



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 11 November 2021

Session 6



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SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE
10th Meeting 2021, Session 6

CONVENER

*Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)

*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)

*Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab)

*Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)

*Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

*Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Vana Anastasiadou (Scottish Government)

Ben Macpherson (Minister for Social Security and Local Government)

Dr Ruari Sutherland (Scottish Government)

Kirsten Sweeney (Social Security Scotland)

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Claire Menzies

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 11 November 2021

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Neil Gray): Good morning, and welcome to the 10th meeting in 2021 of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. Apologies have been received from Natalie Don. I am pleased to say that Evelyn Tweed is attending as her substitute.

Our first item of business is to decide whether to take agenda item 3 in private. Do members agree to do so?

Members indicated agreement.

Benefit Take-up Strategy

09:30

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is an evidence session on the Scottish Government's benefit take-up strategy. Publication of the strategy is a requirement under the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. The first strategy was published in October 2019, and the second strategy was published on 21 October this year. The Social Security Committee did an inquiry into benefit take-up, and its report was published in March 2020.

I welcome to the meeting the Minister for Social Security and Local Government, Ben Macpherson. Dr Ruari Sutherland, supporting access to social security team leader, Scottish Government, is joining the minister in person. Vana Anastasiadou, economic adviser, Scottish Government, and Kirsten Sweeney, strategic communications and marketing lead, Social Security Scotland, are joining us online. I am sorry, Vana: I asked about pronunciation before the meeting started, and I still managed to trip up on your surname.

I invite the minister to make an opening statement.

The Minister for Social Security and Local Government (Ben Macpherson): Thank you for inviting me to give evidence on our latest benefit take-up strategy, which was published and laid before Parliament on 21 October.

The new strategy builds on the 2019 strategy and sets out the Scottish Government's approach to encouraging and supporting the take-up of Scottish benefits, as well as providing our best estimates of the take-up rates for the benefits that Social Security Scotland is delivering.

Publication of the strategy is a duty that is placed on the Scottish ministers by the 2018 act, but it is much more than that. Ensuring that all forms of assistance are available and accessible to those who need them and that everyone is able to take up their entitlements, regardless of personal circumstances, is a fundamental priority for the Scottish Government and something that we are very enthusiastic about.

Reserved benefits also play an important role in maximising people's incomes in Scotland. It is disappointing that the Department for Work and Pensions still does not have any corresponding strategy for ensuring that those benefits are taken up. I genuinely hope that that changes.

A recognition that benefit take-up is part of a bigger picture is at the heart of the refreshed strategy. It is one pillar of a holistic Scottish Government approach to maximising incomes,

which underpins commitments related to tackling poverty and recovering from the economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The new strategy is built around five key principles that have been developed through extensive stakeholder engagement and experience panel research. In delivering the initiatives and interventions that are set out in the strategy, we will prioritise person-centred approaches; communicate and engage effectively; bring services to people; encourage cross-system collaboration; and continuously learn and improve. Each of those five principles, taken alone, is important, but bringing them together in the new strategy means that they will work in combination and yield far greater impact.

The benefit take-up strategy takes a whole-system approach and provides a framework within which we will continue to encourage and support people in Scotland to access the assistance that they are due.

I am happy to take any questions that the committee may have.

The Convener: Thank you very much, minister—that is very helpful. Jeremy Balfour will start the questions.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Good morning, minister, and good morning to your team. It is good to have you back at the committee again.

On page 48 of the strategy document, there is a commitment

“to undertake a review of Adult Disability Payment in summer 2023”.

Will that review look at whether the transition has been safe and secure, and whether it has been done with dignity, fairness and respect? Will it review the descriptors of what ADP might look like in the future? How wide will the review be?

I also ask you to look into your crystal ball. Depending on what the recommendations are and whether there is agreement on them, is your initial thinking that they will be implemented by the Parliament during this session, or are you looking to next session?

Ben Macpherson: That question is slightly off topic, but I am happy to answer as well as I can at this juncture.

The commitment to the review of ADP in 2023 was made by the previous cabinet secretary, Shirley-Anne Somerville—I refer Jeremy Balfour to the comments that she made at that time. The Scottish Government is actively considering what the review will include and how it will be undertaken, and we will, of course, update

Parliament on that, via the committee, in due course.

As the previous cabinet secretary stipulated, the review will look at how ADP has performed at that juncture, but changes will also be considered, and the recommendations that are received as part of the review will be evaluated. Consideration of what the relationship will be with passported benefits will have to be undertaken, so discussion will be required with the United Kingdom Government. As I have alluded to previously, the UK Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, Chloe Smith, and I have already corresponded somewhat on passported benefits. I look forward to discussing that constructively in due course.

There will also have to be active consideration of the conclusion of case transfers. Jeremy Balfour will know that, as the Government undertakes both pieces of work—starting the new benefits and opening them for applications, and undertaking case transfers—we have to consider how they will work in tandem. At the moment, we have to consider how the eligibility criteria correspond to both, so that there is equity in that regard and because of passporting considerations.

I am afraid that that is all that I can say about the ADP review at this juncture, but I am happy to confirm and emphasise that it has always been our intention to update the committee on that in due course.

The Convener: Thank you very much, minister. That is very helpful.

I ask colleagues to indicate that they want to come in; I will bring in Pam Duncan-Glancy shortly.

Will the minister outline why the Scottish Government picked the five principles that underpin the policy? Is there any particular reason why those five principles were chosen?

Ben Macpherson: As I alluded to in my opening remarks, the five principles have been developed through our extensive engagement with stakeholders and people with experience of the social security system. They build on the themes of the previous take-up strategy, which were: removing social barriers to access; addressing costly and complex access; and improving access to information. In addition, the five principles were considered and decided on because of consultation with the stakeholder take-up reference group and the learning that was gained through the projects that were funded through the benefit take-up and income maximisation funds. Building on all that experience, insight and feedback, we decided on those five principles.

The Convener: On the consultations with, and feedback from, stakeholders, how has Covid

impacted on your ability to ensure that the take-up of Scottish social security benefits has been strong?

Ben Macpherson: Covid has, of course, impacted on all of us, not just in terms of the economy, our everyday lives and the health service. For MSPs, it has affected our ability to engage with constituents. It is, therefore, reasonable to note that it has also affected our approach to improving benefit take-up, but we have responded by adapting the ways in which we interact with clients and stakeholders, as you would expect.

We continue to gather insights to better understand how the pandemic is driving longer-term behaviour, which may impact on the channels that we use to promote benefits over the longer term. For example, we may use more radio and television and less print advertising, because people are not necessarily picking up printed materials in the same way as before, or in the same settings. We are always mindful that we should use a range of channels to be as inclusive as possible.

Covid has had an effect, and it has made an impact—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry—there is a radio going off. I will wait for silence, if I may.

