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In 2014 Scotland Welcomes the World



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Dear Michael

Welfare Reform Committee Report – Food Banks and Welfare Reform

I am writing to set out the Scottish Government's response to this report, which I welcome given it is both timely and focussed on issues of significant impact in Scotland. I believe it provides a valuable addition to the material the Committee has published on the impacts of welfare reform.

Turning to the main points of the report, I very much share the concerns of the Committee about the increase in demand for food banks, particularly over the past year. The "Overview of Food Aid Provision in Scotland"¹ published by the Scottish Government in December would support the Committee's view that there is a direct correlation between the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) welfare reforms and this increase. That overview report would tend to agree with the Committee's conclusion that individuals are turning to food banks primarily out of necessity. It cannot be acceptable that people are having to choose "whether to heat or eat" in a country as prosperous as ours. This is a point I and my Ministerial colleagues continue to make to UK Government Ministers, reflecting the call in the report for DWP Ministers to recognise the contribution welfare reforms are making to increasing demand – a point that up until now they have not accepted. I would also echo the conclusion of the report questioning the evidence the UK Government is using to support its position, and will continue to press them on this in our discussions.

I am pleased that the Committee recognises the importance of the Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF). I also agree that food banks should not be a substitute for the SWF, and an application to the SWF should always be taken in the first instance. The SWF has now been running for over a year, and figures recorded to December 2013 show that the actions we have taken both to broaden the scope of the guidance and to increase awareness and take up are working.

¹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0044/00440458.pdf>

Finally, I note the Committee's welcome of the Emergency Food Aid Action Plan. As you know, the Emergency Food Fund is now open for applications and we intend to be able to award funding over the summer. The criteria for the fund recognise the need for short term support to help address the demand for food aid discussed in your report. They also recognise the need to link this work with longer term approaches to tackle poverty, as I share the view that food banks should not become an institutional part of the welfare system.

I hope this response is helpful in setting out the position of the Scottish Government.

Best Wishes
Nicola

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