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Dignity, fairness and respect in disability benefits

Opening speech by Minister for Social Security

Presiding Officer I am delighted to be here today, opening a debate for the first time as Scotland's first Social Security Minister.

I know this Chamber has already debated and discussed these new powers and I look forward to working with parliamentarians in the Chamber and in the new Committee. Our shared task is to lay the foundations of a social security system we can all be proud of.

Given that this is also my first speech in the Chamber, I hope you will permit me to make 3 brief points. The first is of course to thank the voters of Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley – where I was born and raised – for the trust they have placed in me. And the second is to pay rightful and due tribute to both Adam Ingram who served the constituency, the South of Scotland and this Parliament so well in the past 17 years and to Margaret Burgess and her role in particular in setting up the first social security powers of this Parliament. Their example of putting people first, of hard work and of total commitment to doing the best possible job is one I very much hope to emulate.

I am particularly pleased to have the opportunity to open this debate during Carers Week. I'm sure that we all recognise and value the immense contribution that carers make to our society. This morning I visited the 'Voice of Carers Across Lothian' - hearing first-hand about the important work that organisation does and importantly hearing direct from Carers themselves about the challenges they face. I was able to let them know of this Government's absolute commitment to make the best use we can of the new powers to recognise the contribution carers make to the quality of life of us all.

These new powers present us with an enormous opportunity to build a fairer society. An opportunity to take a different path to the UK Government, and to harness the powers to our values so we support people and tackle inequalities.

Presiding Officer, in 2012, the UK Government introduced its Welfare Reform Act. Julia Unwin, Chief Executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation speaking about it a year later said it is...

"A system that is loathed by those who depend upon it [and] criticised by those who understand it, and [with] a public media discourse that demonises poor people and equates poverty with wickedness or hopelessness".

Like many of you in this Chamber, I have heard from disabled people worried and distressed by the cuts being imposed, and by the way they are treated by the UK Government's welfare system. I have heard that the system that is supposed to help and support them is actually doing them harm. Delays and backlogs, lengthy, disjointed and complicated forms and process, inconsistency in assessment decisions. And driving all of that calculated, planned UK government cuts to a lifeline support needed by so many of our most vulnerable citizens. Cuts in the name of austerity to provide a so-called fix for an economic crisis they did not create - but for which they are now paying a terrible price.

UK government welfare spend is forecast to fall by 1.5% of GDP between 2015/16 and 20/2021 – to reach its lowest percentage level in 30 years. Systematic spending cuts in housing benefit, incapacity benefit, employment state pensions, and employment support allowance and the introduction of the benefit cap..

We do not have the powers to redress all of this unfairness. 85% of benefits will remain at Westminster. But we can and must do better with the new powers we will have.

With a fairer, more transparent approach to social security, we intend to rebuild the trust that has been eroded and build in equality, fairness and respect.

Social security is an investment to support people, enabling equality of opportunity and helping them realise their full potential - be that be in work, in volunteering, in education or in the many other contributions a person can make to their community and their family.

An investment in people and communities. There for any one of us – when we need it, and without blame or stigma.

This Government has already achieved a great deal with the powers we already have.

- We have protected and invested in the Independent Living Fund.
- In the Self-directed Support strategy and the legislation that underpins it, we have shown our commitment to enabling individuals, carers and their families to have flexibility, choice and control over the support services they receive.
- We have fully mitigated the effects of the "bedroom tax", providing over £35 million in Discretionary Housing Payments, protecting 72,000 households - 80% of which have a disabled adult - from the terrible anxiety that comes when you're told you need to pay more for your home because you have one bedroom too many.

But with more than half a million people in Scotland receiving carer and disability benefits, our new powers give us the opportunity to do more.

Presiding Officer I now want to outline to the Chamber the steps we are taking to build a fairer and more transparent approach to disability benefits, making real the principles of dignity and respect

principles of dignity and respect.

We have already committed to maintaining the level of disability benefits, and making sure they will not be means tested.

We have heard many, many times that the assessment process is not working. Just last year, this Parliament was told of some harrowing experiences of disabled people through the Welfare Reform Committee and I'd like to pay tribute to the work of that Committee for the invaluable evidence and insight they provided over the past few years. A process unable or unwilling to understand and take account of fluctuating conditions. When a person can have 'good days' and 'bad days'. A process in a system that as one woman, who some days can't walk or brush her teeth, said makes her feel 'like a nuisance' and 'a fraud'. How utterly appalling that we live with a UK Government system that makes someone feel like that.

