



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Social Security Committee

**Thursday 12 November 2020**

**Session 5**



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**SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE**

**22<sup>nd</sup> Meeting 2020, Session 5**

**CONVENER**

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

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)

\*Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)

\*Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

\*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

\*Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)

\*Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green)

\*Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Martin Canavan (Aberlour)

Paula Doherty (Dumfries and Galloway Council)

Sally Dyson (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations)

Richard Gass (Rights Advice Scotland)

Sheila McKandie (Highland Council)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Anne Peat

**LOCATION**

Virtual Meeting



## Scottish Parliament Social Security Committee

Thursday 12 November 2020

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]*

### Decision on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (Bob Doris):** Good morning—I welcome everyone to the Social Security Committee's 22nd meeting in 2020. No apologies have been received; we have a full house of committee members.

Agenda item 1 is to decide whether to take in private item 3, on consideration of the evidence that we will hear today. I will assume that members are content to do so, unless anyone indicates otherwise in the chat box.

I see that we are agreed, as no member has indicated otherwise.

## Social Security Response to Covid-19 (Inquiry)

09:01

**The Convener:** Item 2 is evidence on Covid-19 and social security. This is the committee's second evidence session in its inquiry into the role of social security in the response to, and recovery from, Covid-19.

There are two panels of witnesses this morning. I welcome our first panel: Sally Dyson, who is head of digital participation at the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, and Martin Canavan, who is head of policy and participation at Aberlour. I thank you both for supporting our inquiry.

We move straight to questions, the first of which is from Jeremy Balfour.

**Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** About £80 million of investment has been made available through community funding packages. From your conversations and experience, has that money got down to the grass-roots organisations, and has it had an impact on local communities? Going forward, how can we make sure that the money reaches not only the big organisations, but the small grass-roots organisations that deal with local communities?

**Sally Dyson (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations):** Thank you for that important question. It is critical that we get funding down to local people.

SCVO supported the wellbeing fund, which represented £50 million of the emergency funding. We did so by supporting a lot of voluntary organisations—more than 1,000—across every community and neighbourhood in Scotland. To make sure that the money got down to the grass roots effectively, we had a brilliant partnership of organisations. We had some national funders, who brought their rapid funding expertise to the fore and, on the assessment and communication side, all the local third sector interfaces were represented. We were able to gain from their expertise and knowledge of who was doing fantastic things in local communities, and combine that with the knowledge of the national funders.

We are now getting a lot of monitoring information from the organisations that have been funded. The monitoring process is light touch, in line with everything that we want it to do. We are starting to hear views on the impact that the support is having. From the immediate responses, we know that some of the support involved dropping food parcels on people's doorsteps. In addition, packages to support people's health and wellbeing were delivered either digitally or, where

it was safe to do so, to the doorstep. That included everything from colouring kits for kids to online movement sessions, which have really helped people.

The combination of doing stuff at scale on a national level and bringing in expertise at local level was critical in enabling us to see an impact as a result of that funding.

**Martin Canavan (Aberlour):** Thank you for inviting me along.

To answer your question, the distribution of much of the money that has been made available through various funding streams from the Scottish Government has—as Sally Dyson outlined—generally been excellent across the sector.

Aberlour has benefited in that it has received money through the various Scottish Government funding streams and has therefore been able to ensure that that money has been distributed directly to families and communities. In some respects, we have been working in partnership with local authorities and with other third sector organisations to deliver certain forms of support, such as food parcels for local families, during the pandemic.

More directly, Aberlour specifically—and the families we work with, who rely on us—has benefited from having money directed from the Scottish Government through our urgent assistance fund, which has allowed us to get cash directly into the pockets of families who desperately need it. That approach has also allowed us to work more closely with smaller local community-based organisations that represent particular groups of families and communities. In that way, we were able to make sure that the money from our fund was getting to the families that those organisations work with and support.

In our experience, it seems that the immediate funding that has been made available through the Scottish Government as a crisis response has, on the face of it, been distributed fairly well in the short term.

**Jeremy Balfour:** Thank you for those answers. It might be helpful for our inquiry if Sally Dyson could provide the committee with examples of the stories and feedback that she mentioned.

We do not know what the next three, four or five months will bring, but it is clear that, whatever happens, the third sector will have a very important role. How would you see the distribution of any more moneys that are made available taking place? Some of the feedback that I got early on suggested that very small organisations were struggling to access that money. Are there any other ways to make that process easier for very small charities?

**Sally Dyson:** That is another useful question, and we are doing some useful thinking around the wellbeing fund in particular, which was the fund with which SCVO was most involved.

With regard to stories about the impact on local organisations, we are currently pulling together a report, which we will publish very soon; we can ensure that it is made available directly to the committee. It will contain not only statistics, but some heart-warming stories of the impact that the funding has had. I will definitely make sure that the report comes to you.

We took a lot of learning from the operation of the wellbeing fund and the partnership work that was involved. The experience with that fund was interesting because, within seven or eight days of the pandemic being announced, we, as a coalition of funders, were able to get small amounts of money—£1,000 or £2,000—out to small organisations.

There was no process in place, but we already had a good relationship with a lot of those organisations. We picked up the phone and spoke to them, and asked them whether some emergency funding could help them immediately. Almost always, the answer was yes. It was brilliant that we had the authority from the Scottish Government to enable us to do that—obviously, there were some checks and balances involved. There was then a bidding round for larger amounts of money, which involved a simple application form.

As I said, we had more than a thousand organisations involved across the piece. That was a good start, but we need to go further. We are now in a period in which we need to reflect, but we can do so quickly—indeed, we have already started that work.

Working with the sectoral interfaces was important. As part of the process, we had conversations with organisations that we funded to ask them whether they knew of other organisations in their local areas that were doing some great stuff and could also help. In that way, we were able to expand the network of organisations that we knew were doing brilliant stuff and get money to them.

**Jeremy Balfour:** That was helpful—thank you.

**The Convener:** I will move on to the next theme—Jeremy Balfour's line of questioning leads on to it quite nicely. I will bring in Tom Arthur afterwards.

I note that the funds had some underspends. For example, the supporting communities fund was underspent by something like £19 million, and there was a small underspend in the wellbeing fund. The Scottish Government has now created

the community and third sector recovery programme. Can we identify from that underspend that there was an issue with getting the money out? Alternatively, does it mean that the funding was sufficient, and it was therefore right and reasonable to package up and refocus that spend?

Does Sally Dyson want to comment on that? I see that she is nodding her head.

**Sally Dyson:** Yes, convener—I did not quite get my finger to the keyboard to put an R in the chat box.

We were not centrally involved with the community recovery fund, but the Scottish Government asked SCVO to set up a coronavirus information hub, which we had wanted to do in any case. A key part of that—the part that was most visited and appreciated—was about involving independent funders and grant and trust funders in our work with the Scottish Government funds. In the immediate aftermath of the pandemic being announced, we spoke to them to find out what they were doing to support the organisations with which they already had a relationship.

A lot of those organisations had already been in contact, and the funders were freeing up—or derestricting—the grant funding. We were essentially telling organisations that if they needed to use the money in a different way to respond to what they were seeing in front of them, they should go ahead and do that—they did not need to ask us. We simply told them, “Tell us when you’ve done it, and tell us the stuff that you’ve done.”

The emergency funding was critical, but there was a lot of funding around initially, and people were able to be flexible in what they were doing, which was amazing. We rapidly realised that the situation would not last for only a few weeks or months, but would stretch into the distance, so communities needed to consider how they wanted, and were able, to respond over the longer term.

Having followed how the funding pattern flowed, we now have the community and third sector recovery programme, which is focusing on how we establish more resilience within communities and community organisations to help with people’s changing needs. It was great for us to know that the funding profile was there and that it was secure, and that we would be able to develop, learn from and do different things with that funding in order to meet the on-going needs of communities.

**The Convener:** That is helpful. I was trying to ascertain that any underspend did not indicate an inability to get the cash to where it had to be within the third and voluntary sector—what Sally Dyson said was reassuring on that point.

Does Martin Canavan have any comments to make in that regard?

**Martin Canavan:** I can only really speak about the funding streams that Aberlour was able to access and the money that the Scottish Government distributed to us through those funds.

We would have been happy to channel as much funding as the Scottish Government was able to make available through our urgent assistance fund, for example, so as to get it directly to families. I know that other organisations that operate hardship funds would, similarly, have been happy to distribute as much of that money as the Scottish Government had made available.

One caveat is that organisations such as ours—albeit that Aberlour is a national charity and a relatively large organisation—have capacity issues when it comes to how to administer that. There were, and indeed are, limitations on how much funding we are able to distribute.

09:15

As we move towards recovery, the Scottish Government could consider how some of the funding that has not been distributed could now be made available—for example, to help support services that are struggling with capacity. I am thinking in particular of large organisations, which might not be eligible for some of the smaller tranches of funding, but which could benefit from what is available from the recovery fund.

We have seen a rising level of need, to which we have been able to respond through our urgent assistance fund and other charitable hardship funds to get money directly to families. We have seen a corresponding rise in demand on our family support services. As a result of funding constraints, however, that demand has not necessarily been accompanied by a rise in capacity to meet it. The Scottish Government might want to think about directing some recovery funding to address that.

**The Convener:** That is helpful.

We are experiencing a second spike in Covid-19 and we are trying to identify needs and to find out where the unmet demand is. I represent Maryhill and Springburn in Glasgow. Politicians sometimes put out parliamentary reports. The front page of my most recent parliamentary report was full of all the advice lines that are out there to support people and to make sure that they can get food, including the national assistance helpline.

One local organisation contacted me to say that it had had a spike in requests for food support and assistance. It is a fantastic organisation and wanted to make sure that unmet needs were being identified and met.

