



## **Meeting of the Poverty and Inequality Commission**

**Monday 18 December 2023**

**10:00 – 12:30 pm**

**Virtual meeting - Microsoft Teams**

### **Commission attendees**

Professor Stephen Sinclair

Katie Schmuecker

Alex Cobham

Yvonne Blake

Professor Suzanne Fitzpatrick

Tressa Burke

### **Secretariat attendees**

Katherine Hudson, Secretariat Manager

Rory Morrison, Analytical Manager

Órlaith McAree, Senior Participation Officer

Michele Barr, Secretariat Administrator

### **1. Welcome and apologies**

Stephen welcomed everyone to the meeting.

### **2. Update from Chair and Commissioners on any recent relevant engagements or events**

Stephen provided an update on the Scottish Government pre-budget meeting with the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice he attended on the 21 November. Stephen has written a brief note of the meeting and will share this with Commissioners. Stephen also updated that he had met with the Scottish Government Economic Advisers in a further pre-budget meeting and the secretariat will circulate the presentation from this.

The Commission agreed to do an initial response to the Scottish Government draft budget 2024-25 to share on social media on Tuesday, with a more considered response to come in the new year. The considered response will be based on the draft tax letter to Scottish Government. Stephen asked Commissioners to come back with any wider comments on the budget and general direction that they would want included in the letter. Rory will email Commissioners and make them aware they can provide wider comments by early January 2024. Katie suggested an op-ed from the Chair in the new year.

Stephen Sinclair introduced the item on the Review being carried out by Scottish Government on the Commissioners resignations, which was referenced a recent

Daily Record article, and asked Katherine Hudson provide a brief update about the Review. The Review is being undertaken by Scottish Government and is looking at the circumstances that led to the resignation of the Chair and three Commissioners to determine what action, if any, might have resulted in more positive outcomes. A senior Scottish Government official independent of the sponsor team has interviewed the Chair and Commissioners who have resigned, the remaining Commissioners, the secretariat, the sponsor team and the Office of the Chief Social Policy Adviser.

A report will go to the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and the Scottish Government will consider whether there are any changes to policies or procedures that can be made. The review report is expected to be published sometime in the new year. The Secretariat will update the Commission when they have an idea of timescale for when the report is likely to be shared with the Commission and when it is likely to be published.

### **3. Commission work programme**

Stephen Sinclair invited Commissioners to comment on the Commission work programme. Commissioners discussed the work programme and provide comments.

- Commissioners agreed not to go ahead with the employability research. Tressa Burke mentioned the value of research on income maximisation and employability and disabled people. Stephen noted that the Commission couldn't do separate pieces of work on these but could look at income maximisation as part of the review of recommendations and look at accessibility more broadly as a theme.
- It was agreed to spend the research budget on workshops and engagement activity to support the child poverty scrutiny. Suzanne Fitzpatrick suggested calling the research budget a consultation budget as this might better reflect the kind of work that could be undertaken using the budget.
- Two options were identified for the public meeting, either an online meeting in the first part of the year, or a hybrid meeting later in the summer. Tressa Burke offered GDA's expertise in running hybrid meetings. Stephen Sinclair and secretariat to consider the two options in the context of the other work that is happening. Katherine Hudson will put together a draft proposal for the Annual Public Meeting which will be circulated to Commissioners.

### **4. Whistleblowing policy**

Katherine Hudson introduced the Whistleblowing policy. The Commission is required to have a Whistleblowing Policy in place. The policy only applies to the Commissioners and Chair, as Secretariat staff are employed by Scottish Government and covered by the Civil Service Code and the Scottish Government Whistleblowing Policy.

The policy has been drafted by the secretariat and commented on and approved by Scottish Government. The Commissioners were content to agree and publish the Whistleblowing policy.

## **5. Approach to child poverty scrutiny**

Stephen Sinclair noted that the secretariat had provided options on the approach to child poverty scrutiny which Katherine Hudson spoke through. The Commissioners discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the options.

The Commission agreed to go ahead with Option 1, a broad look at how well the actions in *Best Start, Bright Futures* are targeted at and meet the needs of the priority families but with a more in-depth focus on one or two of the priority groups if possible. As discussed under item 3, the Commission agreed to spend its research budget on workshops and engagement activity to support the child poverty scrutiny. The workshops will be with all of the priority family groups, but could be weighted towards some of the priority groups.

Commissioners requested that the secretariat provide data looking at both the poverty rates for the priority groups, but also the proportions of those in poverty they make up, along with data on the depth of poverty/poverty gap. This would allow the Commission to select which groups to focus on.

## **6. Social Security Bill and Pension Age Winter Heating Payment consultation responses**

Rory Morrison provided an update on the paper circulated on the Commission's approach to the two consultations.

### **Social Security Bill consultation**

- The Commission agreed to respond on the Scottish Child Payment component of the consultation. Tressa Burke raised the issue of concern about potential regression on the social security principles, particularly in relation to compensation recovery that could be looked at further.

### **Pension Age Winter Heating payment**

- Suzanne Fitzpatrick raised the issue of this being poorly targeted and whether the Commission should be commenting on this. Stephen asked if Suzanne would take this up on behalf of the Commission and provide a suggestion to the secretariat to inform their drafting of a response.
- There was also a broader discussion about the Commission's approach to consultations. As the Commission does not have the resources to respond to every consultation that might be relevant, the Chair and secretariat will consider consultations and only circulate those where they think the Commission may want to respond. Commissioners should also send any consultations they think might be relevant to the Chair and the secretariat.

## **7. Risk Register and Budget**

The Commissioners discussed the Risk Register and Budget which are reviewed at every second Commission meeting and agreed the following points:

- It was agreed that the Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland would be invited to a future Commission meeting.
- The Commission agreed in principle to having one or more deputy chairs. Yvonne Blake volunteered to be a deputy chair. Stephen Sinclair said he would seek a further deputy to share the role by email.
- Commissioners were asked to come back with comments on the new risks and whether more is needed to reflect the risks of internal disharmony within the Commission undermining the Commission’s work, or the perception of its work.
- Wording on risk 15 to be changed from ‘only works’ to ‘work only’

## **8. AOB**

- The next Commission meeting will be on 1 February 2024.
- Órlaith McAree provided a brief update on the recruitment process of the new Expert by Experience panel which is expected to be established by late February 2024.
- Yvonne Blake enquired what the next steps were for the Commission Annual Public Meeting. The secretariat will take all the points from the Commissioners on the Annual Public Meeting into consideration and will get back with a proposal to Commissioners.