

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

3 September 2020

Dear Mr. Timms,

Thank you for your kind letter of August 27th. I look forward to appearing in front of your Committee for the pre-appointment hearing on September 9th. In preparation for this hearing, you had asked a number of questions about my experience and priorities. As requested, I have endeavoured to provide brief responses to each.

Role of SSAC and of the Chair: I have had a long-standing interest in the welfare of the most vulnerable in society. Having taken a break from direct policy work for a few years, I am now keen to contribute again, but this time in more of an advisory role where I can provide feedback and reaction.

I see SSAC's primary role as providing impartial advice to government on social security. As a knowledgeable group, its scrutiny can provide honest and well-grounded constructive critiques of secondary legislation. Its independent research can shine a spotlight on salient issues that might otherwise be overlooked, considering the different needs and challenges created by the wide range of circumstances of those engaging with the social security system. In short, at its best SSAC is a critical friend to government and parliament – being candid where it needs to be, but always in a constructive manner.

Professional commitments: My contract of employment at the Legatum Institute was set up to allow for outside activities, and the rest of the senior leadership team is supportive of my application and the time commitment required should I be appointed.

I am well used to managing multiple commitments. For reference, the publications I authored for the Centre for Social Justice (including *Dynamic Benefits*) were all produced while working full-time at Oliver Wyman serving clients in continental Europe and North America. In the fullness of time, I would expect to be based at Caxton House for approximately one day per week, for meetings and other work.

Declaration: I am a member of the [Social Metrics Commission](#), a non-partisan body that has promoted a revised poverty measure for the UK and has been engaging with DWP/HMT/ONS officials and supporting them in their consideration of how to adopt it as an Experimental Statistic.

Political activity: I am not now and have never been politically active.

Social security experience: I have been actively engaging in social security issues for nearly 15 years, using my analytical and consulting experience to help diagnose the issues and develop implementable solutions. Through my work developing a welfare reform agenda with the Centre for Social Justice, creating the blueprint for Universal Credit, and working within DWP I have developed an extensive understanding of the social security system. Subsequently, my work at Social Finance allowed me to better understand how it impacted the lives of the most vulnerable in society, and since then I have advised on the development of anti-poverty programmes in Saudi Arabia. Most recently, as a member of

the Social Metrics Commission, I have developed a deep understanding of the patterns of poverty and their drivers across the UK. In all these cases, I have taken an empirical and systems-led approach to addressing very complex social and economic phenomena – recognising the importance of the ‘plumbing’ of the system.

The current membership of SSAC covers a wide range of expertise including disability, mental health, and housing. As Universal Credit rolls out further and the current coronavirus Job Furlough scheme and other employment policies evolve, the dynamics between the social security system and employers and employees (especially part-time staff) will be of increasing importance – and this is an area of expertise that SSAC may wish to develop further.

My first objective will be to establish a better understanding of the strengths and experiences of existing SSAC members both as individual contributors and also as a team. This assessment will inform the skills most needed for future appointments, especially given there may be space for one more member, if needed, in the near future.

Experience to date: Over the last 25 years, I have worked across academic, professional services, government, and third-sector organisations. In doing so I have developed a range of leadership qualities that allowed me to oversee a large professional services office and also manage multi-national, multi-skilled teams in a variety of cultural settings. These teams have delivered advice for clients (as strategy consultants) and also operational impact (for example at Social Finance). As part of the core team that established and led the Social Metrics Commission on its multi-year journey, I have demonstrated an ability to help forge consensus from a group that had been convened because it had both deep expertise and also a wide range of viewpoints.

As Director of Policy at the Legatum Institute, I have been responsible for setting the strategic direction of the institute’s research programme over the last three years, ensuring it has a broad coherence, while drawing on the particular skills and interests of individual researchers. In addition, my external-facing role has involved chairing over a dozen international advisory panels comprising close to 200 experts from academia, government, multilateral organisations and NGOs, from around Europe, Africa, Australasia and the Americas.

In order to prepare myself for the SSAC role, I have been reviewing the past work of SSAC and DWP policy development, so as to familiarise myself with the processes and topics covered recently. In addition, I plan to engage with the current and past members to seek their guidance and advice. I have already begun to engage with the secretariat in preparation of an induction process identifying the areas of policy and of procedures that I will need training on. We have agreed to review this requirement following initial discussions with key stakeholders.

