



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Social Security Committee

Thursday 20 December 2018

Session 5



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SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE

27th Meeting 2018, Session 5

CONVENER

*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
*Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)
*Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con)
*Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)
*Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green)
*Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Bill Scott

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Anne Peat

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament Social Security Committee

Thursday 20 December 2018

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:38]

Interests

The Convener (Bob Doris): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 27th and final meeting in 2018 of the Social Security Committee. No apologies have been received this morning.

I welcome Keith Brown, who is replacing George Adam on the committee. I put on record my thanks to George Adam for his work in the months gone by. I invite Keith to declare any interests.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I refer the committee to my entry in the register of members' interests. I have no registrable interests to declare.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

09:39

The Convener: Does the committee agree to take item 5, which is consideration of evidence, in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: I note that the committee has previously agreed to take item 6, which is consideration of a draft report, in private.

Poverty and Inequality Commission Chair

09:39

The Convener: The next item is on the appointment of the chair of the Poverty and Inequality Commission. The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 provided for a commission named the Poverty and Inequality Commission, which is to be established on 1 July 2019. The commission will be made up of a chair and between two and four additional members. The Scottish ministers may appoint a person as a member of the commission only if the Scottish Parliament has approved the appointment.

The purpose of today's evidence session is to allow the committee to reach a view on the suitability of the Scottish ministers' nominee for the position of chair. I welcome Bill Scott, nominee for the chair of the Poverty and Inequality Commission.

Bill Scott: Good morning.

The Convener: I congratulate you on securing the nomination and wish you well for this part of the appointment process.

It falls to me to ask the first question. Just before you arrived, the committee members were looking through some of the key skills required to fulfil the job of chair. One of them is:

"a strong understanding of Poverty and Inequality issues in Scotland".

It seems to be stating the obvious to have that as a core skill, but if we start there, perhaps you can demonstrate your knowledge in that area as well as any practical experience on the ground or any direct experience that you have had.

Bill Scott: I was born into a working-class family in Scotland. It was a large family with five children. Although my father was a skilled worker in the building trade, there were periods when he was laid off when we experienced a fair bit of poverty—we were unable to put fuel on the fire and my mum had to borrow to put food on the table. Those memories have stayed with me all my life, as have the memories of the community that I was brought up in, which had a lot of solidarity. The members of that community helped one another when times got tough. It was mainly a mining community. That was my lived experience, but that was a long time ago.

I worked in the civil service for eight years during the 1980s, at the height of a recession when there was mass unemployment—I was working in unemployment benefit. I saw a lot of people who had been in work and had been

managing very successfully in their lives, who felt that they had been thrown on the scrap heap and wanted a new start. I saw my role then—I hope it is still the role of many civil servants—as helping people get what they were entitled to.

In 1989, just after my daughter was born, I made the move to welfare rights. At that point, I wanted to move from being a gamekeeper of sorts to being a bit of a poacher; I wanted to help people to get what they were entitled to and to do more than I could as a civil servant, by actually fighting appeal battles and helping those people to negotiate the system a wee bit more than I was allowed to in that role. I worked in an area of multiple deprivation, which was Pilton and Granton in Edinburgh. I had a lot of experience of assisting people and seeing them using their increased knowledge of the system to help other people get their entitlements, too.

I was director of Lothian Anti Poverty Alliance for five years. During that time, my main role was to support local community projects to develop anti-poverty initiatives. I worked across Lothian and we managed to establish several initiatives. Just before I came into the committee, I was talking about one of them, which was the milk token initiative. People—primarily women—used to use their tokens to get milk from shops. We saw that there was an opportunity to buy the milk wholesale and give it to the women when they exchanged their tokens. We gave them a community benefit for every milk token that had been handed in, which was 50p paid into a credit union account for their child, 50p towards a book token for their child and free fruit that we handed out as part of the exchange. We saw the women coming back to us to do reading classes so that they could use the books that they were getting through the scheme. They were educating themselves to be able to interact with their children by reading to them.

09:45

Poverty damages people in many different ways, one of which is deprivation of human contact. There is also deprivation of intellectual stimulation, which I saw being addressed by the milk token initiative. The book token aspect did a good job of getting mothers and their children to have real contact with each other. It tackled not only material deprivation but other issues in the community. I know that 50p a week is not a lot of money, but the point of starting up a credit union account to enable children to get low-cost credit at some point in their future, when they had grown up, was to encourage the idea of saving for the future and putting money away. The free fruit was obviously a side benefit to the health of both the child and the mother, giving them something that

was sold at quite a premium in local shops, where an apple might cost as much as a pound of them would cost from the supermarket.

I have a lot of practical experience of working with communities. Over the past 11 years, all my policy work for my employer, Inclusion Scotland, has been based on engaging with disabled people, taking from their lived experience and bringing it back to Parliament to inform the policy making here. I see that continuing if I am successful in being given the role of chair of the commission.

The Convener: Could you say a little bit more about that? I suppose that the rules of engagement would change. Previously, you were feeding ideas into Government, some of which it would adopt and some not. If you were to take on the job of chair of the commission you would have a strong role in scrutiny.

I assume—well, I will not just assume, because I will give you the opportunity to put it on record—that you are well up to speed on the current policy landscape in both Scotland and the United Kingdom, as I would hope you would be. Will you say a little bit more about where the opportunities are in that landscape, as well as what your current concerns are?

Bill Scott: The concerns are fairly easy to identify. Poverty among families and children is increasing. In particular, there has been a huge growth in poverty among working families. The targets that have been set are ambitious ones, although they perhaps do not sound that way. We could look at them from the perspective of it being a long period over which to achieve change, but actually we need to look at it in the opposite direction, because the trend that is currently being established is that the number of children living in poverty is increasing year on year. Therefore, there will be huge challenges for the current Scottish Government and its successors until 2030 in actually reducing poverty, some of which relate to the levels of benefits and pay that people are receiving in work, the insecurity of many jobs nowadays, with zero-hours contracts and so on, and the costs. Wages have been largely stagnant for several years now, and the main living costs, such as those for housing, fuel and food, are all rising. For families, whether they are on benefits or in work, the challenges in trying to meet their children's needs are becoming larger and larger.

The Scottish Government has done things that will help to reduce costs, such as increasing the number of hours of funded childcare. Such initiatives at a governmental level reduce costs for families, and they can help. The Scottish Parliament now has powers over social security that it did not have before, but it only has them in certain areas. The Parliament has to think about

how it can use those powers strategically to reduce poverty, which is one of the key principles in the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. There are a number of areas in which the Scottish Parliament has powers and can act and there are a number of areas in which it has no powers and cannot act. It does not have powers over means-tested benefits or over the level of the national minimum wage. Therefore, the Parliament has to be creative in thinking about how it can use the powers that it does have in order to be most effective in reducing poverty.

I see part of the commission's role as offering advice to ministers, as well as holding them to account. Part of the commission's remit is to look at what works and what does not work and I believe that the people who know what works are the people who are at the sharp end of poverty.

The Convener: That aspect is at the heart of my final question and the deputy convener will follow up on it. Should you take on the role of chair of the commission, obviously your relationship with the Government will change. You said that it is important, but hopefully you will say a bit more about how you would scrutinise or challenge the actions of Government if you thought that it was not going far enough or that it was going in a direction that may have unintended consequences. Could you say a little bit more about the experience that you have in making such challenges? You would likely have to get your commissioners together first, but which areas do you think you would like to concentrate on?

Bill Scott: I do not see it as my role only—you are right that it is for the commission as a whole. If I am appointed, one of my key tasks would be to help recruit the other members of the commission, because a collective view must be reached. That will be based on the evidence on what works and does not work that is presented to us and that we seek out. It is very difficult for me to say what the commission will recommend to the Parliament, because I am not the commission and I do not pretend to have those policies in place. The policies should be decided by way of a consensus of the commission, after we have looked at the evidence. It is easy for me to talk generally about social security, for example; it is much more difficult for me to talk about what advice we might offer on how to use the powers that the Parliament and the Government have.

The Convener: I am not asking so much about the advice that you might offer, but rather for examples of how you have carried out such scrutiny in a previous role. It is not about what the advice to Government may be, but about the areas of particular interest that you would like to focus on. You do not have the gig yet, so you are not bound by what you say here, but it would be

interesting for the committee to know what areas you would like to focus on.

Bill Scott: The commission's work plan will be drawn up by the commission and not just by me, but social security is one area in which I have a lot of experience, and I have appeared in front of this committee a number of times. I believe that there is potential in social security regarding the use of powers in relation to top-up and targeting, in order to be most effective in helping families that face the greatest risk of falling into poverty. That would include families with disabled children and disabled parents, lone-parent families and black and minority ethnic families. That is one area.

Another area might be the costs that impact on people's lives, such as housing costs, and where Government action could be most effective in reducing those costs. With regard to eliminating poverty in the future, an area to consider is educational attainment and the question of what the Government can do to ensure that children from poorer households get the same opportunities in life as other children. There is a large range of areas in which the Scottish Parliament and Government have powers and in which the commission could be effective in making recommendations.

With regard to my holding the Government to account, people know that I have engaged over quite a period with the Government and have looked at legislation with a critical eye when it has been proposed, and I hope that I have managed to work successfully with both parliamentarians and the Government in amending that legislation to improve it. For example, with the recent Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018, one of our objectives was to ensure that all disabled people would have access to advocacy support. The minister was not in favour of that at the outset and we had to convince her that it would help with her objective of getting it right the first time for the social security agency. Scrutiny works best when we can convince those with whom we have a difference that what we are asking them to do will help them to attain their objectives. If the Parliament's and the Government's objectives are to reduce poverty and the commission can show that carrying out certain actions will help with that task, that makes the Government's role easier and it makes the commission effective in its role.

I am certainly used to holding the Government to account. Anybody who has read Inclusion Scotland's briefings, which are usually prepared by me or one of the staff whom I manage, will see that we praise the Government where it takes the right action and hold it to account where we think that it could do better. It has always been my view that we are there to assist the Government in doing its job better, whatever its political hue.

The Convener: That is very helpful. You might think that members around the table already know some of the information that I am asking for—maybe they do—but this is the public-facing part of the process and it is important to put that information on the record for folk out there who are watching today's proceedings.

That completes my questions for the moment. Pauline McNeill is next.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning, Bill. We know each other well. You have appeared at committee on many occasions and there is no doubt that you have done very valuable work with the committee.

Regarding the appointment process, you will be aware that the committee's work was integral to persuading the Government that we should follow this process for the important appointment of chair of the Poverty and Inequality Commission. I have two questions. You have probably covered the first one in what you have said, but it is important to get your response on the record. Obviously, the commission chair must be willing to challenge the Government when necessary, because there has to be an arm's-length relationship between the commission and the Government. Can you say a bit more about that? The committee will be discussing your appointment later in private, but I need to hear from you now for the record about the level of independence that you will seek to have from the Government when it comes to probably the biggest single issue that faces Parliament—tackling poverty. Will you be robust in challenging the Government on poverty, when the time comes?

Bill Scott: Again, I say that I will be surprised if anybody has not heard me speaking about poverty. It is a passion for me, and I sometimes have to apologise for how passionate I get about it. I get angry when I see how people's lives are damaged by poverty—especially poverty that could be prevented.

10:00

I honestly have no doubts about my ability to be independent of Government and to hold it to account: if it is not doing everything that it can to reduce poverty, I will want to know why. The commission's role must be to hold the Government to the highest possible standards. I cannot predict the political persuasion of Governments over the lifetime of the child poverty plan up to 2030, but who is in power does not really matter to me. In trying to improve legislation, I have worked with parliamentarians from every political party that is represented in Parliament, and I will continue to do so, regardless of whether I get the position. If people want to achieve

positive change, I am willing to work with them to achieve it. I am willing to work with any Government—now and in the future.

I am also quite a hard taskmaster, in that I look for the best possible outcomes for people. I see the commission's role as being to represent those who have no voice in our society. Many people who live in poverty feel that they have been abandoned by mainstream politics—many do not turn out to vote, and so on. We need to reach out to them and say that not only do we care about them, but we are doing something about them, and are not just talking the talk.

Pauline McNeill: You gave a bit of your analysis of poverty in your response to the convener, but there are a couple of things that you did not mention. Naomi Eisenstadt, who has been the Government's adviser for the first three years of this parliamentary session, talks extensively about poverty being about more than just income—that it is also about the power balance in society and poor people not having the same networks as people who are not poor. I am keen to know whether you share that view.

Secondly, you will be aware that some of us supported successful amendments on people with disabilities and single parents to the bill that became the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. It seems to be that under universal credit, single parents are highly discriminated against. You have not mentioned single parents so far, so I want to be clear that you share that analysis.

Bill Scott: I think that I did mention single parents, who have done worst under the system, overall. When I was a welfare rights worker, I specialised in employment rights and I worked with a number of women's organisations using European law to extend rights on holiday entitlement to women. It was largely women who were affected, because part-time workers were being denied what should have been their rights. I have kept up that work ever since. I still work closely with Close the Gap, Engender, Scottish Women's Aid and, in particular, One Parent Families Scotland, which acts as the secretariat for the Scottish campaign on welfare reform.

I know the gender aspects of poverty very well. We need to take into account women's experiences, which can be different and more intense than men's experiences of poverty, because women are also often left with caring responsibilities and the task of putting food on the table when not enough money is coming into the house.

For me, understanding lived experience is absolutely key to learning about the main difficulties that are faced by people who live in poverty. We can use those experiences when we

look at what our responses should be, so that they are tailored to meet the needs of people who are most affected by major policy changes.

In the past few years, those people have been disabled people and lone parents, but about 66 per cent of all children who are living in poverty are from working families, so we need to address that, as well. That is particularly the case for working lone-parent households that childcare provision does not suit. It is not just about having more childcare; it is about having wraparound childcare that allows women to make the life choices that they want to make—to work, if they want to work.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): As Pauline McNeill has said, we have worked closely together, particularly on the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. I have two questions, to probe a wee bit further. The first is about your current full-time job. Inclusion Scotland is clearly quite close to the Scottish Government, in the sense that the door is open and you can speak to ministers, which I think is positive. How do you see the balance between having to go and be a lobbyist one day and the next morning being commissioner? Do you see any conflict between the two and, if so, how would you manage that?

Bill Scott: That is a fair question, and one that I was asked at my earlier interview, too. In a way, I do not see why it should affect the day job, because they are two completely separate roles, and I do not just speak about social security when I go to see Government or—most of the time—when I go to see ministers. As you know, I have been working with Social Security Scotland since it was established earlier this year, and with various stakeholder reference groups, and I do not go in there as a lobbyist. I try to share my knowledge of what does and does not work for disabled people, and encourage the agency's staff to ask disabled people and to involve them in policy making. In many of ways, that I have two roles will not matter that much, although I acknowledge that, on public occasions, the conflict might look more obvious.

We will have to discuss internally in Inclusion Scotland who speaks out on an issue when disability and poverty are being discussed, to make sure that it is not me, and we will have to have similar discussions within the commission. I would be reluctant to speak on disability and poverty issues, so I hope that another commission member might do it, otherwise it might look like I am harping on and using the role as a platform for the other. I do not want it to be seen like that, and nor do I think that my interests and my passion for reducing poverty are limited to disabled people.

As I said, my background is that I have worked right across the main equalities groups. Although I have never worked for a lesbian, gay, bisexual,

transgender and intersex organisation, I have worked alongside such groups on cross-sectional and intersectional issues, so I take the poverty and inequality part of the commission's role really seriously.

Arrangements would have to be made for somebody else to speak out on Inclusion Scotland's behalf on disability and poverty, and somebody else could speak out on the commission's behalf on disability and poverty, but other than that I do not think that the vast majority of the work that I do is lobbying, as such. I do a lot of lobbying with members, so you probably know me for that, but a lot of the work that I do is practical work—trying to assist not just Government but third sector and public sector organisations to improve their services so that, in practice, they can deliver for disabled people. I can see how the commission could help in that, in terms of local child poverty plans, but an evidence-based approach would be taken to see what works at local level, based on what people in communities tell us.

Jeremy Balfour: That is helpful. To be transparent, I note that you and I probably come from politically opposite extremes, although we can co-operate on specific issues. You have made it clear within your application that you have political affiliations, which are well known. How would you lay aside your personal political views and work with the Government of a different political perspective in 2021? How would you see that working in a constructive way?

Bill Scott: I make the point again that, as an employee of a charity, I must operate in a non-political or apolitical way when I go about my work. I hope that I do that. In doing so—this is genuinely the case personally as well as in the role—I have always been able and willing to work with anybody who wants to work with the organisation that I have been working with, whether that is Inclusion Scotland or Lothian Anti Poverty Alliance or Edinburgh and Lothians Racial Equality Council, to try to effect change that will better the lives of the people whom I represent.

