

Coronavirus halts benefits transfer

1 Apr 2020



The Scottish Government has requested a delay to the transfer of new benefits powers to Holyrood following the coronavirus pandemic.

Social security secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville confirmed today that the UK Government had agreed to continue paying disability benefits including Child Disability Payment and Personal Independence Payment, a scheme the SNP government wanted to replace.

She told MSPs: "I had anticipated laying out my plans for launching Scottish disability benefits this week.

"Work had been continuing at pace and I planned to lay out plans for rolling out Child Disability Payment and the Scottish replacement for Personal Independence Payment to the previously agreed timescales alongside, importantly, our plans for a new method of decision making which would in effect end face-to-face assessments.

"Those timescales are clearly no longer possible."

And she added: "I have therefore spoken to UK ministers and we have agreed they will continue delivering disability benefits for existing and new Scottish clients over a longer transition period."

Shadow social security secretary Graham Simpson said the delays were understandable given the challenges presented by Covid-19, but noted that the SNP government had been struggling to meet these deadlines in any case.

Scottish Conservative shadow social security secretary Graham Simpson said:

"It's disappointing to see the roll-out of future benefits delayed, but in the circumstances we understand the reasons.

"The secure transfer of these powers has to be the absolute priority.

"Moving over powers that the Scottish Government isn't ready for would only hurt the most vulnerable in society.

"Fortunately, the UK Government has been flexible on this, and that again underlines the importance of both of Scotland's governments working together closely.

"There were already question marks about whether these benefits would be delivered on time by the SNP government, but this crisis takes that particular challenge out of their hands for the time being."

Scottish Conservatives to support bulk of emergency legislation

31 Mar 2020



The Scottish Conservatives will support the majority of proposals tabled tomorrow as part of Holyrood's emergency response to the coronavirus.

However, amendments will be sought on plans to change Freedom of Information laws and to scrap jury trials.

The party said the SNP government's bid to extend the length of time public bodies are allowed to respond to FoI requests should be restricted to health boards and local authorities only.

And MSP Murdo Fraser said alternatives could also be looked at to avoid the complete shutdown of jury trials.

He added that the bill could be scrutinised by a body made up of the Scottish Parliament's party leaders, which should ensure new powers under the bill are properly reviewed and checked regularly.

Scottish Conservative MSP Murdo Fraser said:

"These are extraordinary times and, as such, call for extraordinary measures.

"We are supportive of the majority of the Scottish Government's proposals, and understand the motivation behind them.

"There are some amendments we would like to make, such as removing the proposal to end jury trials.

"Trial by jury for serious criminal cases has been part of the Scottish justice system for hundreds of years.

"It is an important safeguard of human rights which we would be most reluctant to see removed.

"We believe there are ways to work around that particular problem without ending trial by jury altogether.

"And we think the FoI extensions should be granted to the NHS and councils only – we don't agree there's an overall justification for the Scottish Government itself to be afforded this change.

"These measures have to come in fast but, like all legislation, must be

scrutinised too.

“That’s why we want to see a special ‘super-committee’ – perhaps made up of party leaders – who could provide that scrutiny in the most urgent way possible.”

Indefinite delay on childcare expansion ‘not unexpected’

31 Mar 2020



The Scottish Conservatives have called the SNP’s removal of the August 2020 deadline for local authorities to provide 1140 free hours of childcare “extremely disappointing but not unexpected”.

The Scottish government has, last night, announced their decision to indefinitely delay the expansion of free childcare to 1140 hours as Covid-19 has “made it impossible” to recruit staff or finish the required infrastructure projects.

This announcement comes less than a month after Audit Scotland warned that hitting the August deadline was already in jeopardy due to slow progress on the infrastructure required to fulfil the commitment, namely shortages of buildings and staffing levels.

Audit Scotland said around half the extra staff needed by the autumn had yet to be recruited and three-quarters of the extra building work was still incomplete. They suggested that delivering on both elements by August this year would, under any circumstances, be extremely difficult.