Relationship management / communication: As an Expert Advisor at DWP and a Senior Advisor to the Saudi Minister for Economy and Planning, I have had over a decade’s experience of engaging directly with cabinet members and senior government officials. This often involved providing them with direct counsel and an independent perspective, as well as being used as a sounding board for challenging decisions. My experience has equipped me to be able to communicate privately, persuading ministers in a group setting, and in more formal presentations. In particular, at DWP I was actively engaged in not only the design of specific policy, but on a number of occasions I also undertook internal scrutiny and review of draft regulations, providing ministers with feedback, before it was distributed more widely.

I think it will be important that I develop the trust and confidence of ministers and officials so that they are willing to engage with me on a candid basis, knowing that I bring objectivity and a sense of common purpose to the discussions. There must also be a clearly understood degree of confidentiality where

appropriate, while ensuring that the work of SSAC is transparent and its reports are in the public domain. In my experience, a policy and practice of 'no surprises' is an important starting point for such relationships. Having extensive experience in professional services, I am used to this role.

Stakeholders: Being able to provide independent advice that is also objective requires one to have taken into account the wide range of viewpoints that are typically associated with an issue – from both different lived experiences, as well as different outlooks and objectives. To that end, I have always found it important to seek a wide range of inputs from stakeholders for any diagnosis and analysis to ring true. From running stakeholder workshops with commercial clients and surveying the key members of the rail industry, to holding multiple evidence-hearing sessions at the Centre for Social Justice and facilitating a number of expert panels for the Social Metrics Commission, I have an established track-record of seeking and embracing stakeholder input.

From the perspective of SSAC I would want to ensure that as a group we are maintaining relationships with an appropriately broad and balanced set of stakeholders, including ministers, officials, experts, interest groups, and employers as well as those engaging directly with the social security system. I would be keen to ensure that we are (and are perceived to be) asking pertinent questions, listening carefully, responding and communicating openly. In addition to the regular substantive engagements, I would expect to keep an open line of communication with many of the key stakeholders – actively seeking feedback from them, to identify ways of improving communication.

Independence: A common thread throughout my professional career has been its evidence-led approach, which has been the basis of being able to provide independent, impartial advice. As a consultant working for clients and an advisor to multiple ministers, I have found that my most valuable role has been to provide an independent perspective. Some of my earliest consulting work for the UK Government – including for HMT, DfT, and DTI – came about precisely because of that ability to provide an independent evidence-led perspective. Having appeared in front of a number of Select Committees, I have not shied away from giving evidence that challenges the Government.

My approach to protecting my personal independence and that of SSAC will be first and foremost to focus on the requirements of the role to provide advice, avoid engaging in any political or commercial conflicts of interest, and not to seek publicity for myself or SSAC beyond the normal remit of being open and transparent about its work. In essence, living up to the Principles of Public Life will go a long way towards protecting and enhancing the independence of SSAC and its Chair.

Decision-making: I would see the Chair as having a procedural as well as a personal role in ensuring SSAC comes to a consensus. As a group that operates formally through a series of regular meetings, I would ensure that the purpose and agenda of each meeting are clear and well communicated in advance. I would ensure that all members have an opportunity to speak and raise questions and issues – encouraging people to express concerns and issues, and to work through differences of perspective. I would also prioritise the informal process of engaging with members in advance, ensuring that concerns or differences of opinion are understood, so that the discussion can focus on addressing them and finding the points of alignment. The job of the Chair is to help the group come to a consensus, rather than lead with a view.

As London Office Head of Oliver Wyman, I spent four years chairing the partner team, which required achieving consensus on hiring and promotion and resourcing decisions across a range of teams with different business models. Like SSAC there was a tradition of consensus-based decision-making. As a member of the steering group of the Social Metrics Commission, I have been actively involved in achieving consensus on the development of a new poverty measure for the UK. Over the past four years this Commission has convened a group deliberately chosen from wide range of perspectives and

experiences to work in a consensus-driven way to identify an approach that can also bring about a broader consensus in society. And I believe that the approach of SSAC should be seen in the same light.