I know that everybody that comes in here is an elected member who wants to change the world for the better—so do I. The starting point is very similar, and that is what makes it easy to work with people who are trying to achieve positive change, whatever their political background and beliefs. I have respect for everybody who does that.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): In your application, you talk about the fact that

“higher proportions of Black and Minority Ethnic people, disabled people and women”

are living in poverty. Today, you have spoken about the people who are at the sharp end of

poverty being best placed to come up with solutions, and you have said that your first job, should you be appointed, would be recruitment of commission members. How do you see that recruitment role of forming the membership of the commission reflecting the people at the sharp end—black and minority ethnic people, disabled people and women?

Bill Scott: It would not be only me selecting members: that would have to be based on the public appointments process. I would be keen to work with people in public appointments in order to try to encourage applications from the groups that Mark Griffin listed. I believe fundamentally that if the commission does not have lived experience among its membership, it will not be driven by the current needs of the groups that are most affected by poverty. We can do our best to reach out.

At the moment—I am thinking about this as a potential conflict of interests in the future—I am a board member of the Poverty Alliance. That board has members who have lived experience. I would encourage such people to apply from disabled people's organisations, lone-parent organisations and so on. I have met such individuals and I know that they could perform a useful role on the commission.

I have almost weekly contact with groups and individuals who are living in poverty, and have the contacts that can encourage people to come forward. I am very keen that such people get over the hurdles of the public appointments system and make it on to the commission. We would be missing something if we did not manage to represent society—especially the people who are living in poverty in Scottish society.

I doubt that all the board members would be such people, but we can do our best to ensure that the right people come forward and are supported through the application process. My organisation currently helps people who are going for public appointments, and a number of other organisations do the same. The Poverty Alliance has the get heard initiative, which encourages people to take on such responsibilities and to get their voices heard at a higher level. By reaching out through such groups, we should be able to attract at least some people to apply and, I hope, get through the appointment process and on to the commission.

10:15

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): You obviously have a great deal of expertise and experience in the area, and it is clear that you are passionate about the subject matter, which is hugely important. The chair is a key role in any organisation. The committee finds it challenging to

scrutinise some of the legislation, because it is very technical and complex. I realise that you have a background in welfare rights, but I would like to understand how you will help to lead the commission in understanding the legislative opportunities that exist and how you will keep abreast of developments between the two Parliaments to ensure that the commission delivers as optimally as we would all like it to.

Bill Scott: I have been a policy professional for a long time, so I am certainly used to digesting a lot of documents, but I am also used to producing briefings that, I hope, are accessible to people. I know where to look and I know the legislative process inside out—maybe not quite as well as some members of the committee, but as well as anybody who is not a parliamentarian can. I also worked in the Parliament for four years. I have worked with the Scottish Parliament information centre in the past, and I am part of the expert group on social security. I know where the information sources are and I know how to make information intelligible. I am sure that, working with the secretariat of the commission, we will be able to brief people about the opportunities and the barriers to effecting change. We will be able to make well-reasoned and good recommendations to Government on how it can go about its job of trying to reduce poverty.

I do not see it only as a national role, though. Certainly, the commission's role is to advise the Government and hold it to account but, if we can, we should assist local authorities and national health service boards in going about their child poverty planning. An ex-colleague of mine, Hannah McCulloch from the Child Poverty Action Group, is working at the Improvement Service. I know her well—I have worked with her for years, and she has the same background as me, as she worked with a disabled people's organisation at one point.

We could do a lot of work to encourage bottom-up approaches as well as top-down approaches, and that is just as important in many ways. Just before I came into the meeting, I was talking to someone about credit unions. I have been in a credit union since I was a low-paid worker, and it was helpful to us in giving us low-cost credit. I know that the Government supports credit unions and wants them to be rolled out further. I hope that the commission will consider how we can provide low-cost credit, because it reduces costs and makes income go further. We might not be able to raise wages, but if we can reduce costs, that is another effective way of reducing poverty.

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): I have two questions. First, I am sure that you are more than aware that there can sometimes be a bit of cynicism about commissions and what they

can achieve. What would you say to that? What do you anticipate that the commission will achieve in five years' time that will make a tangible difference?

Bill Scott: If we have not made a tangible difference, I would consider myself and the commission to be a failure. We need to be realistic about what can be achieved, but we also need to push Government to do everything that it can. That will become even more important over the next few years. There could potentially be fall-out from Brexit on the economy, and even more people could be pushed into poverty than there are now.

The commission can only do so much. It does not have the levers, but it could come up with good, evidence-based recommendations on what would be most effective—I hate using the phrase “give the most bang for your buck”—and ask how we can use the powers and financial resources of Government to effect the most change that we can.