Of course Covid has had an impact, but Social Security Scotland has been active and proactive in promoting our benefits throughout the period in the ways that it can. Committee members will have seen that on social media or through other mechanisms for stakeholder engagement and in the media. I will let Kirsten Sweeney elaborate on that from an agency perspective.

Kirsten Sweeney (Social Security Scotland): Throughout the pandemic, Covid has impacted on our ability to reach audiences through out-of-home advertising that we would have used previously, such as advertising at bus stops. With people staying at home and with the priority to push health messages, that option was taken away from us.

In the past, we found intermediaries such as people in community groups in community halls, who provided an excellent way in which to get the message out. That possibility reduced during the pandemic, but we are starting to see it return. We regularly provided materials to stakeholders, and they ordered literature from us. We are starting to see that come back as the restrictions ease.

With the benefits that are live, we have always found that online channels have been highly effective with the parental audience in particular. We managed to drive 50,000 applications in the past financial year with Facebook advertising alone. That was always a key channel for

promoting the benefits that we have at the moment, and it continued to be effective.

On intermediaries, it is worth flagging that, through the Covid pandemic, we have made sure that word-of-mouth information has continued to get out through support services by providing stakeholders with as much information as we could to help them to promote our benefits. We moved our engagement with stakeholders online and held 36 events, reaching a total of 2,818 stakeholders. In addition, our local delivery service held 754 meetings with stakeholders from September 2020 to September 2021 to raise awareness of our benefits. Over that time, our resources were accessed 2,500 times to enable people to print them off for themselves. We are aware that they were put in things such as boxes and food parcels that were delivered to people, so that information was still getting out.

I hope that that is helpful.

The Convener: It is very helpful—thank you. It was interesting to hear about Facebook advertising driving such demand. Perhaps that runs counter to the current discussion on the use of social media.

09:45

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning to the minister and his team. My question is almost a supplementary to my colleague Jeremy Balfour's question about disability and carers benefits. In the take-up strategy, you highlight that it is difficult to identify individual disabled people and carers. What engagement have you had with organisations that represent disabled people and carers in order to help you to do that? What research have you undertaken to help to identify who is eligible for disability and carers benefits since our predecessor committee recommended that that research be done?

Ben Macpherson: I will bring in Ruari Sutherland shortly, but I will say a bit about that first. One of the challenges that we face collectively is that it is not possible to be 100 per cent accurate in estimating take-up of disability and carers benefits using existing household data such as the family resources survey. Using existing survey data to calculate the eligible population for disability benefits would, unfortunately, result in an inaccurate estimate of take-up due to a number of factors. The survey does not capture certain aspects.

For example, the assessment of eligibility for disability benefits is required to look at all needs and day-to-day limitations, and there is an element of discretion in how the assessments for disability benefits are undertaken and in benefit award decisions. As a result, those who are determined

to be eligible through the surveys might not match those who are determined to be eligible through the assessments. Therefore, there are challenges with the data. Disability is self-reported in the surveys, which means that they are not an objective measure for the eligible population, although I appreciate that that is partly why you asked the question.

On the engagement work to ensure that we are doing what we can, I will let Ruari talk about the stakeholder engagement that has taken place, because officials have led on that. Reflecting back and looking forward, there are strong commitments in the strategy to ensure that we are doing what is required and what we can to reach out to those hard-to-reach groups and those who are more vulnerable in order to inform them and to encourage and support benefit uptake as much as possible.

Dr Ruari Sutherland (Scottish Government): I can speak to the point about engagement with stakeholders. The minister might want to bring in my colleague Vana Anastasiadou on the analytical point.

With regard to stakeholder engagement, as members will know, we have a number of advisory groups and reference groups in the social security policy area that are regularly engaged on all matters relating to the client base. Specifically, the benefit take-up stakeholder reference group is an avenue down which we have taken conversations about establishing the eligible population.

However, as the minister has pointed out, and as Vana will no doubt say if the minister brings her in, it is a difficult population to estimate because of the subjective elements of the disability assessment that is required to establish eligibility. Without putting everyone through that assessment process, it is almost impossible to establish robustly what the eligible population would be. However, I am stepping into the analytical territory, which I am less familiar with.

Ben Macpherson: Thanks, Ruari. It is helpful that you have set out the engagement with stakeholders, which is extremely important.

Before I bring in Vana Anastasiadou, I add that our strategy report discussed the limitations that are associated with estimating eligibility for disability and carers benefits, but it also identified the steps that we are taking to improve the data quality so that we can measure the take-up of those benefits more accurately. The steps include adding questions to the existing household surveys, amending questions in the surveys and exploring the feasibility of using health record data in due course. Proactive steps are under way to improve the situation.

Vana, would you like to add anything?

Vana Anastasiadou (Scottish Government): The key point to reflect on is that we do not currently have the necessary tools to accurately measure the eligible population for disability and carers benefits. We are focusing on a long-term project, which we started some years ago and which is on-going, to improve those tools and allow us to accurately estimate that eligible population.

I will expand a little on what the minister said and what we set out in the second strategy report. We have developed a comprehensive approach as a result of engagement with analysts, academics and our counterparts in other Government departments such as the DWP. After gathering all the information and evidence, the approach that we came up with involves three distinct steps.

The first step is to use individual-level data and management information that will be collected and recorded by Social Security Scotland. That information will help us to better understand the gaps between disability benefits, decision-making processes and the current disability-related survey questions.

Another step is to improve existing questions or add new questions to the population surveys, again in order to get us closer to identifying the true eligible population for disability and carers benefits.

The final, longer-term step is to link survey data to administrative data. Before data linkage can be put in place, we will seek to improve as much as possible the disability-related questions in the existing surveys, as the minister explained, and explore the feasibility of using health records data. Data linkage is the most robust long-term solution and it would resolve to an extent, at least, the issue of the self-reporting nature of the surveys.

I hope that that provides a little more context to the approach that we are taking to get us to a place where we can report take-up of disability and carers benefits with confidence.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): You have acknowledged in the strategy that stigma plays a big part in the low take-up of benefits. What is the Government doing to tackle that stigma?

Ben Macpherson: We had a good discussion on that issue during the debate last week, and Emma Roddick made some important points in her speech. We have a collective responsibility as a Parliament and, more widely, as a society to deal with that issue, which has been wrongly encouraged through some avenues, and through other avenues has been appeased. However, rather than looking back, let us look forward collectively at how we commit as a Parliament, as

I urged in the debate last week, to reduce and in time remove any sense of stigma around claiming social security.

We have a social security system for a reason, which is to help and support people when we as a society agree that support should be there, and that takes a number of forms. I want to make that general, more conceptual point, because we have an important responsibility and opportunity in Scotland to change that stigma, but it will take time. The passing of the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 was part of that, but there is more work to do. It involves a change of social attitudes and a change of culture, and every politician can be a leader in that, as can others including the media.