Strategic Direction of SSAC: From an outsider's perspective, I do not particularly see a pressing need to change the strategic direction of SSAC in a specific way. From my experience in the past of giving evidence to SSAC and as an Expert Advisor in DWP, I have seen the value of the role SSAC plays. I would also recognise the statutory basis of SSAC and the memorandum of understanding with the DWP as setting a framework for its operation.

That said, as we are in the midst of unprecedented times that are having a significant impact on the labour market, changes to benefits, and poverty, I expect the pressures and demands on SSAC to evolve. Hence, I would be keen to work with SSAC members and ministers and officials to ensure that SSAC is set up to provide the most constructive and responsive advice and support it can. I believe that it will be worth reflecting on the last 6+ months, and identifying what can be learned from the experience, and anticipating what challenges lie ahead, and consulting with others to determine if there needs to be any alteration of the strategic direction (and to understand better the practical impact of the Triennial Review). But I would envisage proposing and implementing any such change only after consultation and review.

Evaluating performance as SSAC Chair: I think the most important evaluation would be that I have been able to lead SSAC in a manner such that it has played a constructive role in the development of the social security system in the UK, in that the quality of the decisions taken by the Government has been strengthened by its engagement. To achieve this, the work of SSAC should be seen to have been salient, and providing advice that accounts for the interests and needs of different external stakeholders such as citizens, taxpayers and employers. The quality of this advice should be judged not only on the substance but also on the manner in which it has been developed and communicated in terms of the quality of relationships with stakeholders, parliament, ministers and officials. The chair's performance should be judged on these dimensions.

Hopes for the role: On a personal level, I hope to be able to make another contribution to the development of the social security system in the UK. It would give me enormous pride and satisfaction to be able to serve.

I do hope that this provides your Committee with the background you need in advance of the hearing. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you need clarification or further information on any points in advance of the pre-appointment hearing, otherwise I look forward to discussing further next week.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stephen Brien', with a stylized, cursive script.

Stephen Brien



Work and Pensions Committee

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From the Chair

27 August 2020

Dr Stephen Brien

Preferred candidate for Chair of the Social Security Advisory Committee
Department for Work and Pensions

Dear Stephen,

Congratulations on being selected as DWP's preferred candidate for Chair of the Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC).

As you will be aware, your pre-appointment hearing with the Committee will be held on Wednesday 9 September at 9.30am, after which the Committee will produce a report making recommendations on your suitability for the post of Chair. Prior to that meeting, on Monday 7 September, the Committee will also hold a private meeting with members of SSAC, to better understand how SSAC works.

To inform our discussions at these meetings, it would be very helpful to have some further background information on your experience and priorities. I would be grateful if you would provide short answers to the questions below.

1. What attracted you to the role of Chair of SSAC, and what do you see SSAC's main purpose as being?
2. Will you maintain any other professional commitments alongside being Chair? If so, how do you intend to divide your time between SSAC and those commitments?
3. Do you foresee any conflicts of interest, or potential conflicts of interest, arising as a result of other professional commitments, personal connections, or any other activities?
4. Are you politically active and, if so, in what capacity?
5. What is your current level of social security knowledge?
 - a. Do you think there are any gaps in SSAC's current expertise? If so, how will you address these?
6. How has your experience to date prepared you for the role of Chair of SSAC? What training and research do you intend to undertake to prepare yourself for the role?
7. What is your experience of building relationships with, and challenging, senior Whitehall officials, Ministers and other Parliamentarians? Do you think this will be a difficult balance as Chair of SSAC and how do you intend to approach it?
8. What is your experience of communicating with diverse groups of stakeholders? How will you measure the impact of your communication with SSAC's stakeholders?

9. How will you protect and enhance your personal independence and the independence of SSAC over your term as Chair?
10. SSAC generally reaches its views and decisions by consensus rather than a vote. How do you see the Chair's role in this process and what experience do you have of reconciling different views to come to a shared position?
11. Do you have a view on the strategic direction of SSAC to date? Do you envisage making any changes as Chair?
12. What criteria should be used to judge your performance as Chair of SSAC?
13. What do you hope to get out of the role?

I would appreciate if you could reply by **5pm on Thursday 3 September**, to allow time to incorporate your answers into the Committee's briefing.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Stephen Timms". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee