



Social Justice and Social Security Committee
Thursday 11 December 2025
33rd Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

Advocacy Services

The Committee will hear from:

- Andrew Bartlett, CEO, Advice Direct Scotland

Introduction

This session will hear from Advice Direct Scotland, newly appointed contractor for the social security independent advocacy service. They take over from VoiceAbility who held the contract from 2022. This paper provides the legislative context and an overview of VoiceAbility and Advice Direct Scotland, before suggesting themes for discussion.

Background

Legislation

The [Social Security \(Scotland\) Act 2018](#) requires independent advocacy to be provided for disabled people for all devolved benefits – not just disability benefits.

The Act requires the service provider to comply with advocacy service standards, set in [regulations](#). The [advocacy service standards](#) set out requirements under the six principles of: definition, independence, person centred, accessible, trained and quality assurance. For example:

- Your advocacy worker will not provide advice.
- If the organisation provides a range of services, advocacy support will be delivered separately from these.
- Advocacy workers will meet you at a time and in a place which suits you and meets your needs.
- Advocacy services and workers will communicate using the methods and forms you need and prefer.
- Advocacy workers will have detailed knowledge of the Scottish social security system and advocacy services which can be provided.

The right to independent advocacy was not originally included in the Social Security Bill as introduced in 2017 but was added at Stage 2 following a recommendation from the then Social Security Committee in its Stage 1 report. This stated that:

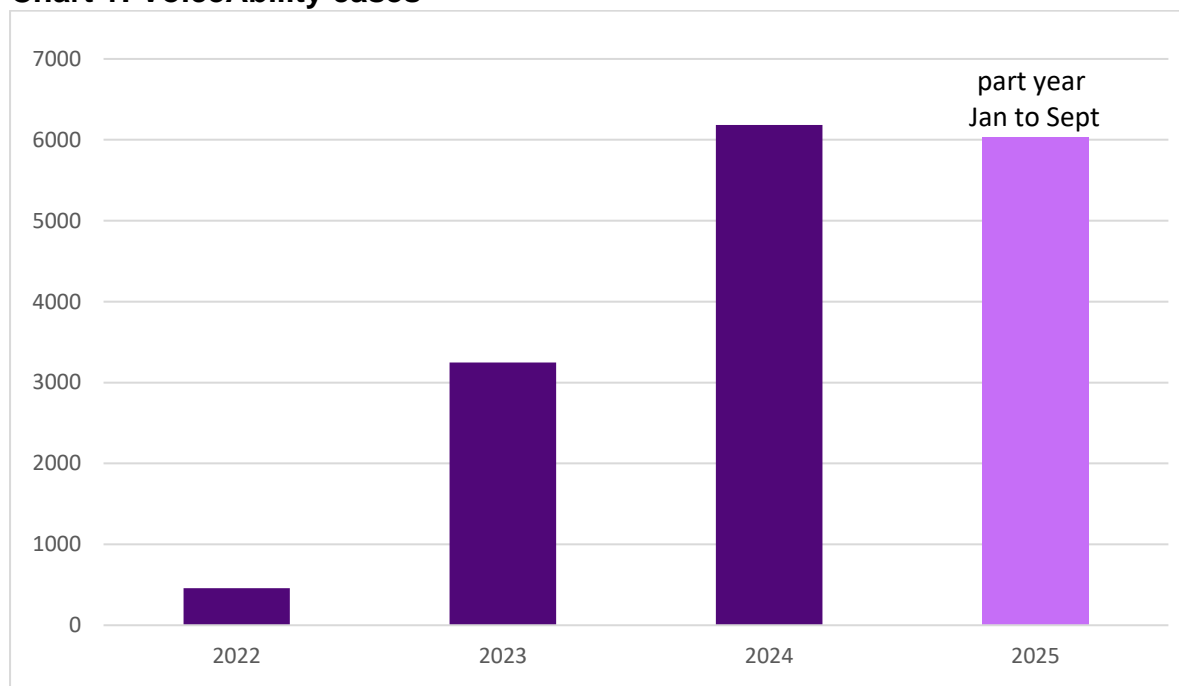
“The Committee supports the addition of a principle to the Bill to state that individuals will have the right to independent advocacy under and with regard to the Scottish social security system.” [Stage 1 report para 154](#)

VoiceAbility

VoiceAbility were awarded the first contract to provide advocacy services. Their contract of £20.4m ran from 31 January 2022 and is due to end on 30 January 2026. Its most recent quarterly report noted that from the start of the contract to end of September 2025 the organisation had dealt with 15,262 cases.

After a slow start, VoiceAbility’s service increased over the contract period. The chart below shows data for 2022 to 2025 (2025 is up to end of September only). A theme throughout their reports was difficulty in getting referrals from Social Security Scotland, although this did improve over time. In the last quarterly report available (July to September 2025), they received 399 referrals from the agency.