There are obvious questions that we must consider as a Government. How do we proactively make those changes? We do that through our media output and our contributions in the chamber, and also through the general work of Social Security Scotland. We have worked hard to ensure that the process of applying for benefits is as accessible and supportive as possible, starting from the position that access to social security is a fundamental human right and is a shared, collective investment that we are making together as a society.

I take this opportunity to encourage people to take the time to check what they may be entitled to and to apply for the money that they are due. That is the fundamental message. We are doing what we can to encourage clients who have accessed a payment and who know someone else who may be eligible to pass the information on. If they have had a good experience, we encourage them and we are trying to support them to tell others about it, as that may make the difference, in that another person may apply, rather than not.

Parliamentary colleagues and others can share information on benefits, whether that involves putting up a poster in an office, encouraging local community centres or other entities to display information, or sharing posts on social media—as I know colleagues do regularly, which is extremely helpful. Kirsten Sweeney talked about the success of the Facebook initiatives that Social Security Scotland has undertaken and the wider social media work that it undertakes. We could all share that as widely as possible.

This is a collective responsibility. I appeal to everyone who comments on these issues—politicians, the media and other stakeholders and individuals—to speak positively about social security so that we can collectively move fully to a culture where stigma around claiming benefits is reduced and then eradicated as we create a society where we believe in people being able to access and get support when they need it. We must make that investment collectively with

passion, positivity and commitment as a whole populace.

Emma Roddick: You touched on the role of the media in supplementing your efforts. What do you expect or want the media to do to help you to drive down stigma?

Ben Macpherson: First, I say thank you to all those in the media who have shared information about Social Security Scotland. Part of the media's role is to hold people to account, to scrutinise and to report, which is absolutely right, of course. When there is a positive story to tell and information that it is helpful to share, I urge the media to do that. I am grateful to all the individuals and media outlets that have done that so far, and I thank them in advance for what they will no doubt do in the future.

We really need to end the instances of some aspects of the media—thankfully, they are a minority—using terms such as “benefits cheats” and “scroungers”. That helps no one. We need to be in a position in future where such phrases are no longer printed in articles or elsewhere. The media will scrutinise the system, but we want to build integrity in the system and in the idea of social security, and that is a collective responsibility for us all, including the media and us as politicians.

10:00

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Good morning. I have some questions on the take-up of low-income benefits. I know that the figures are estimates, but the strategy suggests that the take-up rate for the funeral support payment is 59 per cent. What work has been undertaken to evaluate why that is the case? When most people are arranging a funeral for a loved one, their discussions will be very sector specific, so why is the figure so low? What is being done to work with the sector and promote the benefit within the services that it delivers? It would seem that, at that time, there is an easy opportunity to have a conversation and raise the possibility of people accessing that benefit.

Ben Macpherson: I thank Mr Briggs for his questions on that important issue. Throughout the Social Security (Scotland) Bill process in 2017-18, I was particularly interested in that area, and I engaged with the sector.

You asked about the reasons for the relatively low take-up of the funeral support payment and how we are seeking to address it. We know that not everyone who is eligible for the payment will apply, and a point to note is that many people plan ahead and make provision to cover the cost of their funeral. The relatively low take-up figure for the payment can be explained to an extent by the

fact that our methodology for estimating take-up is at an early stage and there is a degree of uncertainty attached to the estimate. I can bring in Vana Anastasiadou to comment on that if you have any follow-up questions.

Taking all that into account, however, it is important to emphasise that the funeral support payment is working well. It has supported over 9,500 bereaved families since it was launched in September 2019, and it has provided more than £17 million of support to those who need it most. We have made it easier to apply, and as a result the number of successful applications has increased. We have approved 78 per cent of applications, which can be compared with the UK Government's authorisation of 68 per cent of applications in 2019-20. The picture is successful.

You asked about engagement with the sector. One of my early meetings as minister was with the sector. We are well connected with the organisations that represent it and we have an open dialogue with respect to its concerns and how we can, together, promote the benefit and take-up. That was one of the points that we discussed when I met those organisations, and we are collectively engaged in addressing how we can improve take-up.

Miles Briggs: With that in mind, why has the Government decided not to include targets for uptake in the strategy, which could drive forward uptake of all the new benefits? What is the rationale behind that?

Ben Macpherson: There are currently no targets in the UK system. I state that not as a political point, but as a matter of context.

Setting targets to improve take-up would require us to have established a baseline, which again relates to the question of data and where we started from. We published our initial estimates of take-up of the benefits that are currently administered by Social Security in the second take-up strategy, which means that the estimates may change as we improve our methodology and the underlying data. As a result, the baseline that we could use to inform the setting of targets is still in development. That is one of the key points. Any target that was set now would be entirely arbitrary, whereas we want to set targets that are based on proper, robust baseline data.

However, even with a well-established baseline in future, setting different targets for different benefits would likely lead to a potentially unfair system in which some benefits would be deemed as meriting higher take-up than others. We would need to be careful and cognisant of that.

The purpose of our take-up strategy is to ensure that clients are aware of their eligibility, to promote take-up and to encourage and properly support

people in accessing Scottish social security assistance. The strategy takes a very proactive approach to supporting, encouraging and informing people as much as possible. Because of where we are in the journey of the establishment of Social Security Scotland and the development of benefits here in Scotland, setting targets would not be appropriate at this juncture for the reasons that I have set out. However, we will continue to look at the matter as we progress with future strategies.

Miles Briggs: Part of the discussion that we had on last Monday's visit to Social Security Scotland was about groups that might find it difficult to access or fill out forms, or that have technology challenges. On the people who are not applying, what work has been done on identifying whether those are the key reasons for people not wanting to fill out huge numbers of forms? Are there also language or reading barriers?

Ben Macpherson: The point about accessibility is extremely important; I will bring in Kirsten Sweeney to talk about how accessibility of Social Security Scotland's communications and application processes is fundamental to the design of the information technology infrastructure, the forms that are created and the language that is used. We want to produce materials that are as inclusive as possible and are available in various languages, as required, in Braille and in other ways. We are, quite rightly, creating materials that are accessible.

One of the key factors in the creation of Social Security Scotland is that we want people to be able to access the service in a way that is right for them. That theme ran through the discussions on the bill and has, rightly, been an aspect that we have considered strongly in our consideration of the application process for clients and during the journey of creating benefits and the service itself. For example, for people who access the service online, our interface needs to be as accessible, clear and user friendly as possible. Social Security Scotland's IT teams are very focused on and are delivering that.

However, we also want people to be able to pick up the phone, have a video call or meet an adviser in person to help them with forms, if one of those is their preferred method of applying to, accessing, engaging with or communicating with the service.

