



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Social Security Committee

**Thursday 3 December 2020**

**Session 5**



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - [www.parliament.scot](http://www.parliament.scot) or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

---

**Thursday 3 December 2020**

**CONTENTS**

<b>DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE .....</b>	<b>Col. 1</b>
<b>SOCIAL SECURITY RESPONSE TO COVID-19 (INQUIRY) .....</b>	<b>2</b>

---

**SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE**

**25<sup>th</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:**

Mims Davies MP (Minister for Employment)

Jonathan Mills (Department for Work and Pensions)

Margarita Morrison (Department for Work and Pensions)

Ian Pope (Public and Commercial Services Union)

James Russell (Skills Development Scotland)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Anne Peat

**LOCATION**

Virtual Meeting



## Scottish Parliament

### Social Security Committee

*Thursday 3 December 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 25th meeting in 2020 of the Social Security Committee. We have received apologies from Alison Johnstone and Shona Robison.

Under agenda item 1, the committee is asked to agree that item 3, which is consideration of the evidence that we will hear today, be taken in private. I will assume that everyone agrees to take that item in private unless I see otherwise in the chat box.

That is agreed.

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

09:01

**The Convener:** Agenda item 2 is the committee's penultimate evidence session in its inquiry into the role of social security in our response to, and recovery from, Covid-19.

I welcome our first panel of witnesses: Ian Pope, assistant secretary of the Department for Work and Pensions group of the Public and Commercial Services Union; and James Russell, director of career information, advice and guidance, Skills Development Scotland.

I remind everyone to keep their questions and answers—myself included, he says, with full awareness—as succinct as possible. Please leave a couple of seconds before speaking, to give broadcasting staff an opportunity to make your microphone live and ensure that your full contribution is heard.

I will ask the first question of Ian Pope and James Russell; thank you for joining us. Fellow MSPs will ask about your functions and the support that Jobcentre Plus and Skills Development Scotland are providing during Covid-19 and beyond. However, I want to check that you feel that you are fully and adequately resourced to provide that support. Rather than being about the details of the support that has been offered by your members and employees, my question is about how well resourced you feel that you are, which the committee has previously had concerns about.

Before Covid-19, we had heard from PCS about the number of work coaches and their case loads. Of course, the number of universal credit claimants has doubled in Scotland, and that is before the job retention scheme potentially ends next year—we will perhaps talk more about that later. Do you think that PCS and Skills Development Scotland have sufficient levels of staff on board to do the important jobs that they have to do? Given that it is a fast-moving situation, do you think that the staff have been adequately trained?

As I made specific mention of PCS in my question, we will go to Ian Pope first.

**Ian Pope (Public and Commercial Services Union):** In September or October last year, PCS put in a submission for 20,000 additional staff, primarily work coaches. That was as a result of 20,000 staff having been lost from the DWP since 2010—in other words, we were putting in a claim only for what we had lost. We have moved forward a year and, as a result of Covid, the department

has decided to recruit 13,500 new work coaches. That will double the number that we currently have, so there will be 27,000 work coaches. The department is also recruiting 4,500 back-office case manager staff to process claims as they move forward. PCS welcomes that, although it is still short of what we claimed for last year.

However, there is a concern that a number of the staff are Brook Street agency staff and that there has been a rush to get people trained, albeit that that is understandable, given the rise in unemployment. That training and consolidation is happening at the moment. The DWP reckons that about 4,500 staff have been recruited so far and it is looking to have all 13,500 recruited by 31 March next year. That is welcome, but the proof will be in the pudding. We will have to see the effect that the end of the job retention scheme has on unemployment at the end of March next year.

**The Convener:** I will explore those points a bit further. We will come to Skills Development Scotland in a second. The issue of training being required came up quite strongly with the members of the experience panels to whom we spoke, which included people living in poverty with direct experience of the benefits system on the ground. They talked about the variance in the quality of the service that they got from Jobcentre Plus, and they often put that down to whether the individuals who were supporting the claimant had the appropriate level of training and experience.

Has PCS been involved in discussions with the DWP about what the training should look like? Are you confident that, if all the additional staff come on board and get the training that you understand that they are to get, that will be sufficient?

**Ian Pope:** Work coach training and universal credit training are different. The training package for back-office universal credit staff is very intense. It can take up to about four weeks for a member of staff to be trained. There is also an intense training package for work coaches. It is clear that the DWP is trying to deal with the rise in unemployment and to train people as quickly as it can, but it cannot cut corners on that. We want to ensure that the appropriate training is carried out.

As I said, our concern is about the number of agency staff and the fact that the majority of new staff are fixed-term appointments. Clearly, our union's policy is that there should be permanent staff, but the DWP is obviously not willing to look further forward than next year and is waiting to see how the situation materialises. Training is a big issue for us. We always ensure that the appropriate training is carried out, and we will continue to speak to the DWP to ensure that it is.

**The Convener:** We will return to some of those issues later.

James Russell, there are increased and significant demands on Skills Development Scotland. Other members will ask about specific programmes that it will lead on. Do you have sufficient staff in place to cope with those demands?

**James Russell (Skills Development Scotland):** I thank the committee for the opportunity to present evidence. In relation to our immediate response, from a career information, advice and guidance perspective, we are fortunate that we have visibility, through the relevant data-sharing agreements, of the demand in schools and in our post-school service for 16 to 19-year-olds. The priority for us was identifying the immediate demand and redirecting our resources into different areas. Given that we did not have people walking through our front doors following the closure of our public access centres, for example, we took the decision to move all our telephony services online. That required us to consider where our resources—our targeted or proactive services and our demand-led services—were pointed to.

There had to be development and training around our telephony approach. That included upskilling staff to use telephony, given that people were not walking through the door, and a programme of professional development to enable staff to offer professional practice online. The principles of career guidance remained the same, but the methodology was different. We have undertaken that programme.

Particularly from my perspective, we have undertaken scenario planning in relation to the different unemployment scenarios. We have been working closely with the Government about what the situation might look like. In particular, we are a lead agency for the Scottish Government's partnership action for continuing employment service, which relates to redundancy. We undertook modelling on what the likely impact could be. We also looked at redesigning service delivery by harnessing technology to reach scale through one-to-many webinar approaches, as well as by developing and raising up our helpline services.

We are working closely with the Government on our current resources, on the demand that there is and on scenario planning. We received additional investment, particularly for PACE, in order to cope with demand and transition to the new model.

More widely, beyond career information, advice and guidance, we offer a range of work-based learning products. It has been a case of understanding the demand for those and how we might develop new products within that family and use existing resources or additional funding that

the Government might have on the back of its programme for government.

**The Convener:** Mr Russell, I apologise if it sounds as though I am bean counting. We are not getting into the meat of what Skills Development Scotland will deliver, but I want to—*[Inaudible.]*—the lines of questioning. On the specific numbers of staff that Jobcentre Plus and DWP might require, you spoke about new ways of working and redeploying people, so I suspect that what you are saying—please confirm if this is the case—is that, at the moment, you have adequate numbers of staff. You were quite detailed in what you said on the training that has been offered, if not on the numbers of staff.

I will put this question to Ian Pope as well, so perhaps you can address the matter now: when the job retention scheme ends, it is estimated that there could be another 800,000 new claimants across the UK—with a significant number in Scotland, obviously—so have you prepared for the surge that, unfortunately and sadly, is going to happen once people are no longer furloughed under that scheme? Can you tell the committee what those numbers might look like so that we can follow that to ensure that there is sufficient resource?

**James Russell:** We have deployed our resources to the services for which we know that demand exists. On the additional investment, we are transitioning a team of about 25 additional staff to our helpline, which provides increased capacity, because we do not have travel restrictions and all the other things that we have to build into our resource modelling. Those staff are being on-boarded now, with backfill staff coming in at the back end of that.

Yes, we are scenario planning for whatever those different circumstances will look like. That involves a partnership approach. It is not just Skills Development Scotland that delivers under PACE, for example. The additional investment that is going to local authorities and the consideration of the investment in work coaches are part of the total package, through which we are ensuring that we are not duplicating resources unnecessarily.

**The Convener:** Ian Pope, I put the same question to you. No one wants to see that surge of 800,000—it could be more—additional claimants for universal credit. On the numbers of staff that we spoke about earlier, you mentioned that, in many places, they were replacing the numbers that you felt had been lost over previous years. Those staff are supposed to be in place by the end of March next year. I understand that you are concerned about employing agency staff, but are those numbers sufficient to deal with the additional capacity that will be required when the furlough scheme comes to an end?

**Ian Pope:** I said earlier that, based on our calculations, which included looking at what we had lost and consulting our union branches, we felt that 20,000 was a reasonable figure. That was last year, and it is clear that the world has changed. The department was looking to address that because the furlough scheme was due to end at the end of October, and it served notice on our members in 270 jobcentres and 21 universal credit service centres for the extension of operating hours from 30 November. The main aspect of that is that there will be Saturday opening in jobcentres from this Saturday; it will be from the following Saturday in Scotland, because of lockdown.

Our claim—our demand for staff—is still 20,000, but the figure of up to 17,000 is welcome. We would rather that those were permanent, fully trained staff who would be in it for the long haul and not people on one-year, fixed-term contracts. However, we will need to wait to see what happens. We continue to meet the department weekly on those issues, and we will continue to monitor the situation.

**The Convener:** This will be my final question before I bring in the deputy convener, Pauline McNeill.

Ian Pope, the committee has had discussions in the past with PCS and the DWP, and we have had concerns about how conditionality operates, not just for those who are fully employed but for claimants who work part time who have to fulfil a commitment to increase their hours of work. Some of those requirements are pie in the sky in the current economic situation. Conditionality was suspended for a while. I do not know what bringing back conditionality means, but it is back.

Does that mean that sanctions are being applied and that claimant commitments are being increased so that, if someone works 10 hours a week, their work coach will ask them to see whether they can increase that to 15 hours' work or get a second part-time job? All those things worried the committee before Covid-19, and members of PCS also had some concerns about them. Has the DWP taken a measured approach to conditionality, or has it started to put a squeeze on people to get back into work when perhaps the jobs are not there and doing so is counterproductive?

Those concerns are not caused by Covid-19; the committee has had on-going concerns about conditionality for some time. Frankly, I would rather that there was no conditionality, but newly employed work coaches might not be as experienced in how to sensitively ensure that a claimant commitment is realistic and how to support the claimant to meet such commitments under conditionality. Do you have any final comments on that, Mr Pope?

09:15

**Ian Pope:** Many PCS members qualify for universal credit, as their wages are low, and they are bound by conditionality as well. Therefore, it is a major issue for our union.

At the outset of the pandemic, in March, we wrote to the DWP and asked it to suspend labour market activity conditionality and sanctions. It is a policy of PCS that we want those to be scrapped completely. It took a month for the department to eventually do that, at which point all face-to-face appointments were suspended. However, it reintroduced conditionality for universal credit in July. The department would say that it did so in a "light-touch" manner. In August, it reintroduced it for new-style jobseekers allowance, with a "light-touch" approach again being taken.

In the meetings that we had with the department this week, we asked where it is on conditionality. The decision that it is a policy has clearly come from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. However, the department still says that it is a "light-touch" approach and that it would need to be something serious for a benefit claimant to get a sanction, because work coaches are working with them.

Many of our new work coaches were universal credit claimants only a few weeks ago, and many of them might have been sanctioned in the past. Inexperience obviously comes with being new, but the training that they get should cover what the convener mentioned. Over the years, PCS has introduced guidance on the steps that must be taken before a sanction is issued, and we tell staff to make sure that they take those steps. We work very closely with claimant groups such as Unite Community and the Poverty Alliance. We meet them regularly to listen to their concerns and to work with them politically in an effort to get the policy scrapped.

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** I am delighted to hear from Ian Pope that PCS has been arguing against conditionality. I want to put that on record, because the union has done an important thing that I am sure has helped a lot of people.

