



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Social Security Committee

Thursday 8 September 2016

Session 5



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Thursday 8 September 2016

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SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE

3rd Meeting 2016, Session 5

CONVENER

*Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green)

*Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con)

*Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)

*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

*Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

John Dickie (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland)

Nicola Dickie (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Rob Gowans (Citizens Advice Scotland)

Simon Hodgson (Carers Scotland)

Alys Mumford (Engender)

Kayleigh Thorpe (Enable Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Simon Watkins

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Social Security Committee

Thursday 8 September 2016

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Work Programme Priorities

The Convener (Sandra White): Good morning. I welcome everyone to the third meeting of the Social Security Committee, and to our very first round-table discussion, which I have been looking forward to.

I remind everyone present to turn off their mobile phones as they can interfere with the sound system, and I ask people to stay about a foot away from the microphones to enable the sound system to work properly.

Everyone will know that the proposed social security bill is probably the largest piece of legislation that we in this Parliament will consider. Our first item today is the committee's work programme priorities. We will hold a further two round-table discussions, but this morning's session will focus on the medium-term and long-term priorities in the current session of Parliament.

I ask anyone who wants to ask a question or make a contribution to indicate to me and to speak through the chair. I also ask for short and succinct contributions so that we are able to get through as many questions and answers as possible and therefore get more information in the time that we have available.

I welcome our witnesses today: good morning, and thank you for coming along. Eddie Follan from Barnardo's sends his apologies, and Jill Wood from Engender cannot make it today so we have Alys Mumford with us instead. I am sure that everyone will introduce themselves as we go along.

I am grateful to you all for your written submissions. I will start the discussion with a general question, and then I will open up the session to members to ask questions or make contributions.

We all know that the Parliament acquired new social security powers this week and that the Scottish Government plans to introduce a social security bill early next year. We also understand that it plans to introduce a child poverty bill, in which I expect this committee will have a great deal of interest.

In light of what has been said previously and what we are expecting the Scottish Government to

introduce, I ask everyone around the table what they see as the key priorities for this committee.

Nicola Dickie (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): In our submission, we highlighted that we welcome the opportunity to provide views via the consultation that the Scottish Government has launched. However, for our organisation—as for many of the organisations represented around the table today, I am sure—it is important that we look at the long-term integration of social security. The consultation asks some very specific questions but it also asks some very general questions. That is helpful, but there is very little opportunity to talk about long-term integration and how social security would sit in the fabric of Scotland, with the public services that are already delivered to Scotland and those that will be delivered as we move forward. We would be interested in providing evidence around integration.

Rob Gowans (Citizens Advice Scotland): In general terms, there are two broad areas. One concerns the new powers and the proposed social security bill—what the new benefits will do and the possibilities that exist. That relates to questions about how we enshrine dignity and respect in the new system and how we ensure that the system is well administered and works well for people. A lot of the issues that the citizens advice bureaux deal with relate to administration.

However, we see it as equally important that we do not lose sight of the system that currently exists. There is a range of problems with the current reserved system, and they affect Scotland's citizens every day. The previous Welfare Reform Committee did a lot of really important work on that, and it would be good to see that work continue if possible.

John Dickie (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland): It will be key to ensure that, as powers are transferred and the Scottish Parliament takes on responsibilities for elements of social security, the administrative systems are in place so that those who rely on those sources of financial support continue to get the benefits that they need. The focus on administrative delivery is absolutely key.

I am keen to make two other key points. First, I urge the committee not to confine itself to the parameters of the Scottish Government's consultation. We very much welcome the principles that are set out in that consultation, its tone and the opportunity to inform how the new powers relating to the specific benefits that are being devolved might be used. We are working on our response to that consultation, and we will share it as soon as we have it.

However, we were disappointed that the consultation fails to consult on how some of the key powers that are being devolved might be used. The power to create new benefits in devolved areas is mentioned to some extent, but the key issue is how the power potentially to top up United Kingdom benefits might be used. That power needs to be focused on to ensure that social security plays its full role in tackling poverty and inequality.

The Child Poverty Action Group is particularly keen to look at how we might top up family benefits, and we have promoted the idea of topping up child benefit. That could have a big impact on child poverty levels in Scotland.

The second area that I urge the committee to scrutinise and prioritise is the administration and delivery of benefits. I urge the committee to ensure that it scrutinises the recommendations that emerge from the stage 2 options appraisal that is referred to in the Scottish Government's consultation document. Looking at the options for the delivery of benefits in Scotland is happening in parallel with the consultation process. It is crucial that there is thorough scrutiny and a chance to respond to what emerges from that process.

We may come on to this, but like many others we believe that, in general, Scottish social security benefits should be delivered on a national basis.

Alys Mumford (Engender): I am substituting for Jill Wood, so there may be some questions that I will have to refer back to her. I apologise for that.

A key priority for us is to ensure that gender equality and equality more generally are embedded in the process as objectives, that they are mainstreamed throughout and that they are seen as outcomes in and of themselves. They should be mainstreamed through development, delivery and consultations. It is essential that gender equality specifically is in the primary legislation.

Lots of people have mentioned that delivery is really important. We must ensure that the social security system in Scotland does not simply replicate systems that we know are not working in many ways.

A key issue for Engender and the women whom we work with is the delivery of universal credit payments, and an immediate priority for us is automatic payment of universal credit entitlements to individuals rather than there being household payments, on which we have done a lot of work. Household payments are generally seen as a regressive model that entrenches existing gender inequalities and puts many women in a very vulnerable situation. That is certainly a key priority for Engender, and we hope that it will be for the committee too.

Finally, integration of all the discussions around the new powers and the measures that we and many other organisations will call for, such as the topping up of benefits, a carer's living wage and a destitution fund, should be looked at. Those are aspirational, and we understand that we live in a context of budgets, but we want those approaches joined up with consideration of Scotland's new tax-raising powers and aspirational consideration of what the social security system could be.

Kayleigh Thorpe (Enable Scotland): I want to pick up on a couple of points that have been made around the table.

Nicola Dickie talked about integration. It is important that we look at the social security entitlements that already exist in Scotland rather than looking at the new social security benefits in isolation.

How do we create a system that integrates people's entitlements so that they have a simple and straightforward way of accessing all their entitlements? For example, why can we not just make sure that people who have learning disabilities and are entitled to the personal independence payment in its current form get automatic access to their concessionary travel bus pass? It is about embedding that degree of automaticity in the system.

There is also the complex interplay with what will remain reserved benefits. Some scrutiny is needed of what that means for people in reality. How are people navigating what will be an increasingly complex system? I suggest that the advice sector will be fundamentally important and it needs to be more embedded in the social security system.

John Dickie touched on the opportunities to top up and create new benefits. We need to look at the impact of the welfare reform that we are seeing at the UK Government level. For example, for our members the cuts to the employment and support allowance work-related activity groups will be huge come April next year. We need to look at the opportunities that we have in Scotland to use the new powers to address that.

Simon Hodgson (Carers Scotland): I reiterate John Dickie's point about social security being a national service. Carers Scotland and all the carers whom we spoke to feel that there are already enough situations in which there is a postcode lottery of support and services and that this must not be an opportunity for another one. We should really make sure that, wherever you live in Scotland, you are entitled to the same benefits and that they are delivered in the same way by whatever structure is put in place. In our submission, we mention something that goes back to the original debate about which bits of welfare

would be devolved. We, and the sector as a whole, are always conscious of the fact that if you create two systems, you could double the number of people a claimant needs to speak to if they are to get all the things that they might be entitled to. That goes against some other directions of travel. For example, in health and social care, one of the principles is that you cannot be bounced between one system and the other. Health cannot say, "Sorry, that's a social work problem", or vice versa. You should be able to go to one person, irrespective of what is going on behind the scenes in terms of who holds budgets and so on. The person at the receiving end should not have to be made aware of that; it is not really their problem. There is a danger that the new system will create a tension. We recognise that we have not got what everybody asked for so we will have to make the best of it, but that connection between two systems is crucial.

John Dickie also mentioned the transition period. We need to make sure that, when the system kicks in, it works for people. Part of the issue—we are already facing this—is the need to be clear about when things will happen. When acts are passed or you make announcements in the media, we get calls from people who are either concerned about changes to their situation or who expect that new things will be available. We need to be clear all the time about when things will happen.

Timings have already slipped with the implementation of universal credit, and such things put huge demand on the advice sector and a lot of stress on people who are in the middle of it. They hear things—with social media, the fact that something has changed can be out in a minute although the change might not come in for another two years. We have to be conscious of that as we go forward.

The Convener: Thank you. Those have been very good contributions. I will open up the discussion to members.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Thank you. That was fascinating and insightful. A lot of the witnesses mentioned some of the concerns about the current system. Can you comment more widely on those, particularly with regard to the sanctions regime? Like other MSPs around the room, I regularly hear constituents' concerns about that issue.

09:45

John Dickie: Far too many families with children are being impacted by the current approach to conditionality and the imposition of sanctions. That is causing very real hardship, with people ending up in severe difficulty and having to

use food banks. The reality is that the benefits associated with work-related conditionality and sanctions—ESA, jobseekers allowance and income support—will remain reserved.

Having said that, I think that there are things that the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament can do with the new powers to minimise the risk of sanctions and reduce the number of people who might be affected by them. In particular, the Government can use the new employability powers to ensure that employability programmes in Scotland provide opportunities and activities that are appropriate and relevant to the people using them, and are based on users' needs. Too often, inappropriate activities are imposed on people, which means that they are unable to undertake those activities, breach the terms of the benefit and find themselves at risk of sanctions. We must ensure that employability programmes are designed to provide support that meets people's needs and ensure that those programmes—when devolved—limit the number of mandated activities that are attached to the conditionality regime.

There are some concrete ways in which the risk of sanctions can be reduced. We would be keen to explore all options as it is important to do all that we can with the powers and the new relationship between different parts of the social security system to reduce the impact of sanctions on families. They do not work as a means of supporting people into employment or ensuring that they make progress on work-related activity. All the evidence says that sanctions damage people's chances, undermine their health and wellbeing and make it even more difficult for them to manage their lives, to move into work or to increase their work hours.

Ben Macpherson: That issue was touched on in the evidence from Citizens Advice Scotland, so perhaps Rob Gowans can add to that.

Rob Gowans: Gaps in income are a big and growing concern. Last year, citizens advice bureaux referred around 7,000 people to food banks. Sanctions are one of the problems that caused that; other problems include administrative errors and transitions between different benefits—for example, between employment support allowance and jobseekers allowance. In far too many situations, people are left for extended periods of time with no money, and their options can be limited. The Scottish welfare fund has done good work and we would like awareness to continue to be raised about what the Scottish welfare fund can give people through crisis grants. However, it would be interesting to look behind some of the reasons why people are being left with no income in the first place—and sanctions are one of those reasons.

Kayleigh Thorpe: Enable Scotland works for people who have learning disabilities and our client group is particularly vulnerable to work-related conditionality and being at risk of sanctions. Some of that is down to Job Centre Plus practices and staff communication with vulnerable people.

The decrease in Job Centre Plus disability employment advisers is a huge issue, as people are being asked to sign up to conditions that they have not been properly taken through and that they do not understand. Thanks to the changes that are to be introduced in April 2017 by the welfare reform legislation, that problem is only going to increase. More and more people who have learning disabilities—who currently represent one of the largest groups in the work-related activity group—will be exposed to work conditionality and sanctions. That would be a helpful area for the committee to explore, and we would be happy to provide further evidence of the problem.

Alys Mumford: I will pick up on a couple of points around the need for employability programmes to target particular groups of women who might find it harder to access them, including refugee women, carers and old women. We know that targeting works, but unfortunately very few employability programmes with targeted support are left. We also know that work programmes and employability help remain incredibly gender segregated, which further entrenches gender inequalities, so that is a key area to look at.

A key demographic that sanctions hit very hard is lone parents, the majority of whom are women. Under universal credit, the parental flexibilities that exist are being further eroded—they are coming under guidance rather than regulation. Given that we do not have sufficient childcare to support lone parents back into work, that will be a key pressure area that will hit lone parents, and women in particular will be sanctioned more and more because of that.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): Kayleigh Thorpe highlighted the difficulty that some people have with navigating the benefits system. To be honest, I think that most people find that quite challenging at times. I would like to hear from Kayleigh Thorpe and Rob Gowans on whether a person should be automatically considered for all benefits when they apply to the Scottish social security agency for a benefit. We hear that a great number of people are not receiving what they are entitled to.

Kayleigh Thorpe: We would be supportive of that. I talked about the opportunity to create a more connected and responsive system. We need to look at the opportunities that are presented by the huge change that we will see, one of which would be to have a much more connected system

that involves greater levels of automatic entitlement.

In relation to awards and when a person has applied for an entitlement, the passported entitlements should come automatically without an adviser having to tell a person, “Now you can go fill this form out with your local authority and you might get this.” That would make things a lot easier for people; it would probably make things a lot easier for welfare rights advisers.

There is a real opportunity for us to create a much more responsive system that is easier to access. I absolutely believe that welfare rights advice should be embedded in the system, but people should be able to advocate for themselves even within that setting, so we need to look at communicating with people in ways that are much easier to understand than the 40-page letters that I cannot understand.

Rob Gowans: Alison Johnstone certainly raises an interesting idea that would be worthy of consideration. About 39 per cent of the issues that CABs deal with relate to benefits. The system is extremely complicated, and there are many benefits to which people may not realise they are entitled. A bread-and-butter task of CABs is to go through people’s circumstances and explain what they might be entitled to. We would support anything that would make the process a bit easier.

The Convener: I have listened to Kayleigh, Rob and others. You seem to be talking about a one-stop-shop, where people can access all the benefits. That brings me on to Nicola Dickie’s point about local councils already adopting policies, such as concessionary fares. Will you clarify for the committee—and for Parliament—how that would work? Would someone present themselves and there would be a register of agencies that would have the benefits? I throw that out to all panel members.

Nicola Dickie: When we speak to local government officers about the issue, there is no appetite for unfettered local discretion. Social security in Scotland should be a national entitlement. The solutions—integration, a single customer journey and people getting the best local outcomes—should be delivered locally. That is what is important; that is the opportunity, and we need to be ambitious about it. That is not to say that one agency has to do everything; rather, all the agencies have to understand the journey that we are trying to achieve. Integration of health and social care is a direction of travel. It is a journey—we are not there yet. It is a journey that we are all on and we recognise the benefits and the outcomes of it.

To move social security back again would, in effect, be another layer of complication that

customers do not need. Kayleigh Thorpe made the point that customers should, wherever possible, be able to navigate the system themselves without requiring someone else to do it for them.

That leads into the discussion about dignity and respect. Everyone deserves the right to navigate their own journey and still have the opportunity to opt out and get advice if required. However, I do not think that we want to build a system where doing that becomes complicated, and there is another door for people to go through.

We recognise that customers will still have to go through Jobcentre Plus to get certain benefits and they will still have to come to local government to access lots of services that we provide. If another layer is built on top of that, that would not be a simplification. We are interested in having a conversation around joining things up and thinking about the direction of travel. It is not about us having 32 social security systems in Scotland—heaven forbid.

The Convener: Alison, do you want to come back in on that?

Alison Johnstone: Yes. I was not thinking about adding another layer at all—that is probably the last thing that any of us would want. It is about making sure that when you approach that first agency, it is more aware of what you are entitled to and can perhaps send you more easily in the right direction. It is about being more linked up. For example, Carers Scotland would like to see a national entitlement that is understood at the high level to remove any inconsistency in what one claimant is receiving compared with another, depending on who they happen to meet in the jobcentre.

The Convener: Adam, do you want to come in?

Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con): This is really important and I am puzzled by the implications of what a number of you are saying. I want to try to understand it a bit more.

The devolution of aspects of United Kingdom social security necessarily makes things more complicated than they are at the moment. There is no way of getting around that. We are not devolving all UK social security; we are devolving some of it.

The points that Nicola Dickie has very powerfully made are important in the sense that health and social care will continue to be delivered locally not nationally; the role of local authorities will continue to be key in a huge variety of service delivery; the Department for Work and Pensions is not going anywhere; and Jobcentre Plus is still going to be key. On top of all that, the consultation proposal is that we create a new and additional Scottish social security agency.

Is the implication of what you are saying that we should not be creating a new Scottish social security agency? Would you prefer devolved social security benefits to be administered through existing institutions, such as the DWP, Jobcentre Plus and local authorities, without the creation of a new Scottish social security agency? Is that what you are saying?

Nicola Dickie: I do not think that it is as straightforward as that. If the agency had governance of social security policy, that would work well. There is something about it being in the one place with all the stakeholders who are involved having a say in it. John Dickie made a point about the delivery of this stuff being absolutely critical. From a local Government perspective, we would have to create an infrastructure to provide the governance that, in effect, the DWP currently provides. That is where we would see divergence. We are talking about policy being centrally developed but when it gets into how that plays out and how the customer accesses that support, that is where we have to start having a bit of a different conversation.

Adam Tomkins: Do our other guests agree with that?

Rob Gowans: You are correct to say that it is complex and necessarily so, as people may already have to deal with three different agencies—the DWP, HM Revenue and Customs if they receive tax credits, and the local authority for housing benefits or the Scottish welfare fund and so on—and now there will be another new agency. That is not necessarily a problem.

It is probably more important that agencies can refer to one another and promote information about the services that other agencies provide that people might be entitled to, so that we avoid a situation in which people go to the social security agency and are not told anything about employment and support allowance, for example, or a disabled person goes to the jobcentre and does not receive any information about disability benefits. If someone came to us, we would look at their circumstances holistically and try to help them to resolve their problems, regardless of which agency was responsible for them. Such an integrated approach would work well and would help people to take up more of the benefits that they are entitled to, but which they might not be claiming at the moment.

10:00

John Dickie: To echo that, I think that the relationships and the information sharing between agencies are key in ensuring that, regardless of where someone starts their journey and regardless of whether they are looking for financial

support, social security support or health and social care support, they are routed to the other supports that are available.

However, it is also important to recognise that social security is quite a distinct form of support, as many people who access social security do not need health or social care or the other supports that local government and its partners provide. We need to make sure that we do not confuse the two kinds of support and service that are being offered. There is something extremely important about national delivery of social security. Local government and third sector organisations at local level have a real role to play in supporting people in accessing the system, but assessment, decision making and delivering benefits to people is a complicated business. The DWP has a lot of experience of that. Housing benefit is delivered locally and the Scottish welfare fund is delivered locally. The reality is that, when there is local delivery and decision making, we get a range of outcomes and a varying quality of decision making. There is inconsistency.

The other advantage of having a national delivery agency is that it is more able to go through a continuous improvement process, with the agency at national level learning what works and what does not work and developing excellence in communications. The quality of communications on other local authority benefits and services varies widely, so there is a strong argument to be made for a national system. We are very keen to make sure that, when it comes to decision making and the delivery and administration of social security, it takes place at a Scottish level, but that is not to say that relationships between local government and other local partners in supporting access to the system and finding ways of sharing information so that people do not have to go through multiple assessments unnecessarily when one assessment might be enough to determine whether they are entitled to a particular benefit are not important.

Kayleigh Thorpe: I support John Dickie's point about national delivery. Our members' experience of accessing the national concessionary travel scheme—a national entitlement that is delivered locally—is that there has been a patchwork of entitlement. At times, it has ended up being a postcode lottery. When it comes to accessing the scheme, in one local authority area the forms might be available online, in another they might be available in local libraries and in another people might have to go through the social work teams. That means that it is difficult for us, as a national body, to help our members to access their entitlements. I am talking about things such as EasyRead guidance for people on how to get their bus pass. There is a huge issue for people who have learning disabilities in accessing transport.

We could not even say, "You go to this person to get your bus pass form and then you go to that person," because the system varies in different local authority areas.

Therefore, I agree with the point about a need for continual improvement. The creation of a new agency gives us an opportunity to embed a new ethos and culture and to start from the beginning on staff training. However, that is not to say that there should not be a local feel. There should definitely be local access points, and local authorities have a huge role to play in that.

The Convener: For clarity on that particular point, the majority of the parties in the Parliament asked for all the welfare system to be devolved. We are where we are, but the majority of parties said that we could do it differently, and they certainly had the support of most agencies, not just those that are represented round the table today. We plan to set up a social security agency to stop the austerity measures and the sanctions that we feel are endangering people, particularly disabled people. That is the reason why we are where we are. We can deliver a very good agency. That may be complicated, but I think that everyone is looking forward to doing that and doing something different. People in jobcentres are saying that they have an opportunity to create something good that puts citizens rather than bureaucracy at its heart.

I will open up the discussion again.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): My question is on dignity and respect and how we treat people. I ask Alys Mumford to expand on the point about single household payments. Most of us would intuitively realise where the issues are with that and see that it might put vulnerable women and children in harm's way. I acknowledge that universal credit has not been rolled out everywhere in Scotland, but will you expand on that point for us?

Alys Mumford: Absolutely. As you say, there are some stark and obvious examples of where a household payment might be damaging, particularly for women who are suffering from violence or coercive control. That is an example at the sharp end. One can imagine a situation in which a woman has no financial autonomy over her entitlements, including things such as child benefit. That is a clear-cut example, but there is also an argument of principle about individual entitlements. People should have autonomy in relation to their own entitlements and financial services. In the discussions on household payments of universal credit, we have seen fear and shock from women at the thought that they will no longer have access to their own finances.

The decision seems to be based on a myth that all families are nuclear families and operate in the same way, and that all budgeting decisions are made in a completely equal environment, but we know that that is not true. Women in Scotland are still more likely to be economically dependent on men, to hold caring roles, to be victims of abuse and to be subject to other financial pressures. A household payment of that money is incredibly damaging to such women, and of course the issue becomes even more highlighted when we look at women facing multiple discrimination, such as refugees or disabled women. We already hear huge amounts of concern from disabled people, particularly women, about the fact that they have no access to their finances. This change will only broaden that out more.

There are practical examples of where household payments will put women and children in danger, and there is the issue of principle, which is that the payments are entitlements and should go to the person who is entitled to them.

Ruth Maguire: Thank you.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): My first point is about the new agency. I accept that we have an opportunity to create something new, but my experience is no different from anyone else's and I know that one thing that we are brilliant at in this country is not sharing information. How do we create an agency that has an ethos of sharing information between two systems or more? I would like the panel to explore whether we need legal duties of information sharing. How can we create what is almost a one-stop shop?

Most people who want to claim benefits for the first time are completely lost. At one end of the spectrum, there are people who are very vulnerable, but anyone who loses their job and who has not previously depended on the state is vulnerable. I know of lots of cases where people have gone along to the jobcentre and have been shocked at the attitude and at the way in which they have been treated. They are shocked at the lack of information. They do not know what they are entitled to, but what do they have to do? They have to wait. They wait and they wait and they worry, until they find out what they are entitled to; then they go, "Oh my goodness, I'm getting this and not this," and they do not know how to challenge it. We have a massive task on our hands.

The first thing that I would like to explore is whether, in creating a new agency, we need to—dare I say it—go back and talk about powers over sharing of information.

Secondly, there is the issue of the postcode lottery and how people get into the system. Too many assumptions are still made, for example

about people being online. It is assumed that if someone is in a certain age or income group, they will definitely be online. I do not know what the figures are, but the number of people who are online in Glasgow is probably less than 50 per cent—it is pretty low. Why is there not a uniform approach to this? I suppose that the reason is that we put all our investment in an online system. However, we must think seriously about creating that front door—an easy, accessible system where people can get all the information. That applies to a whole range of people.

My question is really whether there is scope for legislation on information sharing.

Rob Gowans: The committee might want to explore the issue of information sharing as part of its scrutiny of the bill. It is an area that can get quite complex. We can see that in our work. We are a confidential service, so we would not necessarily share all information with the DWP. There are issues there. Even within the DWP, for various reasons, teams do not share information with each other, which can mean that a person's entire circumstances are not taken into account.

The digital issue is very important. In Musselburgh and Inverness, we are seeing the roll-out of the full service of universal credit. That is universal credit for all people who would have claimed one of the six benefits that it replaces. One of the biggest issues that we have seen with the full roll-out is that people are having problems with digital access. We did a survey of CAB clients last year that showed that 36 per cent would not be able to make a claim for benefit online without assistance. From what we are seeing, it may be even higher than that in practice, and it rises even further for disabled people.

The committee may want to look at the role of digital, and the universal credit roll-out across Scotland, particularly the full service roll-out, which will soon expand to other areas and will start to affect more and more people. That would be an excellent thing for the committee to have in its work programme.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Good morning, everyone. I would like to ask about Citizens Advice Scotland's written evidence. You said that one of the things that we should look at is the

"Use of medical assessments and existing medical evidence in determining disability benefit awards."

As MSPs, we all have horror stories in our constituencies about that. Would you elaborate on why you think that we should have that at the core of our work?

10:15

Rob Gowans: There are two issues of interest there. One concerns the lessons that can be learned for the new system. Some of the medical evidence relates to the personal independence payment, which is to be devolved, and some of it relates to employment and support allowance, which is not. The main problem is how information is obtained. At present, in law, if someone was to require additional medical evidence, it would be the DWP's responsibility to pursue that. General practitioners are paid for ESA assessments but not for PIP additional evidence. Some of the problems start to creep in if someone wants to submit additional evidence for their PIP claim, or if they feel that an incorrect decision has been made and they want a mandatory reconsideration on appeal. They would seek to get additional evidence, for which, in some cases, GPs will charge them around £30, although we have heard evidence to suggest that some GPs are charging even more.

There are also problems that relate to the medical evidence when it gets to the DWP. First, there have been too many cases in which medical evidence goes missing. Perhaps it is lost in the post or in the mail handling centre in Wolverhampton, or perhaps it has just not been processed on to the system. People then have to go back to their GP for more medical evidence.

George Adam: On that point, do you have a percentage for the number of cases in which the medical evidence goes missing? Are there any figures for that?

Rob Gowans: The evidence is anecdotal, but I can have a look and see whether I can find statistics.

George Adam: That would be interesting. You have already mentioned that there is a cost on individuals. The process is stressful enough for the individual who has gone to the extent of making such a claim in the first place and, if the evidence goes missing, that just makes things worse.

Rob Gowans: Absolutely. There are a lot of lessons to be learned for the new system, and there is a need to address a situation that affects a lot of people, who then come to a CAB or to their MSP for help and advice.

Nicola Dickie: To go back to the point about sharing data, it was interesting to see from the evidence that we took for the Scottish welfare fund, which was the previous element that was devolved to Scotland, that people assumed that, if they told one council blouse, the rest of the council would know. That came through very strongly in the evidence sessions that the committee held, as it did in some of the work that we did at local authority level.

Pauline McNeill is right about the natural nervousness in organisations about sharing information. That is true in local government and in the DWP, and—unless I am very wrong about this and the culture is very different—it will also be true of the proposed new agency. Unless it is crystal clear what information can be shared and what customer consent looks like, we may well end up in a situation in which it is difficult to share such information. Our experience with the welfare fund is that people just expect—quite naturally; I do not disagree with that—that sharing will happen. The issue is how we make that a reality.

On the point about digital access, Ruth Maguire is right to say that the universal credit roll-out has slowed down, but that does not mean that it is not causing issues on the ground. As of the end of the current financial year, five of our local authorities in Scotland will be on full service.

It would be timely for the committee to take evidence on the type of issues that Alys Mumford mentioned regarding single household payments and the way in which housing costs are paid straight to the customer rather than to the landlord. The Scottish Government will have those flexibilities devolved to it and will have the opportunity to use them. We need to build a good evidence base for what is happening on the ground and look at what we can do to make things better. Our organisations, as social landlords, are worried about how customers will continue to be able to make their rental payments without some assistance. With regard to the points that Alys Mumford made about single household payments, it is critical that we get in early and do as much as we can on that.

The Convener: Thank you.

Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con): Perhaps Nicola Dickie's comment about evidence bases is a good point for me to come in on. My question is somewhat general, but it might be useful to make it a bit more specific by relating it to an issue that John Dickie might be able to help us with, given that it is referred to in the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland submission.

The submission suggests that the two-child policy

"is likely to increase poverty amongst larger families."

What is the evidence base for such a statement? I suppose that the question is this: what are the behavioural consequences, say, of a tax credit system that is limited to providing tax credits to two-child families? Will it have an effect on the number of children that families have? I should make it clear that I am not saying that it will. On the other hand, we are told that we have an ageing population, so it might be considered a

good thing for families to have more children. There are different ways of looking at the issue.

Do you know of any specific studies, including from other European countries, that have addressed these issues? I think that we are all aware that different countries have looked at this, so we need to make sure that we are not basing our approach on old or uninformed assumptions or, indeed, are not simply trying to reinvent the wheel when others might have looked at and compared all these issues and have seen what the consequences might be 10 or 20 years down the road.

In short, then, what is the evidence base or database for that sentence in your submission and, as a more general question, how should we approach these things to ensure that, in light of this new opportunity—which, as the convener has said, might not be the new opportunity that some might have wanted—we do not go down the same lines with the same consequences?

John Dickie: With regard to your question about evidence, I suppose that we are urging the committee to scrutinise, take evidence and understand how the policy impacts on children and families in Scotland. The committee certainly has a role in that respect.

As for the evidence that the policy is likely to lead to an increase in child poverty, we already know that larger families are more at risk and that children growing up in such families are at a higher risk of being in child poverty than other children. Thirty-six per cent of children growing up in families of three or more children are growing up in poverty compared with around one in five children growing up in poverty more generally. It therefore seems fairly clear that removing a significant source of financial support from those larger families is likely to reduce the amount of income that they have and increase the risk of poverty.

With regard to the behavioural impacts of that, the fact is that people's circumstances change all the time. Parents become unemployed, get sick or get disabilities; their incomes change; and their entitlement to tax credits or, in the future, universal credit will change, too. If, in some arbitrary way, a third or more child who is already there, already in existence and already part of that family is no longer entitled to any financial support, the families in question, who are already at increased risk of poverty, will inevitably be worse off than they would otherwise have been. That is why we think that removing support from the third child in families is likely to increase child poverty. We need to look at the impact of that and, more important, look at what we can do within devolved social security powers and, indeed, wider devolved powers to ensure that the implications of

such a move are considered and what more we can do to support families who are at particular risk of poverty and who are losing an important source of financial support.

Gordon Lindhurst: So are you looking primarily at what you would see as immediate and self-evident impacts of this policy rather than at its long-term consequences or results in, say, 10, 20 or 30 years' time?

John Dickie: We have to look at the immediate impacts for those families and the likely impacts for them in the future. The idea that the policy will drive how many children families have seems unlikely, given that, in many cases, people's entitlement to benefit or their need for additional financial support emerges long after they have had their children.

I am not aware of any modelling that suggests that the approach will have a positive impact on levels of child poverty, but I will need to go back and see the extent to which that has been factored in. The Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Resolution Foundation have done significant modelling that looks at the wider impact of reforms to social security and how that impacts on levels of child poverty. The modelling suggests that levels of child poverty across the UK look set to increase dramatically between now and the end of the decade. I do not think that that particular reform has been modelled into that yet.

There are those who are better able to model these things in the longer term. It will be important to take that evidence into account, as well.

Gordon Lindhurst: So you agree that the committee needs to look at not just the immediate effect of things, which is obviously important, but the longer-term effect of things.

John Dickie: Absolutely. We know that the long-term effects of reducing the levels of financial support that families are entitled to are modelled to increase child poverty dramatically.

Kayleigh Thorpe: I would like to go back to George Adam's question about medical assessments. Is that okay?

The Convener: It is.

George Adam: That is a great idea. [*Laughter.*]

Kayleigh Thorpe: Enable Scotland's experience is that specific medical assessments have not been a positive experience for many people who have learning disabilities. They are particularly vulnerable to negative decisions in a process that involves their personally communicating their difficulties and the issues that they face. In fact, those assessments provide only a snapshot of a claimant's life rather than a long-term picture.

The point that Pauline McNeill made about information sharing is related to that. Obviously, evidence gathering is part of the social security system. We need to know people's needs in order to determine their entitlement. If we move away from specific medical assessments, which I would probably welcome, there is an opportunity to look at the degree of automaticity in information sharing across different agencies, such as the national health service and education authorities. People's needs are assessed for support in school and they are diagnosed by the NHS. I caution that information sharing should be appropriate and it should always be done with the person's consent. However, it is part of creating a more connected and user-friendly system that does not involve people running about and gathering their own evidence or specific medical assessments, which have been quite unpleasant for people.

Ruth Maguire: On the evidence aspect, those of us who have been councillors or MSPs before will have seen right in front of our faces evidence of the hardship that has been caused. My local authority has certainly gathered specific numbers on the real families that have been impacted by the policy. I do not know whether COSLA could assist with getting that for us.

May I ask another question?

The Convener: Yes, surely.

Ruth Maguire: On expectations, I think that we are all conscious that we do not have everything and that we do not have a blank sheet of paper. I was interested to hear—Simon Hodgson from Carers Scotland, in particular, mentioned this—that whenever there is an announcement or it is said that something is coming or is going to happen, expectations are raised. I would be interested to hear folks' views on how we can remain positive about what we can do, but set expectations accordingly and ensure that we are not causing any undue upset while we make the changes.

Alys Mumford: I want to go back briefly to the two-children rule and the question of long-term effects and short-term consequences. It is absolutely right that the committee should consider the very short term and the long term, but the effects on equality and poverty reduction and the aims of a good social security system should be taken into account. The limiting to two children borders on the policing of women's bodies, particularly in the case of women on low incomes. We should not be discouraging women from making choices around their bodily autonomy based on whether they can access a certain benefit.

The issue affects different women in Scotland very differently. Minority ethnic women, refugee

women and women on low incomes are more likely to have more children and larger families, so the issue is discriminatory. We need to come back to the ideals of dignity and respect and consider how we make sure that we do not have different rules for different demographic groups.

10:30

Adam Tomkins: I feel that I should declare an interest as the father of four children.

I want to comment on some of the discussion around information sharing. It would be helpful if we distinguished between two completely different sorts of information sharing. The first is when an individual turns up to whatever agency and has to tell their life story, and there is a frustration that goes directly to the points about dignity, fairness and respect when that individual has to tell their whole life story again to another job coach or another agency. One reason why that may sometimes have to happen is because the first agency may not lawfully share sensitive data about the individual with another agency because that would be incompatible with data protection laws. We have just seen—in a different context—a unanimous Supreme Court decision strike down aspects of the named person legislation because of illegal data sharing provisions in that legislation, so we need to be careful about that.

The other sort of information sharing is when agencies share information with individuals about the range of benefits that are available, and that is where we can—and must—do much better. It might be useful to distinguish between those two different sorts of information sharing.

I have two quick questions for John Dickie, which are inspired by some of the things that he has said. First, how does the Child Poverty Action Group measure poverty? I should know the answer—I apologise—but I was struck when I read the child poverty consultation document that the measure of poverty that the Scottish Government suggests that we use is just about income.

This week, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published its comprehensive document "We can solve poverty in the UK", which is interesting and challenging in equal measure. One of the interesting things about the document—I do not know whether you have had a chance to read it yet as it was only published this week—is that its proposed measure of poverty is quite different from just focusing on income; it also looks at the cost of living and a range of other factors. I wonder whether John Dickie will reflect on that.

My second question is on something that he mentioned in his first contribution this morning. He said that one of the striking omissions from the

Scottish Government's social security consultation is that there is no mention anywhere of the top-up power. We all know that the number 1 ask of the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland is that the top-up power is used to raise child benefit by £5 per eligible child.

Does John Dickie have any reflections on why the Scottish Government has, first, not mentioned child benefit anywhere in that 145-page document and, secondly, not mentioned the top-up power anywhere?

The Convener: I know that questions have been directed to John Dickie, but another two members want to come in. George, is your question related to that?

George Adam: It is totally unrelated.

The Convener: Okay. Alison, is your question related to that?

Alison Johnstone: I would say that it is.

The Convener: Okay. If you ask it now, people can then respond to the questions together.

Alison Johnstone: Ruth Maguire spoke about expectations. People are aware that we have devolved powers that enable us to tackle issues. From April 2017, we will see another round of welfare benefit cuts including a £30 a week cut to employment and support allowance. As a Parliament, we have the means to mitigate some of the impacts of those cuts, and I would like to hear a bit more about whether we are in a position to do that.

April 2017 is not far away. Are the Scottish Government and this Parliament being active enough in ensuring that we are using our powers properly? We then have to make decisions about who we are taxing and by how much, but the public are well aware that we have those powers coming and that we can do something about the issue if we choose to do so.

John Dickie: What do we mean by child poverty? It means families not having the resources to bring up their children in a way that is socially acceptable and that meets the standards of the society that they are living in. In our society, that is primarily about their not having enough money to buy food, to pay the bills, to meet their energy costs and to ensure that their children are able to participate fully at school. There is a good reason for income being at the heart of any measure of poverty in a modern society such as ours.

The four key measures that are proposed in the Scottish Government's consultation build on and reflect the measures that have been used at a UK level for the past 15 years or more and measures that are used internationally to understand how far

behind low-income families with children are falling. The headline measure is the number of children who are living in families with less than 60 per cent of the median income. It is important to note that the consultation also proposes a low-income and material deprivation measure, which is the number of children missing out on holidays, not having a winter coat and not being able to participate in mainstream activities. There is that non-income measure in the consultation as well.

There is something to be said for considering subsidiary measures that address the costs that families face, particularly in a devolved context in which there may be other levers and powers that we can use to reduce those costs. That may involve reducing people's fuel bills through fuel poverty programmes, enabling them to buy school uniforms through improving school clothing grants, reducing the charging for school trips and so on. There are ways of introducing such non-income measures, although it is absolutely right that we have income at the heart of any measure of child poverty.

I was going to talk about the linkages between the social security bill and the child poverty bill. As has been mentioned, the child poverty bill proposes putting the Scottish Government's ambition to eradicate child poverty into statute, with duties on the Government to produce a strategic delivery plan every five years and to report on progress on a measurement framework to sit alongside that. We can look at how we can put into that measurement framework measures that would help to understand the contribution that can be made both by devolved social security and by efforts to reduce the costs that families face.

Adam Tomkins's second question was about the top-up power that is coming to the Scottish Parliament. As a household type, families with children, in particular, have seen their incomes squeezed over the past seven or eight years. We have done some modelling of the £5 top-up and it seems that the figure could be meaningful because around 30,000 fewer children would be living in poverty—there would be a 14 per cent reduction in the number of children living in poverty. That would put real money into families' pockets to tackle the lack of income that prevents children from being able to make the most of their experience. I do not know why that proposal has not been included in the consultation.

The Convener: We will ask.

John Dickie: It is a big ask—we are aware of that. The indicative costing is around £256 million a year. We are not naive. That is a big chunk of Government spending, but it is not an impossible chunk to ask for. If the Government in Scotland is absolutely serious about eradicating child poverty, one key way in which it could do that would be to

ensure that more money went to support families with the costs of raising their children. The top-up power is a clear lever for achieving that.

George Adam: We got some evidence from people who follow the committee on Twitter. One of them is Lynn Williams, who is, according to the clerk's paper, an unpaid carer from Glasgow. She is actually from Paisley, convener—I just thought that I should correct that. She asked the committee to

"look at the reality of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) to Personal Independence Payment (PIP) transfer and what this might mean for devolution of new powers".

That is probably a good issue to put to Simon Hodgson, as the written evidence from Carers Scotland mentions some problems in that area. For example, there is a section on the impact of UK welfare reform on support individuals. That is important because we have so many carers in Scotland and, with the new powers coming over, there are expectations. How can we deal with that process?

Simon Hodgson: The issue that we raise is about reassessments. All the disability benefits are being devolved, but carers allowance is based on someone having one of the other benefits. If someone is reassessed and they lose their DLA or other relevant benefit, the caring role will not change but the carer's £60 or £62 a week of benefit will be lost as a direct consequence of the reassessment.

The Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 recognises carers in a really broad sense and not just people who are in receipt of carers allowance, who are a small minority of the number of carers in Scotland. However, we need to sort out the loss of that benefit to the small cohort of people who draw it down when their other circumstances have not changed.

George Adam: Knowing Lynn Williams and being her MSP, I am aware of her personal circumstances. I declare an interest as I am a carer, too, although my wife Stacey would argue the point about whether she cares for me or I care for her.

Lynn and others find themselves in a position where, to start with, they have massive forms to fill in. The whole process is scary; they may be rejected during the process and they almost have to prove the disability of their loved one or family member yet, if they appeal, 80 per cent of them get the benefit back. There is something bizarre about the whole system. Is there a way to make it better or find a way round it? A starter for 10 would do.

Simon Hodgson: I do not have a straightforward answer to that. What we are setting out in the social security bill is a different

approach so that people are not given incentives to make savings. We should be incentivising people to ensure that fewer people are not receiving benefits that they are entitled to. At present, we know that loads of people do not claim benefits that they are entitled to. Pensioners do not pull down their full benefits and other cohorts of people do not get benefits because nobody told them that they could get them. It is not the duty of DWP staff to tell people what their entitlements are—they have to ask.

If we are going to do it the other way round, at least we will be starting from a different place. Even in the outline consultation, there were things about setting up a system where we get it right first time and we do not have lots of appeals. Therefore, there should not be so many successful appeals. It seems to me that, if 80 per cent of people win their cases on appeal, there is something wrong with the system—it is an abject failure. It costs a fortune, it puts people in a difficult position and the appeals take a lot of time and cost money to administer. If we get it right first time, we will not have to deal with that.

We deal with people who have lifelong or terminal conditions yet they are still being forced to go through the assessment processes. They feel vulnerable and they can suddenly be left with no resources at all, so the proposed different approach is a good thing.

I do not know how we can mitigate the problems of living through the change process. We are redesigning the plane while it is in flight. We need to consider both the here and now for people in Lynn's situation and how to make the system better in the future. I am sorry that I do not have a silver bullet for that problem—maybe others have better ideas. Lots of people have been in difficult situations—we get lots of examples and I am sure that others do, too—during the transition of benefits.

George Adam: There are also people who give up paid employment as their loved one's mobility or disability gets worse, yet that is their only access to income.

There is obviously a problem with the system given that, as you rightly say, 80 per cent win their cases on appeal. Originally, it was a numbers game. There was no thought about individuals; it was just about making a cut. That was probably the system's fault. As we move on, how do we deal with the dignity and respect agenda to make sure that we can deliver on it? That is important.

Simon Hodgson: Totally.

The Convener: Mr Hodgson, do you want to come in again?

Simon Hodgson: No.

The Convener: Do others have views?

10:45

Rob Gowans: It is correct to say that the transfer from DLA to PIP has been difficult. We have seen a huge number of problems with disability benefits—it is the largest issue that citizens advice bureaux deal with—and how the process is hugely stressful for disabled people and their carers. We can learn lessons from those problems for when disability benefits are devolved, but people are experiencing problems now and it will be a few years before a Scottish disability benefits system is up and running. It is expected that, by that point, almost everyone will have been migrated over to PIP, so there will be many more assessments to come.

Our biggest problem has been the use of medical assessments in almost all cases, because we have found that they do not necessarily lead to the correct decisions. Although the situation has improved recently, there have been lengthy delays in getting an assessment in the first place. When PIP was first introduced, we saw delays of up to a year in assessing whether people would get support. We have also found the assessments to be quite impersonal. A person may have to tell a stranger whether they can go to the toilet.

In particular, it is key that the new system makes as much use of existing evidence as is possible, whether that evidence comes from the claimant, who will know their condition better than anyone else, from friends and families, from GPs, from community psychiatric nurses or from support workers. Only after all those sources have been exhausted and it is impossible to make a decision should the system look to an outside assessment. That would reduce a lot of the stress and the delays in the process and make the experience a lot better for Scotland's disabled citizens.

Ruth Maguire: I have enjoyed everyone's interesting contributions, but I realise that I did not get an answer to my question. Perhaps Simon Hodgson and Kayleigh Thorpe can reflect on the importance of setting expectations and making sure that we do not cause more stress and worry as we progress.

Kayleigh Thorpe: I will try to come to that in my response. First, I will pick up on George Adam's point about form filling and the experience of carers and family members who are supporting a loved one through the process. He gave Lynn Williams a voice in the committee, and I would like to give one of our members—a parent who has a child with a learning disability—a voice. They say:

"Claiming DLA is difficult—the forms are horrendous and it is so upsetting having to justify every bit of support your

child needs and having to write in minute detail all the things your child can't do"

then feeling like "a waster" because you are having to claim

"financial support for your child."

We need to look at the parents and families who are being confronted by deficit-focused forms and processes and think a bit differently about things, including the content of forms, the approach and the support that people are given when they go through the process.

There have been various submissions on the carers allowance, which is an important source of support for the committee and the Parliament to explore. Another dimension of the allowance to explore relates to the situation in which a loved one is hospitalised. The Scottish Government has made an extremely welcome announcement that the 84-day rule on children who receive DLA who are hospitalised will be abolished and that payability of disability benefits and of the associated carers allowance will not be suspended. However, a not dissimilar 28-day rule applies to adults who are in receipt of disability benefits and their carers, and that might be an area to explore. I have not costed this, but I think that there is an argument to be made for abolishing that rule on the basis of the cost of its impact on other areas of policy. For example, stopping the benefits of someone who has been hospitalised has an impact on health because there is an issue with delayed discharge, as it is necessary for them to go through the whole process to get their support back.

The issue of communicating changes and setting expectations is hugely important. We are preparing for a meeting of our members on Saturday, at which we will explore their views on the social security consultation. It is extremely important to set expectations on the basis of when changes are likely to be made and what limitations will apply to those changes. It is also important not to frighten people, because many disabled people have just been through the change from DLA to PIP. We will explain things fully in an easily accessible way, and we will emphasise that a welfare rights adviser who works for us will be able to do a full benefits assessment for anyone who is worried about anything.

I do not have any more advice to provide.

The Convener: Do you want to come back in on that, Simon?

Simon Hodgson: On communication, it is important to have a clear timetable so that we can explain to people when things might happen. We are all doing that through our own networks—I hope that we are all saying the same things. We

need a clear and accurate template that we can all use for communication through our own channels.

That will not catch everyone, however, because there are people out there who are not engaging and who are not linked into the voluntary sector or the public sector. At some point, we will need a clear, Government-led communications programme. Otherwise, there will be a danger of misinformation, which will mean that Ruth Maguire will get more casework, because people will come in to ask what is happening and when the change will take place. We will get phone calls about the situation and, although that will not clog up the system, it is not helpful.

There are some good stories to tell here. People are obviously nervous about the change, because they think that it might be negative, so we should take the opportunity to say some good things.

The Convener: Do you want to come back in, Ruth?

Ruth Maguire: This is not a question—it is just a quick point. During the change, one of the most important things will be to make sure that people do not fall through the gaps. There is a slight tension between the need to give a clear timetable for when things are going to happen and the need to get the new system right and have a smooth transition.

The Convener: Nearly everyone has commented on the need for a smooth transition. The committee will certainly look at that.

Alys Mumford: I thank Ruth Maguire for her question, because it is very important not to ignore the strain that social security changes put on people's mental health. All the agencies that are represented here will have come across that. Communication and acknowledgement that it is a highly complex process are always useful.

The move from DLA to PIP is premised on significantly reduced incomes for many carers and disabled people. Although delivery of the systems is extremely important, we also need to look at adequacy of income. We need to determine whether the changes are reducing poverty and making people's lives better and whether people are accessing what they need to be able to access. We advocate that carers be paid a living wage, and we have called for pilot projects of a citizen's basic income. We want to explore such ambitious and positive visions of how we could do things a bit differently.

It is vital that the impacts of social security changes on groups that face multiple discrimination—I am thinking of disabled women, in particular—are monitored and that we make sure that the voices of the people who are affected are heard throughout the process.

I again thank the committee for inviting us all here to give evidence.

The Convener: It has been a wonderful morning, and we have heard plenty of ideas. I began by asking everyone about the key priorities, and we have been given plenty to think about. Thank you very much for coming along. It has been extremely interesting. I look forward to meeting you all again at another evidence session.

We will have a five-minute break before the next item.

10:55

Meeting suspended.

11:04

On resuming—

Petition

Food Banks (Funding) (PE1571)

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is consideration of petition PE1571, on food bank funding. The petition, which is in the name of John Beattie, was lodged in July 2015 and calls on the Scottish Government to provide direct funding to food banks. Paper 2 sets out the context and the work that the Public Petitions Committee has undertaken on the petition, along with a number of suggestions. What are members' views on the petition?

George Adam: Paragraph 12 of paper 2 suggests that the committee should maintain a watching brief as part of its wider work on social security and should ask the Scottish Government to keep the petitioner and the committee informed of any response to the report of the short-life working group on food poverty. That seems pretty reasonable to me.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I agree. I have been contacted by some food banks, particularly those that missed out on the allocation of funding from the Government's emergency food fund. It would be interesting to hear from the Government on the level of demand for that fund, whether the fund was oversubscribed and, if so, by how much, and how many organisations missed out. It has been put to me that some food banks feel that what they do—their emergency food supply to people who are in desperate need—is coming under pressure and is at risk of not existing at all. We should ask whether the Government has done any work on whether food banks and the people who work voluntarily to provide that service will be able to continue.

Ruth Maguire: I agree with the recommendations in paper 2. I commend the work that volunteers do in providing emergency food, but I do not think that food banks should be part of our social security system. They are a sign that a social security system is not working; they are not a solution. Different things should be explored to address food poverty.

Alison Johnstone: If food banks are struggling, that is clearly tremendously serious for those who rely on them, although I would hope that nobody would have to rely on them. I note that Ewan Gurr from the Trussell Trust said:

"It is a crucial thing to avoid ever being assimilated with the welfare state."

The short-life working group on food poverty has reported, and I believe that the cabinet secretary

has said that she will consider the report in full and respond in due course. I, too, support the action that is suggested in paragraph 12 of paper 2.

Adam Tomkins: I agree with George Adam and I, too, support the action in paragraph 12.

The Convener: Mark Griffin has raised a specific point. Can we come to a compromise and take the action that is recommended in the paper, which members agree with, but also write a letter to the cabinet secretary?

Mark Griffin: Yes.

The Convener: Would that suffice for the committee?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That is great. I now bring the meeting to an end.

Meeting closed at 11:07.

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