We are providing all that, which is why the local delivery teams that are about to be initiated countrywide are so important. They are already in place in the three areas that are piloting the child disability payment. The extra contribution, commitment and resource to ensure that people access the service and the benefits in the way that is right for them lie at the heart of what we are providing. The local delivery teams are really

important, which is why I am so enthusiastic and passionate about them. They will make a difference to people who are not confident about going online, who might not be digitally literate or who need support to fill out their forms.

Kirsten Sweeney: It is worth flagging up that we are developing every aspect of the new service with the people who will use it. We are, for example, user testing all the various elements, and we are ensuring that protected characteristics are covered in the sample of people with whom we are working on the process. We are testing everything—from how people interact with the application form online to how, if they are using a paper version, they will use the local delivery service.

I will give an example of an improvement that will come through as a result of feedback from users. In the adult disability payment form, photographs will be included along with the questions in order to help people's interpretation and understanding of what they are being asked for. That is an example of how we will make the benefit easier to access.

The minister highlighted improvements that we are making on the communications side. The first thing that a person needs to know is that a benefit exists, so we proactively produce materials in 11 community languages, including British Sign Language. In order to get the message out, we ensure that we disseminate materials via stakeholders who have relationships with the people who require them in those formats. People can interact with us in more than 100 languages. We also produce things in easy-read format for those who require it.

The minister focused on the important aspect—namely, that it is about inclusive communication. It is about people having choice in how they interact with us—be that online, on the phone, by post or face-to-face with the at least 400 local delivery colleagues who will be working across the country once all the benefits have been introduced and people have been transferred to the new system. I also flag up that the Scottish Government has made provision for advocacy support for people who require it, in order to enable them to access their entitlements.

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): My question is for the minister. Are there any plans to make Scotland's baby box more accommodating to parents with disabled babies, through, for example, providing more items in the box for low-income families?

Ben Macpherson: I thank Mr Choudhury for that question. However, that is not an area of responsibility for me, as social security minister; it is a question for the Minister for Public Health,

Women's Health and Sport. Perhaps the convener and committee could note that and engage with the minister. I think that that would be more appropriate; I would not want to answer on behalf of another minister.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. I am more than happy for us to take that forward with ministerial colleagues to ensure that the question is answered. It is an interesting matter for us to note and pursue.

As Mr Choudhury does not have another question, we move to questions from Marie McNair.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Good morning, minister; it is good to see you.

Unfortunately, access to many of the Scottish benefits is dependent on people's being in receipt of reserved benefits. How has the UK Government responded to requests for a more unified and strategic approach to maximising take-up? If the response was disappointing, how do you intend to follow up on that?

Ben Macpherson: I thank Marie McNair for that important question. First of all, as I said at the beginning, it is unfortunate that the DWP does not have a similar strategy. I respectfully note that, if the DWP were to change its position and introduce a similar strategy, that would be a welcome step forward for social security as a whole in terms of promoting benefits in social security and changing the culture, which I talked about earlier. We would like to work more closely with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on that in order, for example, to encourage a more collaborative approach to supporting take-up of all benefits. Unfortunately, however, we have not yet seen an appetite for that.

In 2020, there was a joint letter from the then Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People and her Welsh and Northern Irish counterparts urging the DWP to take a more strategic approach to increasing benefit take-up during the pandemic. That letter was unanswered. Although I appreciate that it was a busy time for all, the devolved Administrations put forward a good suggestion.

As the committee would expect, I have been building up my relationship with UK ministers, including Chloe Smith, the new Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work. I look forward to further constructive engagement with her on a number of matters. The matter is certainly something that we might discuss in due course.

However, it would be a welcome step forward if the UK Government were to implement such a strategy. We could provide evidence and

examples of the difference that it makes—not only in practically engaging clients and helping with take-up, but in bringing us together, as members of the Parliaments and as a society, to promote social security, the benefits that it provides and the collective enrichment and improvement that it facilitates in our society.

10:15

Marie McNair: That is disappointing to hear; I hope that we will get some positive engagement soon.

I welcome the efforts to get decisions right first time. However, at the end of the day, there are cases in which claimants are not happy with the final decision. What are we doing through the strategy to promote the right to request redeterminations and appeals?

Ben Macpherson: Throughout the application process and in communication with clients, they are advised of the process, what steps are available to them to request a redetermination and what support will be available to them. As we roll out the advocacy service, a key part of its work and the wider collective work will be ensure that people are aware of and advised about the service, and that they use it.

The information is built into communication throughout the process; it is part of the wider communications on the website and of any engagement that we have. We ministers are keen to emphasise at junctures such as this meeting the steps that are available to people if they feel that the wrong decision has been made. They have the option to request a redetermination or to make an appeal, and that is clearly put to them, as is the support that is available to them through that process.

Marie McNair: Thank you, minister. That is reassuring.

The Convener: To go back to your answer to Ms McNair's previous question, I note that it would be helpful if, just for information, you could share with the committee the letter that was sent on behalf of the devolved Governments.

Ben Macpherson: Certainly, convener. We will pass the letter on to the committee.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Good morning, minister. It is good to see you again. I welcome the strategy. There are so many good things in it that will offer a lot of reassurance about how the Scottish Government is considering benefits, as we move forward.

I am interested in the holistic approach that is mentioned in the strategy document. The Government talks about working with the public

sector and the third sector. What will you do to promote collaborative working and what it will provide in terms of benefits?

Ben Macpherson: Evelyn Tweed highlights an important point. We all have anecdotal evidence; I think of engagement that I have had, as minister, with individuals who have benefited from the social security system. Many people have heard about the support that is available to them when they were taking a child to school, visiting their general practitioner or passing through their community centre.

Engagement and collaboration with statutory services and the third sector are important. We need to give their role equal emphasis. Third sector organisations that operate in a variety of fields—supporting individuals who have disabilities, people who are in care and people who are carers—disseminate our information through their networks. The way that they do it is outstanding and makes an important difference. Also, their feedback to us on the experiences of the people whom they support is really helpful.

All those things make a difference. That is why, for example, we are funding welfare rights advisers in 150 GP surgeries in Scotland's most deprived areas. That will make a difference to people learning about and accessing Scottish social security in the settings of other statutory services.

We have, throughout the period, taken a holistic approach to social security and maximising incomes. However, at the heart of the new strategy is recognition that benefit take-up is, as Evelyn Tweed emphasised, part of a bigger picture in terms of how we encourage income maximisation, how we tackle poverty and how we recover from the pandemic. That cross-system collaboration can be seen in our approach to funding welfare advice and health partnership workers, which launched in September. That is a cross-Government initiative that is funded from the health, communities and social security budgets, and it engages with different parts of society.