That made me think about the third sector community recovery programme and those funds. If community organisations are now seeing a spike in demand for food and other support, what funds are currently open for them to apply to so that they can quickly get cash to meet that increasing, real-time demand?

**Sally Dyson:** As part of our learning from the wellbeing fund and from talking to other funders, we wanted to make sure that something was baked in at the start of the recovery fund programme to enable flexibility. Organisations have to indicate what they want to do with that money. However, we have baked into that that if we see a spike in Covid cases or go into or come out of a deeper lockdown, organisations can be flexible. They can use the money to meet the needs that they see in front of them. It is good that that fluid situation was considered from the beginning.

Depending on how long this goes on, we may need to request more money from the Scottish Government. Organisations must know that they have money to be able to meet the needs that they see in front of them. That is important, and it is brilliant that that was agreed.

**The Convener:** I might contact you about this after the meeting. What advice would you give to local MSPs who are trying to identify where the need is? Once we identify a need, we direct people to local voluntary and third sector organisations. That increases the demand and the pressure on those fantastic organisations. A lot of the money that they applied for, including the wellbeing fund and the food fund, petered out in September and October. We are now in November. What live funds are available to the third sector to allow it to meet that second spike in demand?

**Sally Dyson:** The live funds from the Scottish Government that I am aware of are the communities recovery fund and the adapt and thrive programme. Both of those were open from late September or early October.

Funds have been going out continually. I point the third sector to SCVO's Funding Scotland service, where it is available. The application form is simple. The message that we get from independent funders such as the national lottery and the Corra Foundation is that, if an organisation already has a relationship with a funder, it should first talk to its funder about what it is seeing because it is likely that the funder will be able to flex and adapt. That is the key message that is coming across.

The communities recovery fund is open. The turnaround time for applications is pretty quick—it takes about three weeks from application—and

there is lots of help, advice and support for organisations, if they need it.

**The Convener:** That reassures me, although I note that my local organisations are already well plugged into and supported by those networks.

My experience in Maryhill and Springburn has been that third sector organisations work closely together, and different organisations do not compete for the funds. Rather, they get together to put in one bid and—even across quite large areas—share the resources appropriately to ensure that those in the greatest need get help. That has been a success story; I assume and hope that that has happened more broadly elsewhere.

**Martin Canavan:** On the question about what advice to give to MSPs and others, Aberlour has an urgent assistance fund, as I mentioned—I might speak about that in a bit more detail. When people support families to apply to that fund, we are always willing and, I hope, able to help—certainly, in the immediate context of the crisis, we hope to support families.

The Scottish welfare fund is one obvious way in which families should be able to get support. We will probably talk about that in a bit more detail. What needs to be addressed is the wider knowledge and awareness of the Scottish welfare fund. I will take the opportunity to talk a bit about that, if I can.

**The Convener:** That will definitely come up, if not in this session, then in the next session, when we speak to some local authority colleagues.

**Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP):** A lot of the ground that I want to explore on the derestriction of funding and flexibility has already been covered.

I am keen to hear the views of Sally Dyson and Martin Canavan on what the impact of increased flexibility has been on the culture and behaviour of third sector organisations and social enterprises. What I have picked up anecdotally is that organisations that felt previously that the process for applying for funding could be a barrier now feel that the barrier has been reduced or entirely removed, which has encouraged them to be bolder and more ambitious. Indeed, some organisations that, previously, had not got that far with funding applications have now been able to receive funding. The way that people have described it to me is that organisations take more of an entrepreneurial approach to the funding schemes; they take the risk of applying, because there is not much time to assess their applications. It has given organisations the confidence to go for it, which has had some positive results on the ground. I know that from my constituency work in



Renfrewshire South. Do our witnesses want to echo anything that I have said?

**Sally Dyson:** I echo everything that you said. There is a fine balance between assessing applications properly and getting it done quickly. Organisations have come up with some really novel ways of supporting their communities and they are working more in collaboration with other local organisations. In some respects, that makes the assessment of applications easier, because there are fewer applications.

Although funders have always worked together, they are working together much more now. The Scottish Government and other funders were coming together collectively every fortnight up until last week—the meetings are now held monthly. They are exchanging knowledge about their practices and are learning quickly. People have been able to perhaps take a step out of the process and focus hard on getting money out quickly to communities.

I find it heartening that there is an on-going conversation about how we keep up the momentum, ensure that we learn from the experience that we have been through and do not go back to how we did things before. I am heartened that we are starting to see a change in the funding environment for local voluntary sector organisations.

**Tom Arthur:** Before I ask Martin Canavan a question, I want to pick up on what you have just said. I know that this is putting you on the spot, but could you distil three key lessons that have been learned from the experience about what we need to retain in relation to funding for the third sector, social enterprises and voluntary groups?

**Sally Dyson:** One is definitely about the derestriction of funding where possible. We know that it is not always possible, but we should do it where it is possible. A second is that funders should think carefully about what information they are asking for and what it will be used for, in order to shorten the application process and get the critical information. The third is about collaboration of funders. With the wellbeing fund and all the other emergency funds, we were able to create a hub. With the recovery fund, we have a single front door and a single application form for all the funders, so organisations apply once and their application is seen by a number of funders. It would be brilliant if that approach was taken further.

In short, the three things would be derestriction, having funders take out steps in the process where they can do so and having as many funders working together as possible.

**Tom Arthur:** I will pose the same questions to Martin Canavan. First, what are his general

reflections on the implications of having a more derestricted and flexible environment? Has that encouraged innovation and allowed organisations to develop in a way that they would not otherwise have been able to do? Perhaps he will also summarise the three key lessons that he has learned from the experience.

**Martin Canavan:** On your first point, I can speak only from Aberlour's point of view, but one thing that I would say about the response over the past six months is that, because of how the third sector operates and how organisations are structured, they are naturally more flexible and agile, which has allowed them—that includes us—to respond more flexibly to the need. Those organisations can work in a way that local authorities, just because of their size and structure, cannot always do.

It has been very positive just to be able to recognise that we are doing the right thing and to have the permission to respond to the need that we see in the way that we feel is best and with the flexibility that has been allowed through funding. I echo Sally Dyson's comments in that regard.

On your point about the three key things, I do not know whether I can identify anything to add to what Sally said.

**The Convener:** Do you have another question, Tom?

**Tom Arthur:** I see that Sally Dyson has typed an R in the chat bar, convener.

**The Convener:** You are more eagle eyed than I am. I apologise, Sally.

**Sally Dyson:** That is okay.

I just want to add one final thing, which is about listening to organisations. The SCVO has a history of working with thousands of organisations, and they have been asking for flexibility for a long time. Over the past six months, they have demonstrated just how fleet of foot they can be. Trust has really increased over the past six or eight months, between organisations and between funders and organisations. That has really blossomed, and we need to cherish it and take it forward. The situation has allowed organisations to do what they have been saying that they can do for a long time and to really demonstrate it.

09:30

**Tom Arthur:** I agree entirely. That has very much been my experience with organisations—*[Inaudible.]*—a long time, I know. That was very helpful.

**Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP):** I will focus my line of questioning on the level of individual need that the witnesses' organisations

and other third sector organisations have identified during Covid. What does that tell us about any weaknesses in the social security safety net system, to paraphrase? Importantly, how might those weaknesses be addressed and how will lessons be learned?

**Sally Dyson:** SCVO funds organisations that then support individuals. As I have said, up until now, it has been about getting money out, but we are now starting to receive rich information from organisations about whom they have supported, and how. We expect to be able to start sharing that information within the next couple of months.

**Shona Robison:** That would be very helpful. Will that information identify the interface that individuals and families have faced between the social security system and the support and help that they have required from organisations that have been funded locally? Will there be that granular detail?

**Sally Dyson:** We will definitely have some case studies that contain granular detail about individuals and families. We will also have greater statistics about the clusters of people who were supported, which communities they were supported in, what they were supported with and what worked. We will have both those things. The statistics will always be backed up by some great stories. We know that organisations love to tell us those stories and to share them, because that is how they reach us.

**Shona Robison:** That would be great information to share with the committee, once it is available.

I ask Martin Canavan the same question.

**Martin Canavan:** The short answer to your question is that the level of need for families and communities has been overwhelming and stark in many cases. Heriot-Watt University has undertaken an analysis of the use of our urgent assistance fund during the first six months of the pandemic. I think that that is due to be published next week, but I am more than happy to give the committee early sight of it and to share it after this morning's meeting.

I can talk about some of the top-line information and about what we have been able to identify over the past six months. There has been about a 1,400 per cent rise in the number of applications for our urgent assistance fund, compared with any other time in previous years. That equates to somewhere in the region of 2,000 families and 4,500 children whom we have been able to reach in the first six months.

As you can probably imagine, those families are in desperate situations and circumstances—they are in crisis—and have nowhere else to turn.

Those families were struggling to make ends meet before the pandemic and have fallen further, or have been pushed further or deeper, into poverty. One or both parents in such families might have been furloughed or lost their job as a result of the pandemic, or they might be self-employed. Families in those circumstances might have applied for universal credit but have a five-week wait, during which they might have no savings or income to draw on.

We have seen an incredible illustration of the scale of the need. I will get into the detail of what that need looks like. The vast majority of the grants that we provide to families—on average, the grants are £240 per family—are to help with the cost of food.

I think that 60 per cent of the applications to our fund are for assistance with food, but as well as helping with the provision, preparation and storage of food, we provide help with prepaid power cards and fuel, beds, bedding, children's clothing and white goods. It has become apparent to us that the level of need is alarming, and the circumstances that families are finding themselves in would probably be more recognisable as absolute rather than relative poverty. The situation is absolutely desperate. As I said, it has been quite overwhelming.

**Shona Robison:** You seem to be saying that two groups in particular have been affected. The first group consists of those who were already struggling before the pandemic and whose poverty levels have been severely exacerbated. The second group consists of people who are coming into contact with the social security system for the first time, who might never previously have come into contact with it, which will bring them up against the five-week wait for universal credit. Is that a fair summation of what you are saying?

**Martin Canavan:** It is. We have an analysis that we can share with the committee that provides a more demographic breakdown and more fixed data.

That summation is certainly the picture that we have seen. First, we have the groups who we know were struggling before Covid—the types of families and communities who are identified in the Scottish Government's "Every child, every chance: The Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018-2022"—who are now in even more desperate situations.

We also have those who, in advance of the pandemic, would probably have described themselves as being comfortable but now find themselves in circumstances in which they have had to come to Aberlour, or other organisations that have hardship funds, to get the help that they need.

I come back to the Scottish welfare fund, which I mentioned earlier, and the fact that the safety net might not be working in the way that it is supposed to work. We have found that about 10 per cent of the families who apply to our fund volunteer the information that they have unsuccessfully applied to the Scottish welfare fund before coming to us for help. That is also concerning. Because of the scale of our fund, we would not necessarily have been able to identify that as a particular challenge or issue in advance of the pandemic, but it has become quite a concern because of the sheer rise in the number of applications that we are seeing.

On the face of it, the reasons that families who are applying are giving, the circumstances that they are identifying and the issues for which they are requiring support urgently are things for which we would expect them to be able to go to the Scottish welfare fund to access the help and support that they need, but many times we are finding that that is simply not the case. In some authorities, it has been reported that things such as community care grants have been suspended or closed, so families have not been able to get help with white goods and other household items for which they might otherwise have been able to get support.

There are definitely problems with the safety net—the Scottish welfare fund, in particular.

**Shona Robison:** It sounds as though the information that you describe is a rich seam of information that would very pertinent to our inquiry, and sight of which would be helpful for us. I do not know whether this is included in that information, but it would also be helpful if you could provide evidence of geographical variation in use of the Scottish welfare fund—whether certain authorities are declining more people, and what the reasons for that are. Any information on that would be extremely helpful, too.

**Martin Canavan:** We will certainly provide whatever information we can provide. I think that the Poverty and Inequality Commission has provided a good analysis of use and distribution of the Scottish welfare fund. We have been able to provide some anecdotal evidence of where there might be challenges in relation to the fund and where it might be working better. We will share with the committee any further information that we are able to provide.

**Shona Robison:** Thank you.

**The Convener:** I see that Sally Dyson wants to come in. Sally—hold on to your thoughts for a second, because Rachael Hamilton has a supplementary question. It will have to be brief, Rachael, because of time constraints, but if you ask your question now, Sally can respond to the questions together.

**Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** Thanks, convener. Where does Aberlour direct families whose applications to the Scottish welfare fund have been turned down? Martin mentioned the Poverty and Inequality Commission, which has advised that there should be a right of appeal. What do you do when families are turned down?

**The Convener:** It makes sense for Martin Canavan to respond first, then we will go to Sally Dyson.

**Martin Canavan:** We provide whatever help and support we can provide. Our fund is there as a support mechanism for families that have nowhere else to go. There are some groups who are not eligible for the Scottish welfare fund and who rely on our funding—families who have no recourse to public funds, for example. In those circumstances, we help by providing whatever support we can through cash grants. If appropriate and possible, we might also provide items that families are looking for but have been unable to access through the Scottish welfare fund.

In responding to some of the challenges and issues relating to the Scottish welfare fund—accessibility and whether or not families can get the help to which they should be entitled—our efforts include highlighting where we find challenges and ensuring that you, as members of the committee, and others, including the Scottish Government, which we have engaged with on the issue, recognise where the weaknesses and challenges are. We do what we can to help and support the Scottish Government and local authorities to address the challenges.

**Sally Dyson:** I want to go back to the question about people being in contact with social services for the first time. That was at the forefront of voluntary and community organisations' thinking back in March, April and May with regard to applications, and of their conversations with us. Organisations looked at how they could identify themselves and make themselves visible to people who would not necessarily have realised that they needed support. Therefore, that thinking has already started in many organisations, and that change and adaptation is a clear example of their forward thinking.

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** Many of the submissions indicated that some groups are more severely affected than others, as we might expect. [*Inaudible*]*—them, and it is a common theme that the crisis is mostly felt by groups already identified, such as lone parents, black and minority ethnic families, young mothers, families with a disabled adult or child and families with a child under one. Do the witnesses agree with that or are there people who are not mentioned in that list but should be? For example, I would have thought that*

people who have been shielding—some people might have lost their jobs through shielding—would be included in that group. I am keen to know whether anyone has been missed out.

**Martin Canavan:** The groups that you mentioned, and which others have highlighted as being most affected, are probably consistent with what we have found.

I refer again to our urgent assistance fund. We have found the same: around 70 per cent of applications to our urgent assistance fund to support families are from single-parent households. Beyond that, black and minority ethnic community families are overrepresented in applications to our fund, and asylum-seeking families and families with no recourse to public funds also represent significant proportions of the families who apply.

There has also been a significant impact on families who are living with a disability, whether it is a parent or a child who has a disability. In our experience, those are, broadly, the groups who have been most affected by the pandemic and the financial impact.

09:45

**Sally Dyson:** I completely agree with everything that everyone has said. I have nothing to add to that, nor any further insight.

**Pauline McNeill:** Perhaps Sally Dyson wants to comment on the importance of digital connection to those groups. Many public services can now be accessed only using the internet. Do you want to comment on that? I am concerned that there is, and has been, too much reliance on online provision. There has been removal of face-to-face contact; the committee has tackled that and managed to establish that our agency—unlike the DWP—will have more face-to-face contact. Are you concerned that we might move away from that as we get past the Covid period? Anything that you want to say about digital connection will be important.

**Sally Dyson:** The pandemic has shown us how important it is for people to be able to connect digitally. SCVO has a history of working with the Scottish Government on that, through Scotland's digital participation charter.

The connecting Scotland programme was absolutely delighted to go from persuading people of how important digital is, as part of connecting and communicating, and telling them that they should consider it, to being able to respond really quickly.

Digital is absolutely not the whole of it, however—people must have a choice. I agree entirely that it is not, and never should be, about

only digital connectivity. Phones are fantastic, too—just having a conversation with someone on the phone. Those things are part of the mix.

Helping people to get online and work out what they want to use online connectivity for, and giving them that choice, is really important.

**Martin Canavan:** I will just echo what Sally said about the importance of digital connectivity. One of the things that became apparent very early on was how pervasive digital exclusion is for so many of the families whom we work with. They are struggling families who do not have devices, or, if they do, they do not have access to broadband or data. That was probably an inequality that existed previously, but because of the way in which we all moved indoors and started using our phones and laptops to communicate, it became quite apparent that a huge section of society—children, families and communities—simply did not have that access.

Working alongside the Scottish Government and Children 1st, we did what we could through the connecting Scotland fund to access and distribute devices, such as laptops, to families that we knew did not have access to devices, data or top-up packages. That was really important for a number of reasons. The first was that it kept us connected to families and it kept families connected to services that they rely on and the support that we provide—our family support services, for example.

Almost overnight, we moved to wholesale virtual and digital support in the period after lockdown was announced. It was therefore vital that we could ensure that families were connected, so we did what we could to ensure that families had devices and data to do that. That was absolutely crucial for children's education. It was also crucial for the wider connection to families and for social connections to communities and friends. It is important to recognise the impact that lack of such connections has on the wellbeing and mental health of children and families. That issue has been addressed to some degree.

The Scottish Government has committed to doing what it can, but we need to look at the issue much more closely and to accept that digital connection is no longer a luxury, and that it is crucial and essential for all families to live and function through being connected to their communities and being able to access the services that they need, including social security and welfare.

**Sally Dyson:** I would echo everything that Martin said. The Scottish Government has been consistently working on that agenda for a number of years, and it is a fantastic platform from which to operate. Colleagues in other nations whom I have spoken to are jealous of the position that we

were able to start from. Connecting Scotland's first phase, which was worth £5 million, reached more than 8,500 people with devices and connectivity in May and June this year, helping them to keep in touch with friends, family and neighbours and to access the services of organisations. As Martin pointed out, charities and voluntary organisations immediately started to look at how they could deliver services remotely.

The second phase of connecting Scotland reached another 17,000 people. They got not only a device but a link to a digital champion, who is usually someone whom they know, and are helped and supported so that their confidence to go online develops. We know that one of the biggest barriers to people going online is that they do not feel safe; there has been an increase in all sorts of scams, so having a digital champion—a known and trusted person who is there to help—is critical.

More often than not, helping people to get online is about something that they enjoy—it could be about having a blether, or about a hobby or interest—which leads to confidence about other things with which they need to engage. Making sure that people know that they have that choice is critical; the key message that I want the panel and everybody to take away is that this is about people having choice.

**The Convener:** We move on to Keith Brown. I know that Keith has been having some issues, so we will give him a couple of seconds. Keith, can you hear us?

**Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** It is working fine for me just now, convener, but for some reason the mute button keeps going on and off. I apologise if the sound cuts out again.

My question, which touches on some issues that have already been raised, relates to the point that Sally Dyson made previously about the flex that she has been keen to see being used by organisations that receive funding. In relation to her role and the role of organisations like hers, have they also used that flex? I am conscious that, in my constituency, we have some groups who very quickly had lots of resources sent their way. I can think of one group that has a community larder that even now is one of the best-stocked larders anywhere and has tons of volunteers coming forward but does not have the same level of need as, for example, two of the food banks in my constituency. I want to understand how SCVO and others managed to flex the way that they allocated funding to make sure that it went to those who were most in need over the past months.

**Sally Dyson:** Listening to organisations and asking questions about what they are linking into

locally has been critical to getting money, activity and support to where it needs to be.

In a lot of the applications that we receive from organisations, they tell us not only how they are linking and networking, but how they are thinking about the different types of support that they can give. They may have previously been focusing on one particular activity but, with their knowledge of the people whom they support, they are able to become more multifaceted by putting in some additional support.

**Keith Brown:** I suppose my point is that, with regard to the point about perhaps not being as stringent or onerous on financial accountability as we would be in normal circumstances, the Government will still want to ensure that the money is going to those who are most in need. Does either of the witnesses have any—*[Inaudible.]*

**The Convener:** I am not sure whether other people are having the same information technology issues that I am experiencing. I see some nodding heads.

**Keith Brown:** I think that the issue is on my side, convener.

**The Convener:** Do you want to continue, Keith? We can hear you even if we cannot see you.

**Keith Brown:** The issue is on my side. After I have finished my question, I will log out, relocate and see whether I can log back on.

Financial accountability is very important. During the pandemic, we have quite rightly been more lax in that regard, but we still want to ensure that the money is going to those who are most in need. Can the witnesses give any examples of where they have switched priorities or switched from one organisation to another, or where they have taken account of the fact that one area that is receiving money is not as effective as another?

**Martin Canavan:** On financial accountability, I will speak from the perspective of Aberlour with regard to the way in which we operate our own funds and how we distribute money to families directly.

A key element of how we do that is the principle of trust. For example, we do not ask families to provide receipts to account for the money that they have received, as other funds or organisations might do. Families are sponsored by a professional—usually a social worker or financial inclusion officer, or perhaps a teacher—and they submit an application and outline their needs. On the basis of that application, we provide them with a simple grant or, in some cases, the actual items that they are looking for.

It is absolutely crucial that we are able to place that trust in families, to give them a sense of dignity and choice and to allow them to decide what they spend the money on, so that they can use it for things that they need. That needs to be the basis and the principle on which we support families financially, whether through the Scottish welfare fund, hardship funds or any other way that we support families, including the Scottish child payment and other social security measures. The cash-first approach, which gets money directly into families' pockets and trusts that they are able to make choices, is crucial.

With regard to financial accountability, we need to apply oversight to ensure that the money is getting where it needs to go. Nonetheless, at the level that we are talking about, which involves getting money directly to families, we operate on the basis that I have just described, and we think that the country should operate on that basis, too.

10:00

**Sally Dyson:** Picking up again on financial probity and due diligence, I can talk about the wellbeing fund and SCVO's role in that. We ensured that some of the processes were freed up, but financial due diligence was still important. That was in the context of us hoping that the grants that we gave out would be spent. We hoped that the fund would be spent within three or four months. We did not ask for a lot of onerous documentation, either at the assessment stage or during monitoring.

That sounds very process driven, but we need to remember people. We made sure that we were clear that what we were asking for in reporting was proportionate. There was some rigour, but it was in proportion to what the organisations were doing. We focused on trust. Those organisations are established within their communities. Whatever their type or size, they have been around for a long time and they know their communities well. We passed that trust down, but there was also good financial probity.

**Keith Brown:** I do not have another question, but this may be a correction. I was not really asking about financial accountability; I was asking about organisations being allocated funding using flexibility after that point if you found out that the funding was not being effective or that it could be more effective in another area.

It may be a connectivity issue. I will try to take it up separately.

**Rachael Hamilton:** A lot of what I wanted to ask about has been covered. I want to probe the idea of digital inclusion. Do you believe that all local authorities across Scotland have identified those who are most in need of digital support, and

are those people being referred? There has been a reliance on moving to digital while physical buildings have not been available for meetings. When we take into account the second wave of Covid and the continuing situation, does the connecting Scotland fund go far enough?

**Sally Dyson:** All local authorities, and lots of other partners, are engaged with connecting Scotland. It is a great partnership. I see regular conversations happening.

Is the programme going far enough? Not yet, but we are on a trajectory that will take us far enough. Connecting Scotland is one element of a wider digital inclusion programme that is being delivered through housing associations and lots of other voluntary and community organisations as well as through the national health service and a number of private sector organisations.

It is critical to have that multifaceted approach to helping people, and that has been going on for a while. It is being spearheaded now because the time is right and everybody could immediately see why we had to give people the opportunity and the ability to be online.

It is a long road. There are many different elements to being online, and those change rapidly. We can see from the number of videoconference calls that now take place in everyday life—whether for work, for family quizzes or for keeping in touch—that people are communicating more with digital technology. It is brilliant that connecting Scotland was extended in the programme for government. We must be able to help people to get through this situation and to integrate the digital technology that they want for their future lives.

We must do more. We can do more at the moment, and we must continue to do more.

**Martin Canavan:** The work that has been going on is really positive, and we support the Scottish Government's commitments and aim to reach disadvantaged families and others who are currently not connected. Until everyone in Scotland is connected and has access, no scheme has gone far enough.

As I mentioned earlier, the issue of digital exclusion has been highlighted and magnified as a result of the pandemic and lockdown. We have had to support families to get access to devices, data and connectivity. If we have to do that, it means that local authorities are not doing it. In one local authority where we work, some schools have provided all pupils with iPads and other devices, yet other schools have not. Therefore, the programme is not reaching everyone and more needs to be done, but good progress has been made so far.

We need to think more about families' circumstances. It is not just about giving every family an iPad or a laptop. In families that have two, three or four children of school age, the children all need their own device in order to connect to their schools and education, and the parents also need a device, whether that is a smartphone or a laptop. It is about recognising families' individual circumstances and making sure that, when we say that families are connected, that does not mean a laptop that the family has to share. We must respond to those families' digital needs.

Sally Dyson talked about digital champions, and that idea also needs to be looked at further. We support many vulnerable families and parents. We work with families in which one or both parents have a learning disability; among families in those circumstances, the levels of digital literacy are maybe not great. We have to give a lot of support to those families, so that they are able to use the devices and access the systems that they are required to. It is not just about making sure that every family or household has a device; it is about recognising individual families' circumstances. That is what the Government and local authorities have to recognise in order to reach everyone and make sure that we do not have any level of digital exclusion.

**Rachael Hamilton:** To come back to Martin Canavan's point, a lot of day care services in local authority settings have not resumed. Do you feel that the voices of people with disabilities are being heard? I am getting a lot of feedback from families and unpaid carers who want to get back to those settings. I want to dig deep into how that affects the service that you are offering. Although the buildings are not appropriate, would it be beneficial if local authorities could get the physical and human contact face-to-face services going again? Would you support a call for that?

**Martin Canavan:** The experience of families that we work with in which the parents have a learning disability is that social isolation and the lack of formal contact with the services that support them, as well as informal contact in their communities, have been felt very acutely. We have done what we can across all our services to contact families to make sure that they are connected and have some form of support.

The lack of personal and physical connection has really been felt. It has been felt by families whom we have worked with right across Scotland, but it would be fair to say that it has been specifically and acutely felt by families in which parents have a learning disability, because of the lack of the formal and informal networks on which they would normally rely for support. Anything that would allow us to get back to a point at which

some of the support that they would have expected to receive before the pandemic can be provided would be really positive. That is obviously within the context of what is safe and what the regulations tell us. The lack of contact has affected some groups more than others.

**Sally Dyson:** There is a real opportunity for us to do a reimagining of services, so that we have the blended elements of formal and informal face-to-face contact when it is safe and relevant. That should be backed up with different types of services that are delivered online and digitally.

If we are looking at delivering something digitally, it is not just about changing what is delivered physically directly to a digital delivery; it is about thinking carefully about what can be delivered and putting people at the heart of that. We do that a lot through service design with local organisations. Face-to-face contact for everybody is a critical part of that.

**Shona Robison:** Is there anything else that the witnesses want to put on the record regarding the community and third sector recovery programme in the context of a second wave of Covid?

We have touched on how organisations have worked together in response to Covid. In particular, the third sector and local authorities have worked together on social security. We have also highlighted some of the weaknesses. What could be done in the short term to better complement organisations' grants and financial support in a way that makes it easier for the end user to access those? In relation to the long term, the witnesses have talked about a reimagining of services, but that will take time. Could anything be done in the here and now to improve the financial support that organisations offer and to better complement the work that they do?

**Martin Canavan:** We have a number of recommendations relating to the Scottish welfare fund, which I have touched on a couple of times. We have done a bit of work with other organisations, including One Parent Families Scotland and the Child Poverty Action Group, to identify some of the weaknesses. As I have highlighted, some of them relate to the welfare fund and how it supports families—in some ways, it has not been able to support families.

We have some recommendations on how the Scottish welfare fund could be strengthened and improved. I mentioned that community care grants have reportedly been closed or suspended over the pandemic, and we want to ensure that such grants remain open and available to families who require them.

The application process has been highlighted as being convoluted and complicated for people, and it is inconsistent from authority to authority. We

should ensure that the information that is required is available in easy-read form and is not available only digitally or through telephone applications. A range of ways in which families and others can apply for the fund need to be made available, and a consistent approach needs to be taken.

Government guidance for local authorities on the fund and how it operates could be strengthened to improve consistency in the management of the fund and decision-making processes. We have been quite shocked, in relation to our urgent assistance fund, by how little knowledge and awareness there is of the Scottish welfare fund nationally, not just among the families and communities that should be able to access and be eligible to receive support from the fund, but also among practitioners, professionals and people who support families to apply to our fund.