People have to make difficult choices at times about the priorities for change. I would very much see the commission taking a collegiate approach, in which everybody has to own the recommendations that we make. We will sometimes have difficult arguments, but I am used to that; I have served on a number of boards that have not always seen eye to eye. If you come to it with the approach that you have a job to do, which is to make the best possible recommendations for the groups of people who are hardest hit, you are starting from the right place—you have the same aim.

I think that the commission can make a positive difference by making good recommendations to Government that are non-political. The Government's justification for doing things could be that they are not coming from a political agenda, but are what the Poverty and Inequality Commission has recommended through an evidence-based case and therefore it has to do them.

Those things might not always be popular with all of society, which can be difficult in politics, but it can help if the Government has good evidence behind its actions and knows that they will be most effective. The commission can provide it with the ammunition to counter detractors who do not want a particular action to be taken. The commission should be playing a more objective role.

Shona Robison: You spoke earlier about people overcoming the hurdles in the public appointments system, which is something that I feel strongly about. How do we make it easier for people from more varied walks of life and backgrounds to get into serving the public good?

Bill Scott: It is not just in public appointments; employment recruitment in general has become more difficult for people in a lot of ways. Competency-based approaches are good in that they look at people's experience of doing something and ask them to explain how what they did effected change in their workplace or society, but it is difficult for a lot of people who do not have experience of that sort of process to word their application to get through it.

At Inclusion Scotland, we have been working with disabled people to talk them through what would go best in their applications. That sort of coaching should be available to people from low-income and BME backgrounds, lone parents and others who want to go through the public appointments process. If we can make that available, it is worth its weight in gold. Often, people have the experience but they do not know how to express it on paper. Once people get as far as an interview, they can often make a convincing case for being given a post or an appointment. It is about getting people through that first stage, so that they can at least come before a selection panel.

The people who are involved in making public appointments could do more to reach out to people who are underrepresented on public boards, to encourage them to apply and to give them the tools that they need to be able to express themselves in what, for them, will be a new way. People will have been used to being asked just to list what they have done, rather than talk about how what they did in their role benefited the organisation that they worked for. We could do more. I might not be able to do that, if I am appointed as chair of the commission, but I hope that I would be able to encourage some of the groups that are out there, such as Gingerbread, which works with lone parents, to work with people who are making applications and talk them through the competency-based stuff, so that they give themselves the best chance.

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): Good morning, Bill—I suspect that you have met all of us at some point.

I have three questions. The first is on a quick point of clarification. You said on your application form that you took up the post of acting manager of Inclusion Scotland in 2011, and then you refer yourself as—still—acting manager. Is that right?

Bill Scott: No, I am not. I am deputy chief exec of Inclusion.

Michelle Ballantyne: Right. That is what I thought. I wanted to clarify the issue, because it was on your form and I thought that I had misunderstood it.

There are two issues that I want to pick up on. First, social security is a safety net. It is the thing that should help someone when things are not going well or when they have gone wrong, to bounce the person back on to their feet again. How do you see the role of the Poverty and Inequality Commission in the context of the preventative agenda—that is, in preventing the need for the social security safety net in the first place?

Bill Scott: Prevention is better than cure, and if we have a well-performing economy, in which people are adequately rewarded for the work that they do, we can certainly prevent a lot of poverty in our society.

I agree with you that social security is a safety net at times of crisis. However, for some people it is there to meet the extra costs of disability, for example, which continue, rather than being one-off costs.

We have to think again about the purpose of different benefits, so that they are used most effectively. I have heard talk in Government and the civil service about the possibility of a scheme such as Motability for fuel costs, so that, through bulk buying, the overall cost for households could be reduced. That would be part of a preventative approach, because if we can use the resources that we have to reduce the fuel costs of low-income households, we will be reducing a key cost that can plunge a family that is managing into a situation in which they are not managing. We need to look at that idea seriously. I have come to no conclusions.

Michelle Ballantyne: But how would you see the role of the commission on the preventative agenda?

10:30

Bill Scott: The commission's role would be to examine the evidence and consider what could be achieved and what cost savings could be effected by such a change in policy. It would consider how many people the policy would affect, how many children it would lift out of poverty and so on. We would then present objective conclusions to Government about what we think could be achieved by doing or not doing it, or whether an alternative approach would be better. In other words, we would weigh up what the best options are. The policy that I mentioned is being talked about in terms of disability benefits, but I know that some local authorities have been looking at that for tenants, too.