There is an income maximisation working group that brings together officials from across the Scottish Government to ensure that we have a co-ordinated and clear sense of the collective direction of travel. We want to provide joined-up support to wrap around people, and to make it as person centred as possible in order to drive better outcomes. A lot of collaborative work is already undertaken; the benefit strategy focuses on how we can improve and build on that.

Evelyn Tweed: That is very positive. It is good to hear that we are taking that holistic approach and looking at the big picture.

I am interested in the advocacy service that you touched on earlier. How will that help us to increase take-up of benefits?

Ben Macpherson: I was grateful to have a session with the committee a few weeks ago on the advocacy service. Since then, the procurement process has moved into the final stages and the service is in the process of being rolled out. At that meeting, I committed to speaking again to the committee about the advocacy service, because I was sure that it would be of interest. I am looking forward to meeting VoiceAbility, the organisation that we have contracted to deliver the service, later this month. Ruari Sutherland, who has led on engagement with VoiceAbility and the procurement process, might have something to add.

Dr Sutherland: The advocacy service will support benefits take-up in general by providing the opportunity for disabled people to engage the services of an advocate when interacting with the social security agency. That will allow them far greater access and support by enabling them to have a say in the processes that affect them, and to interact more fully and meaningfully with the social security agency. By its very existence, the advocacy service, which is funded by the Scottish Government but is independent of both the Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland, will undoubtedly play a part in bringing disabled people into the social security system in ways that work for them, that support them and that allow them to play as big a part in the process as anyone else.

The Convener: Thank you, Dr Sutherland.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I have some questions on monitoring and targets. I have heard this morning and seen in the strategy that the Government is not necessarily able to identify all the eligible people. I heard your response earlier about disabled people and carers benefits.

However, in order to monitor whether the take-up strategy has been successful, it is important that we understand who should be taking the benefits up and what success is. Without targets or an understanding of who should be taking up the benefits, how will we deliver on the statutory responsibility to monitor the strategy?

Ben Macpherson: That is a really important area, but it is also very challenging for all of us. Our policy evaluation programme will set out clients' experiences of the factors that helped or hindered their applying for the benefit. That will provide important context for the situation in which the strategy operates: that feedback will be important. We will be looking for testimony that services were well advertised, that information was clearly accessible and that the application

process was straightforward. To an extent, our policy evaluation programme will play a role in evaluating and monitoring in the way that Pam Duncan-Glancy rightly emphasises is important.

In addition, Social Security Scotland's client insight programme will report on whether clients have been adequately supported by knowledgeable and understanding staff through the process of receiving a fair decision on their applications, so we will receive feedback on that. Of course, we report information annually in our charter measurement framework, which was published last week on 3 November. There are other processes and bits of work to make sure, rightly, that we monitor and evaluate—as much as we can—where we are as a service, what we have improved, what we need to improve further and how we make sure that we serve as effectively and informatively as possible those who access the service.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I have a follow-up question. I appreciate your answer, minister, and I have little doubt that the engagement between the agency and individuals who come through the system will be positive and, certainly, a bit different from what has gone before it. However, it is the people who we are not seeing and who are not yet claiming the benefits who concern me. For example, in order to reach our targets to reduce child poverty, we need to increase uptake of the Scottish child payment to at least 83 per cent, but it is currently sitting at 73 per cent. What are the Government's plans to improve on that, so that we meet our child poverty targets? Members know that, at the current rate of uptake, we will not necessarily meet those targets, so how will we find the additional approximately 25 per cent of people who are eligible? How will we find the other people who have not come through the system yet? My colleague Miles Briggs mentioned earlier that only 59 per cent of people have taken up funeral support payments. A moment ago, you described a series of engagements that you will carry out with people who have been through the system, but what will we do for people who are not yet taking the benefits up?

Ben Macpherson: First, I thank Pam Duncan-Glancy for all that she does to promote and emphasise the Scottish child payment in her own work, because that is an example of how members can help to raise awareness of the benefits that are available, by utilising their initiative and coverage and through their constituency work.

There are some initiatives around the Scottish child payment that I think you will be interested in. We have commissioned Ipsos MORI to conduct research that will inform an interim evaluation of the initial roll-out of Scottish child payment for zero

to five-year-olds. As with evaluations of our other benefits, that will contribute to a wider report that will combine commissioned research with what we know from official statistics and population surveys. The evaluation is due for publication in the summer of 2022, so that work will help us in the areas that Pam Duncan-Glancy has rightly highlighted.

We also recently published our evaluation strategy for the devolution of disability benefits. It contains a range of thematic projects up until 2025, which are designed to assess the safe and secure transition of benefits from the DWP. That will help with regard to initial experiences of the application and decision-making approach, particularly around supporting information in the application process, and it will draw largely from our experience of the child disability payment. It is not related to the Scottish child payment, but it is a piece of research in the same thematic area that will help us to improve our insight and evidence.

10:30

The experience of families in applying for the child disability benefit and the impact that that has had on them and their wellbeing will be key aspects of that work. We will look at that following the full roll-out of the child disability payment later this month.

On the question about the uptake figure of 77 per cent for the Scottish child payment, it is important to recognise that, first of all, 108,000 children have benefited from the Scottish child payment, so it has been a success for a lot of people. On the estimated reduction of 3 percentage points or, rather, on the point about the figure of 77 per cent, it is important to point out that it is an initial estimate. We expect that to increase when the Scottish child payment reaches its steady state, which will occur when growth in the number of benefit recipients flattens and settles at its natural level. We are expecting the data to show an increase. Vana Anastasiadou might want to say something on the figure of 77 per cent.

Vana Anastasiadou: Yes. I will add that the 3 percentage point reduction was estimated when we were developing the policy for the Scottish child payment. The modelling was undertaken back in 2019, and that reduction was forecast for the year 2023-24. Therefore, there are two points to flag up, one of which is that the 83 per cent take-up rate was an assumption that was necessary to enable us to estimate the potential impact of the Scottish child payment on child poverty. Since the modelling was undertaken, a great deal has changed with regard to the economic conditions and other factors that play into the child poverty forecast. I am saying that to

explain that the take-up of the payment is not the sole factor that will determine the child poverty reduction in 2023-24. The other key point to flag up—to expand on what the minister set out—is that we expect the take-up of the Scottish child payment to increase by 2023-24, which is when the 3 percentage point reduction was estimated for, because the benefit has a long way to go before reaching a steady state. It might also be worth flagging up that the Scottish Fiscal Commission previously forecast take-up of the Scottish child payment for 2023-24 at 80 per cent.