Chart 1: VoiceAbility cases



Source: [VoiceAbility quarterly reports, FOI](#), Committee Correspondence November 2025. Chart shows calendar years.

For some quarters VoiceAbility provided a breakdown of types of case. For example, in the quarter from April to June 2025, VoiceAbility received 1,828 cases, of which:

- 1,057 concerned the initial application

- 376 concerned redeterminations
- 256 concerned change of circumstance/determination
- 127 concerned appeals to the 1st Tier Tribunal
- 11 concerned appeals to the Upper Tribunal.

(See Members' Bulletin, circulated 6 November).

In the quarter from July to September 2025, VoiceAbility received 2,194 cases.

Staffing

[Writing to the Committee in March 2024](#), VoiceAbility noted that:

“VoiceAbility has grown over the past two years from 16 to 41 advocates delivering across Scotland. We have nine volunteers, some of whom are about to finalise their volunteer training, who support advocacy partners with light-touch advocacy and community engagement work.”

By quarter 2 of 2025, VoiceAbility had 58 staff made up of:

- 1 operations manager
- 1 contract manager
- 4 team leaders
- 48 advocates.
- 4 referral/information advocates who reside in Scotland

Advice Direct Scotland

The new [contract has been awarded to Advice Direct Scotland \(ADS\), with an annual value of £3.2m \(excl. VAT\)](#). The contract [will run from 31 January 2026 to 30 January 2028, with the option of two one-year extensions up to January 2030](#).

Their 2023-24 annual report describes their work:

“Advice Direct Scotland is a registered charity, based in Glasgow, which runs Scotland’s largest independent national digital advice service. We provide free, practical, and impartial advice to any resident of Scotland on a wide range of issues including money & debt, energy bills, welfare, benefits and consumer rights” (annual report 2023-24)

ADS provide online advice through several distinct ‘brands’ including:

- [Consumeradvice.scot](#)
- [Moneyadvice.scot](#) – debt advice
- [Energy advice.scot](#)
- [Advice.scot](#) – benefits, employment, housing, neighbourhood issues, family and relationships.

- [Postaladvice](#) – advice and information on Royal Mail

Their other work includes:

- Administering the £4m fund for public and third sector bodies to pilot the '[Ask and Act](#)' duty on preventing homelessness.
- [Social enterprise direct](#) – the trading arm of Advice Direct Scotland, providing training and business services.
- [Academy.scot](#) – providing training for third sector organisations.

Their '[service plan](#)' shows that their resources are focused consumer advice (250 users per day), benefits advice (advice.scot 250 users per day) and energy advice (120 users per day).

The charity's income grew rapidly from £3m in 2021 to £13m by 2023-24 ([OSCR](#)). Much of this increased income was re-distributed as grants as they administered the £9m Home Heating Support Fund in 2023-24. This was part of the Fuel Insecurity Fund which closed in 2024. [The 2024-25 accounts](#) reflect this and other grant changes in a much reduced income of £2.8m. Their charitable income is heavily reliant on the Scottish Government, and includes the following:

Table 1: ADS charitable income, 2024-25 and 2023-24

	March 2025	March 2024
Scottish Government	590,000	550,000
Money Mentors	-	1,950
SG consumer	900,000	900,000
SG energy	565,100	462,513
SG debt	590,000	550,000
Home heating	-	792,137
Workplace equality fund	-	636,396
Consumer Scotland	117,250	-
Home heating	-	8,186,191
Trader integration	-	45,000
Dalry fund	-	264,400
HMRC taxation helpline	5,560	345,000
Total	2,767,910	12,733,587

Source: [ADS Annual Accounts 2024-25](#)

Suggested themes for discussion

Delivering advocacy

Advice Direct Scotland currently operates across a range of subject areas – such as consumer rights, energy and social security. It does not currently have an advocacy project.

The Social Security (Scotland) Act 2019 defines advocacy services as:

“services of support and representation that are made available for the purpose of enabling an individual to whom they are provided to have as much control of, or capacity to influence, the decisions that determine the individual's entitlement to be given assistance through the Scottish social security system as is, in the circumstances, appropriate”

The [statutory service standards](#) include that:

- Your advocacy worker will not provide advice,
- If the organisation provides a range of services, advocacy support will be delivered separately from these.

The VoiceAbility contract was [£20.4m over four years](#). The new contract has an annual [value of £3.2m](#) (excluding VAT). This would be £15.4m over four years including VAT.

Members may wish to discuss:

- 1. What experience does Advice Direct Scotland have in providing advocacy services? How will you adapt your ways of working in order to deliver an advocacy service?**
- 2. The contract value is £3.2m. This is lower than the annual value of the VoiceAbility contract. How will you deliver an improved service, to more people, for less money?**

Providing advocacy in person

The statutory service standards give the client the choice about whether to meet in person, online or over the phone:

Advocacy workers will meet you at a time and in a place which suits you and meets your needs. This location should be safe for both you and your advocacy worker so you can discuss sensitive and personal matters.