I am interested in the pattern of experiences that people—young people, in particular—have had throughout the Covid pandemic. I have a few example cases that highlight why I have concerns. A couple of cases that I have dealt with speak to the varied way in which work coaches are dealing with clients. There are incidents where there have been missed calls and the claimant has found it very different to get back to the person who they spoke to or where there has been no work coach meeting at all.

So far, I have not seen much evidence in the cases that I have that people have been informed of, for example, the job support payment. I have another case in which a young man who started work was refused a job payment and had been out of work for six months.

My concern is that lot of young people have been shielding, and being out of circulation has given them mild mental health issues. Therefore, my question to Ian is: what is your view on how wide and varied the pattern of support to clients has been during the pandemic?

**Ian Pope:** During the pandemic, the department introduced a number of easements, which meant that there was no face-to-face activities or appointments unless the benefit claimant was vulnerable, in which case they would be seen at a jobcentre—the doors would be locked, but they would be seen by appointment. Clearly, we welcomed that. However, our priority as a union is the safety of our members and of the public. We felt that anything that might bring Covid into jobcentres could have a major effect. Sadly, people who worked in jobcentres have died as a result of Covid.

The department's policy was digital by default—telephone or computer—but, clearly, not everybody has access to that. Until recently, the 18 to 24 age group had high levels of Covid, and there were real concerns about that, but the Government brought in stuff to assist 18 to 24-year-olds. They should get an interview but, unfortunately, due to Covid, that has not happened until recently. However, we have an agreement with the department whereby our work coaches can decide how they see benefit claimants—whether face to face, by telephone, or by digital means. They are the experts, who know their claimant group and how it should be dealt with. It is also a safety measure for our members. As a union, we do not want to take a service away from the public—we want to help. Many of our friends and families claim benefits as well, and we want to support people in their time of need.

**Pauline McNeill:** As far as you know, do the work coaches go through all the job support that is available, or does the person have to ask? I ask because my experience has been that people have to put a note in their journal to ask for access to that. In the past two weeks, I have had five or six cases in which I have been told that someone did not know about job support, so I advised them about it and they went back and put it in their journal. What has been your experience of that?

**Ian Pope:** We are absolutely taking forward that area with the department. Since conditionality was brought back in, in July, the interview timings have changed. Previously, a new benefit claimant would have got 50 minutes with a work coach. That has

been reduced to 30 minutes. They also have 10-minute interviews in which things such as security checks and CVs are discussed. We do not think that that is enough. The feedback from our work coaches is that they feel that their autonomy has been taken away, they are unable to do the job properly, and, as you have said, they are not able to give the service that they want to give to the public.

The department has responded by saying that it is a temporary measure, which is down to the case load and the number of people who are now claiming, and that it is trying to get everybody seen. However, we do not agree that there should be a reduction in appointment timings. It was 50 minutes for a reason. We are putting pressure on the department to get it put back to an appropriate amount of time.

**Pauline McNeill:** I have a question for James Russell. I am interested in how we reach young people. Has there been any review of different ways of doing that? A particular concern of mine, which I have raised with ministers, is that it is really important to seek out the many young people who are vulnerable or marginalised, or who have been shielding during the pandemic and have not had much contact with any Government agencies. It would be really helpful if you would go through any new ways in which you are going to reach all those young people who need support.

**James Russell:** That goes back to the point that I made about targeted support. We use a needs-based approach, under education legislation for sharing data between such bodies as schools, local authorities, SDS and DWP. That data is available for people up to the age of 24.

In schools, we target and proactively support the delivery of entitlements for young people. About 40 per cent of the senior PACE population are identified as requiring additional support from a careers adviser for their career decision making.

When we work face to face in schools, we work with the schools to get to access to young people. When we took our advisers out of schools at the point of the school closures, we moved to using telephony. The data-sharing approach was important and valuable for us in maintaining access to those young people.

We took the decision to extend proactive support to all leavers, as they would not necessarily have been in the targeted support group before. Between the April lockdown and the summer, we had proactive engagement with more than 40,000 young people to understand how the lockdown had impacted on their post-school decision making. That support has been invaluable. A young person will not necessarily have been identified as requiring additional

support, but every careers adviser can decide to bring them into that targeted service.

Similarly, in a post-school setting, we have a responsibility under the opportunities for all policy to proactively follow up every 16 to 19-year-old who has not been identified as participating. We can then offer our next steps service, which is a proactive, intensive service, consisting of weekly or fortnightly engagement with people. That is not conditional, so there is absolutely a choice for the young person to engage with us.

The telephony approach has been critical, and we have been using the data to make calls out to young people. The helpline service is relatively new, and we have been promoting it through a wide range of social channels, including new social media channels, over the past few months. We have listened to young people so as to understand what they are engaging with and how we can access that.

One of the most important things is our partnership connections. There is huge alignment around shared social media channels, either in education or in authorities, and around how we promote the availability of services to young people.

We have tried to respond in the best way using digital means, but the outbound nature of our service delivery has been invaluable in maintaining support.

**Pauline McNeill:** If a young person between the ages of 19 and 24 is unemployed now and they want to get in touch to find out how they can enhance their skills to get employment, how do they get in touch? I ask that with some concern. I could be wrong, but I do not see much engagement on further education at the moment. I could not tell you what the further education sector has been up to over the nine months, apart from dealing with funding issues. It seems to me that the sector is vital to the delivery of the whole programme.

**James Russell:** It is indeed absolutely vital. We have been working with our college partners, and not just in our regional collaboration, on skills provision and using our labour market insight. We are working closely with the Scottish Funding Council and regional college boards, using that labour market insight in relation to how provision in colleges is being reshaped. That work has been under way for a number of months.

My department in particular, with its careers service perspective, has close working relationships with all the colleges. We have partnership arrangements with them, identifying college students who are at risk of dropping out or who have additional support needs so that they become part of our targeted offer. That allows us

to support them through information sharing with the college, ensuring that they are getting the support that they need. Colleges have reshaped provision, and they have identified new ways to bring in provision to meet labour market needs if that has not necessarily been done before.

Going back to the original part of the question, about contact, we have a helpline and we have played a fundamental role in working with the Scottish Government on the young persons guarantee. We took on responsibility for the development of the landing page of the website, which directs people to understand what the young persons guarantee means for them and how they can access a range of partnership support.

That aims to bring together and maximise partnership support in the system, enabling people to get to that, either digitally or by handing them to our helpline services, where they can have a mediated service. We would then use our partnership connections more widely, either to refer people or to triage them through to the appropriate support that they might need.

09:30

**Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):** I want to know how service delivery has changed for both your organisations as a result of the pandemic, given the loss of the ability to have face-to-face contact. James Russell has covered a lot of that already, but I would like to know in particular how services are adapting to the needs of those who are digitally excluded through either a lack of skills or not having a reliable broadband connection.

**James Russell:** As I mentioned, we transitioned our service delivery and closed our centres during the initial phase of the pandemic. In June, we reverted and began our reset and restart process. With human resources and recognised trade unions, we developed a robust process to get our careers advisers back into schools during the summer period, through an appropriate risk assessment process and through understanding the guidance that the Government had provided for schools.

We are now back working face to face in 93 per cent of schools. In other areas, we are delivering digitally. In some Highland communities, for example, we cannot travel as safely as we might have done previously because a plane is required. In certain areas, some of our school partners have a great digital infrastructure, and we have been delivering services remotely as part of that. In addition, after going through the same assessment process, we have opened a large proportion of our public access centres.

In a similar way to what Ian Pope described earlier, we have given the advisers who work with young people the autonomy to make decisions on whether a face-to-face intervention is best for them. Our centres have been set up in such a way that, where we have the appropriate space, most of them have a confidential one-to-one pod in which an individual can get support from an adviser without any other interaction. We have also set up digital rooms for people who need to be close to an adviser but do not want to be in front of them; individuals can access that room using Microsoft Teams or Skype videoconferencing facilities.

The digital rooms also enable us to do job interviews online; all employers have had to take that sort of approach. We also have public access machines with appropriate screening in place so that if people need mediated support, we are able to sit side by side with them, with screens between us, to provide that. We have done as much as we can, by providing our services in the way that we have, to ensure that those who need face-to-face contact or who are digitally excluded can access our provision.

We are also working through our local authority partnerships and local employability partnerships. When we identify challenges around digital exclusion, we can work with our partners in the connecting Scotland initiative to find ways of providing funding for people to get broadband or the hardware that will allow them to connect digitally.

**Mark Griffin:** A lot of what James Russell has talked about has focused in particular on allowing clients to come in and use services if they do not have access to broadband. In jobcentres in my region, people were previously able to come in and sit with their phone or tablet to use the wi-fi. How are those people being impacted as a result of jobcentres being closed?

**Ian Pope:** Digitalisation is a major issue—I gave evidence to the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee on that just three weeks ago. The 2018 Scottish household survey said that 13 per cent of people in Scotland do not have internet at all, so there is a major issue there. In addition, there are literacy issues—7.1 million people in England are described as having “very poor literacy skills”. Those issues are really concerning.

With the jobcentres reopening their doors at the start of July, people have been able to use the services. There are systems at the door, but people can come in. However, because of Covid, there are restrictions on how many people can be in a jobcentre at any one time. The risk assessment that has been done limits the number of people—rightly so—to protect claimants and staff, security guards, cleaners and so on.

It is important that people have access to those services. We have only to look at the film “I, Daniel Blake”—people might say that it is fiction, but it is fact—in which the claimant goes to the library to access the internet. He does not know what he is doing, and he runs out of time. Those are the people whom we, and the Government, need to support. Our members are trained to support them, but that has been difficult with Covid restrictions. The jobcentre doors are open but, as I said, there is limited access to the centres because of safety concerns.

**Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** I will start with questions for Ian Pope, but first I want to comment on the fantastic staff at my local DWP centre. I visited when it first opened, and I was absolutely blown away by the resilience and flexibility that they showed and the support that they gave to new claimants. I take my hat off to them, because they have done an amazing job. Similarly, I thank SDS for the PACE services that it has offered in response to the redundancies that have been happening recently. It has been a very difficult time.

We sometimes seem to miss out disabled people when we are speaking about these issues. I want to ask Ian Pope about the fair start Scotland scheme, which has managed to find employment for only one out of four people, including disabled people. Do you have any comments on how employees help to shape some of the schemes, which are possibly not working for disabled people? Do employees get an opportunity to do that? What kind of training do they get to help disabled people into employment?

**Ian Pope:** Work coach training would cover all aspects of that. As I said, work coaching is about trying to support vulnerable people and people with disabilities. Those people would have access to support in a jobcentre if they required it, but our members provide as much support as they can to those groups.

It is difficult for me to comment on your point about employees. Our members work closely with employers to get people into work, but I am not sure about the level to which that would be taken. I can comment only on the work coaches, who would provide support.

Rachael Hamilton is right to highlight the issues. During the pandemic, 2.5 million claims for universal credit were cleared and payments made. That work included work coaches and processors working from home or coming into the office. In addition, there was a 2,500 per cent spike in claims for the new-style jobseekers allowance during that period. Work coach training includes training on how to support disabled customers through their journey on benefits, and how to point

them in the right direction to get them into employment.

**Rachael Hamilton:** We now have a vaccine on the way, which is brilliant news, and we will—I hope—start to see some green shoots of recovery and some light at the end of the tunnel. We have talked a lot about how the impact of Covid has changed the way in which services are delivered. How do you work with your members to take forward their approach to the future? We have talked about how delivery has changed. How could services best be delivered for individuals who are seeking employment and looking for job-search services?

**Ian Pope:** Obviously, the world has changed, and the service is not the same as it was nine months ago. That is down to the restrictions on people being able to come into a jobcentre—due to safety, there is a limit on the number of people who can come into a jobcentre at any one time. However, the service has been increased. Heading into the future, we hope that, with a vaccine, we can provide the support that we have been providing over a number of years.