Jeremy Balfour: May I come back to a point that my colleague Miles Briggs made about the funeral support payment? I should declare that I am the convener of the cross-party group on funerals and bereavement. In my initial conversations with funeral directors, they were very positive about filling out the form for the payment and they felt that the process was working well. Again, the 59 per cent take-up rate for the funeral support payment surprises me. What are we going to do to get to the other 41 per cent who have not taken up that payment? I appreciate that some people have organised their own funerals and will not fall into that category, but I do not think that the percentage will be that high. I might have missed this, minister—I apologise if so—but what are we going to do about that? Is there a geographical breakdown of that data? Is it more likely that people in central Scotland are claiming compared with people in the Borders or the Highlands? Is that data being recorded by Social Security Scotland and, if so, could we see a breakdown of those figures?

Ben Macpherson: I would be happy to come back to Mr Balfour on some of those points. As I said, there is engagement and continued correspondence with the sector on how we can work collectively to raise awareness of the benefit and make sure that those who are entitled and want to claim it do so. The general marketing and awareness campaigns that Social Security Scotland undertake promote the benefit as one of our 11 benefits, so wider work is taking place. I will follow up in due course on the more detailed questions that Mr Balfour asked if that is helpful.

Emma Roddick: The Scottish Government has recently expanded free school meals to blanket age groups, which I and many others are supportive of. However, given that claiming free school meals is linked to other payments, including bridging payments for the Scottish child payment, what is being done to communicate the benefits of applying for free school meals even if your kid is already being fed?

Ben Macpherson: In effect, free schools meals are a passported benefit of entitlement from other benefits. We have a hybrid system here. Emma

Roddick rightly emphasises the importance of raising awareness in school settings of Scottish benefits. As I emphasised earlier, there is already significant engagement with the education sector and local authorities on how we promote Scottish benefits in schools.

The challenge is that we cannot promote reserved benefits, because that is for the DWP to undertake, so as much as there is engagement with, for example, Citizens Advice Scotland and its work, it is a reality that reserved benefits are not promoted in the same way as Scottish Government benefits.

The interconnectedness of receipt of free school meals being passported from other benefits emphasises the importance of continued engagement with the education sector to promote take-up of Scottish benefits by individuals who interact with schools. That has been successful so far, but there is more that we can do and we will continue to do it.

Marie McNair: As the minister will know, the introduction of the child disability payment has been piloted in three council areas—Dundee, Perth and Kinross and the Western Isles. What lessons can be learned from the pilot and what number of claims are we talking about collectively from those areas? What source of supporting evidence will be used to assess those claims? I am aware that you might not have that information to hand and it is okay if you do not, but will you forward it on to me when you get it?

Ben Macpherson: We recently received an evaluation on the pilot, and I am happy to provide that to the committee ahead of the national launch on 22 November. Members should bear in mind that it was a pilot and part of the process of a pilot is to refine and to learn. One very positive outcome of the pilot was that 88 per cent of people who applied did so digitally. That shows that Social Security Scotland's public-facing IT was accessible and its interfacing was a success, in that the people who participated in the pilot for CDP engaged with the IT successfully.

A number of factors arose that we have taken on board to consider ahead of the national launch. One is that some people who tried to apply for CDP were already on the UK benefit. They will be transferred in due course as part of the case transfer, and therefore they were unable to make an application. That shows that we need to do some awareness raising ahead of the national launch, and that has been factored in for consideration around 22 November.

Kirsten Sweeney might want to say more.

Kirsten Sweeney: Minister, you took the words out of my mouth. A key lesson from the pilot is that we need to look at the weighting of our messaging

to ensure that we are promoting the benefit to those who might be coming into eligibility or who have been eligible for the legacy DWP benefit but have not applied for it.

We also need to manage the expectations of clients who are in receipt of disability living allowance for children. We need to reassure them that their benefit will be transferred so they will not have to apply for the new benefit, and we need to manage their expectations about when the transfer will happen, so that they do not think that the new benefit is additional to disability living allowance for children. We also need to encourage them not to end their existing award from the DWP, because their case will be moved to us naturally. That has been a key message.

We are also amplifying in our advance communications a clear message about the types of evidence that help us in making decisions, so that we get as much of that evidence as possible on receipt of the initial application. That enables us to make decisions as quickly as possible and minimises any back and forth with the client, although support for that is there, should it be required to ensure that we get all the evidence that we need.

Marie McNair: Thank you. Minister, I look forward to seeing the additional information, if you can pass it on.

Under the old system, people were deterred from applying for the carers allowance by the fact that the underlying entitlement rules meant that for some it offered no financial gain. What are we doing to get the message out that that has changed and that a gain will come from the carers allowance supplement?

Ben Macpherson: The carers allowance supplement was the first benefit to be introduced following passage of the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. Throughout the process of its introduction and our experience of the past years—particularly with the additional payment in June 2020 and the additional payment that is forthcoming in December this year—we have undertaken proactively to promote it, through central communications in the Government and the agency and, particularly, through engagement with carers organisations. We have encouraged them to raise awareness of, and encourage application to, the benefit within their networks so that people can receive the additional amounts. That is an on-going exercise that we undertake with the relevant stakeholders.

The passage of the bill helped bring attention to that issue organically, just by virtue of the fact that it was the first non-emergency bill that we passed in that parliamentary session. Awareness was

raised significantly through that process. That work continues.

Marie McNair: I have no further questions.

The Convener: Before I bring in Pam Duncan-Glancy, I note that colleagues should be aware that, regardless of whether we are in public or private—although it looks more likely that we will be in public—I intend to suspend at 11 o'clock so that we can observe a two-minute silence.

10:45

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Take-up of the Scottish welfare fund appears to be dependent on postcode; there is significant variability in the success rates of applications across the country. In addition, we see more and more repeated applications for the Scottish welfare fund, which suggests that people are living in crisis. What is the Government doing to review the Scottish welfare fund and address the variability across locations and postcodes in Scotland, and what is it doing to ensure that people can access benefits on a more permanent basis to ensure that they have the money that they need to live on rather than consistently going back to what is in essence a crisis fund?

Ben Macpherson: I thank Pam Duncan-Glancy for that important question. First of all, she will be aware that the cabinet secretary announced a significant new winter package of support, much of which is allocated to local authorities in order to help with funding at a local level.

Members will be aware that we committed in our pre-election manifesto to a review of the Scottish welfare fund in this parliamentary session. Work towards initiating that review is progressing significantly. I am happy to take that point away and come back to the committee with clarity as to where the process is with regard to initiating that review and the formalities that have to be considered in that process. I will do that along with further information for Mr Balfour on engagement in relation to funeral benefits and, although I have given Marie McNair significant information on the valuation of the pilot of CDP, anything more that I can add to that. I am also happy to update Pam Duncan-Glancy with a clear position on a review of the Scottish welfare fund.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: That would be really helpful. Specifically, could you outline when it is intended that the review will start and what it will consider?

Ben Macpherson: I will do that to the extent that we can within the considerations of the process and the issues around procuring and initiating such a review that we have to consider.

