

The Rt Hon Thérèse Coffey MP  
Secretary of State  
Department for Work and Pensions  
Caxton House  
Tothill Street  
London  
SW1H 9NA

12 November 2020

**This letter is sent jointly from the Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People, the Welsh Government's Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government, and the Northern Ireland Executive's Minister for Communities.**

Dear Thérèse

The Covid-19 pandemic has reiterated the importance of a robust financial safety net for individuals and families. It is vital that we continue to focus on and invest in tried and tested approaches to tackling poverty using the levers available to all of us.

Given the acute financial pressures many households are likely to be experiencing as a result of the pandemic, all of our devolved administrations are focusing on things we can do now. We have all introduced packages of additional assistance and funding to support people through this difficult time.

Welsh Ministers have agreed a series of practical immediate steps in the [Child Poverty Income Maximisation Action Plan](#), outlining the actions that the Welsh Government will take over the coming months to help maximise the incomes of families living in poverty and support them to build their financial resilience.

The North of Ireland has a well established and excellent benefit take-up model, the aim of which is to ensure that every individual and household is receiving all the social security benefits and other supports and services to which they and their families are entitled. Since 2005, the benefit take-up initiative *Make the Call* has generated over £260 million in additional annual benefits for people there. The most recent results for 2019/20 show that the work undertaken has benefited just under 10,000 people who are now better off by an average of £88 per person per week.

To support those most affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Scottish Government has made £350m of additional funding available to support people with housing and access to food. £45m of this has gone towards increasing the Scottish Welfare Fund. Furthermore, a

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Coronavirus Carer's Allowance Supplement meant that eligible carers in Scotland received an additional one-off payment of £230.10 in recognition of the additional pressure on unpaid carers.

As you know, the Scottish Government published its first [Benefit Take-up Strategy](#) in October 2019. This delivers on the duty in the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 to do so, however, the Scottish Government has been clear that maximising benefit take-up is more than just a legal obligation – it is a moral one. Whilst no equivalent duty exists in UK legislation, we consider it imperative to make every effort to ensure individuals and families are aware of the support available to them. Since many devolved benefits and passported benefits rely on receipt of reserved forms of assistance, much devolved benefit take-up is constrained by the levels of take-up of DWP benefits.

With this in mind, we write to urge a more strategic approach to maximising take-up from your Department. In particular we would very much welcome a published awareness raising strategy/communications campaign. We would be happy to meet at a Ministerial or official level to discuss the interdependencies and practicalities of this, and to share learning from our respective extensive stakeholder engagement and our own work to promote take-up. Promoting the take-up of reserved benefits has been raised consistently by stakeholders – for example, Independent Age, who [recently called](#) for: 'an ambitious action plan detailing how [the UK government] will work to increase the uptake of Pension Credit over the next five years.'

Your officials [gave evidence](#) to the Scottish Parliament's Social Security Committee on 23 January, as part of that committee's inquiry into benefit take-up. During that session, Jeremy Balfour MSP (Con) asked whether your Department should be more proactive in using existing data to approach individuals claiming one benefit and make them aware of their possible eligibility for others. Your officials responded positively, and were clear that 'there is a general obligation on public bodies to inform people of their entitlements' – though they were unable to give any detail on the success of this within your Department due to what they described as a lack of systematic data collection and audit surrounding such processes. They agreed to take Mr Balfour's question away for further consideration.

We would be grateful if you were able to give an update on the progress of that consideration.

This is of interest to Ministers in all devolved administrations as we seek to ensure everyone who is eligible for financial support gets it. This is more important than ever as we face the economic impact of Covid-19 and we believe is also a moral duty to ensure citizens are fully supported.

As the reserved and devolved social security systems are inextricably linked, it would also be useful to know if any thought had been given to whether data might be collected systematically on the proactive signposting of clients, for example, by Work Coaches.

Finally, the Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People wrote to you on 27 October and the Welsh Government's Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government wrote to you on the 19 October urging you to retain the £20 uplift to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits. At this time of increased financial hardship and uncertainty, and in acknowledgement that many more people will need to rely on Universal Credit, people need to know that they can continue to rely on such support. To this end, we

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implore you again to make the uplift permanent, and to announce this without delay in order to avoid causing further anxiety.

Maximising the take-up of benefits is a fundamental priority for us all, and we have been grateful for the constructive engagement and co-operation around supporting devolved areas of responsibility shown by your officials. We hope that this can continue, and that a more considered and collaborative approach to maximising benefit take-up across the reserved *and* devolved benefits systems might be possible to help those who are most vulnerable now and going forward.

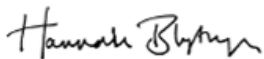
We look forward to hearing from you, and hope to be able to work with you to increase activity to maximise the take-up of benefits to which people are entitled.

Yours sincerely



**Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP**

Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People



**Hannah Blythyn AS/MS**

Y Dirprwy Weinidog Tai a Llywodraeth Leol  
Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government



**Carál Ní Chuilín MLA**

Minister for Communities

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