We would highlight which approach has the best chances of success and buy-in among the people whom you are attempting to reach. The whole idea of that scheme is that the more people who join it,

the greater the increase in the bulk-buying power and the lower the cost that can be achieved. If you were to go after something like that, you would want more people to participate in it than do not. The issue is how to best achieve that. As I say, the commission's role would be to weigh up the options and, I hope, make the correct recommendation to Government about which of them would be most effective.

Michelle Ballantyne: You say that the commission will look at evidence and present it. Do you see the commission's role as one in which it draws evidence from work that other people have done, or will it engage people more widely and draw on its own evidence?

Bill Scott: Both. I hope that we will engage with people at the grass-roots community level about what works and whether that can be rolled out nationally. Some solutions might apply just to local issues; although they work well there, they might not work well elsewhere. Other solutions might have the potential to be introduced in communities across Scotland. In those cases, I hope that the commission would tell the Government to look at an example that works and ask whether local authorities and NHS boards could support community initiatives like that in their areas.

It is about testing things. As I say, it will be about going right down to community level; it will also be about seeking evidence from those with the greatest amount of knowledge on that issue. I do not pretend to be an expert on fuel poverty; I would want to speak to the people who are the experts. That would be people who live with fuel poverty; sometimes, it would also be those who can say how to purchase electricity power, or whatever, and use it to reduce costs.

Michelle Ballantyne: Presumably, on the other side of the fence, you would want to speak to the employers and suppliers and so on.

Bill Scott: Exactly.

Michelle Ballantyne: I was particularly interested in your response to Shona Robison's question about having a broader base of people on the commission. I hear what you are saying about inclusivity, but your role, particularly in the first year, would very much be about setting the ethos, driving the agenda and ensuring that you have a focus. I want to tighten that up. If you were to be appointed as chair, what would you want to achieve in that first year? What would you judge your success by at the end of the first 12 months when looking back and asking yourself whether you have delivered?

Bill Scott: The first thing would be recruitment. Getting the breadth of experience that we need on the commission will be key, so that we have different voices and expertise. I would want to

know that the other members were bringing something to the table that I do not have. I would expect them to have the same passion about reducing poverty, but I would want them to have expertise and more knowledge than I have in other areas.

In the first year, I would want us to establish our work programme, our priorities and a risk register; make sure that we try to avoid damage to the commission's reputation; look at how to establish our independence from Government in the public eye; and highlight the fact that we are there to listen to the communities and that we want to work with them to improve people's lives.

I suppose that it is about establishing an independent persona and a work programme that is achievable, and setting our own priorities, which would be to show our independence from the Government and to look at what is happening and making sure that we fit in with the policy agenda. We can be independent in commenting, but we need to know what is happening on the ground to be able to have influence. If we know that opportunities are coming up, it would be stupid to ignore them. We need to do the full analysis that we would do when setting policy for any organisation and working out a business plan.

The important thing will be to get us established through recruitment, set our sails to the wind and say which direction we will take, and to get on with it. That will be enough for the first year. Thereafter, we would hope to have more influence, but the first year is about getting established solidly so that we know we are working on the right issues and that the recommendations that we eventually make will be solidly grounded in evidence.

Michelle Ballantyne: You have talked about establishing the commission as independent from Government. How can you establish yourself as independent in terms of being politically neutral and evidence based rather than politically based?

Bill Scott: We have to be seen as independent of Government, which means at least speaking to some of the communities who feel neglected and that they are not being heard, telling them that we are here to listen, and asking them to give us their ideas about how they want us to tackle the problem of persistent poverty in our society. We need to tell them that we are not just going to listen to them—we will take on board what they are telling us.

I know that the Government does that too, but the commission will be seen as fully independent by going out and being seen to not just talk the talk but walk the walk, and by eventually making recommendations that might be difficult for the Government to live with. That will probably not happen until we make some of the difficult

judgments that we will have to make. We can start that process in the first year by speaking out on poverty and trying to convince society that it must be tackled. Poverty does not just damage the lives of people who are living with it; it damages the fabric of society.

We have to get the message out that we might be talking about dealing with this problem, but it is a problem for everybody and not just for those who are living in poverty.

