

F/T: 0300 244 4000
E: scottish.ministers@gov.scot

Collette Stevenson MSP
Convener
Social Justice and Social Security Committee

By email: sjss.committee@parliament.scot

8 June 2023

Dear Convener,

VoiceAbility – progress on independent advocacy services

Thank you for your letter of 27 April regarding the Social Security Independent Advocacy Service. Please accept my apologies for the delay in responding. Below I set out the answers to your questions.

Sole Provider

VoiceAbility were awarded the contract to be the national provider for the Independent Advocacy Service to provide free and independent advocacy to anyone identifying as disabled in Scotland who requires support to access and apply for Social Security Scotland assistance as outlined by Section 10 (2) of the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018.

The contract for delivery of this service was awarded in September 2021 after a regulated procurement exercise. This was the second procurement exercise for this contract after the initial exercise was postponed in March 2020 due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the intervening period, my officials engaged extensively with the advocacy sector through the Social Security Advocacy Service Short-Life Working Group – exploring the impact of the procurement model and the service on the sector, and putting mitigations in place. Members of this group included the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance (SIAA), the Health and Social Care Alliance (the ALLIANCE) and several independent advocacy providers. The decision to pursue a national provider contract model over a grant funding model was taken in line with guidance set out in the Scottish Public Finance Manual (SPFM). In acknowledgement of the impact that this could have for smaller advocacy providers wishing to tender for the contract, joint and consortium bids were encouraged.

Whilst VoiceAbility is the sole provider, people can choose to use any advocacy service available to them when engaging with Social Security Scotland. It may be, for example, that a person has a pre-existing relationship with an organisation providing advocacy services, and feels more comfortable continuing to draw on this support. The Social Security

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Independent Advocacy Service therefore supplements rather than replaces existing provision and anyone making use of another advocacy provider will not be at any disadvantage.

Review

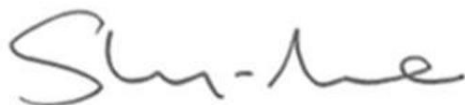
An evaluation of the service is underway, and this will consider both key performance indicators and wider quantitative and qualitative measures of success. This exercise will inform the design of the service as we move beyond the initial four year contract period. As this was a new and novel service when it was launched, there was no baseline data to fully inform the procurement process and service design – this is no longer the case, and we expect to be in a stronger position when we next go through procurement.

Client Journey

With regard to monitoring and evaluation, VoiceAbility submit a quarterly report which provides an update on performance against a number of metrics. There are also several KPI's contained within the current contract that focus on the client journey, and these have been met by VoiceAbility consistently since the service launched. VoiceAbility are also required to issue client satisfaction surveys to every individual within two days of their service requirements ending. The service has received over 1400 referrals to date, and all surveys returned have been positive. To date there have been no official complaints relating to the service. As referral rates continue to rise, we will review how we monitor clients' journeys and take any necessary action to ensure continuous improvement.

I hope this information provides some clarity and helps inform the Committee's scrutiny of VoiceAbility and the Social Security Independent Advocacy Service.

Yours sincerely,



SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE

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St Andrew's House, Regent Road, Edinburgh EH1 3DG
www.gov.scot

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