of Scottish child payment claims. They should also arrange access to data to allow them to identify families who are getting a qualifying benefit, yet not getting Scottish child payment, and invite these families to apply. This should be a rolling programme to ensure all families in receipt of a qualifying benefit in Scotland are invited to apply for Scottish child payment.

*Example - when Scottish child payment was introduced, invitations to apply were sent out to all families who were entitled. This should be done again when Scottish child payment is fully rolled out on 14th November, and periodically to those families who are entitled to Scottish child payment but not claiming it.*

Data sharing arrangements should work both ways and allow local authorities access to individual level data on which families are entitled to Scottish child payment. This will allow them to identify which families may be entitled to additional support such as school clothing grants. By cross referencing this data with their own data they can identify families that aren't getting a Scottish child payment who may be entitled to one.

All data sharing must be done in a way that protects individuals' privacy and is in line with data protection regulations.

### **Alignment of entitlements**

We welcome the commitment in Best Start, Bright Futures to bring entitlement of Best Start Foods in line with the entitlement criteria of Best Start Grants and Scottish child payment. This will make automation within Social Security Scotland easier.

Consideration should now be given to aligning the entitlement criteria for other payments. For example, entitlement of school clothing grants and free school meals could be aligned with the Scottish child payment. This will make automation easier, simplify take-up messaging and ensure more families receive the support they need.

## Universalism

We know that take up rates of universal payments such as child benefit, and other services such as school meals and childcare, are higher than a means-tested approach. A universal approach is less stigmatising, makes qualifying criteria easier to understand and applications are usually easier. As well as increased take-up, the universal approach has other advantages. Such an approach can increase public support, helps provide long term stability and can prevent, as well as alleviate, poverty. The Scottish government should consider the evidence for, for example, making Best Start grant payments universal.<sup>i</sup>

It is important the Scottish government considers the role of the universal approach beyond social security. For example, we need an immediate plan on how to roll out universal free school meals to all children and must consider the benefits of universal provision of childcare.

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<sup>i</sup> For example, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion research demonstrates a link between increased birth weight and universal pregnancy grants. The birthweight effects of universal child benefits in pregnancy: quasi-experimental evidence from England and Wales LSA, 2021