In addition, the Scottish government was defeated in the Scottish Parliament by a Scottish Conservative led debate forcing them to urgently address the concerns of the Audit Scotland report.

Jamie Greene, Scottish Conservative shadow education secretary said:

“This is extremely disappointing but not entirely unexpected news – prior to the Covid-19 outbreak Audit Scotland had warned that the Scottish government would struggle to meet this deadline.

“Parliament reaffirmed these concerns in a cross party debate which forced the government to concede that August 2020 was always going to be difficult due to slow progress, long before the current crisis outbreak.

“Of course we should focus on the immediate task in hand of supporting key

workers with childcare during this critical period, but the Scottish government must do what it can to support the very survival of the childcare and nursery sector in the long term.

“The Scottish Government has explained the reasons for axing the 1140 commitment is its inability to recruit staff and complete infrastructure projects – the two risks Audit Scotland identified earlier this month.

“Whilst we are all currently dealing with the immediate threat of this virus, as soon as practical, the Scottish government must make good on their original promise of 1140 hours of free childcare which many parents will desperately be relying on in future.”

[Sturgeon should think twice before readmitting Salmond](#)

30 Mar 2020



Nicola Sturgeon has been urged to think carefully before allowing her predecessor Alex Salmond to relaunch his political ambitions within the SNP.

The former First Minister was cleared last week of a number of sexual assault charges.

However, questions about his conduct were raised throughout the trial, and charities including Rape Crisis Scotland were critical about how the events unfolded at the High Court in Edinburgh.

And at the weekend, his top defence lawyer Gordon Jackson was caught questioning his integrity during a train journey, in which he also named two of the accusers.

That followed criticism from defence witness Alex Bell, Salmond’s former advisor, who described him as a “creep” and that his defence was “nothing to smile about”.

It has been rumoured that Salmond now wants to be readmitted to the SNP, and even stand again for office at the 2021 Holyrood elections.

That bid has been backed by senior SNP figures, including former health secretary Alex Neil, who remains a prominent MSP.

However, given the numerous concerns raised about his behaviour, the Scottish Conservatives have urged the SNP’s leadership to block such a move.

Scottish Conservative deputy leader Annie Wells said:

“Alex Salmond may have been cleared in a court of law, but concerns remain about his conduct while he held the highest office in the land.

“Even his top defence lawyer and defence witness can’t seem to vouch for his character.

“It’s pretty obvious, now he’s brushed this off, the former First Minister wants to get himself back into politics and onto the front line.

“Nicola Sturgeon has a decision to make, and if she’s as serious about concerns raised by charities like Rape Crisis Scotland, she should think twice about who she allows back into the SNP.”

[Scots stand ready to help NHS volunteering scheme](#)

25 Mar 2020



Thousands of Scots stand ready to help an NHS volunteering scheme, and the SNP government should waste no time in setting one up, the Scottish Conservatives have said.

Yesterday, UK health secretary Matt Hancock announced an initiative which allows members of the public to help out hospitals and patients with a range of tasks.

However, the plan which will ease pressure on the NHS amid the coronavirus pandemic is only on offer in England.

Now shadow health secretary Miles Briggs has called on the Scottish Government to create a similar scheme north of the border.

The project means ordinary people – so long as they’re showing no signs of Covid-19 – can help with tasks like transporting medicine and equipment, and helping with deliveries for those who are self-isolating.

Scottish Conservative shadow health secretary Miles Briggs said:

“So far, both the Scottish and UK governments have worked really well together as we face this unprecedented crisis.

“Now this volunteering scheme has been set up for England, this would be another good way for both to collaborate.

“Thousands of Scots would have seen this announcement and immediately looked into it, only to find it was just those living south of the border who could get involved.

“Hopefully now the Scottish Government will follow suit and harness the amazing goodwill that is out there.

“Ordinary people are desperate to help out our amazing NHS at this crucial time.

“Scots help out fellow Scots when they are facing tough times. That’s just how Scotland works and that’s exactly what we are all going to have to do.”