So, we will reform the assessment procedures to ensure they work for the people claiming disability benefits.

The process of applying for, and receiving, benefits should be easy for everyone to understand, and people should be supported through the process.

We will set clear time frames for assessments, decisions and appeals.

We will ensure information is accessible for those who need it.

If someone has an existing long-term condition that is unlikely to change, they should not be repeatedly reassessed.

So we will stop the revolving door of assessments for those with long-term illnesses, disabilities or conditions and introduce longer-term awards - based on individual circumstances and needs.

And to provide more certainty, and reduce stress to thousands of families, whilst the transfer of benefits takes place, any child in receipt of disability living allowance will continue to receive that award to the age 18 if they so wish.

And we will do more.

We will build into our system a consistent, systemic approach that treats every single person with compassion, with dignity, with fairness and with respect. Nothing less will be tolerated.

Presiding Officer, Research by 'Contact a Family' has shown that higher heating and utility bills are the top extra costs for families with disabled children. In 2014, an estimated 34% of families with disabled children were going without heating.

Now that is simply unacceptable. No parent should be forced into making a choice about whether or not to heat their home.

That is why we will extend eligibility for Winter Fuel Payment to families with children in receipt of the highest care component of the disability living allowance.

Presiding Officer, I mentioned earlier the immense contribution that Scotland's carers make. There are around 745,000 unpaid adult carers and 44,000 young carers in Scotland.

And, they save the Scottish public purse over £10.3 billion a year.

Carers are motivated by love and compassion and for many, caring is a rewarding and positive experience.

But that doesn't mean it can't also have a negative impact on a carer's physical and mental wellbeing, and their financial security.

Some carers are forced into difficult choices between work and caring. Between studying and caring.

Others take lower paid or less skilled jobs to fit in with their caring duties.

And there are fewer opportunities for carers to do the simple things we take for granted - meeting friends, going to the cinema or taking exercise.

That is why it is crucial that we, together with the public, the third sector, and our other partners, support carers to have a life alongside caring.

It is unfair that support in the form of Carer's Allowance is the lowest of all working age benefits.

That is why we have committed to increasing it to the level of the Jobseeker's Allowance - an additional £600 a year, an approximate 18% increase. And we have won the argument with the UK Government to make sure that any carer who is in receipt of another low income benefit - like Income Support - will remain entitled to that benefit as well.

On May 25th the First Minister announced in her speech outlining the priorities for this government that we will ask our Carer Advisory Groups for their views on how we might make progress on a Young Carer's Allowance, to provide extra support for young people with significant caring responsibilities. This suggestion came from the Green Party and I am delighted that we can show in practice our commitment as a Government to listen and act on good ideas - wherever they come from. I know that the Greens wanted to amend our motion calling on us to consider this issue, and I would have welcomed that amendment, as I welcome the idea.

The devolution of social security powers and how we use them, is one of most complex tasks undertaken since the Scottish Parliament was established. It is a huge challenge and one that cannot be underestimated.

It involves delivering a range of, sometimes complex, benefits worth around £2.7 billion.

So our first priority is ensuring a smooth transition for people receiving benefits, particularly disabled people and their carers.

I am confident that, with shared effort, delivering these benefits safely and securely is a challenge we can meet.

But an undertaking of this scale will take time to get right - not only in its technicalities but in the approach we take to translate our founding principles into attitudes and behaviours which exemplify fairness, dignity and respect.

As we progress over the next few years, we will engage in extensive consultation with the Parliament, with our partners and importantly - with our communities and the people who have direct experience of the benefits to be devolved - to ensure we make the most of this opportunity to create a fair social security system in Scotland.

And we will continue working with representative groups, with disabled people and their carers so that their needs and aspirations are properly reflected.

Presiding Officer, we have a huge opportunity to do things differently in Scotland.

With that opportunity comes responsibility to make sure that what we deliver in Scotland plays its part in tackling inequality and making life fairer for the people who claim disability benefits, their carers and their families.

Together we can build a stronger Scotland where every person has the opportunity to achieve their potential, now and in future generations.

I am pleased to move this motion in the Cabinet Secretary's name.

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