Advocacy services will provide support if you contact them personally or if you are referred by someone else. This can be done in writing, by phone, in person or by other ways of communicating depending on your needs.

VoiceAbility used local 'hubs' to provide a 'drop-in' service and engaged with a wide range of partners to get referrals to the service. In their 2023-24 quarter 4 report, VoiceAbility stated that 46% of their cases were in person and 54% remote.

Advice Direct Scotland provides its current services online. It is [currently recruiting for 'in-person' advocacy workers](#) who will:

“meet clients face-to-face in community settings, at offices, and sometimes in their own homes. You will provide one-to-one advocacy to help people prepare for and take part in benefit applications, redeterminations, and appeals.”

Members may wish to discuss:

- 3. Advice Direct Scotland is a digital organisation. How will you deliver advocacy 'face to face' in local communities and in peoples' homes? Will you have staff available in every local authority?**
- 4. How will you work with partners in local communities to promote and deliver 'in person' advocacy?**

Recruitment, project set up and transition period

The contract was awarded in November, with a start date of 31 January 2026 allowing for, as a [letter in August from the Cabinet Secretary](#) noted:

“a three month implementation period for the successful tenderer.”

[Recruitment for advocacy workers is underway](#). Adverts state that full training will be provided. One of the six principles in the statutory service standards is training. This includes:

- Advocacy workers will have detailed knowledge of the Scottish social security system and advocacy services which can be provided.
- Advocacy workers will understand your rights, needs and any barriers you face.
- Advocacy workers will be able to meet your rights and needs including any communication and capacity needs.
- Advocacy workers will be trained and continue to develop their knowledge, skills and experience.
- Advocacy workers will get regular support and supervision.

Members may wish to discuss:

- 5. Can you explain your approach to the transition period? How are you working with VoiceAbility Scotland and the Scottish Government to ensure a smooth transition in service delivery?**

6. Do you expect your advocacy service to be at full strength when the contract starts on 31 January? What progress have you made so far in staff recruitment and training?

Delivering at scale

Social Security Scotland is delivering at a far larger scale now than when advocacy was first provided in January 2022. This suggests a far higher likely level of demand, particularly as numbers of redeterminations and appeals increase.

The table below illustrates how the number of Social Security Scotland clients has grown since 2022. Next year, with case transfer complete, almost all devolved benefit clients will be clients of Social Security Scotland. Its forecast that there will be around 900,000 people getting disability benefits from Social Security Scotland next year. This compares to around 100,000 in 2022-23. At that time most devolved benefits were still being administered by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Table 2: Estimated Social Security Scotland clients, 2022 and 2026.

Payments, thousands	2022-23	2026-27
Adult Disability Payment	39	571
Child Disability Payment	63	109
Pension Age Disability Payment	0	173
Scottish Adult Disability Living Allowance	0	58
Total disability benefits	102	911
Carer Support Payment	0	112
Best Start Foods	41	50
Best Start Grant	66	56
Child Winter Heating Payment	27	47
Funeral Support Payment	6	6
Pension Age Winter Heating Payment	0	819
Scottish Child Payment	289	333
Winter Heating Payment	0	485

Source: Scottish Fiscal Commission Forecasts [May 2025](#), [December 2023](#). Social Security Scotland CDP statistics, ADP statistics.

One recurring theme for VoiceAbility has been difficulty getting referrals from Social Security Scotland. It had been anticipated that this would be a significant source of referrals, but, although referral levels improved over the course of the contract, most referrals came from other agencies and partners.

Members may wish to discuss:

7. Social Security Scotland is operating on a far larger scale now than when VoiceAbility started in January 2022. What level of demand are you anticipating for the project?
8. How will you work with Social Security Scotland and other partners to get referrals for the advocacy service?

9. On 27 November the Committee heard from Edel Harris, author of the Independent Review into Adult Disability Payment that there was very low awareness of the advocacy service. How will Advice Direct Scotland change this?

Monitoring and evaluation

The service standards include:

“Advocacy services will carry out self-evaluations and provide service updates, including complaints, to funding bodies as part of routine reporting.”

VoiceAbility shared several of its’ quarterly monitoring reports with this Committee.

The [letter from the Cabinet Secretary in August](#) set out the plans for monitoring and evaluation of the new contract:

“An independent evaluation will be undertaken during the lifetime of the next contract to show to what extent the service is achieving the outcomes required and whether service standards are being fully met. For every year of the new contract, the successful tenderer will be required to produce publicly available annual reports to demonstrate the advocacy service’s impact.”

Members may wish to discuss:

10. Successful evaluation is built in at the start of a project. What arrangements are being put in place now to ensure successful evaluation?

**Camilla Kidner,
Senior Researcher,
SPICe**

Date: 27 November 2025

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