As a union, we are of the opinion that universal credit is not fit for purpose, and we want a full social security review. We and our members want a social security system that, like the Scottish system, treats claimants and staff with dignity, respect and fairness, that helps people at the point of need and that does not have stringent conditionality attached to it. We want to help people and we do not want punitive sanctions to address those situations. That is the view of our union, and we are working with claimant groups to achieve that.

**Rachael Hamilton:** You talked earlier about a light-touch approach to conditionality. How does the discretionary framework work in practice? If individuals are able to use their discretion, is that fair across the board?

**Ian Pope:** There is a certain level that work coaches have to get to, and certain measures that have to be carried out before they issue a sanction. The department says that sanctions are a last resort. It says that conditionality has been reintroduced and that sanctions are in place but that, in the current circumstances, it has to be a serious situation for a customer to be issued with a sanction. We are engaging with our work coach members to see whether that is the case and to find out, anecdotally, how many sanctions are being issued. We are still gathering that information.

The same approach should be taken across the board; it should not be one rule for one person and another rule for somebody else. Issuing a sanction is a last resort and it should be clear to staff when

it is appropriate to do so. However, as I said, we want that option to be taken away completely.

**Rachael Hamilton:** That was helpful.

I have a question for Skills Development Scotland. We have talked a lot about 18 to 24-year-olds and, yesterday, we heard about the pressures on Arcadia and Debenhams, which have gone into administration. There will be a loss of many service sector jobs—25,000 retail jobs are likely to be lost from Arcadia and Debenhams, and there are more on the way, so we have a big task on our hands. Can employability and job search services be tailored to help people segue into sectors such as health and social care in which there is a demand for labour? What will you do at a local level, and what do you expect of the Scottish Government?

**James Russell:** I return to the point that I made earlier about labour market insight. That intelligence is central to the provision of career information, advice and guidance. It is important that it is evidence based so that, when we work with individuals in Scotland, we understand what the labour market is doing and where opportunities exist.

It is also important that SDS is impartial, in that we do not have a vested interest in the provision that someone might go for. There are SDS apprenticeships and other products, but an SDS careers adviser does not favour apprenticeships over other products.

09:45

Those two principles are deployed as part of the professional practice of a career professional, which helps us to guide people. We talk about career management skills. There is a theme around horizons, which is about understanding the labour market so that decisions are as informed as they can be. At practitioner and customer levels, that evidence is critical. People can access that support through SDS. They can access career guidance through our local partnerships and our PACE partnerships.

We are then able to refer or signpost people to other services, if they need something that we cannot provide. That might be financial support from Citizens Advice Scotland or employment rights support from the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, for example. We try to ensure that our practitioners understand all the provision. That is a difficult task, but I think that they know exactly what local services are available and how they can support their customers through the different journeys.

Similarly, at a more strategic level, there are the labour market insights and the work that we have

done with our partners, including enterprise agencies and industry leadership groups, on the regional skills assessments. That work is central. What skills do people have? How transferable are those skills into other sectors? We know that service sectors such as retail are being challenged, whereas there is a huge demand for talent in service sectors in health and social care.

There is a policy role in considering how we invest in apprenticeship programmes and how the system invests in further and higher education provision to ensure that the matching of skills is appropriate. That applies not just at the policy level—we should apply the same principles at practitioner level. We focus on skills, how people use those skills to transfer, and what programmes can help people to upskill and reskill in order to make the transition from one place to another.

We do that through our digital services. People can go on to the my world of work website and self-serve, if they are capable of doing so. Those who require face to face dialogue can get mediated support through our helpline. We want to continue that model, but we hope to maximise the customer journey in each of those spaces, as we harness technology and learn from some of the things that we have had to do as a result of the pandemic. That learning will serve us well in the future.

**Rachael Hamilton:** Has enough been done to support disabled people into employment?

**James Russell:** There is a wide range of support and a huge commitment to support disabled people into employment. There is the fair start Scotland service, as you mentioned. Additional funding is available for employers to bring in individuals into their workforce and to provide the work-based learning that they need to make the transition successful for them.

There is our targeted support at 40 per cent of the senior-phase population, which is an example of the needs-based approach that we take. The socioeconomic factors and the information that we have about individuals are critical in identifying the targeted support that we provide. If someone is identified as having a disability through our information sharing, they are automatically put into the category of those who potentially require additional support. An adviser with the school or another practitioner then validates that with the individual to find out their needs and how they can be supported.

We have mechanisms in place, and there is a wide range of support in the system. The critical aspect is working with specialist partners who can support us in shaping the provision and programmes that we put in place. It is also about how our practitioners support disabled people into

employment. We continue to work to increase the knowledge, awareness and capacity of our teams in order to support them as effectively as we can.

**Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** I will follow on from Rachael Hamilton's questions. Interestingly, today is the United Nations international day of persons with disabilities. My first question is for James Russell. Before the current crisis, the number of people with a disability who got employment in England was about 4 to 5 per cent higher than the number in Scotland. Why is it the case that more disabled people are finding jobs in England compared with Scotland? What lessons can we learn from that?

**James Russell:** Is that for me?

**Jeremy Balfour:** Yes.

**James Russell:** Why are more people in England with a disability gaining employment than are people in Scotland with a disability—is that the question?

**Jeremy Balfour:** Yes.

**James Russell:** I would need to understand that data more widely and the circumstances in which that is the case. It could be a result of the provision or funding that is in place. I am not overly familiar with the intricacies of the English system.

In Scotland, as I have said, from our perspective in career information and guidance, where we have the ability to offer that support, we provide it, through our needs-based approach to people with a disability. They are entitled to that level of support if they need it. All the programmes that are in place—such as fair start Scotland's additional funding for apprenticeships, which you mentioned—are there to maximise that.

I do not have an answer as to why there is that difference between Scotland and England. If things are being done differently in England that result in better outcomes being delivered, it is certainly our perspective that we should be able to learn lessons from that. That applies internationally, as well, if other countries provide services in a way that improves outcomes for individuals with a disability.

**Jeremy Balfour:** I take it from your answer that you have had no cross-border discussions with other agencies in England, Wales or Northern Ireland about how they do it, compared with how we do it. That differential has been there for at least the past five to 10 years, and it is getting larger. I am slightly surprised that your organisation has not analysed that to find out what you could do better or what lessons you could learn. Is there an opportunity to do that and have those discussions?

**James Russell:** We absolutely work cross border. In my directorate, we work with the career services across the four nations as well as internationally to understand what provision is in place, what approaches they are taking and what international practice looks like. That informs the design, development and continuous improvement of our career service.

For our framework and standards on work-based learning, there is absolutely work across the United Kingdom nations. Frameworks and standards have to be applicable in the UK and not just in Scotland. We learn from best practice and from where it is driving better outcomes. Some of the additional support that is available through our work-based learning programmes will have been identified from need or effective practice.

I do not have to hand the specifics underneath that. I can take that back to our skills planning team to see if there is evidence that tells us more about the reasons why England might have a better employment rate for those with a disability than Scotland has.

**Jeremy Balfour:** It would be helpful if you could write to the committee once you have done that to follow that up.

Moving on, from a trade union perspective, is much sharing going on between coaches north and south of the border, or is it still done on a nation basis?

**Ian Pope:** Work coaches in Scotland are employed by a Westminster department, so they should have the same training and communications and they are bound by the same rules and guidance as English and Welsh work coaches.

The reason why the numbers that you mentioned are higher in England is possibly because of the training and expertise that our members have in getting people into work. In Scotland, with the devolved social security, there is no customer-facing situation. I sit on a group that includes representatives from the DWP, claimant groups and the unions and which shares experiences and best practice and discusses how to take matters forward. It will meet this afternoon, and I hope that that point will be taken away from the meeting. I hope that, if things are being done better by the DWP, the Scottish Government will learn from that and act on it.

**Jeremy Balfour:** I have no further questions, convener.

**The Convener:** That was a helpful line of questioning. It would be useful if Mr Russell could provide the committee with more data on that area from Skills Development Scotland.

I was just looking at the data that we have, which shows that the disability employment rate for England is 53.7 per cent and, for Scotland, it is 46.9 per cent, so there is a differential. I do not know whether those figures relate to before or after the involvement of the fair start Scotland service, but it would be helpful to find out how they might look going forward.

**Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP):** It is fair to say that for some time it has been recognised that the employability policy landscape across Scotland has been fairly complex. Different agencies are at play: the UK Government, the Scottish Government, the DWP and now Social Security Scotland. We also have the job start payment, SDS, the kickstart scheme and the Scottish youth guarantee. I would like to hear your views on whether we are getting a handle on that. Is the landscape becoming more complex? During our response to the pandemic over the past nine months, we have seen rapid change and acceleration of existing changes. Have we also seen a renewed impetus towards integration and alignment of services? I ask that James Russell responds first.

**James Russell:** The employability landscape will always have a level of complexity, given that so many different organisations are involved. The important point is that that complexity should not be experienced by the customer. That principle also underpins the no one left behind strategy and the previous opportunities for all strategy. Partnership working takes place through our local employability partnerships and community planning partnerships, and SDS, local authorities and the DWP are all represented.

It is our responsibility to knit together those complex elements behind the scenes, to ensure that an individual gets the support that they need when they need it, without having to think who does what when—that is up to the practitioners on the ground, such as work coaches, careers advisers, employability key workers and third sector partners.

Such complexity will always exist to a degree. When there is more or changing provision in the system, as has happened during the response to the pandemic, and we are all involved in that, the level of complexity increases. However, I am assured that we are maintaining our awareness of the changes and are working with our partners on them through our partnership approach. For example, the emerging workplace learning programmes that we have launched have been developed with our partners. They not only provide labour market insight and look at the sectoral opportunities and the upskilling and reskilling needs of individuals; they also look at individual's eligibility for such programmes and how that sits

with the kickstart scheme and local authority employment services. We are trying to reduce duplication and also increase the efficiency of the customer's journey through the system.

The principles underpinning the no one left behind strategy, the PACE framework and local employability partnerships are all the same. Peer measurement and data sharing enable us to set out what we are trying to achieve and how well we are doing so. We hope that the principles around service design and putting the user at the heart of services will get us to a place where we can continue to reduce complexity from a customer's perspective.

Therefore, to answer the second part of your question, there has certainly been renewed impetus. Collaboration is at the heart of SDS's strategic plan, which we developed in 2019 with organisations such as the Scottish Funding Council and Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

The impetus is that we have had to do things more quickly as a result of the circumstances. Digital technology—harnessing the service delivery model through digital capability—has absolutely been part of that. Because all partners have had to respond, we are engaging them in its development, if possible, for awareness and visibility.

10:00

We run programmes of continuing professional development sessions, for example through the work coach network in our partnership with DWP, to ensure that our staff and its staff are aware of the support that is happening, the changing needs of customers and the programmes that are available. When the kickstart scheme started, UK policy teams came in to provide sessions about it for all our teams.

The word "impetus" suggests greater pace. Because of the pace that we are working at, and the immediacy of our need to respond, we have not been able to wait for things to happen, so, yes, there has been renewed impetus, and the principles that were already in place have been a good foundation on which to deliver that acceleration of pace.

**Tom Arthur:** Do you have any comments to make on that question, Ian Pope?

**Ian Pope:** I will be brief, as I do not have much to add to what James Russell has said. I agree about getting support to people when they need it. I have made it clear that our members want to provide that support at the earliest opportunity. I know that there is close working between DWP and Scottish Government officials. However, benefit claimants do not really care where they get

help from. Any joined-up approach would, I am sure, be welcomed, in order to get things right. As long as it is done right, and fairly, our union would agree with it.

**Tom Arthur:** Perhaps, despite the complexity that may exist for policy makers and for those who deliver the services, clients do not experience that at the point of use—or do you think that they do?

**Ian Pope:** The benefits system is complex by definition—that is one of the issues. I think that is the reason that the Government would give for moving to universal credit: it rolls all the benefits into one, in order to make the system simpler for people to understand and make claims.