The Convener: There is one final question from Keith Brown before we draw to a close. We are probably going beyond our allotted time but, as this is the first time that we have gone through this process and it needs to be open, public and transparent, we want to allow as much time as possible for questions.

I see no bids for further questions; members should catch my eye if they have a question, but they will have to be brief.

Keith Brown: I have two questions, convener, if that is possible; I do not have five questions like Michelle Ballantyne. I am happy to get brief answers.

On the one hand, Bill Scott and I have quite similar backgrounds, although there were six kids in my family; like him, I have been in the public sector for a long time. Throughout that time, I have had to argue to make sure that councils put into their anti-discrimination policies the grounds of their political views. That was surprisingly hard to do with a number of councils. I abhor the idea that we would include somebody because of their political views, and I hope that that will be the same during the appointment of the commission members.

On the other hand, you mentioned the voiceless. You will inevitably be a product of all the good organisations that you have worked with in the anti-poverty field, in which there are very good people. As you have identified, there are people who will not relate to any of those bodies. They are completely cut off; as you said, they do not vote. How do you intend that the commission will engage with such people?

Bill Scott: That might require an answer that is longer than the question was.

I think that there is work that can be done to reach those people, but it is not easy. I have worked with homeless people, so I know that they can be among the most difficult people to reach, but there is always somebody with whom they have to be in contact. In their case, quite often, it is health services that they need to be in contact with. You need to think about where the groups that you are trying to reach have to go and attempt to reach them that way. I am a big supporter of

welfare rights in health settings, because I think that that is where people who are in the greatest need often go, even when they have completely lost contact with their local authority and so on.

Bringing together such people is a much bigger task. Agencies such as Oxfam and the Poverty Alliance have done work that has been successful in reaching those groups, but there are always people who are right on the margins. It is necessary to take them into account even though they are not always present. We need to keep on thinking about how we can bring them into the tent to begin that discussion. There are techniques that can be used to reach out to those people. Through health services, some people can be reached who might not otherwise be reached. There will always be groups that are extremely difficult to engage with.

Keith Brown: In relation to the Smith commission and what is now the devolved settlement, it strikes me that, with experience, it is possible to see that the arrangements in some areas are a complete nightmare and do not work. The situation in consumer protection, for example, is bizarre. I will not ask you to say which powers should rest where, but is there one measure in the field that you expect to cover in relation to which it would make a big difference if the relevant power—I will not talk about things being devolved or re-reserved or whatever—lay with the Government that it does not currently lie with? I hope that you could follow that.

Bill Scott: Our past record on the Smith commission is fairly well known—we argued for all social security powers to be devolved. That is Inclusion Scotland's view, and it is probably mine, too. A mishmash involving some social security powers lying in one place and some lying in another is not an easy situation for policy makers to deal with. I would like all social security powers to be devolved, but that is a personal view, not the commission's view; the commission will take its own view. More devolution in that area might be helpful, because it could lead to more coherent policy responses. It would make it possible to tailor all the benefits in such a way as to allow us to do the job that we want to do.

However, that is not the situation. We must work with what we have got. We must look at how we can utilise the powers that we have in the most effective way possible. The Scottish Government does not have power over the minimum wage, so it has chosen to go down the route of encouraging employers to pay their staff the living wage. That has been effective for thousands of workers. A lot can be done through encouragement and other means. We need to think about what we can do through things such as the living wage campaign, as well as what we cannot do.

The Convener: Okay—

Bill Scott: I would like to make one final point. I was asked at the outset what my vision was. My vision is of a Scotland that is free of want, hunger and the stigma of poverty, and I think that everybody in the room wants to achieve that. I hope that, if I am appointed, we can work collectively on that.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Mr Scott. This is probably the first time that I have had what feels like a job interview experience in a public meeting in Parliament. That has made it a slightly artificial process. If it had been a normal evidence session, I suspect that I would have truncated some of your responses and some of the questioning, but I felt that we had to let the process run its course for the sake of public transparency. There is no point in doing these things unless we let them run their course.

Thank you for your time. I should inform you that the committee will report back to Parliament on the appointment decision before us. We hope to do that in good order. I wish you a very happy Christmas when it comes.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

10:45

The Convener: We move to agenda item 4, under which the committee is invited to agree to hold the discussion about its next potential inquiry—which I understand will be on housing—in private at its next meeting. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: We previously agreed to take item 5 in private, so we now move into private session.

10:46

Meeting continued in private until 11:19.

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