

Review of the Scottish Welfare Fund Update

Summary and Recommendations

This report provides the Board with an update on the Review of the Scottish Welfare Fund, (SWF) being commissioned by the Scottish Government. It sets out what is currently known about the approach being taken by its Social Security Directorate, (SSD) in establishing the key objectives and design of the review and provides members with the review's terms of reference, (**see appendices**).

The report also notifies the Board of: COSLA's invitation to join the SWF Review Advisory Group; what is currently known about SSD's plans for engaging with stakeholders; obtaining expert advice and policy perspectives; and its plans to appoint an independent research organisation to undertake the year-long review.

This paper invites the Community Wellbeing Board to:

- i. Note the previously agreed position that COSLA engages constructively in the review of the Scottish Welfare Fund and positions itself to influence the scope and approach taken.
- ii. Seek to amend the framing documents so that a purpose of the review will be to advise ministers and Local Government's political leadership.
- iii. confirm that COSLA should seek wider membership of the SWF Review Advisory Group to include representation from COSLA's Local Government Finance Team, as well as a representative from either SOLACE or Directors of Finance.
- iv. confirm that COSLA should continue to press for a full review of funding, particularly as it relates to administrative funding.
- v. note that any discussion around distribution will follow COSLA's financial governance principles and processes, with any decisions to be brought back to COSLA Leaders.

References

Previous reports on [topic]:

- Community Wellbeing Board – 17 September 2021
- Community Wellbeing Board – 5 March 2021
- Community Wellbeing Board – November 2020
- Community Wellbeing Board – September 2020
- Community Wellbeing Board – January 2020
- Community Wellbeing Board – June 2019
- Special COSLA Leaders – March 2019
- Community Wellbeing Board – March 2019

John Cunningham
Social Security Policy Manager
johnc@cosla.gov.uk Tel 0131 474 9267

November 2021

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Purpose

1. The Scottish Government has committed to undertake a full, independent review of the Scottish Welfare Fund, (SWF). Commencing in December 2021, this year-long review will examine the purpose and operation of the fund, including levels of funding, promotion, take-up accessibility and guidance. The review work will be overseen by a Review Advisory Group which will be informed by stakeholders from within Local Government and the Third Sector.
2. An independent research organisation will be appointed in December 2021 which will coincide with the SWF Review Advisory Group holding its inaugural meeting. It is anticipated that the Review Advisor's Group will hold at least 3 formal meetings through the course of the year. These will coincide with key reporting and research milestones and the final report on findings will be due to be published in December 2022.
3. This report asks the Board to note this update and seeks the Board's views on proposed next steps in respect of establishing COSLA's engagement with the Review Advisor's Group.

Current COSLA Position

4. COSLA's Social Security Policy Manager has been allocated 1 place on the Review Advisory Group. In addition to this, SSD is currently seeking 3 local authority representatives from its existing SWF Practitioners Group in order to provide oversight and expert advice from an operational perspective.

What is changing?

5. During the period that the Review will be undertaken, Local Government will continue its statutory administration of Scottish Welfare Fund. However, given its scope, the Review has the potential to result in significant future changes to the SWF scheme.
6. The Terms of Reference (annexed) define the role of the group overseeing the review as primarily overseeing the research process. The 'key objectives and design' does state that a purpose will be to "identify recommendations designed to improve the impacts, cost-effectiveness and fundamental working of the Fund, that are supported by evidence, practical to implement and amenable to monitoring. It might be helpful if the contractor and the oversight clearly had marked up their role in advising ministers and Local Government's political leadership.

Proposed COSLA Position

7. Whilst COSLA welcomes both the involvement of local authority practitioners and of its Social Security Policy Manager in the SWF Review Advisory Group, officers seek member's views on pressing for SSD to allocate an additional place to COSLA's Local Government Finance Team and on the proposal that additional representation should also be sought by SSD from either SOLACE or Directors of Finance.

8. COSLA officers propose that during the course of the SWF Review, COSLA will continue to draw on the advice of Local Government officers either directly involved in the SWF Review Advisory Group and/or through its own Welfare and Social Security Advisory Group.
9. Lastly and importantly, COSLA staff will ask Scottish Government officials to amend the framing document so that a purpose of the review will be to advise ministers and Local Government's political leadership.

Next Steps

10. Depending on decisions agreed by the Board - to work with Scottish Government, officers to:
 - i. ensure that COSLA continues to engage constructively in the Review of the Scottish Welfare Fund and wherever possible, positions itself to influence its scope, approach and outcomes.
 - ii. submit a request that Social Security Directorate SWF leads expand the Review Advisory Group to include representatives from COSLA's Local Government Finance Team and from either SOLACE or Directors of Finance.
 - iii. to continue to liaise with local authority managers and practitioners to inform COSLA positions.