During the pandemic, the priority was to pay people their benefits, and the rest could be dealt with later. The department is now picking up on what happened previously, for example any errors or fraudulent claims.

It is a complex situation. Benefits are complex. It can be complex for our members as well. As I said earlier, our staff need to do an intensive training package in order to process the benefits and support claimants through the process.

**Tom Arthur:** Thank you. My final question is for Ian Pope. I want to get your general perspective as a trade unionist. There is a recognition of the changing nature of work and how that has been accelerated by the pandemic. The reality is that the new jobs of today will perhaps be obsolete in 10 or 20 years' time. What are your reflections on the role of the union movement in supporting employees to continually develop their skills throughout their career? Do you think that there is enough of a collaborative approach between trade unions, Government and business in achieving that?

**Ian Pope:** I go back to the point that I made about the Work and Pensions committee meeting of three weeks ago, which examined the future of employment and digitalisation. Robots are being brought in now to process claims, so what is the future for staff and jobs, 10 or 20 years down the road? The current evidence shows, for example, that although supermarkets have brought in automation, there has not been a reduction in jobs in that sector in the way that the unions thought there would be, because staff have been redeployed to other parts of the business.

Of course, the issue is a real concern for us. However, in my evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee, I made the point that, when I joined the Department for Health and Social Security, as it was in 1984, everything was done using pen and paper. Moving forward 10 years, everybody had a computer on their desks, and now, 25 or 26 years later, the world has changed

again. The world is always changing, and we must adapt to it.

We have to work with employers and Government on how things will be done in the future. Changes must be made appropriately with full consultation, and we will defend our members' jobs. We will also defend the services—it is not just about our members' jobs; we take great pride in delivering the services that we provide. Who knows what it will be like in 10 years' time? Any way forward has to involve a collaborative approach. It needs to be done right, and we, as a union, must have an input into the process and our voices must be heard.

**Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** First, I want to follow up briefly on Jeremy Balfour's question. I will not ask James Russell any detailed questions about the system south of the border; I know that that is not his remit. However, if he is getting back to the committee with information on the differential rates for people with disabilities gaining employment, I ask him to factor in the point that the situation of those people is perhaps even more anomalous, given that, for the best part of 18 months, unemployment has been lower in Scotland than in the rest of the UK.

My question builds on the questions that have been asked so far about how the service has changed as a result of Covid. Both witnesses have been asked about areas in which services might have improved during the pandemic. You may not be able to give an answer off the top of your head—if not, I ask you to submit one in writing. Can you give an example of a service that has changed and improved as a product of partnership working between SDS and jobcentres? Do you intend to develop or continue that change?

**James Russell:** Is your question specifically about SDS and jobcentres?

**Keith Brown:** I am asking about partnership working between SDS and jobcentres.

**James Russell:** This may not be a great example, but—for those who may not be aware—we have had, for a number of years, a formal service offer for individuals that is delivered between SDS and the DWP. The integrated employment and skills model sets out to identify where a DWP or universal credit customer is accessing support but is unable to sustain the opportunities that they take up, or is not quite able to consider, with the work coach, what their future may look like. A need for career guidance is identified, and those issues can be explored more deeply with the individual in question. There is a partnership approach. We have in place appropriate protocols for warm handovers and information sharing, with the customer's approval,

to ensure that those processes are seamless. There is then a case conference approach and a hand-back at the point when we believe that the individual has a better sense of direction and decision making for their next steps.

That model has been in place for a number of years. It has not necessarily become more important at this stage, with the increase in claimants, but we have used it in our work with other partners, particularly our local authority partners. Through the Scottish Local Authorities Economic Development group, for example, we have developed a similar mechanism. Where we previously had in place physical partnerships with people, there was no need for those formal protocols, but things have changed. We recognise that the IES model has been really important—certainly when we are delivering national services through a helpline by someone who is not based in a certain local authority—in enabling us to get something in place quickly with our local authority partners, so that an individual does not have to phone a helpline and then phone someone else or wait for a call back. We use telephony to do a warm transfer for that individual, and in some cases we are able to undertake a case conference with a three-way dialogue before the handover takes place.

I do not know whether that is a good enough example. However, that approach enabled us to build on a process that already existed in the system, while using the current environment in which we are operating to escalate it.

**Keith Brown:** Can Ian Pope talk about anything that has improved during the Covid pandemic that is a product of partnership working between SDS and jobcentres, and that will continue?

**Ian Pope:** It is difficult for me to comment. I do not profess to speak on behalf of the DWP, although I am an employee of the DWP. Obviously, I am here to represent PCS, so I cannot comment on SDS and DWP.

However, it is difficult for me to think of anything that has been done during the year that is better than the situation before Covid, because the department has had to react to the situation. As I said earlier, part of that was putting in place easements, which meant that there was no face-to-face activity for several months. The department is now starting to recover from that. As part of that, it is extending operating hours. We would not necessarily say that that is a good thing from our members' point of view, on safety grounds. However, we want to provide a service for benefit claimants when they need it. You have probably seen that our union has balloted our members and took action on that, but we have agreed some concessions from the employer, which we are able to work through.

It is early days to say what can be improved on. The UK Government has introduced measures to support benefits claimants, so that might assist the situation. However, on the service that people are getting in offices, the department is recovering from the pandemic. We hope that the new recruits will be a positive, and that the service can improve because we might have the staff in place by March next year to provide the service for which we have been arguing for years.

**The Convener:** I have one final question, but, given the time, the witnesses might want to provide an answer in writing. I am keen to find out a bit more about the single-service offer that Skills Development Scotland was referring to, given the complexity of the system. The committee will address the issue in the next evidence session with DWP and the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Employment, but perhaps Ian Pope could address the matter. If a young person is engaging with a work coach in Jobcentre Plus, how is the decision made on whether to refer them to the new kickstart scheme or to the Scottish youth guarantee?

The idea behind the single-service offer is that there is no wrong door—whoever someone gets at the first point of contact can ensure that they have seamless access to all opportunities to get back into employment, irrespective of whether those opportunities come from the Scottish Government, the UK Government or even the local authority. I am happy for witnesses to make the briefest of comments on that, but a substantive response in writing would be welcome. Ian Pope, do you have any brief observations on that before we close the evidence session?

**Ian Pope:** I will take that issue away and respond in writing later, because I will need to discuss with work coach members what the role entails and how they decide to refer people to the kickstart scheme.

**The Convener:** That would be helpful, thank you. James Russell, is the situation the same for you?

You are muted, James.

**James Russell:** Can you hear me now?

**The Convener:** Yes, although I think that you are just going to say that you will write to us on that anyway, Mr Russell.

**James Russell:** Yes—on the expanded wider support, which links to child protection and the protection of vulnerable adults. On the referral process, Ian Pope can deal with the DWP perspective. From my perspective, that is all about choice. We inform individuals about the range of available programmes, eligibility, what the expectations are and then support them in their

decision making. Again, impartiality is critical to how our service operates.

**The Convener:** That is helpful, and that is a good note on which to end our evidence session. It was a lengthy evidence session, but it was worth while. I thank James Russell and Ian Pope.

We will continue with agenda item 2 after a short suspension to allow our second panel of witnesses to join us.

10:15

*Meeting suspended.*

10:20

*On resuming—*

**The Convener:** Welcome back. We are still on agenda item 2, which is the committee's inquiry into social security and Covid-19. We welcome our second panel of witnesses: Mims Davies MP, Minister for Employment; Jonathan Mills, policy group director general at the DWP; and Margarita Morrison, the DWP's area director for Scotland. I thank all three of you for supporting the committee's work and our inquiry.

I understand that the minister will make a brief statement before we move to questions.

**Mims Davies MP (Minister for Employment):** Good morning, everybody. I am grateful for the opportunity to be here today and to talk to you about the UK Government's hugely important plan for jobs.

As you just heard, I am joined by Margarita Morrison, area director for DWP operations, work and health for Scotland, and Jonathan Mills, our director general for policy at the DWP. I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Margarita, Jonathan and all my department's hard-working civil servants for the impressive skill and dedication—and everything else—that they have demonstrated in the handling of the unique challenge of Covid-19 and the health emergency.

All through the pandemic, the DWP and the wider UK Government have provided a comprehensive economic support package, with a focus on protecting, supporting and creating jobs. Our main focus has always been to encourage and guide people back into work, where going back to work is safe. We will continue to be led by the latest public health advice, and we will continue to work closely with the Scottish Government to support those who are most in need.

Faced with the significant pressures that the virus has placed on the labour market, the Chancellor of the Exchequer quickly introduced

the coronavirus job retention scheme and the self-employed income support scheme, alongside additional measures to strengthen the welfare safety net, to support businesses and individuals affected by the pandemic and—most crucially—to keep as many people as close to the labour market as possible.

That generous support package was swiftly rolled out, and it remains in place for those who need it. However, our focus has rightly turned to supporting people across the UK back into employment.

We recognise that young people have been among the most impacted by the pandemic, which is why we launched the kickstart scheme in September. Brought in at pace, kickstart is a £2 billion fund to create hundreds of thousands of new six-month work placements for people under 25 who are on universal credit and who are at most risk of long-term unemployment. The roles are fully subsidised by the UK Government and will give young people valuable employment experience, which will benefit them in the short term by providing a sense of fulfilment and, crucially, acting as a springboard to improve their chances of unlocking long-term, high-quality work and opportunities. The placement could lead to a traineeship, apprenticeship or further education, and it will help young people to map out their future.

I am pleased that a variety of Scottish employers are already taking part in the kickstart scheme, including an employer in the west of Scotland that is offering an exciting programme for 200 young people in the cyber, tech and digital sector. Kickstart is open to employers of all types, shapes and sizes in Scotland, and we are working with local gateway organisations such as chambers of commerce, local authorities and colleges, alongside employers and third sector organisations, to encourage as many employers as possible to apply to be part of the scheme over the coming months.

In addition to kickstart, we established the new, enhanced DWP youth offer in September, which has seen the department increase the support that is offered by our 13-week youth employment programme to help young people gain the skills and experience that employers are looking for. We are also working with our network of external partners, who are delivering 100 new co-located and co-delivered local youth hubs, and we are expanding the number of youth employability work coaches, of whom there are 70 in Scotland.

In the spending review in November, the chancellor announced the launch of our new DWP restart programme. Representing investment of almost £3 billion in England and Wales, the scheme will help more than a million of our

claimants who have been unemployed for more than 12 months. The scheme will launch in the next financial year, with £36 million being made available to the Scottish Government under the Barnett formula.

We have gone even further by boosting our sector-based work academy programme, or SWAP, schemes. Those schemes are for pre-employment training and work experience, and they guarantee job interviews that are linked to actual vacancies, perhaps in a different sector. They will give jobseekers of all ages the chance to develop and understand the skills that employers in particular sectors are looking for. The DWP is looking to further bolster that programme in the next financial year. We have already run 40,000 SWAPs this year to help people pivot into new industries; we are looking to double that next year to 80,000.

The new DWP job finding support service is an additional one-to-one scheme that has been established in response to the pandemic, to help those who have been unemployed for coming up to three months to increase their chances of finding their next job. With 12,800 new starts in Scotland, this new online service draws on the private sector's capacity to help those who are recently unemployed to bounce back into new roles and new sectors.

In addition, our job entry targeted support—JETS—scheme has begun its roll-out in the UK. It will take off early in the new year in Scotland. We are currently contracting it, and it is on track to go live in January. That new scheme will provide essential and additional support to enable those who are unemployed for more than three months to engage with the labour market. JETS will offer personalised support for up to six months to help participants prospectively re-engage with the labour market and focus on their job search.

Finally, we need to add great people to our fantastic DWP family to help deliver those excellent and wide-ranging support programmes. Therefore, we are committed to doubling the number of work coaches in our jobcentres across Great Britain before the end of the financial year, and we are on track to do that. We have committed to recruiting 800 new work coaches in Scotland by March 2021, and more than 400 have already been recruited.