However, we will certainly do that as much as we can.

Foysoil Choudhury: How do you plan to limit the negative aspects of automation? For example, there has been a five-week wait for universal credit, and dealing with the DWP's system has caused confusion.

Ben Macpherson: Universal credit is of course a reserved benefit, so we are not able to affect the process of universal credit at all. Mr Choudhury—and, indeed, the committee, if it was inclined—would have to take that up with the UK Government.

Incidentally, when I was on your predecessor committee, I raised the issue of the five-week wait with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and pressed it as a point of concern. It is very disappointing that, at this juncture, people are still facing that issue and that politicians are still having to query it. It is not helpful in any way for those accessing the system.

On automation generally, there are important considerations around it in our system. In the longer term, there is an intention to automate benefits such as Scottish child payment where it is both appropriate and feasible. However, there is important context to that, which I will set out. First of all, analysis is under way within the Scottish Government regarding the feasibility of using Scottish child payment and its eligibility criteria for automating education benefits such as free school meals, which relates to what Emma Roddick asked about earlier.

The current position is that the eligibility criteria differ, and we are exploring options for achieving full automation. That work is progressing, but, for the sake of context, I suggest that the committee considers the fact that automation is not universally welcomed and does not solve all the take-up issues. We know that to be the case, because stakeholders who responded to the benefit take-up inquiry conducted by your predecessor committee highlighted that very complexity. For example, in its written submission, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation stated:

“Human advisors with robust knowledge of the system can assess the nuances of individual cases to identify eligibility in a way automation likely never could.”

Moreover, in its written evidence, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations said:

“algorithms do not lend themselves to nuanced decisions based on dignity, fairness and respect.”

As we continue to evolve and improve digital capacity in Social Security Scotland, the Scottish Government and the Scottish public sector more widely, including local government—and it is quite significant that the Scottish Government's digital

strategy is a joint one with local government—we will continue to consider how automation can be of assistance. However, as we design the social security service, we need to keep in mind that having advisers and providing accessibility through having someone to speak to, which I talked about earlier, will be a really important part of the process of application and resolving issues. The question is how we strike a balance in that respect.

Finally, on the point about universal credit, I encourage Mr Choudhury to take the issue up with UK ministers.

Marie McNair: I want to highlight a good example from Glasgow, where people registering births are assisted in making best start grant claims. Are there any other examples of good practice elsewhere?

Ben Macpherson: I am sorry, but can you elaborate? I am not familiar with the example that you highlighted.

Marie McNair: In Glasgow, a person who registers a birth is assisted in making a claim for a best start grant. Do you know of any other such examples of good practice elsewhere? Of course, you might not have that information to hand.

Ben Macpherson: Thank you for highlighting that example; indeed, such examples exist right across the country. I have already spoken about my anecdotal experience as a constituency MSP and as a minister engaging with stakeholder and individual claimants, and I think that those kinds of life events—a family registering a birth, as you have alluded to, or an individual starting nursery or school—provide really important opportunities for signposting. The approach is particularly relevant in promoting our five family benefits, which are very important.

In its corporate plan, Social Security Scotland commits to providing a joined-up service to clients, which means providing them with the best possible advice and referring them to organisations that can give any further help that might be needed. That is the overarching position of Social Security Scotland's operation, and it is working closely with partners to support the development of referral pathways of the kind that Marie McNair has brought to light in the example that she referred to and to ensure that clients who need broader support can connect with an organisation that can provide it.

This is a complex area of work. How do we ensure that referral happens at those signposting events, that engagement is happening and that information is available? We are certainly starting from a strong position, particularly with regard to the five family benefits.

Marie McNair: I was just interested in hearing about other areas where there might be that kind of good practice.

The strategy aspires to reaching a position where people are automatically referred to Social Security Scotland when things happen to them that could make them eligible for benefits. How achievable is that aspiration, and how can we embed it in our approach to the public sector and other services that people access?

Ben Macpherson: That gets to the overarching position of the strategy—how we promote the wider support that is available and encourage individuals to engage with it. That is one of the challenges that the Government faces. As we recover from the pandemic, the Government is strongly focused on how to provide that wraparound support. Social Security Scotland is an important part of that, and the benefit strategy that we are looking at today emphasises and considers ways that we can do that by encouraging the take-up of benefits, informing individuals about what is available and providing them with the support that they need to access that.

Marie McNair's question is more widely applicable to service delivery in the round. I refer her to the Covid recovery strategy that was published a few weeks ago by the Deputy First Minister, which makes it clear that the Government's focus is on taking a person-centred approach. People are at the heart of what we are doing collectively, in terms of public service provision. Social Security Scotland is a key part of that as one of a variety of public services that need to work together to support individuals.

Miles Briggs: I am not sure whether you will have time to answer this before we suspend the meeting. With regard to strengthening portfolio working across Government, one of the key issues is where people can find the information. Foyso Choudhury mentioned the baby box. We know that 66 per cent of parents welcomed the fact that it included information about breastfeeding and postnatal depression. Is that approach being looked at to see whether that life event could include advertising for different benefits—the five family benefits that you mentioned—as Marie McNair touched on earlier?

Ben Macpherson: I will bring in Kirsten Sweeney on the communication materials and when they are supplied to people. Perhaps that should be after we suspend the meeting—I am conscious of the time. Mr Briggs makes an important point around how the Government, collectively, provides that wraparound support for individuals. That is a key point of consideration for the Government in relation to Covid recovery and

how we as a society move forward from here. I will leave it there.

The Convener: I am happy for Kirsten Sweeney to come in. I will cut her off at about 10:59:40, if that is okay.

Ben Macpherson: I am sorry. I thought that we were finishing at 10:58.

Kirsten Sweeney: I will be as quick as I can, Mr Briggs. We include information about the five family payments in the baby box. We are in the middle of running an evaluation of the effectiveness of the campaign on the five family payments, and the literature in the baby box came out as one of the top channels through which people said they heard about those benefits. That is a new way to promote benefits that was introduced at the start of the year, and it is showing to be effective. We also include materials in midwife and health visitor packs that are given to expectant and new mothers, and the payments are included in conversations that midwives will have with mothers at key stages. I hope that that answers the question. We are using that tactic and it appears to be working.

The Convener: Thank you. Given the time, and to make sure that I do not have to cut anybody off when asking a question or giving an answer, I will suspend the meeting so that the committee, everybody in the room and those attending virtually can observe the act of remembrance of the two-minute silence. We will be back at 11:02.

10:59

Meeting suspended.

11:02

On resuming—

The Convener: Thank you, colleagues.

Miles Briggs: Further to my question, the recent Scottish Commission on Social Security report on adult disability payments recommended a focus on active referrals, rather than just signposting, as the way forward. Will a key part of the strategy to develop pathways be to actively refer people and not just signpost them?

Ben Macpherson: First, I offer our gratitude for all the work that SCOSS does in evaluating regulations. Mr Briggs is aware that the SCOSS report on the draft adult disability payment regulations was recently published and we are still to formally respond to it. We will touch on that recommendation in our formal response.

Jeremy Balfour: My question follows on a bit from theme 1 but also relates to this theme. The Social Security Committee made a visit to Wester

Hailes when we were looking at the issue of uptake. It came out clearly that a lot of people will not even go to a school or their nearest GP to get information. In fact, one person said to us that, unless we go door to door, we will miss a lot of people. I appreciate that it is not possible to go door to door, but how do we get the information down to those people who, as Pam Duncan-Glancy mentioned, are not already on those benefits? A lot of those individuals are not on Facebook and are certainly not on Twitter. What strategy do we have to reach the hardest-to-reach individuals, who would find it difficult to cross a road to get that information, let alone go elsewhere? How do we get that information out to people, particularly post-pandemic, when there is less access to GPs and we cannot get into schools at the moment?

Ben Macpherson: That is one of the hardest questions for us, collectively, to answer. I have considered the matter in two capacities; I did so first when I was Minister for Europe, Migration and International Development, when I considered how we could raise awareness of the UK Government's European Union settlement scheme among the hardest to reach, who might not necessarily access services in the normal manner.

Of course, there is the media work that Social Security Scotland does, which includes work with the mainstream media, such as newspapers and local radio, as well as work with social media, through all the different mechanisms that you would expect. Kirsten Sweeney will be able to say more about that.

The investment in the welfare advice and health partnerships is significant. The vast majority of people will access GP services and the national health service at some point. The provision of that service, whereby 150 surgeries are due to deliver welfare advice services in-house, is significant. We have provided new funding for that service, which is an important aspect of our outreach work.

Kirsten, would you like to say a bit more about Social Security Scotland's activity in the mainstream media?

Kirsten Sweeney: Yes, and if it would be okay, I will also say something about the invite to apply approach that we use. We work proactively with the mainstream media and with community media outlets. We also advertise times in alternative languages, where that is appropriate.

We do a lot of that work through case studies. If people see themselves in a case study, it will make them more inclined to interact; the message will resonate and they will realise that it is for them. In our work with the media, we rely heavily on case studies and human interest stories to raise awareness and visibility.

I guess that a key issue that Mr Balfour asked about was how we arrive at somebody's door. A key way in which we do that is that we use data that is provided by the Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to issue invitations to people whom that data shows might be eligible for a number of our family benefits. We will look at whether that is a tactic that we can deploy across the benefits if the data is available to enable us to do so.

Later in the year, we will do an evaluation of the invite to apply approach and its impact. We will speak to some of the people who got an invitation to apply but chose not to act on it, to better understand why that was the case and to see whether there is anything that we can do to improve that approach.

We are currently undertaking work that will involve research with some of the more seldom heard groups to better understand how to disseminate information to them. At the moment, a lot of that appears to be done by word of mouth. We work closely with some stakeholders—for example, through Gypsy Traveller groups—to utilise existing channels and forums for getting the message out. There are online forums for Gypsy Traveller groups, on which we have provided information in the form of videos that Gypsy Travellers have made about the benefits. Using a trusted person to talk to their community in that way might help to get the message out.

Those are some examples of the work that we are doing to tackle the issue of reaching the more seldom heard groups, who might not be engaging with the benefits system. I flag the fact that the limitation of the invite to apply approach is that, if someone is not getting the qualifying benefit, we will not be able to reach them. That is a consideration in relation to people getting their entitlements from the DWP, which needs to happen before we can tap into that information to make sure that they access the benefits that are available via Social Security Scotland.

The Convener: That you very much indeed—that was very insightful.

The final set of questions will be asked by Pam Duncan-Glancy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I thank the minister and his team for the responses that they have given today, which have been really helpful.

I want to ask about automation and the ability to flex that in the way that the minister described earlier for people who might need a human being to talk to them about a situation. As I am sure that he will be aware, there is the “Tell us once” system, whereby people need tell the state only once—literally—that someone has passed away. That triggers a host of things, including stopping

pensions, council tax, benefits and all the rest of it. That is quite helpful, because it lifts the burden of responsibility, which, as I am sure the minister understands, is particularly difficult at such times.

Has the Government considered such an approach in relation to people who are alive, to help them to access benefits? Could we create a system in which it was necessary to have only one touch point?

My next question—it is slightly different, but on the same theme—is on monitoring the uptake of benefits. What are you doing to learn from your work in that regard on the minimum income guarantee?

Ben Macpherson: On the point about an individual having only one interaction with a service, with a proactive process, either digitally or otherwise, that then enables them to engage with other support, that already happens to a large extent, but there is improvement to be undertaken. I am talking about the public service as a whole, where refinement and efficacy could be improved to a greater extent. The Government as a whole is focused on that question and I am sure that we will come back to it collectively, as a Parliament, in the period ahead. Again, the Covid recovery strategy touches on some of those issues.

Another way of thinking about it is that there should be no wrong door—that is a phrase that I have used previously. If somebody goes to a GP practice and asks about social security, they should be able to get some assistance. That is exactly why we are providing 150 advisers in GP practices: to build on that concept and capacity. It is about not only co-ordination between public services, but the development of our digital capacity in the public sector; those two things are interrelated.

How do we ensure that referrals are made with proper and appropriate consideration of data protection and all the other aspects that services rightly have to consider? How do we put in place the infrastructure as well as the co-ordination to provide people with the greatest level of support that is available to them, so that they do not have to go to different places, either physically, digitally or otherwise?

We are starting from a good position on that, but there is more work to do across Government and local government, and with stakeholders. That is a really important thematic area of attention in the period ahead, as we recover from the pandemic.

You asked about the situation with monitoring. I refer to my earlier comments, in which I touched on the most important themes. We will continue to engage through the stakeholder take-up reference group and other entities that are already in place to make sure that we are monitoring progress as

much as we can, within the data constraints that we touched on earlier. Does that answer your point?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Almost.

The Convener: What about the minimum income guarantee?

Ben Macpherson: Apologies—I meant to touch on that as well. The work on the minimum income guarantee is being taken forward by the cabinet secretary, and it has a strong focus on income maximisation. The work on the formation of the group and its evaluation is at an early stage. I look forward to seeing its findings, which can help us with the benefit take-up strategy's implementation and the evaluative process.

The Convener: I thank Ms Anastasiadou, Ms Sweeney, Dr Sutherland and the minister for the extended time that they have given us this morning—it is very much appreciated. The session has been insightful and helpful, and I have no doubt that we will see, and welcome, you before the committee very soon. That concludes the public part of today's meeting.

11:14

Meeting continued in private until 11:31.

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