10:15

To go back to the point that I made earlier about the report on the analysis of our urgent assistance fund, around 40 per cent of the applications to our fund are sponsored by local authority workers—a combination of local authority staff and education staff—yet the level of awareness of the Scottish welfare fund is quite limited. That speaks volumes about how little information and knowledge there is. The Scottish Government and local authorities need to do a lot of work to provide that public information, raise awareness and promote the fund so that people know that it is there and they can access it. It should be something that people think of first when they are at the point at which they need urgent help.

**Sally Dyson:** I agree with what Martin Canavan said and will take it up a level. We must continue to trust and push trust as far as possible. Service design and reimagining services does not have to be long term; little and often is important. We need to collaborate more and talk for shorter amounts of time, but very regularly. We must all remember to put the service users at the heart of the conversations about the things that affect them. We need to listen well and share ideas and change things. Everyone should push themselves. If someone does not feel a little uncomfortable, they are not pushing far enough to make things better for the people they are working with.

**Shona Robison:** Thank you. That is very helpful.

**The Convener:** During Covid, there has been a boots-on-the-ground response, with people chapping on doors, delivering food supplies and arts and crafts for kids—in other words, providing food and goods for people, with volunteer-led donations. We have heard today that giving cash, where possible, is much more dignified. I am

aware that many groups, including Aberlour, were giving out store cards for supermarkets and energy cards. Do you have any brief comments on the balance between the provision of goods and services and the provision of credited cards that allow people to go out and buy goods, hard cash, and the formal social security system? We are talking about an informal social security system that is supporting the weaknesses in the formal system during Covid-19.

That is a large question to ask at the end, but I would like to hear any brief thoughts. Witnesses can also write to us.

**Martin Canavan:** We would support a cash-first approach in any circumstance. That should be the default, regardless of whether we are talking about the informal social security system, the Scottish welfare fund and other measures or the formal welfare system and social security payments—whatever they may look like. Getting money directly into the pockets of families allows families to have adequate income, household budgets and the opportunity for dignity, choice and trust in how they use that money. It should always be our default. There is always a place to provide items or cards when, for one reason or another, cash is not appropriate. However, we should have a social security system that is built on the fundamental principle that we aim to increase family incomes by getting money directly into people's pockets. We would support that as the default approach across Scotland.

**The Convener:** Do you agree with that, Sally Dyson?

**Sally Dyson:** Absolutely. I have nothing to add to that.

**The Convener:** That is very helpful. It has been a long evidence session this morning. I thank Martin Canavan and Sally Dyson for their time.

10:20

*Meeting suspended.*

10:22

*On resuming—*

**The Convener:** I welcome our second panel of witnesses: Richard Gass, chair of Rights Advice Scotland; Sheila McKandie, head of revenues and business support at Highland Council; and Paula Doherty, benefits and welfare team leader at Dumfries and Galloway Council.

Our first line of questioning comes from Rachael Hamilton.

**Rachael Hamilton:** Convener, could you give me a minute and go to the next person, please?



**The Convener:** Yes. We can go to Shona Robison.

**Shona Robison:** You might have heard the previous discussion about the Scottish welfare fund, which is what I want to focus on. How effective has the Scottish welfare fund been as a safety net for those who require support that they cannot get elsewhere? What are your initial responses to some of the criticisms of the variation in decision-making on the Scottish welfare fund? Is that decision making okay, or does it need to be standardised? That question is perhaps for our local authority colleagues. What do you think about the call for the Scottish Government guidance to be strengthened? Perhaps we can go to Sheila McKandie first.

**The Convener:** I cannot hear Sheila McKandie, and I do not think that other members can either.

**Shona Robison:** In that case, can we go to Paula Doherty first?

**The Convener:** Yes. That is a good idea.

**Paula Doherty (Dumfries and Galloway Council):** Thank you for the chance to speak to the committee.

The Scottish welfare fund has been essential in supporting customers who are most in need throughout the pandemic. We noticed a significant increase in applications for crisis grants, and we managed to resolve those locally within timescales, to ensure that customers received the funding that they desperately required.

At the beginning of the pandemic, community care grant applications dropped because people were not moving home—moving home is a significant reason for people requiring community care grant support. When the tenancy market opened again, community care grant applications increased significantly and, at the end of quarter 2, a 20 per cent increase in applications compared with those in previous years and a significant increase in the average spend showed. That clearly shows that we are supporting customers with the Scottish welfare fund at a significantly increased level because of Covid.

**Shona Robison:** I know that you can perhaps speak only for Dumfries and Galloway, but what about the issues that have been raised about the inconsistency in decision making and the lack of knowledge and awareness of staff who have a key role in supporting applications to the Scottish welfare fund? Do you want to respond to that?

**Paula Doherty:** Yes. We do a lot of work locally to ensure good awareness of the fund throughout council staff, the schools network and our partners.

On consistency in decision making, I can talk only for Dumfries and Galloway. We apply the framework to ensure that we support customers who are in the most need. Our default position is to award funding and to not award funding only if we really cannot do so. Our spend and the success rate of applications show that we are still receiving unsuccessful applications, but that is constantly under review to ensure that we are targeting support and encouraging applications from those who might not previously have been aware of the fund.

Earlier, somebody mentioned awareness of the fund. I did some analysis of first applications to the fund and of the numbers of people who apply only once. We see customers who will have a community care grant this year and who will come back again next year, so it is clear that they are already aware of the fund. In March, we received 803 applications for a crisis grant, of which 450 were from customers who had never accessed the fund before and who have not accessed it since. The position was similar in April, when we received 893 applications to the fund, of which 409 were from customers who had never applied before and have not applied since. That was at the peak of the pandemic. The numbers of new applications rose significantly over March and April. I think that that was due mainly to our publicity campaign and the support that we pushed out to customers. The message was, “Come to us; we’ll help.” If we cannot help—that is a rare situation—we will do a referral or signpost to other organisations.

**Shona Robison:** Can we go back to Sheila McKandie now?

**The Convener:** No, I do not think that we can yet. We will go to Richard Gass now. If Sheila McKandie can hear us, she might want to try to log off and log back on again.

**Richard Gass (Rights Advice Scotland):** I hope that you can hear me.

Although I am chair of Rights Advice Scotland, I work for Glasgow City Council, so I can give the committee a wee bit of information about Glasgow, which largely matches what Paula Doherty said about Dumfries and Galloway.

At lockdown, community care grants went through the floor. Folk were not moving, and support services were perhaps not supporting folk to make applications for individual items. However, that has subsequently changed. Folk are now getting access to tenancies and are moving, and that has led to a big increase in community care grants. Because folk are moving addresses, they require large community care grants for not just a single item but multiple items.

10:30

Crisis grants went up dramatically at lockdown, and we had to draft in additional staff. Five additional staff came in from social—[Inaudible.]—and a further five came from elsewhere in revenues and benefits to support what would ordinarily be 30 members of staff for the Scottish welfare fund.

People were overspending because the circumstances were different. Folk were bulk buying, and they had higher utility costs because they were at home all the time. They were doing things such as buying takeaway food because they did not feel safe going to the supermarket. Folk's expenses went up, and it was the crisis grants that were the safety net.

Over the past three years or so, Glasgow has had a reduction in its Scottish welfare fund allocation. Glasgow City Council puts about £1 million into the budget. The additional money that has been made available this year for Covid has certainly been welcome. Although there was a downturn in applications for crisis grants, our revenues and benefits section is confident that, by the end of the financial year, we will have spent every penny that we have been given and perhaps more.

I have something to say about isolation payments, but they might come up later.

**Shona Robison:** Do you mean the self-isolation support grant?

**Richard Gass:** Yes.

**Shona Robison:** Go ahead. It is routed through the welfare fund, is it not?

**Richard Gass:** It is. The idea that there needs to be something additional in the system for folk who are isolating is important. However, our experience is that an awful lot of time and effort goes into processing unsuccessful claims. In the first week, Glasgow got 250 claims, of which only eight received awards. In the second week, there were 200 applications, but we awarded only 18. In the past two weeks, applications have stabilised at around 250 a week, but we are turning down three quarters of them. Folk are getting turned down because they are not in receipt of a qualifying benefit. Either there has been a lack of information to make people aware that they need to have a qualifying benefit or folk believe that they are in a low-income situation but find that our assessment for low income is based on whether they receive a Department for Work and Pensions means-tested benefit. We do not include the council tax reduction, and there will be people who get a council tax reduction but not a DWP benefit. That is an area that could be examined.

Some people do not qualify for universal credit because of various barriers. For example, students are excluded from universal credit. People from abroad who might have no recourse to public funds are excluded, although I appreciate that some changes may be coming in the guidance. We have found that, when some folk who have recourse to public funds apply for universal credit, those applications go into the slow queue. There are probably extra checks to be made to see whether someone is going to qualify. As a consequence, some folk from abroad do not get a quick decision on universal credit. We probably need some examination of the definition of low income, because a lot of time and effort is being put into this, just to turn folk down. It is a case of lose, lose, lose. The individual is disappointed and feels that they have been turned down for something to which they felt entitled.

**Shona Robison:** Are you recommending a review of the criteria for the self-isolation support grant, and particularly the link to the qualifying benefits?

**Richard Gass:** Yes. We recommend that. In some situations, folk have been self-isolating, but they have not been on the list that was provided to the council. We know that there have been problems for folk who have been advised through the app to isolate. There needs to be connectivity behind the scenes so that, when folk are told to isolate, the lists that come to local authorities are there and are correct.

**Shona Robison:** Briefly, do you think that Covid has led to us needing to review the Scottish welfare fund more generally? The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has said that the fund

"has advanced beyond its original purpose and vision."

Is there a need to review the purpose of the Scottish welfare fund more widely?

**Richard Gass:** I think so. The Scottish welfare fund was introduced before Social Security Scotland even existed. The fund was to bridge a gap that the United Kingdom Government was passing over. Now that other benefits have been devolved, there should at least be a connection between the roles of the Scottish welfare fund and other Scottish benefits.

The fund is cash limited. That makes it difficult for local authorities to go out and advertise that they have that budget and that people should make a claim. Most councils will be spending it to the hilt. If there is to be an expansion or promotion of entitlement, that must be matched with resources to deliver, and that would require a full-scale review.

There are other discretionary schemes. There are discretionary housing payments. Should they

be completely separate from the Scottish welfare fund? What local authorities deliver maybe needs to be reviewed in its totality.

**Shona Robison:** That is helpful. Thank you.

**Rachael Hamilton:** I want to pick up on the point about crisis grants. Do the witnesses believe that there was an issue with eligibility and that the criteria should perhaps be changed? We heard evidence from Dr McCormick on 8 October that in Glasgow only 8 per cent of the Scottish welfare fund had been utilised. People were left without access to beds and other goods. Does that suggest a systemic problem with delivery? The Poverty and Inequality Commission highlighted a number of issues with that.

I would also like the witnesses to expand on some of the comments about and criticisms of the Scottish welfare fund that they have made in their evidence. Could we start with Richard Gass?

**The Convener:** My apologies for cutting across you, Rachel, but I see that Sheila McKandie is back online. She has not had an opportunity to comment yet, so it might be best to start with her. *[Interruption.]* Oh dear, maybe not. *[Interruption.]* You are almost there, Sheila. *[Interruption.]* No, I am sorry. We had better bring in the other witnesses.

**Paula Doherty:** When you talk about the Scottish welfare fund being underspent, I think that you are looking at both parts of the fund together. We have already said that community care grant applications and spend levels significantly reduced in the first quarter due to families not moving from one property to another or not requiring whole-home awards.

Crisis grant spend has significantly increased. We have received more applications, and our average award in Dumfries and Galloway has increased because more of our customers are on universal credit, more families are accessing the fund and more support is required for longer periods. That is why we are providing more support.

We are able to make awards from the Scottish welfare fund for customers who we define as being on a low income. It is about resolving their crisis situation. A customer can be awarded a crisis grant because they have not been paid by their employer. We found a lot of that at the start of the pandemic. Before furlough was announced, there was panic, because employers indicated that there was no work for staff, who faced no paycheck at the end of the week. When furlough was announced, some employers took a bit of time to get those furlough payments out because of their own cash-flow issues.

The Scottish welfare fund was integral in supporting affected families during that time. They may have been in receipt of housing benefit or council tax reduction, but in Dumfries and Galloway we look at council tax reduction, the Scottish welfare fund and the discretionary housing payment together as the holy trinity of support. If somebody gets one, we ensure that we encourage and promote take-up of the others.

Someone who has a longer-term need—a cash-flow issue, a reduction in their income or an increase in their expenditure—might need a discretionary housing payment to support that need. Discretionary housing payments are generally awarded for a long period. Therefore, the Scottish welfare fund might be used to sort things out for them now and a discretionary housing payment might be used to help them for the next few months. When we are dealing with that, we ensure that we have their council tax reduction application in, recorded and in payment to ensure that their liability to pay council tax is reduced to match their available income.

We noted an increase in our council tax reduction case load throughout the period, with the majority of the increase involving families—and families with children. Those are new customers who have either not been on council tax reduction for some time or who have no experience of the welfare system at all.

We added another benefit for customers who come for council tax reduction; we also consider free school meals. Free school meals direct payments began in Dumfries and Galloway in May, and we made a decision that we would also award free school meals direct payments to families who were in receipt of council tax reduction but who might not satisfy the Scottish Government's criteria for free school meals. That brought in a whole raft of children and families, who received a direct payment in recompense for school meals. That was an essential financial support for those families and accounted for around 20 per cent of our awarded payments.

**Rachael Hamilton:** Thank you for that detailed answer.

**Richard Gass:** I agree with Paula Doherty about the situation at the start of Covid. The number of community care grants went down. That was to be expected, but the number has now climbed back up.

Previous witnesses have commented on statistics that show that there has been a lower spend on community care grants over the period. That was not because councils were turning folk down but because applications were not coming in. The applications are now coming in and will continue to do so. All the moves that were on hold

are coming through. The end of the financial year will be the time to review the situation, to see how it panned out over the whole period.

I will move away from the Scottish welfare fund, because Paula also mentioned school meals. Glasgow did something similar to Dumfries and Galloway, in that it paid money out over the summer. Before Christmas, Glasgow will make payments to cover school meals over the Christmas, February and Easter breaks. This side of Christmas, payments to cover any school holidays between now and the end of the school year will go into the bank accounts of eligible families in a single lump-sum payment. That money being received—albeit that it is for school meals—might take some pressure off the Scottish welfare fund because people might choose to use it in the here and now. However, in future, we might find that they come back to the Scottish welfare fund. The Scottish welfare fund is the end of the road; there is nowhere else.

A further factor to consider is that an extra £20 a week was put into universal credit. That is £80 a month, which is clearly significant and has in some ways perhaps protected the Scottish welfare fund to an extent. However, when that payment ends in April next year—if it is not extended, and it does not look like it will be—low-income families will miss that £80 a month, and the end of the road is the Scottish welfare fund. Therefore, we anticipate an increase in demand after the end of this financial year.

10:45

**Rachael Hamilton:** The committee is discussing supporting the extension of that uplift in universal credit.

I will round off this part of the discussion by asking whether the witnesses believe that there should be a review of the Scottish welfare fund, and further monitoring and evaluation of it, as suggested by the Poverty and Inequality Commission.

**The Convener:** I hope that we can go to Sheila first on this occasion—let us find out.

**Sheila McKandie (Highland Council):** Thank you, convener. Can you hear me?

**The Convener:** Yes!

**Sheila McKandie:** I apologise for all the problems. I nipped out to get a headset, so I have not heard any of the discussion.

We feel that the Scottish welfare fund has not been sufficiently agile to flex to the changing needs that Covid has introduced. There is a wave of individuals who sit just above the group of individuals whom the Scottish welfare fund was

originally intended to support. Of course, support needs in Scotland have changed because of Covid, so we would welcome a review to enable an increase in the base of individuals who would be entitled to support from the Scottish welfare fund. As we know, every pound that we put into the community has an exponential effect—it is spent many times. We would certainly support a review of the fund, and we welcome the refocusing of the second uplift in the fund, which had been held back. That is a significant step forward; it would have been better if it been done earlier, but it is here now and will be really helpful.

**Rachael Hamilton:** While we have your sound back—it is nice to hear you—can you comment on the further flexibility for the Scottish welfare fund in which you expressed an interest in your written evidence to the committee?

**Sheila McKandie:** We have been given more powers in relation to how we can use the second tranche of funding. We think that that will address local need—I am sure that other local authorities think the same. That means that more people will be helped at the point of need. The Scottish welfare fund, as Richard Gass referred to, is the last resort, but surely we do not want people to have to reach the last resort before we can support them as a nation. That repurposing or refocusing—however you want to word it—is doing that; it is catching people before they fall to the lowest level of support, and we very much welcome it.

**Paula Doherty:** I agree with Sheila McKandie's comment that a review of the Scottish welfare fund would be welcome. In relation to expanding eligibility, we need to be aware that doing so would expand the financial requirements to meet that demand, and we are already spending what we have on supporting our communities and our customers who are at crisis point. If we were reviewing that in any way, we would need to make sure that additional funding was available to help more people.

I would welcome any discussion of a review and any request for case studies or other non-statistical information about how the Scottish welfare fund and other funds are helping and supporting our customers.

**The Convener:** Before I allow Richard Gass to address Rachael Hamilton's question, I have a couple of other questions for him. We will then move on to Pauline McNeill for our next question theme.

Richard, you said something that was a bit worrying about local authorities being wary of advertising the Scottish welfare fund. It is almost as if they want to pace the grants that are given out in case the money runs out; in other words, it

looks as if there are sufficient funds over the year, but there will only be sufficient funds if the Scottish welfare fund is not advertised. I find that worrying, because it means that we cannot ascertain the level of need that exists in relation to the Scottish welfare fund. We might not get reliable data; more important, we might not meet the needs of those who wish to claim from the fund. Can you respond to that issue as well as to the points that Rachael Hamilton made?

**Richard Gass:** In Glasgow, the Scottish welfare fund is certainly not a secret fund. Anyone who asks about it will be properly advised by the advice sector, the Scottish welfare fund itself and colleagues in financial services. One of your witnesses on the first panel said that an advertising campaign was needed to make people aware of the Scottish welfare fund. Glasgow is spending its budget to the maximum. The council also puts its own money into the Scottish welfare fund, and Glasgow's budget has been cut from the original figure of £8 million to about £6 million. We would be delighted if there was enough resource to meet demand, but the expectation is that demand will go up—when we come to April next year and the loss of the extra £20 per week, demand will go up.

A review would be the right way forward, as well as a commitment not to have a postcode lottery, so that someone who is entitled to a payment from the Scottish welfare fund gets it and that the Scottish Government, which owns the fund and the budget, makes it available to everybody.

**The Convener:** Before we move on, I will give the final word on that to Sheila McKandie, who has not had much of an opportunity to give evidence this morning.

**Sheila McKandie:** I have a couple of comments on the point that Richard Gass made. In Highland, we take a different approach. We actively promote the Scottish welfare fund.

I caught a bit of the earlier discussion about ensuring that professionals who support the individuals who might apply to the Scottish welfare fund are aware of it, and the comment from an earlier speaker that 40 per cent were not aware of the scheme. We take a slightly different approach, in so far as we do not expect our professionals, who have lots of knowledge about lots of things, also to know about the Scottish welfare fund. We tell our professionals that individuals can go to citizens advice, which we fund to the tune of £1.1 million, or our welfare support and income maximisation teams. Our professionals do not need to know the ins and outs of the scheme; they are told that the help is available and that, if they channel referrals through those teams, people will get the necessary support. We do full welfare

benefit checks, so people get the support to which they are entitled.