We are also undertaking work to increase our Jobcentre Plus capacity, to ensure that the service can be delivered in a Covid-safe environment for our employees and our claimants. We have reduced the reliance on face-to-face interventions by offering work coaches' support via digital and telephony channels, to allow our claimants to access the full Jobcentre Plus offer without the additional anxiety that might be associated with

travelling into an office when we have the impact of tiers and lockdowns.

All our new recruits will receive six weeks of intensive training to acquire the skills that are necessary to deliver the tailored support that our claimants need. They will continue their learning through on-going access to action learning sets and bite-size products—a learning hub that will help them build their confidence and skills so that they can continue to grow in their role at the DWP.

Thank you for letting me set out where we are so far. I look forward to your questions and our conversation.

**The Convener:** That was a very helpful statement, minister—there was an awful lot in it. We look forward to keeping this dialogue going, perhaps with future visits to the committee. There is so much happening now and it is such a changing landscape.

I do not know whether you followed our first evidence session this morning, but my opening question for you is similar to one that I put to Skills Development Scotland and PCS. Our committee members want to get stuck into some of the details on this. You mentioned pressures on the system and the doubling of Jobcentre Plus staff and work coaches. We know that there has been a doubling of UC claimants in Scotland and, when the job retention scheme comes to an end next year, it is anticipated that there will be 800,000 additional UC claimants across the UK, so there are huge challenges for the system.

10:30

When we asked the PCS whether both staff numbers and training were sufficient to meet demand, its representative said that, although the union welcomed the increase in staff numbers and acknowledged the training, the increase in staff numbers only brought the levels back up to where they were before the staff cuts that happened pre-Covid. How confident are you that you will have sufficient numbers by March? I suppose that you will say that you are confident, so perhaps the more important question is: what assurances can you give that you will keep the position under review and are prepared to take on more staff, speedily if possible, to make sure that the unprecedented demand can be met?

**Mims Davies:** We have a fantastic team in Scotland. The secretary of state and I do a regular focus group with our work coaches; I also link into conversations with our leaders in our teams across the Jobcentre Plus network. I could not be prouder of the work that our staff have done, particularly when the UC case load exploded because of the handbrake on the economy that was caused by the pandemic.

We have 84 jobcentres across Scotland; we have six districts and five service centres—there are three in Glasgow, and one each in Dundee and Bathgate. Before Covid, I had a fantastic visit to Forres, Forfar, Stirling, Falkirk, Newlands in Glasgow and our Glasgow service centre, and I had more conversations planned, because the secretary of state and I absolutely agree that hearing from our work coaches and seeing what is going on on the ground is very important. The feedback that we get is that work coaches have never felt more supported or empowered, and we are absolutely listening to their needs and wants. Obviously, we are reviewing our estate and looking at what we need to do to house those additional work coaches safely, to support them through the right leadership and to bring them into our team.

However, the big focus that I have had since starting in this job is to understand local labour markets and the local challenges that people have, and to recognise the links between jobcentres, Skills Development Scotland, local authorities and charities, to see how much we, as the DWP, can bring when we all work together.

I recognise what you said about the challenge of bringing in a large number of new people. That has to be managed and we have to make sure that our claimants get the right advice and a good experience when talking to our coaches. I have been really pleased with how it is going so far, but I am keen for Margarita Morrison to tell you more about how she thinks that things are going operationally.

The DWP has been magnificent this year. For example, alongside our jobcentres, our service centres pivoted into all the new UC claim processing, and the feedback has been fantastic. People have had common cause in supporting those who are most in need and most vulnerable. Not everybody who is on UC is unemployed. It might be that they have lost hours or something has changed, so they need additional support.

**The Convener:** I am keen to hear from Margarita Morrison but, before we bring her in, you mentioned the really important point that not everyone who claims UC is unemployed. Again, before Covid, we had been concerned for some time about conditionality—even when it is considered light touch—and the claimant commitments around those who are already in employment seeking additional hours or a second part-time job. A lot of that was suspended during Covid and has been reintroduced. The issue was previously a concern to the committee and certainly a concern to me and PCS. Given the fact that conditionality is supposed to be light touch, I am unsure about why we would apply it at all at this point.

Will you consider suspending conditionality again? We are in unprecedented times and the idea of telling someone who is on minimum wage and working 15 hours a week that, as part of their claimant commitment, they must find another job for 10 hours a week is pie in the sky at the moment.

It is more about supporting people into employment than creating the perception of a potential threat that they could be sanctioned if they do not fulfil their claimant commitment. I know that work coaches do not want to create that perception. Do you have any more thoughts on that?

**Mims Davies:** As I said, our work coaches are more empowered and focused on the individual and the circumstances that they see before them. The labour market has changed significantly, as have the challenges that people face and the situations that they find themselves in. It is absolutely right that we operate a system that reflects that.

We need to get to know our claimants and what is going on with them. The number of sanctions is tiny; Margarita will confirm that about 0.2 per cent of people receive them. We reinstated conditionality for all claimants at the end of June. It is reasonable that new claimants who have not been engaged with the benefits system before recognise that it is a two-way street. We will help and support them until they do not need support, and if they are among the most vulnerable they will get all the support that they need.

It is not about bringing in sanctions or a difficult regime; it is about ensuring that we understand the new cohort. Some people will be quite surprised to come into the benefits system—they will have had quite a shock that their sector has been impacted—and it is absolutely right that we have reintroduced engagement with them.

I spoke about the feedback group that the secretary of state and I run. Initially, it was held twice weekly, but it is now monthly. Every month, work coaches feel that they have a direct line to ministers to discuss any issue that comes up.

Our work coaches feel that it is important to engage with our cohort of claimants to find out what is going on. Work coaches are linked into local opportunities and employment, and claimants could be feeling very isolated. I think that we have got the balance right: it is individual and tailored, and it allows us to get to know our cohort.

Perhaps Margarita can tell you what she thinks about what is happening operationally.

**Margarita Morrison (Department for Work and Pensions):** It is important to recognise that we went from receiving 4,500 claims per week to

29,000 in a very short period of time, and we learnt a lot from that about how we operated and the decisions that we made.

We put a team of people together to talk about that on a daily basis so that we could reach the right decisions on what to do to ensure that every customer was paid. I am pleased to say that, at that time, 93 per cent of customers were paid. Since then, we have managed to sustain that number at more than 90 per cent. We are learning a lot from the processes that we have put in place, and we will reflect on those as we consider how the service will operate in future.

The other thing that has helped is that we have been able to segment tasks according to what our customers need from us, as the minister said. Because we have a digital system, for some tasks, other parts of Scotland and the UK can help us out in areas where there are extra claims that we need to deal with. We will take a lot of learning from the early position.

It is absolutely right that our work coaches are fully empowered. We have been working differently during Covid. We were not a working from home organisation before. However, we have now sent out 1,600 pieces of kit to colleagues who are working at home. They are working digitally with our customers when that suits the customer, and we also have people working with telephony if the customer prefers that.

However, our jobcentres have remained open throughout the pandemic to ensure that vulnerable customers who need our help and face-to-face support in recognition of their personal circumstances can be seen in a very safe, Covid-secure environment. I could talk more about that—I lead on health and safety across the UK, so I am happy to explore that issue further if you would like.

It is about tailored support for the customer. We learn a lot from the people we see and the discussions that we have with them. The decisions that we make on what we do in our projects will be based on those conversations. Claimants have a one-on-one relationship with their work coach. It is very important that we get to know the customer so that we can tailor the support that they receive.

**The Convener:** First, let me put on record my recognition of the exceptional work of the many work coaches across the DWP in these unprecedented times, which I have seen first-hand in my constituency. I echo the sentiments about building relationships and getting to know those who are out of work, not only the long-term unemployed, who we must still be concerned about and care for, but also those who are new to the benefits system.

On building those relationships—this might be a question for the minister—one of the things that was helpful, and had cross-party support, was the £20-per-week increase in universal credit during these unprecedented times. It would be remiss of me not to comment that the Institute for Public Policy Research and a coalition of 40 charities across the UK have called for that £20-per-week increase to universal credit to be not only extended to legacy benefits but made permanent—full stop. I would warmly welcome that—it would be the right thing to do.

Minister, my concern, apart from the direct economic impact of withdrawing that £20 per week, which would put 60,000 households in Scotland and 300,000 kids across the UK into poverty, is the message that it would send to those in the benefits system that, at the height of Covid, we will give support to families that are new to the benefits system but not to them. If it was not enough money to live on pre-Covid, it will not be enough money to live on post-Covid, so I am worried about undermining the relationship with those people we are trying to get to know and support back into employment.

Are you actively considering extending the £20-per-week universal credit uplift either to legacy benefits or further into 2021? Also, what assessment have you made of the possible impact of withdrawing that £20 per week? I am keen for it to stay.

**Mims Davies:** Thank you for visiting your local jobcentre; that is something that I speak about to councillors, other elected officials and members of the Scottish Parliament, the Senedd and the UK Parliament, because it is important for people to talk to our work coaches, engage with the different programmes and understand what is out there. You may have seen some of the documentary programmes recently; I know that people in my constituency and my social group have been astounded about what is under the bonnet when it comes to jobcentres.

Many people will not have been to a Jobcentre Plus for a long time and this will perhaps be the first time that they have come into the benefits system—because of the Covid impact—and for most people, it has been incredibly positive. I applaud our staff who continue to do great work daily and I reflect Margarita's point that jobcentres have never closed—they have remained open for the most vulnerable and for those people who have come into the benefits system for the first time and may have found that a huge shock. I am delighted about the way that we have worked with our unions, operations and all our staff in our more than 600 jobcentres, and I put on record that I am delighted that you have seen that first-hand. JCP—jobs, community, progression—is what our

jobcentres really do and the more that people recognise that, the more they would be positive about what working with the DWP could mean.

In relation to addressing the UC uplift, I have had on-going engagement on that, along with the welfare delivery minister, and I recognise what some charities are saying. The reality for me as employment minister is that the best way that I can help people is by making sure that they have the skills, confidence and ability to get back into work. We need to work with the Government and across our nations to make sure that as we come into the recovery period, our economy goes back to where we were before, which was a jobs miracle. I know that not everybody was seeing that success and when the Prime Minister appointed me to this role, he knew about my interest in young people, people with barriers and people who were not progressing. That is a big focus for us at DWP and that will not change.

On the point about the UC uplift, the Government—as I set out in my opening remarks—introduced a raft of temporary measures to support those who were hardest hit. That included the furlough scheme, the self-employment income support scheme and the £20 uplift, which was absolutely the right thing to do.

10:45

I turn to universal credit itself and what we have managed to do as a department. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions described the process as being like “Wallace and Gromit”—we were having to build the train track in front of us as the numbers kept coming. It was fantastic that we got universal credit standing up to be able to support people. It would have been completely impossible if we had had people queueing round the block with their rent agreements and employment details to get on to universal credit and get support.

The chancellor has confirmed that the uplift will remain in place until March. It is right that we wait for more clarity and look at the national economic and social picture, and the overall way in which we continue to support low-income families as we go forward. The uplift is just one part of that, alongside our £30 billion plan for jobs.

**The Convener:** I just want to check something, minister. Perhaps it is my fault for not making my question focused enough. I get that it might not be your decision to make, and that the Government is keeping the matter under review; I think that making the uplift permanent would be the right thing to do. Nonetheless, taking £80 a month out of a household’s income when that household is trying to get back into employment might be counterproductive. If members of the household

are having to concentrate on budgeting to get food on the table, pay the bills and make ends meet, it might undermine their ability to get back into employment and their focus on doing so. They would be dealing with the day-to-day reality of coping on a low income and living in poverty. That might also start to erode the relationship, which we discussed, between the DWP and those who are struggling to get back into employment.

As minister for employment, are you not worried that taking £20 a week—£80 a month—off the poorest families in Scotland and across the UK not only sends out the wrong message to those on universal credit, but might erode their ability to get back into employment?

**Mims Davies:** I recognise your point, but my message for people who are listening to, or engaging with, this session is that the UC uplift is part of a package of support that includes the kickstart scheme, the job-finding support service, the JETS initiative and our flexible support fund. It also includes our youth hubs, which bring training and apprenticeship opportunities to young people. In addition, we are working with local economies, and every jobcentre has its own local recovery plan. Those are additional ways by which we can help people back into work and support them.

I recognise that UC and the support that you have described is one of those areas of support, but I and my department have a range of interventions to support people. I absolutely do not want people to feel left behind; we want to get down to looking at what barriers they face, and that is why the DWP is more empowered than ever to support people individually. Our flexible support fund can be fantastic, whether it is helping people to buy a suit, funding a month’s worth of travel or enabling someone to upgrade their driving licence so that they can take on more hours. There is an array of ways in which we can help people—the UC uplift is not the sole way for us to do so.

However, I recognise that the uplift that we introduced this year has been a powerful tool that we were able to deploy quickly. It was the right thing to do, and it is right that we look at the broader picture as we head into the budget, which is where those decisions are made.

**The Convener:** I promise you that we will look at some of the details of the schemes that you mentioned in your opening statement.

I do not know whether you were giving a hint there that you accepted my points about sending the wrong message to those on UC by taking £20 a week off them, and the idea that placing people in poverty might undermine their ability to get back into the workplace. I will not push you any further on that, but there may be a bit of movement there.

I give a cautious welcome to that, although it is perhaps just wishful thinking on my part.

I have a note that tells me that, as a result of the £20 UC uplift, the number of families impacted by the benefit cap has gone up, and an additional 31,000 households are now subject to the cap. They are losing out, and the additional £20 in UC is not benefiting them. Across the UK, 129,000 families are subject to the benefit cap.

I have one final question on that before I bring in Keith Brown. Do you feel that those who have been in the benefits system for some time might need some additional support? They might now be furthest away from the labour market, as they are competing with much more skilled people who have only recently been made unemployed.

I get the point that the UK Government is trying to get people who are newly unemployed back into the labour market as quickly as possible, but are those who were already struggling to get into the labour market and who were becoming long-term unemployed at particular risk of being lost for the next two, three, four or five years, or even longer, if we do not find a way to support them specifically?

**Mims Davies:** I will start with the benefit cap. I recognise that some people will be brought into that, but many people will have the nine-month grace period. Someone earning £604 a month is not affected. I must point out that people with additional vulnerabilities get additional benefits such as disability or carer benefits. I remind people that the cap comes in at around £24,000 for gross earnings, or £28,000 for London. There is a balance between taxpayers and those needing support, and we absolutely need to find that support.

I have been spending a number of months on exactly what you describe. It is a difficult challenge. How do we ensure that we do not leave those people who had challenges before further behind, and how do we quickly pivot people back into employment where possible, so that we can continue to focus on those who are most in need and on those with the most vulnerabilities?

We are doing that through the various interventions that we have planned for jobs: job-finding support, JETS, our fuller working lives agenda and kickstart. Kickstart is a classic example, as it ensures that, for six months, young people do not get left behind—we know about the scarring effect on young people.

On the wider point about people with barriers, there is an opportunity here to fix some of the structural challenges that we have had in the labour market and to ensure that people with additional barriers are not left further behind.

When I visited Forres I was struck by the fantastic intervention by our local jobcentre there. It was working with people who had been out of work for some time after a large tyre company had closed. They had been doing physical, outside work. A care academy was set up for people who could go into one-to-one support, moving into the care industry. Many of them were men. Taking someone with a disability to the football was a joy for everybody concerned—it was a completely different type of work experience.

We need to open up opportunities, give people confidence and deal with the barriers. That is what our jobcentres are fantastically good at. My role, since I came into the department, has been to empower, support and understand those individual needs. There are sectors that need people, and we need to give people the skills, the ability and confidence to take roles up.

**The Convener:** Let us move the questioning on and consider some of the specific initiatives from the UK Government.

**Keith Brown:** My questions are about kickstart, which of course has the potential to be a hugely important initiative. You will be aware, however, that *This is Money* has been disappointed by kickstart, not least because of its complicated nature, and described it as “a let-down.”

You will know that, in Scotland, the configuration of businesses is quite different, with proportionally far more small businesses than larger businesses. I represent a semi-rural area. Given all that, the idea that a company must have 30 placements to offer in order to qualify for the scheme will be a major inhibitor, even if it is possible to pool together with others. Many of the villages that I represent do not have any employers with 30 or more employees.

What discussions were held to ensure that Scotland’s needs were taken into account in that regard when the initiative was devised? In particular, what discussions took place with the Scottish Government to ensure that the scheme fitted Scotland’s needs?

**Mims Davies:** Thank you for the opportunity to speak about kickstart. It was stood up very quickly, and it is now about 12 weeks old. I am absolutely delighted about where we have got to. We have had more than 4,000 applications for the kickstart scheme, and coming up to 20,000 placements have gone into approval.

People are starting their placements this month. I remind anyone listening who is keen to get a kickstarter as part of their business that they can apply for someone to be part of their organisation through to December next year. As part of the recovery and as part of their plans, there is a

chance for businesses to take part as the scheme is rolled out.

We carried out significant engagement across the nations—across mayors and local enterprise partnerships. We had more than 300 different types of engagements, linking in with all the different stakeholders. It was vital that we worked with Scottish Chambers of Commerce and lots of different people, who fed into how to make the scheme work. I also point out that you do not need to have 30 placements—you just need to apply to be part of an existing gateway.

Margarita Morrison will say a bit more about what has happened on the ground, operationally. There has been a perception that this is disappointing, but, to go back to my previous comments, we have seen through our engagement that people want national programmes to be delivered locally, working with local employers and focusing on local recovery and local networks, whether that is working with the Federation of Small Businesses, the local authority or charities. The scheme has the opportunity to be even more transformative for young people than, for example, the future jobs fund, because it is not just focused on opportunities in charity or local government sectors; it includes large and small employers. It is set up in such a way as to support small employers by providing the employability support that the young person needs.

As we designed the scheme, I was mindful of the fact that, as a kickstarter, a young person could be 16 and a care leaver, so people need to be supported throughout the placement. Young people will also be supported through their placements by their work coaches, so that they can plan for the opportunities at the next stage. The gateway opportunity is a way for people to come together and work together in their local area, and I am extremely proud of how it is coming together. There is no limit on places. If I may, I will bring in Margarita Morrison to talk about her experience of how the scheme is landing locally.

**Margarita Morrison:** It has been 14 weeks since the scheme was launched. We have been inundated with expressions of interest, which is fantastic. We acknowledge that we have more to do. I did a webinar with the Federation of Small Businesses to understand the matters that are of importance to small businesses, and I intend to work through the issues with the FSB to give small businesses the best support that we can. We have hosted 20 webinars, responded to more than 2,000 online inquiries, introduced district support surgeries for employers in gateway organisations, and we now have dedicated people across our jobcentre network as district kickstart leads and experts. That is to give help and support to people

who are interested in the scheme and, importantly, to employers.

We are talking weekly to our gateway organisations to discuss how we can gather those 30 applications together and use best practice from across employers to ensure that we give the best information, so that we get those started as jobs. As the minister said, we have 20,000 jobs from more than 4,000 applications across the UK so far. We are working on it, and we are happy to engage with anyone. I have a meeting with Skills Development Scotland this afternoon to talk further about not only the great work that we are doing just now but how we can expand that in light of the additional products that we are bringing on board as a result of Covid.

**Keith Brown:** That additional information is useful, but a response to my question would be more valuable to me. I take it from both answers that there was no consultation with the Scottish Government before the scheme was rolled out. I am a wee bit confused about whether employers have to pool together. I think that the minister said no, but that Margarita Morrison said that she is working to try to ensure that people do that. If it is not possible to answer now on what engagement, if any, was undertaken with the Scottish Government, it would be useful to have that in writing, subsequently.

It is good to hear about the level of take-up for the scheme. It would also be good to hear, proportionally, what is happening in Scotland.

Are there plans to make sure that delivery will be integrated with devolved services? Discussion with SDS has been mentioned, but I want to know about plans to integrate delivery with local authorities. The minister has talked about discussions with mayors, but if there has been no advance consultation of the Scottish Government, by what means will delivery be integrated with local authorities and other agencies in Scotland?

11:00

**Mims Davies:** The Scottish Government has announced the young persons guarantee, so we are linking in, in order to understand that.

Kickstart concerns a reserved matter, but as Margarita Morrison said about links with local employers, and as I said about links with local authorities, our jobcentres on the ground are where links are absolutely manifested. Margarita Morrison and I are both right about kickstart and the 30 placements. An employer can put in for one person and, as Margarita said, local representatives and engagement through JCPs will help people to develop that and to link to existing gateways. For example, a council in, I think, Renfrewshire has a specific gateway.

Gateways are being led by local authorities or by chambers of commerce. Through the JCP link and our local networks, we link employers with the right partners to work with on the gateway.

We are aiming at creating more than 20,000 jobs. The numbers are growing daily; we can continue to update the committee on that. Jonathan Mills will say more on the policy and on gateways. We had, on top of the day-to-day operations of the DWP, to take a view on how to set the system up in order that we could get that heft of jobs to come through quickly—we had to balance the needs of local economies, link with local employers and be able to manage all that.

However, as Margarita Morrison described, there is also a way in through local links to JCPs, and through existing links such as with Skills Development Scotland. I feel that there are lots of ways in.

We are continuing to learn and understand as we develop the system. We stood the system up in a certain way, but that does not mean that we are fully wedded to that way.

I will let Jonathan Mills come in.

**Jonathan Mills (Department for Work and Pensions):** As the minister said, we have asked employers that want to bid for fewer than 30 posts to bid via gateway organisations. One reason for that, from experience of previous schemes such as the future jobs fund, is that it gives the opportunity for local authorities, chambers of commerce and third sector organisations, for example, to join up provision exactly as Keith Brown suggested, and to integrate use of the kickstart provisions in their wider economic planning.

We are acutely aware of the point about opportunities for smaller employers in relation to a number of regions—in particular, rural areas. We have seen some really good gateway bids coming through, involving some very small employers taking advantage of the gateway's benefit of providing greater scale and better-quality employability support than small employers would be able to provide on their own for the kickstarter to move from a placement to sustained employment. The gateway is one of the ways in which we can provide the joining up to which Keith Brown alluded.

**Keith Brown:** I will make one last point, if that is okay, convener.

It is a very important initiative and, if we are to exploit the opportunities properly, there must be proper joined-up working. It might be the first time that it has happened for you guys, but the Scottish Government is regularly cut out of such things. Our colleagues tell us that the two Governments

are meant to be working together. Why would you have discussions with mayors and so on around the country, but not talk to the Scottish Government—unless you have done so but are not able to speak about it? The scheme will not reach full effectiveness.

I am also a bit surprised that the FSB would not have raised the issue that there are, proportionally, many more small and medium-sized businesses in Scotland. It would be useful to get information on the consultations that were held.

**The Convener:** Does the minister have any comments on that before we move to the next line of questioning? Mr Brown asked about formal discussions with the Scottish Government before the kickstart scheme was rolled out.

**Mims Davies:** There was an extensive conversation with chambers of commerce, and I know that Scottish colleges and local authorities are linking in, too. We are linking in on cross-border matters related to the young person's guarantee and the fair start scheme. We continue to try to understand needs in relation to reserved and devolved matters and to link into them. Margarita Morrison attended the meeting on the youth guarantee.

I recognise the challenge and will ensure that we continue to have the strongest engagement. We have local recovery plans in order that we can understand and link into local authorities and employers. I like to think that no one is missing out at all, but we will obviously take away those comments.

