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Douglas Ross MSP  
Convener  
Education, Children and Young People Committee  
Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
EH99 1SP

29 April 2025

Dear Convener,

During my evidence session to discuss the Social Security Information-Sharing (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2025 on 2 April, I undertook to provide some additional information and updates on areas of work taking place across my portfolio and the wider Scottish Government.

### **Tackling Stigma Associated with Free School Meals**

The Committee raised the issue of stigmatisation of young people who may be eligible for free school meals through the latest phase of the programme. As mentioned in the evidence session, section 53B of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 provides for the protection of the identity of pupils who receive free school lunches. This means that education authorities must take reasonable steps to ensure that the identity of those who are receiving free school meals is not revealed, other than to people who need to know in order to provide meals to them.

Local authorities have undertaken a variety of steps to address these concerns. The roll out of contactless prepaid payment systems across the school estate in Scotland and the provision of training to catering staff which makes them aware of the duties upon them to both help to protect those eligible for Free School Meals.

### **Social Security Scotland – Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)**

As my officials mentioned at the evidence session, when we considered the appropriate impact assessments for the Social Security Information-Sharing (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2025, we recognised that an operational DPIA is required to support the data sharing between Social Security Scotland and local authorities. It is worth noting that the DPIA is not required for the Regulations but for the resulting data share. Social Security Scotland (SSS) is working to complete the work on the DPIA which will support the data share, if approved, allowing SSS to share data twice yearly.

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Social Security Scotland's development of the DPIA is progressing well. While no concerns have been raised about the practicalities of implementing the data share, there is some variation in terms of Local Authorities' requirements, therefore the DPIA is fairly complex.

Beyond social security data sharing for the purposes of the 2025 Order discussed at the Committee meeting, the Scottish Government is interested in widening access to data which can benefit those who may be eligible for support. To support this work Social Security Scotland are planning a Data Sharing Roundtable, which will take place in the coming weeks, with senior officials from the Scottish Government and wider stakeholders. The Roundtable will consider barriers to sharing data and possible solutions, focusing on wider benefits to Scottish citizens. Social Security Scotland plan to discuss consideration of extending their legislative powers in terms of data sharing to ensure that they can contribute as fully as possible to the delivery of key objectives in our Programme for Government, and more widely. As I mentioned in the evidence session, any learning from the development and implementation of the Social Security Information-Sharing (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2025 will be taken into account in this discussion.

### **Free School Meals Programme - Test of Change**

I also undertook to update the Committee on progress with the Test of Change phase of the Free School Meals Programme, which will support those in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment in S1 to 3. It is expected that the Test of Change will run for a school year starting from August 2025 until July 2026 and will be carried out in secondary schools that currently have capacity to deliver the expansion with support for provision of meals within 8 local authorities. Participants will represent a variety of geographical areas; urban, semi-urban, rural and islands.

My officials wrote to all local authorities on 11 March to seek partners who will be in a position to deliver provision from August 2025. I am pleased to acknowledge interest from 17 local authorities who wish to partner with the Scottish Government to deliver this important support to those in most need. We are currently considering these notes of interest, and I will write again with an update once the outcome is known.

### **University of Dundee**

The Committee will be aware that The Courier published a clarification on 3 April 2025 regarding the story referenced by the Committee, as follows: *"Our April 2 headline stated that government finance chiefs 'cut' university funding by £5m. In fact, the full amount requested by Dundee University was ultimately made available. The story explained that an earlier draft offer, agreed for announcement on February 25, had been reduced. We apologise for the inaccurate use of the word 'cut'."* Notwithstanding this clarification, I am happy to provide some further context on this matter as follows:

On 25 February, the Scottish Government announced £15 million of funding made to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to support the sector and universities such as the University of Dundee. This was six days after the initial request for additional financial support was made by the SFC on 19 February to Ministers.

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During internal budget negotiations there are often changes to budget figures dependent on levels of spend in year across portfolios. In reaching the £15 million figure, the government engaged with the SFC to establish both the funding levels required by the sector and the optimal balance of types of funding required, including at the University of Dundee. At that time £15 million was identified in financial transactions elsewhere within government budgets. Officials continued engaging with the SFC regarding the funding levels required to ensure these met the needs of the sector and to consider alternative means of funding support such as resource and capital.

Thereafter, on 14 March, I announced that a further £10 million of capital funding was available as a result of reprofiling of budgets within SFC, which was in addition to the £15 million already announced. Providing this financial support enabled the University of Dundee's request for £22 million of liquidity support to be met, with the SFC announcing that the support package had been approved on 20 March.

### **Edinburgh University**

In response to Miles Briggs' question concerning the current situation at Edinburgh University, I can confirm that there has not been a financial ask from the University. I can also confirm that the University Principal engaged with the SFC CEO in advance of the university's announcement of the need for £140 million of savings.

I, and my officials, will continue to regularly engage with the SFC to discuss and monitor the financial sustainability of institutions across the sector.

I trust that the Committee finds this update helpful.

**JENNY GILRUTH**

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