**The Convener:** That will provoke debate, and there are time constraints, but if the other witnesses have different perspectives, the committee should explore the issue further.

**Richard Gass:** I came across as saying that Glasgow does not promote the fund. Glasgow promotes it, in that we provide in-depth welfare rights training for voluntary organisations and social work staff; we also get the message out that the fund is there. My point is that the earlier speaker wanted wider promotion. I do not know whether that would be through leaflets or a television or radio campaign, but if that were to happen in Glasgow, there would be a concern about resources to meet the expected increase in demand.

**The Convener:** That is very interesting. With the previous panel of witnesses, I mentioned that I put out a parliamentary report that had all the advice line numbers on the front page. I put that report through 38,000 doors, with the result that those telephone numbers got used a heck of a lot more than they otherwise would have done. We cannot hide from the level of need that is out there, but I note and understand your point.

**Pauline McNeill:** I have a question about discretionary housing payments. Shelter Scotland acknowledged that many home owners, despite being in difficulty because of losing their jobs, do not qualify for social security. I am not sure whether they can apply to the fund. My question is in two parts. First, is it time to revise the housing fund, so that it helps people who are short of their rent? If we can—even temporarily—help people through that difficult period, we will have fewer evictions and fewer people losing their homes.

Secondly, I am interested in whether you think that help should be made available for home owners who have lost their jobs but who might have paid into the system all their lives. Many professional or middle-income people have lost their jobs during the pandemic. Should the scheme include them?

**The Convener:** Are there any volunteers to come in on that question? Although I am conscious that all three of you may not wish to come in, who would like to come in?

**Paula Doherty:** Obviously, discretionary housing payments are not available for home owners. If we were to make them available for those customers, we would need to consider the eligibility criteria and how we would determine that they were in need of that grant support. Currently, discretionary housing payment spend is increasing exponentially—in particular, customers on universal credit are able to receive more support

than they would have been able to had they been on housing benefit. That is of significant benefit—I say the word “benefit” all the time—to the families who are receiving that support in enabling them to meet their housing costs and wider housing needs.

We are keen to prevent evictions, whether from a tenanted or a home owner property. We are also keen for any suggestions as to how we might be able to support the home owner community, particularly given that those in it are unable to access any DWP support until they have been jobless for a full year.

**The Convener:** Does Pauline McNeill want to come back in on the specific point that Paula Doherty made before I bring in Richard Gass?

**Pauline McNeill:** I am keen to hear what Richard Gass thinks, if he heard the question.

**Richard Gass:** Three or four years ago now—I do not know how many—support for home owners changed dramatically. They used to get housing support within their DWP means-tested benefit. That was a payment; now it is a loan. Home owners are therefore in a situation in which the support that they get from the state does not allow them to tread water. Local authorities have a desperate desire to ensure that folk do not lose their houses. If there is to be a review of DHP to enable us to provide resourced support for home owners, we would welcome that.

**Sheila McKandie:** In my submission, I referred to the mortgage interest support that Richard Gass has just mentioned. That is, of course, a loan, which is paid back with interest. There is real concern about that, and I suggested in the submission that it should be made into a grant for a fixed period.

Our elected members in the Highland Council certainly have an eye on home owners, because they do not seem to be accommodated through existing systems. That goes back to my earlier point about existing entitlements not having flexed to the changing circumstances in which we are all having to live. We would like the support for mortgage interest to be converted into a grant, rather than its being a loan. Regardless of whether that grant could be channelled through DHPs—which local authorities would very much welcome—or whether it could be administered in the way that it already is, but as a grant instead of a loan, would be very helpful for home owners.

**Pauline McNeill:** *[Inaudible.]*—that position, because I have constituency cases in which home owners, including a number of single parents, have used up their mortgage holidays. Although their mortgage payment is smaller than a rent payment would be, without work, they are having difficulty in meeting it and there is no provision for

their situation. I therefore thank the witnesses for those answers.

**Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green):** I will take a step back to the Scottish welfare fund. We have heard about the number of people being turned down for it. In the earlier part of the meeting, Martin Canavan said that 10 per cent of those engaging with Aberlour volunteered that they had applied unsuccessfully. We have also heard that people have been turned down because they are not in receipt of a qualifying benefit. I would like to better understand how many of those people might be eligible. Is the barrier simply because they do not meet the criteria, or is it because they are unaware of that qualifying benefit?

11:00

**Paula Doherty:** We certainly would not refuse customers on the basis that they are not in receipt of a qualifying benefit. The main reason for refusal of a crisis grant is that a customer is not in crisis and has the ability to resolve their situation in other ways.

Our award success rate for the Scottish welfare fund significantly improved during Covid, as we opened up the criteria because we had extra funding available to provide customers with more support. We do not ask them to take a universal credit advance, which is part of the fund criteria.

It would have to be questioned whether a local position is being taken on customers being refused in that regard. We would certainly award customers on the basis that they are on a low income and we do not hold that a payment of a benefit is required for an award.

**Alison Johnstone:** Thank you. Do the local authority representatives consider whether they have adequate administrative capacity to provide support to everyone who requires it? Is there anything in particular about the Scottish welfare fund that you would like to be remodelled?

**Sheila McKandie:** *[Inaudible.]*—received for Scottish welfare fund has never been sufficient to meet the provision. At Highland Council, we have approached that by—I think that most local authorities have done this—embedding the Scottish welfare fund in our revenues and benefits teams. That means that we can move staff around as we get peaks and troughs in the numbers of applications. However, it would be helpful to have more administration funding to meet our costs. As local government budgets are being squeezed, it is becoming more difficult.

Another reason why Scottish welfare fund applications—particularly for crisis grants—are being refused is that some individuals have the

slight cushion of a small amount of savings. When they can use those to meet the initial crisis, we should not pay a crisis grant. That goes back to my earlier point about whether we should wait for everybody to fall into crisis before we help them, or whether we should try to prevent that crisis from deteriorating even more. It would be really helpful if we could help individuals at a higher need, rather than waiting for them to get to a lower position.

**Richard Gass:** I do not have the full detail as to why folk are being turned down for crisis grants in Glasgow. However, it is likely to be that folk have exceeded the number of crisis grants in a particular period—which applies to repeat applicants—or it will be the case that they are applying and we do not recognise that they are in crisis.

I echo Sheila McKandie's point that, if we could do something preventative to avoid a crisis arising, that would be preferable to waiting for the crisis to happen.

**The Convener:** I have opened the BlueJeans chat box, to see who has outstanding bids for question. I will read that out for members' information. Keith Brown, Tom Arthur, Jeremy Balfour and Shona Robison are waiting to ask questions. I also note that Mark Griffin has not had an opportunity to ask one, so I intend to bring him in now. It would be very helpful if other MSPs could state in the chat box whether they still wish to ask a question.

**Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):** Are the witnesses aware of whether any local authorities have been more innovative in getting support to people who are struggling in their areas? We know about the usual channels, such as free school meals, council tax reductions and so on, but are any local authorities thinking out of the box to support people in their communities who are struggling?

**Richard Gass:** Our colleagues in education services intend to get a payment out this side of Christmas for all school meals until the end of the school academic year. They will also look at data—within the data-sharing regulations, of course—and what information we already hold, so that we can identify those who qualify for free school meals but have not taken up the entitlement. That is one innovation. That leads on to the issue of whether, if we hold information that allows us to identify that someone has an entitlement, all councils should have the legal powers to take that information to them.

**Sheila McKandie:** Many years ago, Highland Council introduced a single application form for council-administered benefits, including free school meals. When somebody applies, they fill

out a single application form and provide their evidence once, and we then pay for whichever entitlements—there are nine in total, including free school meals—they qualify.

If families who have said that they need some support with food do not qualify for free school meals, we provide them with food. We have been providing significant numbers of food parcels. In the past month, we provided more than 2,600 food parcels through doorstep deliveries and deliveries via community groups. The number keeps growing; our provision is significant.

Consequently, we are doing a couple of things in Highland Council. We are looking across our data sets—when we have the authority from the applicant to do so, of course—contacting individuals and inviting them to make claims. Our citizen's advice team and our welfare support team work hand in glove and are very proactive.

We put a lot on social feeds and do lots of advertising and marketing with professionals and potential applicants to try to ensure that people understand that help is available. They might not understand the technicalities of what the help is or the eligibility criteria—we do not expect them to—but we encourage them to access the advice that is available to them, and we take it from there.

When adverse decisions are made, we appeal and challenge those on behalf of the applicant, with their consent, of course. We have a high success rate. We are doing quite a few things at local authority level, and I am sure that the same is true across lots of local authorities.

**Paula Doherty:** I echo what Sheila McKandie has said. Our customers are encouraged to come to us if they need any help and support, or if someone thinks that someone needs help and support. We have provided significant funding to the citizens advice service to support our working-age people, and we have a welfare support team to support our pensioner cohort. We also have a group of staff working closely with our homelessness service on housing options and on supporting customers financially as best they can to prevent homelessness.

I do not know whether that work would necessarily be classed as innovative. However, as I mentioned earlier, given that all our benefits sit together, with the customer's consent, we certainly look at all the benefits that are available to ensure that we meet the customer's immediate and on-going needs as best we can.

As Sheila McKandie and others have mentioned, local authorities are under significant financial pressure. We do not have the admin resources to go out and target customers constantly. However, when we deal with a customer, we hope to resolve the issues as best

we can at that point, so that they do not have to come back to us so often. That requires financial support being available. Thankfully, we have that support at the moment.

My concern is about the funding not being available for future years. Customers are used to receiving it and we are used to providing it. If the support is not available, it will be a double whammy for many.

**The Convener:** Alison Johnstone, do you want to come back in before we move on? I think that Alison has had to leave.

**Mark Griffin:** Convener, I assume that you mean me, since it was my question.

**The Convener:** I am sorry, Mark. Yes, it was you and not Alison Johnstone who asked the previous question—you can see that I am on the ball this morning. I apologise. On you go.

**Mark Griffin:** Thanks, convener. I am hearing about the same issues that we always seem to hear about on data sharing and data sets from the Department for Work and Pensions about who qualifies for certain benefits, which would probably help local authorities to target people. Are those restrictions around data preventing local authorities from being as responsive as they wish to be in targeting support and helping people and communities?

**Richard Gass:** Sheila McKandie had her hand up, but I will jump in. There are real restrictions on the use of DWP data on free school meals. In Glasgow, the use of data on school clothing grants is not as restricted, so people with school-aged children who are in receipt of a council tax reduction qualify for the school clothing grant. We are able to ask ourselves: does someone get a council tax reduction—yes or no? We are permitted to do that because we run council tax reduction. We are not permitted to ask how the decision on council tax reduction was arrived at and use that to provide free school meals, but we are allowed to ask whether someone gets a council tax reduction, and, if the answer is yes, they can get a school clothing grant. We have used the data as far as we believe that we can, legally, but we are restrained in that, even though we can glean so much from the data about the population in Glasgow. If someone has applied to Glasgow City Council for help with their council tax, they are indicating to the council that they need some financial support, and it feels as though we are falling a bit short if we cannot give them 100 per cent of that support.

**Sheila McKandie:** I have discussed the issue that I am about to raise with the committee previously. The benefit cap is applied either through housing benefit or universal credit. When it is applied through housing benefit, the local

authority invites a claim for discretionary housing payments, and we put that into a payment to bridge the gap, where applicable. We do not receive that data for universal credit, so we cannot identify and be proactive for those individuals who are impacted by the benefit cap. We cannot give them the additional discretionary support through the discretionary housing payment system. We have lobbied DWP very hard for that data. In any consultation that touches on the benefit cap or universal credit, we introduce that conversation. That is why I have discussed it with the committee previously. It would be very helpful if the committee could exercise any influence to enable that data sharing, because we are concerned, particularly for individuals in the private rented sector who do not have support around them and who are not aware of the support that is available to them to access discretionary housing payments. They are severely impacted by the benefit cap.

**Paula Doherty:** I would welcome better data sharing to enable us to support our customers. We proactively contact customers who have children and are in receipt of a council tax reduction to invite an application for free school meals. However, it would be handy if we did not have to invite the application and we were able to award it without a request. We have customers who we have contacted numerous times to ask them to put in an application or whether we can help with an application and they do not do it. That might be because they feel that there is a stigma attached to receiving free school meals, but it is unfortunate that we cannot just award the grant without the application.

**The Convener:** Mark Griffin, I have your name right this time. Do you want to come back in?

**Mark Griffin:** I have no further questions.

11:15

**Jeremy Balfour:** I want to follow up some of what has been said about the best way to administer this. We now have the new social security agency up and running here in Scotland. Should the load be spread so that some benefits are taken on more centrally by the new agency to free up local authorities to do other things, or should things stay as they are with each local authority administering benefits themselves through 32 different systems?

**The Convener:** My reception is dreadful and I cannot see whether anyone is making a bid to speak, so I will have to pick someone. Sheila McKandie, can you come in?

**Sheila McKandie:** That is a helpful question.

The elected members on Highland Council would like to see the agency devolved further, with



the funding that goes into the agency spread across Scotland. That would create sustainable, well-paid employment, which is what all local authorities need during this economic downturn. We would like to see further devolution of the agency and rather than more funding going into it, more being devolved to local authorities. We have the infrastructure in place.

I have been looking up the costs. I think I put it into my submission that the agency's costs are increasing beyond it thought they would be. We could help with that. There is a role for local authorities in the delivery of social security in Scotland.

**Paula Doherty:** I echo Sheila McKandie's comments. In rural Dumfries and Galloway, just as in rural Highland, we would welcome the further devolution of social security so that support and employment opportunities are available across Scotland to ensure that we meet the needs of all our customers and residents.

**Richard Gass:** I cannot tell you what Glasgow's position would be on the devolution of more of Social Security Scotland, but we would prefer there to be better joined-up thinking about council tax reduction, the Scottish welfare fund and the new Scottish social security benefits. Social Security Scotland could take the lead responsibility for the Scottish welfare fund and council tax reduction, so that, although those are delivered by local authorities, all the decision making and thinking would be done in the one place, and we might not see new benefits continually being introduced that do not have council tax reduction as the qualifying benefit. We must recognise that council tax reduction is the one means-tested benefit that is within the control of the Scottish Government, and it is the one United Kingdom means-tested benefit that does not employ a two child policy.

**The Convener:** I have a question about free school meals. My question is inspired not by what is happening in England just now but by the progress that we have made in Scotland over a number of years in extending free school meals and by the success that local authorities have had with their holiday hunger programmes. We are now giving cash to local authorities to enable the provision of free school meals during holidays such as Christmas, at Easter and over the summer. That is positive. We have heard of the intention for a lot of that support to come in the form of cash payments. We seem to be moving towards a possibly temporary but more structured system of providing additional cash support for families who are in need during holiday periods.

Do the witnesses have any ideas about how we should implement that? We would have to find the cash to fund all that. How should we co-ordinate

the approach to hunger and free school meals? How could the good work that is going on be taken forward and woven into a more progressive social security system?

**Richard Gass:** I see that Paula Doherty has her hand up; do you maybe want to take her?

**The Convener:** I apologise, Paula; I cannot see a thing on my screen. I call Paula Doherty.

**Paula Doherty:** That is quite all right.

Dumfries and Galloway Council has been making direct payments in recompense for free school meals since May. We continued that payment at £17.50 per child per week throughout the summer and expanded the eligibility to include families who are in receipt of council tax reduction. We continued the payment throughout the October holidays and paid £40 per eligible child. However, as that was prior to the Scottish Government's commitment to funding, it was paid only to those families who are eligible under the Scottish Government free school meals criteria.

I welcome the point that Richard Gass made earlier about council tax reduction and its being a qualifying benefit for much of the support. Council tax reduction is tapered support and takes into account the size of a family and its income; it does not have a cliff edge, to that degree. However, Dumfries and Galloway also has one of the lowest council tax charges in Scotland. If we were looking to provide that support, there might be a need to consider the impact, as a lower council tax reduction charge means that, for many families, council tax reduction ends earlier. It is therefore about making sure that there is parity across the country. For example, Dumfries and Galloway charges are around £3 per week less than those in the City of Edinburgh. Although I have not looked at many others, they are certainly among the lowest council charges in mainland Scotland.

**The Convener:** I have to admit that I am flying blind a little bit, but does Sheila or Richard wish to come back in? I see Sheila's hand.

**Sheila McKandie:** I am the same as you, convener; I cannot see anything in the chat either.

We pay £15 per pupil per week and we pay around 4,500 pupils at any given time, which, in a fortnight, is around £135,000. However, as was just highlighted in the discussion, I am very conscious that it is £17.50 in Dumfries and Galloway and £15 in Highland, and that there should perhaps be more parity in how much we pay across Scotland. We pay slightly less, but we calculated and arrived at £15 per week by looking at what it costs to provide a school meal. Given that parents do not have that purchasing power, we then inflated the amount that we pay to families.

Many families come forward and ask us for additional support over and above free school meals during the holiday period, which is when we supply the food on top of the free school meal entitlement. We are providing food to individuals who are currently just above the entitlement for free school meals, and we are also providing food to individuals who receive free school meals.

In relation to the self-isolation support grants, I note that when pupils are asked to self-isolate, we sometimes find that other pupils also self-isolate, which is a parental choice. Although they therefore do not receive their free school meal entitlement, because they have made that choice, we provide them with food instead.

**The Convener:** That is a helpful point, which I do not think that the committee was aware of. I also thank you for identifying the relationship between the holiday hunger programmes—which have been hugely successful—and the cash payments for free school meals. Of course, not every young person will qualify. If they are just the wrong side of the qualification criteria, they might still have significant issues in getting the food that they need. That is therefore a really important point.

Does Richard Gass want to make any final comments before we close the evidence session?

**Richard Gass:** I do not have any comments to make on free school meals, but on what the committee could do, if it wanted to, to address three things in relation to the £20 of universal credit. First, I think that there has already been a commitment that there will be a recommendation that it should continue.

Secondly, that £20 is not available within employment and support allowance, income support or jobseekers allowance. That is forcing folk who want that £20 to give up their legacy benefits and make a claim for a new benefit at a time when support services are not readily accessible. If there is a recognition that that extra money is required by people in that situation, why can it not also be available through those legacy means tested benefits?

Finally, the benefit cap was not increased, so a family with three children, who are subject to the benefit cap, might celebrate the fact that they will get an extra £20 universal credit, only to find that they do not get it, because they have already reached the benefit cap. The benefit cap is denying larger families with children the extra support that is supposed to be available.

**The Convener:** Thank you. We are out of time, so we will have to leave the evidence session there. I apologise to Sheila McKandie and Paul Doherty. Without putting words into your mouths, I am sure that you would echo Richard Gass's

comments. I thank Richard Gass, Sheila McKandie and Paul Doherty, and Sally Dyson and Martin Canavan from our first evidence session, for all their support this morning for our inquiry. I also thank everyone for bearing with us through the technical difficulties.

11:26

*Meeting continued in private until 11:56.*

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