The system was stood up in very short order, and the breadth of engagement was as much as we could do. We certainly involved chambers of commerce; in fact, we could not have delivered gateways without support from the chambers of commerce, which have been key and have been providing fantastic gateways.

**Mark Griffin:** I will ask about access to face-to-face services during the pandemic, which I covered with the previous witnesses. Many of my constituents valued being able to go into a Jobcentre Plus with a phone or tablet to use wi-fi there to keep up their job searches. Now that face-to-face support has been reduced so much, how has the operation changed to support people who are digitally excluded or who are shielding?

**Mims Davies:** That is a really important question. Our most vulnerable customers and the people who are most excluded have been at the heart of our thinking, which is why we have kept all our jobcentres open throughout the peaks of the pandemic and the lockdowns. I very much admire our front-line teams, who have consistently supported people through this time. I will let

Margarita Morrison come in on that point, in a moment.

We have had to strike a balance by pivoting as many staff as possible towards actively processing and supporting claims. One figure always sticks out in my mind: it is that 27,000 additional hours were worked over the Easter bank holiday weekend. That work was done up and down the land by people who do not always process UC claims. They included senior management and others across the DWP. It was all hands to the pump.

All the way through the pandemic, we have been very mindful of the most vulnerable people. That is another reason why, when we link with our focus groups and visit jobcentres—disappointingly, the meetings will be virtual rather than face-to-face this weekend—we always listen to what our work coaches say about what they need. Face-to-face support is so important, hence our doubling of the number of work coaches.

**Margarita Morrison:** I led on keeping open all jobcentres. As I said earlier, I lead on health and safety; it is important to us to be open for customers who need our help because of their vulnerabilities, but it is also important that our colleagues are safe.

During the first lockdown, I led a project that resulted in installation of about 1,000 6mm security screens in all our jobcentres, so that colleagues are safe. They wear masks and the customers wear masks when they come into jobcentres, so it is a very safe environment for customers who cannot use the telephone or other means to communicate. That has been really helpful for customers. Across all our offices we have things that members will have seen—hand sanitiser and 2m markings—to keep our colleagues safe while giving customers somewhere to come when they need our help.

We have now set up a trial using the 1,600 colleagues who are working at home with kit. We want to learn from that and to find out how successful it has been. A group that is led by our director general, John-Paul Marks, is considering what our future operations might look like, in the light of the benefits that we have seen from operating, as we have, to ensure that we reach people.

For example, universal credit being dealt with online has given us the opportunity to have virtual work coaches working at Northgate in Glasgow talking to people on the islands to give them more support, in light of the enhanced numbers that we discussed earlier. We do not want to lose any of that experience; instead, we want to consider what has been positive, and to work towards a better operating model.

Our approach is all about customer-centric services and ensuring that we segment our customer types—for example, someone mentioned people who have been unemployed for a long time—and get the right level of support to each of them.

**Mark Griffin:** As part of the committee's inquiry, we have done quite a bit of community outreach, in which we have spoken to people with direct experience of the universal credit system. We struck a balance between those who are experiencing the system for the first time and those who have longer-term experience.

We spoke to a highly skilled graduate who had had a highly paid job but had lost it because of the pandemic. That person was complimentary about their experience with universal credit work coaches, who treated them with respect. However, I have to say that people who had longer-term experience of the system and had perhaps been in low-paid and low-skilled jobs were not as complimentary about their engagement.

Does the DWP take a different approach to clients who have longer-term experience of the universal credit system than it takes to people who have experienced it for the first time during the pandemic?

**Margarita Morrison:** I am happy to come in on that. It is very important to me that all our customers are given a fantastic service. Throughout the year we carry out a lot of capability training to ensure that we provide an empathetic and professional service to anyone who needs our help.

I will be happy to look at issues that anyone in Scotland might have had. We have a safeguarding team of seven members of staff who work full time on looking at journal entries, commentaries and letters from customers. We ensure that we learn from any commentary that could be seen as negative. I do an all-colleagues call every week, and I regularly contact colleagues at other times, when we call out such matters and have conversations about how we could do better next time. The key point is that our safeguarding leads give us information to ensure that those problems never happen to other customers. I do not differentiate between customers other than to consider which products a work coach could use to ensure that they get the best support from us during these difficult times.

**Pauline McNeill:** It is good to see the minister at the committee's meeting. In all honesty, I am pleased to see that she appears to have a lot more passion for tackling issues that affect young people than previous ministers whom we have questioned. I will not name names.

I have questions for the minister on that subject, but I will begin by asking Margarita Morrison about what she has just said in response to Mark Griffin. I have had many similar experiences that have given me cause for concern, and which I have raised. For example, I currently have two or three cases involving young people, one of whom had been shielding. A lot of young people who have been shielding have found it difficult to have social interaction, having been at home for four months. In one of my cases, the person waited all day for a telephone appointment that never happened. Even in Glasgow, there can be issues with mobile phone services. It seems to be quite hard to get a call back when a call is missed.

I have also had two or three cases in which young people were not told about the job support payment or the additional shielding payment. On all those occasions, I have had to write to the DWP on their behalf. I am therefore concerned that there are quite serious gaps in what work coaches are telling people.

Lastly—I will cut to the chase on this—in my experience, some people know how to work the system: they know which boxes to tick and what to say. That is a fact of life. However, many others do not understand the system and might not get the benefits to which they are entitled. Anything that you can tell me about how we might sort out such issues would be helpful.

11:15

**Mims Davies:** Margarita Morrison might want to come in to pick up on the specific issues, and I will be happy to answer on the broader points.

**Margarita Morrison:** Thank you for letting me know that there are issues with the service. I am very keen to understand who those people are and what the issues are, so that we can help. We have kept our jobcentres open precisely because some people need additional help and support, so our work coaches are there and are ready to speak to people to give them advice and support.

We come across cases that need additional help; I can give an example. Recently, we had a youth customer who suffers from dyspraxia who was struggling to find employment and was, as has been mentioned, shielding. We managed to find a job that can be done virtually, so he is working online. We have given him further help and training in digital skills using our flexible support fund.

We find answers; we have great products available to help out, so keep raising those issues with us. Let us learn from such examples. As I said, our jobcentres are open for people who cannot engage with us digitally or on the telephone.

**Pauline McNeill:** Is there a checklist that the work coaches are meant to go through? Obviously, when they phone someone, they cannot always stick to a time, but is there anything in the system that says that the work coach should make sure that they get that person? If someone does not know when their work coach is going to phone, they might miss the appointment.

**Margarita Morrison:** Everyone has a universal credit journal, and we alert people to the fact that an appointment is due. For various reasons that are related to Covid, people do not come into the office just now, so we use the journal a lot to keep in touch and ensure that they have the opportunity to talk to us. As I have said, if they feel that they need help, the door is open to come and speak to us. If people are having difficulties, it is important that they let us know so that we can work them through with them.

**Pauline McNeill:** I have a question for the minister. A lot of the schemes try to identify those who are furthest away from the labour market. I have heard that phrase many times, and I am not sure that I fully understand what it means. I wonder whether we need to make adjustments to what that drives at, because there have been a lot of changes in the world as a result of Covid. To what extent will the DWP take into consideration the fact that there are deeper mental health issues and people are struggling to engage?

**Mims Davies:** That is a really important point about the changing nature of the mental health challenge and the impact of the pandemic on mental wellbeing. I am a former loneliness minister, and I was clear that we tended to think that loneliness is related to isolation when people are older. However, many surveys have shown that younger people with fewer networks and less confidence have been more impacted by the pandemic. That was certainly starting to show through before. I know that, in the work that he is doing, the Minister of State for Disabled People, Work and Health is well aware of the change in what disability is and could be.

I am happy for Margarita Morrison to pick up those issues. When issues about operations at the DWP come to me as the minister to reply, I rarely get anything substantial. Despite all the challenges, the feedback has been strong. We are happy to pick up the challenges that you have identified, particularly around young people and isolation.

I know through the kickstart scheme that a person with a disability was in one of our earliest placements, using the access to work scheme. Some of the placements are home working placements and can be used for people with particular disabilities. A multiplicity of youth hubs

are coming on board, which will help our young people with the signposting and the journey.

People talk about the barriers to work. You are right. What does that mean? Is the barrier someone's background, education, confidence or current experience? Understanding what the barriers are is vital.

I am not going to deny it: I am very passionate about my role and about supporting young people. That is why I was so keen to pull together our youth offer, which was absolutely key.

I have had conversations during my visits to jobcentres across Scotland. There are reserved and devolved matters and different opportunities. The area can be a real minefield for employers. They want to be inclusive, but they do not necessarily even know where to start. For me, it is all about trying to make that easier. We have set up our job help website and our employer help website, which has a lot of information on it and pulls together a lot of what the DWP does.

I admire our work coaches. They continually get messaging and updates on how to support people. Just keeping up with that alongside their work coaching role is very significant.

Our youth offer for under-25s and ensuring that that covers what is available in the local area will be really important. Many offers have been delivered with local charities, local authorities or local colleges. That gives people the opportunity to understand traineeships and apprenticeships, the fact that they could go back into education, and any other help that they need. There are mentoring circles and basic maths and English help. We can describe and prescribe a lot of things to people once we know their circumstances.

I have always found it very strange that we are not allowed to treat people as individually as I would like at the DWP, and I have striven to ensure that we do.

Jonathan Mills is keen to come in and say more about our youth offer.

**Jonathan Mills:** I want to expand on that a little, because it is relevant to the point that was raised about the different sorts of challenges that some younger people are finding that they are experiencing in the context of the pandemic.

At the core of the youth employment programme and the role that we have established for youth employability coaches is the ability to provide fuller and more individualised support for younger people through having more time to invest with them up front in understanding their own situation and the barriers that they face. They could be the classic barriers to work, such as experience or skills, or the barriers that we have talked about,

which relate to mental wellbeing, physical health or other circumstances.

The programme is about being able to signpost young people to the great diversity of provision that is available from the UK Government, the Scottish Government, local government and the third sector, and then sticking with them and providing continuing support once they have transitioned into employment. We know that the initial period in employment can be challenging for a lot of younger people who are taking that step for the first time. A person having support to deal with the ups and downs of work when they are coming into the world of work for the first time can be important. Our offer reflects the need for more intensive and individualised support for young people, particularly in the context of the way that the pandemic has played out.

**Jeremy Balfour:** Thank you very much for coming to the meeting. I want to explore further the issue of getting people with disabilities back into employment. It is clear that there will be a lot of pressures on those people. What lessons can we learn from what has happened in the past few months to help more disabled people to get back into employment? What work is your organisation doing to target those with disabilities in a positive way and help them back into employment?

**Mims Davies:** That is an absolute priority for me. We are talking about people with barriers who may have felt left behind.

Today is the United Nations international day of persons with disabilities, and I have my purple scarf on. It is really important to understand the opportunities that having a more inclusive workplace can bring to businesses and organisations.

As I have said, from engagement that I have had with employers, I know that lots of people want to be more inclusive for various reasons, but they are busy doing the day job of running their business. They want to have more local input and understanding, but they do not always know how to go about it. That is a big focus for us at the department, and the minister for disabled people is doing a huge amount of work on the issue. Obviously, we have made sure that, while the pandemic is going on, we have been able to support new personal independence payment claims and support people through that process to make sure that they do not feel left behind or isolated.

The design of the kickstart scheme has been key in ensuring that the placements are treated like regular work and that existing schemes, such as the access to work scheme, can be used, so that young people can discuss their options with their work coaches. Again, that goes back to the

issue of understanding our claimants and their needs and why are they are engaged with the DWP. We engage with employers on things such as the disability confident scheme. It is crucial that we use all the opportunities that we have as we rebuild the economy to engage and be more inclusive.

On work coaches, it is all about a can-do attitude and understanding what claimants can do. As I said earlier, our kickstart scheme has opportunities for working at home and so on. The fact that the access to work programme covers that as well is really important. That is at the heart of everything that we do at the DWP.

To go back to the care academy, some of the chaps had impacts from outside work and long-term health impacts. Those impacts sometimes mean that people do not always know what is possible in their employment, because things can change. My father was made disabled by an incident at work. That is a good reminder that disablement can happen at any point in our lives and can change what we can do and our finances. We need to make people understand that and really support people. That runs through the heart of what we do.

Does Margarita Morrison want to come in on some of the interventions that we have made across Scotland? I am keen for us to share them.

**Margarita Morrison:** On access to work, during the Covid pandemic, we have supported with assisted technology, office furniture, virtual support, support to transfer equipment from the workplace, wellbeing support plans and coping strategies to support home working. That has been really important. We continue to have dedicated disability employment advisers, and we have colleagues in each of our jobcentres who focus on helping people who need extra support.

I can give members a recent example. A person with mental health issues who had been on carers allowance for seven years and was very apprehensive came into one of our jobcentres. We had a gentle conversation about what he wanted to do, and we got him started on volunteering. To fast forward, he started on Monday 30 November as a mailroom assistant, and he says that that has transformed his life. We have talked to his employer as an aside from the help that we have given him to make sure that assistance measures were in place for him starting. That has been a real success story. Fortunately, we have loads of success stories, and we are happy to share more of them.

**Jeremy Balfour:** That is really helpful. I thank the DWP staff for all the work that they do in Scotland, and particularly in Lothian. I have had positive engagement with all the jobcentres in my

region and am very impressed with what is happening on the ground.

I have no further questions, convener.

**Rachael Hamilton:** I, too, thank the DWP. I visited Galashiels Jobcentre Plus just after the Covid restrictions were lifted, and I was impressed and blown away by the work of the staff and the positivity that they exuded.

11:30

My question follows on from Jeremy Balfour's questioning and is for Margarita Morrison initially. I understand that the DWP work coaches refer people on to the Scottish Government's £96 million flagship fair start Scotland scheme. I know that that scheme has been affected by Covid. However, only 14 per cent of people who participated in the scheme sustained their employment in the following year, and 51 per cent of those who started the scheme left it early. What happened? Can you talk the committee through what happens to individuals who are failed by that system? What options are there for those people, including disabled people, who are furthest away from the employment ladder?

**Margarita Morrison:** You mentioned some of the figures for fair start. That is a fantastic scheme, which we take part in. I meet Scottish Government colleagues regularly to discuss how to best use all the tools that are available for our joint customer base.

We have made 42,784 referrals, 64 per cent of which have come from our work coaches. The scheme is an important part of the tools that they can offer customers to provide support. As I have said, we have regular conversations to discuss the complementary nature of what we are able to give customers across Scotland, which is important.

It is important for us to understand why the scheme would fail. We follow up each case to ensure that we can talk to Scottish Government colleagues about what has happened. I will give members a recent example. Dominic Munro and I discussed whether the 16 hours threshold was a barrier, and it was subsequently changed in order to give more people greater access. We address each of the failures to see what we can do about the issues that they raise.

**Rachael Hamilton:** Minister, can you tell us how the £40 million job-finding initiative to support those who have been out of work for less than three months will segue into existing services that are run in Scotland? How is it different from the job-finding service that is currently being offered?

**Mims Davies:** The job-finding support service will help people who have recently lost their jobs. It will offer an additional digital service to provide

tailored one-to-one support for those who have been unemployed for less than 13 weeks, in order to help their chances of finding employment.

We already have some local contracts up and running across Scotland—Margarita Morrison can tell us more about those shortly—but we will introduce a broader offer in Scotland, starting at the end of January. We have been holding an open competition for a contractor to deliver the contract across Great Britain, in order to achieve more consistency and value for money. We were previously using the flexible support fund.

The job-finding support service will involve a minimum of four hours of support, delivered across 20 working days. The first portion will be delivered through local contracts and, as I said, the broader contract will come out later on, landing at the end of January. It is basically about expanding employment support across the piece. Our plan for jobs also includes JETS, which is for people who need further or additional help six months on.

We heard earlier about the positive experience that some people new to UC have had with the DWP. Those people tend to have more confidence and broader networks, and they are not used to being in the system and part of a process. If we can deal with them quickly and effectively, and link them up with our job-finding support service and our work coaches, the chances are that we can boost them to get back into the employment market.

The new service is different from existing services because it is not necessarily about some of the things that we talked about earlier, such as health conditions and disabilities, or the broader barriers. It is about quicker fixes. Quite often, we can use SWAPs—sector-based work academy programmes—as well. Some people just need a bit of understanding, if their sector has ground to a halt, of the skills that they can take into a new sector. It is about knowing how to package those skills and having the confidence to go for it.

We discussed the sector-based work academy programmes earlier. SWAPs are brilliant: they involve an existing vacancy, and people get to work with employers, do some training and develop some understanding of the sector concerned. For example, I have seen people with a retail and logistics background who were able to pivot into the construction sector. They did not necessarily know that their skills were the right ones—it was a question of selling themselves.

There is a lot going on with the pandemic, and some sectors may be grinding to a halt. People's confidence is affected, and they have financial worries with everything that is going on, so it is a

matter of providing extra support as part of our plan for jobs.

As Margarita Morrison said, it is really important to segment people and to get the right support to them and for them, so that we do not end up with people experiencing more challenges in the longer term around their confidence, their networks and so on.

Through PACE and our rapid response service for people with redundancies, we know that areas such as manufacturing and construction are still buoyant in Scotland. We know that particular areas still have vacancies and are still buoyant; it is a matter of helping newly unemployed people to recognise where they could be turning their attention and what they could bring to those sectors.

**Rachael Hamilton:** You mention the sectors that are still buoyant. We know that unemployment is likely to soar, and that young people will be affected. Regarding the minimum four hours that is on offer, I presume that the contracts will allow people with quite broad experience to “pivot”—to use your word—into new skills, while focusing on the skills that they currently have. Four hours is not a long time, although I suppose that it is quite a long time digitally. Can you outline the aim of ensuring that people in hospitality and retail will be able to take new opportunities to go into different jobs that they perhaps did not even think existed or did not think they were capable of doing?

**Mims Davies:** It is exactly as you describe. It is a one-to-one approach that is about people knowing what skills they have that they can move into another area.

For example, in the airline industry, someone who suddenly has to do a CV or an interview 20 or 25 years on will find that it is now all online, and that will not be something that they are used to. They will have opportunities to do mock interviews and to be part of an online group to discuss things and go through different sessions that will help them. Jonathan Mills will be able to say more on that.

We can then tailor specific advice for particular sectors, and we can help people with job matching. That helps with the additional capacity that we need, as our work coaches are very busy.

As I said, I am keen to address some of the structural issues in the labour market. We need people in the care and construction sectors, and there are sectors with an ageing workforce or a lack of skills, such as digital skills. There are opportunities for people to move across into new sectors.

I will let Jonathan Mills come in briefly on JFS.

**Jonathan Mills:** As the minister says, the JFS scheme is designed to be targeted at one particular group of claimants: perhaps those who have more recent work experience and who are more ready to go immediately back into the labour market, given their skills and qualifications, but who may not have undertaken job search recently. The support is particularly focused on the things that the minister has just talked about, which will help them to re-engage with getting work quickly, whether through CVs, interviews or whatever.

Like the offer for all our claimants, JFS is the tip of the iceberg in pointing people towards more in-depth provision that they might benefit from. In the cases that we have been discussing involving people who may be looking to change sectors or change provision, there is a wide range of skills provision from the UK Government and from the Scottish Government, including apprenticeships, traineeships and other skills programmes that people can be pointed towards.

The purpose of the JFS provision is not to be a substitute for that; rather, it is to provide people with a top layer of support to help them to identify what might work best for them and to enable them to immediately get back into searching for a job. They might not have done that for quite a while, because they might have been working in one profession with one employer for quite a long time. The JFS scheme provides a targeted offer for that group.

**Tom Arthur:** I have a more general and forward-looking question for the minister. How does she envisage the employability support landscape evolving and developing over the coming years, as we respond to the longer-term challenges that have been presented by the pandemic and the economic wake of it? Clearly, there has been a lot of focus on what we are doing in the immediate term to address the crisis. Does the minister have any reflections on what will be required in the coming years? Perhaps she could articulate how she anticipates packages of support will evolve and develop.

**Mims Davies:** That is a really important point. I am very proud of what we have stood up very quickly through our plan for jobs, whether it is JETS, JFS or the kickstart scheme, and of how we have evolved our services so that they can be offered digitally. We know that the employment map is changing because of how people work. There have been changes as a result of Covid that people have and have not liked. That will, of course, change the labour market.

I remember meeting my labour market team in January—less than a year ago—to start to map out those issues ahead of the pandemic. Apparently, I said—this is minuted—“What about that virus in China? Do you think it’s going to have

a big effect?” At that point, we were focused on the people with the broadest barriers and those who had not seen the opportunities in the labour market where there were starting to be skills gaps.

The question is very broad. I am sure that Jonathan Mills will be keen to jump in, because this is his meat and drink. The next priority that I am focused on is the over-50s. I want to ensure that we support people who have lived and worked longer—they might have done something for 20 years but now need to think about doing something different. As a country, when we talk to our young people and come together, we need to be honest that this is a life of jobs, not a job for life, and that we will benefit from training, pivoting and being more open minded about employment, in the way that we are in all other areas of our life. That is what our employability support schemes will need to provide.

I am conscious that, when we talk about upskilling and reskilling, we should not do so in a negative way, as though the things that have gone before are not valuable, because they are extremely valuable. However, there is a changing landscape in the workplace and changing needs. For Scotland and for communities, it is important that we look at our recovery plans—which we are doing through Jobcentre Plus—understand our local employers, link in with our colleges, refine our links to education and be clear about the opportunities that are available. We need to ensure that people know and understand the opportunities across their career, because work can be so important and fulfilling.

All of that is really important in relation to the provision that we have. We know that digital skills will be key and that certain sectors remain Cinderella sectors. We have seen that many people value particular jobs and roles in a way that they have never done before. Perhaps that will make such jobs more attractive at certain points in people’s careers. I love the idea of teach last—people coming in to education or training to share their experience in a particular sector or role and inspire the next generation. We can do lots of things to try to be positive.

It would be wrong of me not to let Jonathan Mills come in, given that this is his meat and drink, day to day.

**Jonathan Mills:** We could talk about this topic for a very long time. I am sure that members will have seen lots of the commentary and analysis from external parties that has tried to distinguish between the short-term effects of the pandemic on the economy and the structural changes that might be with us for longer.

As the minister said, the interventions that we have put in place now will help to foster some of

the opportunities for the future. Through the kickstart scheme, I have seen some great applications in the digital sector and in other sectors in which the science investment could pay off in the future. There are opportunities to align our short-term interventions with the long-term shape of the economy. The Government's priority is levelling up the national economy, and we are seeking to do that.

There is probably more than enough to the question to have another hour or two of discussion, but I am conscious of the time that has been allotted.

**The Convener:** We will have to stop shortly. Tom, do you have another question before we close the session?

**Tom Arthur:** No. I am grateful for those answers, but I am conscious of the time, so I am happy to stop there.

**The Convener:** It has been a worthwhile session. I thank the minister and her officials for participating. We genuinely hope that this is the start of an on-going dialogue with the UK Government and its agencies. There are messages of thanks in the chat box but, on behalf of all committee members, I thank the witnesses for their time this morning and for helping us with our inquiry.

11:46

*Meeting continued in private until 12:12.*



This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

---

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

---

All documents are available on  
the Scottish Parliament website at:

[www.parliament.scot](http://www.parliament.scot)

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers  
is available here:

[www.parliament.scot/documents](http://www.parliament.scot/documents)

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact  
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: [sp.info@parliament.scot](mailto:sp.info@parliament.scot)

---



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba