



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 11 September 2025

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE
22nd Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

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

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind)

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

*Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab)

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Chris Birt (Joseph Rowntree Foundation)

Edel Harris OBE (Independent Review of Adult Disability Payment)

Emma Jackson (Citizens Advice Scotland)

Professor Stephen Sinclair (Poverty and Inequality Commission)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Diane Barr

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 11 September 2025

[The Deputy Convener opened the meeting in private at 09:04]

09:45

Meeting continued in public.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Deputy Convener (Bob Doris): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 22nd meeting in 2025 of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. We have apologies from our convener, Collette Stevenson, and from Michael Marra. Unfortunately, neither of them can be with us this morning.

The committee dealt with its first agenda item in private. We now move to agenda item 2, which is a decision on taking business in private. Does the committee agree to take agenda item 4 in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Pre-Budget Scrutiny 2026-27

09:45

The Deputy Convener: Agenda item 3 is the committee's second evidence session on pre-budget scrutiny. I welcome our witnesses. In the room, we are joined by Chris Birt, associate director for Scotland, Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Stephen Sinclair, chair, Poverty and Inequality Commission; and Emma Jackson, head of social justice, Citizens Advice Scotland. Edel Harris OBE, chair of the independent review of adult disability payments, joins us online. Thank you all for the support that you will give us this morning with our budget scrutiny.

A significant amount of money has been invested in social security in Scotland, and the budget is dramatically increasing. However, that is happening in a controlled fashion, if you like, as a result of policy intentions. For example, there will be an additional £489 million for the Scottish child payment next year, and disability benefits payments will be £452 million above the block grant adjustment. There will also be an additional £123 million for carers allowance, £100 million for mitigating United Kingdom policies in relation to discretionary housing payments, and spend of £155 million on the forthcoming mitigation of the two-child benefit cap.

We can quickly see how that all stacks up to a huge amount more money than the block grant adjustment. Although that significant investment is welcome, we must have the evidence to show that it is having the impact that we want it to have. I ask the witnesses to say—perhaps by referring to one or another of those measures—where the evidence is that the additional investment is having the impact that we would like to see. Where the evidence is not there, does that mean that there is a gap and that we need to collect data, or do we have to do something else? There is quite a lot in that question to start off our evidence session.

Professor Stephen Sinclair (Poverty and Inequality Commission): Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the committee's work.

Convener, I am very glad that you referred to this as an investment, and to the purposes of some of the social security expenditure. The Social Security (Scotland) Act 1998 rightly describes social security as

“an investment in the people of Scotland”,

so, in contrast to what is said in much of the discussion that surrounds the subject, I am glad that you are not focusing on the cost or regarding it as unwarranted expenditure.

You asked about the impact of the expenditure, and we have excellent and growing evidence of the impact of the Scottish child payment. The committee produced a report on that last year, and we have seen some of the impact already in this year's annual child poverty statistics. Much of the 4 per cent decrease in the headline figure for relative child poverty is attributable to the Scottish child payment.

In addition, there is a lot of testimony from the commission's experts by experience panel, poverty truth commissions and other sources about the value of the Scottish child payment to parents. The payment is addressing long-standing deficiencies in the social security system, particularly in relation to the two-child benefit cap, the underoccupation penalty in housing benefit and the deficiencies of universal credit. The payment is preventing much worse things from happening. In that sense, it is an investment in children's long-term wellbeing, and there is a wide range of evidence to testify to that.

Emma Jackson (Citizens Advice Scotland): I thank the committee for having me this morning.

I begin by echoing what Stephen Sinclair said about social security being an investment, not only in the people who need to access the payments but in us all and across our whole society and economy. It should exist to provide a safety net and a springboard for the times in life when unexpected things happen to us and we need to be caught, but it should also enable us all to realise our potential and step into more positive destinations.

We can see that the social security payments that we have in Scotland act as both a safety net and a springboard. Based on the citizens advice network's work across Scotland, we agree that the Scottish child payment is acting as a vital lifeline and making a marked difference to the families who receive it. There is well-documented evidence of the difference that it makes, and time and again in our conversations with them, families attest to that difference. It means that families are able to turn the heating on so that the house is warm before children come home from school, it means that good, healthy, nutritious food can be bought and it means that children can attend school trips. Those are the areas in which it is making a meaningful impact.

Outwith Social Security Scotland, the citizens advice network is the largest provider of adult disability payment advice in Scotland. In quarter 1 of this year, we provided advice more than 20,000 times and were able to work alongside individuals to secure more than £7 million in ADP payments for them. Time and again, our advisers talk about ADP's very real positive impacts, not only through its material benefit to people's lives as they deal

with the additional costs of being disabled, but, more important, in relation to the whole process of how they navigate the system. Individuals say that their experience of the ADP process is markedly different from their previous experiences with personal independence payments. The fact that we have a system that is rooted in dignity, fairness and respect really makes a difference to people's lives.

The payments can be absolutely transformative. Of those who get ADP advice from the citizens advice network, around a quarter are in work, so the payment enables people to realise their potential and participate in work. Moreover, individuals report how it enables them to have a social life and be involved in and connected to their communities. One person told our advisers, "If I didn't have the benefit, I would be Jonny nae pals", and that they would not be able to go anywhere.

It is important that we capture the huge richness and value that the payments make to people's lives.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you very much. Disability payments were mentioned, so it would be appropriate to bring in Edel Harris next. I have no doubt that she will have something meaningful to say.

What evidence do we have that such investment is making a real difference, Edel? We know that there are gaps, because at last week's committee session we learned that it was not clear how many people who claim ADP are in work and how many are out of work. We got some evidence on that from Emma Jackson, but where are the gaps? It would be quite helpful to have more information.

Edel Harris OBE (Independent Review of Adult Disability Payment): In doing the review, which took place over 18 months, I found plenty of qualitative evidence and stories—they echo some of the things that have just been said—about the difference that the approach to social security in Scotland is having. However, there appears to be very little to no real research or hard data available about the impact on people's lives or circumstances of the investments in adult disability payments in Scotland. I am not talking about the difference that the payment itself makes but the impact of spending over and above any existing social security support in Scotland.

There is evidence that investments have been made to improve the systems, approaches and processes, and there has been investment in areas such as the take-up strategy. We have to assume that one reason why the numbers are as they are is the investment in advertising the benefit and in the hard work to ensure that the opportunity to get ADP is there for people to take.

We all await the publication of the Audit Scotland publication, which might address some of the questions on that point.

You will see from my report that, in relation to the approach that is taken in Scotland and the practices of Social Security Scotland, there is plenty of qualitative evidence to suggest that the changes are having a positive impact. That includes things such as the cessation of assessments and the availability of short-term assistance when appealing a decision, which is obviously not the case across the United Kingdom or with the Department for Work and Pensions.

You asked about data gaps, and again I refer to my experience of doing the review. We do not know how many disabled people there are in Scotland—I include those living with a long-term health condition. That is a very obvious data gap.

If the purpose of ADP is to cover the additional costs that those people face, more work could be done to understand what those costs are. I note the Scope report that came out in 2025, which is referenced in my report. I really feel that we need to understand more about what the additional costs are.

For me, those are the main data gaps.

The Deputy Convener: That is very helpful.

Chris Birt (Joseph Rowntree Foundation): I align myself with Professor Sinclair's and Emma Jackson's comments on the purpose of social security, so I will not repeat them.

On data gaps—I think that I have raised this with the committee before, and I have perhaps written to you on it—I am concerned about the quality of the family resources survey. It is one of the ways that we measure the child poverty reduction targets. The sample sizes are very small, which prevents us from looking into the effects in different households of poverty and so on. That is a worry, and I would like to see both the DWP and the Scottish Government take that more seriously.

In the context of the UK Government's proposed reforms to PIP, we saw that we do not know how ADP and the health elements of universal credit will interact in Scotland. That would be extremely valuable information for us to have, for reasons that my fellow panel members have set out. That foundational evidence would help us.

We have done lots of modelling in that space on things such as the Scottish child payment, and we believe that Scotland is the only part of the UK that will have falling child poverty by the end of this decade, so it is having an impact. The robustness of the family resources survey is incredibly important to this Parliament and to policy making. We should be concerned about that.

The Deputy Convener: Does the spend have a positive impact? Yes. Is it a massive investment? Yes. However, is it value for money? That is the next question that we have to ask. It is clear that spending huge amounts of money to tackle child poverty and support disabled people and carers will have a positive impact, but we have to ask whether it is value for money. If the policy intent is to tackle poverty and support disabled people and carers, is that suite of measures good value for money?

Professor Sinclair: I will principally focus on the Scottish child payment, because that is within the Poverty and Inequality Commission's statutory remit; others are more expert on ADP and disability. I know that, last week, you had testimony from the Fraser of Allander Institute, which has done modelling that shows that, of the available viable options, the Scottish child payment is the most efficient and effective way of delivering on the child poverty targets. There is no path to the 2030 targets that does not involve significant, substantial and sustained investment in social security. Depending on one's point of view, that is just a nettle that has to be grasped or an opportunity that has to be taken. However, doing so will raise revenue issues, which we will perhaps go on to talk about.

On instruments that could be introduced, a new benefit would not be more efficient and effective than the Scottish child payment. It is delivering value for money, and it is the principal resource that we have to address the child poverty targets.

We can talk about other non-social security activities that could supplement the Scottish child payment. However, there is no lever that will have the same direct impact. Even in the best-case scenario of getting people into employment, reducing costs of living and increasing the supply of affordable housing, those measures each would make a 1 or 2 per cent contribution to reducing the relative child poverty headline figure. The Scottish child payment alone has contributed a large bulk of the 4 per cent decrease. In combination with other activities, it could get us significantly closer to the 2030 targets, so we really need to address that challenge.

10:00

The Deputy Convener: I sometimes feel that the heft of the Scottish child payment is so significant that other investments somehow become the poor relations when it comes to scrutiny and assessment of value for money. It is not that I do not want to hear more about the Scottish child payment, but I would quite like to hear more about whether other investments are value for money.

Chris Birt: I think that, first of all, it comes back to what you value. I will not labour the point about the child payment, but if you read some of the testimony in the Scottish Government's evaluation of the five family payments, you will see that, if what you value is children living in homes where there is food on the table, which are warm and so on, they represent a very good investment. Reversing the two-child limit is very good value for money, too; given that the proportion of children in poverty who are in large families is consistently increasing, its reversal will have a massive impact. When it comes to the amount of additional investment that those families will get and the direct impact on them, it is very good value for money.

The Deputy Convener: I will bring in Emma Jackson and will ask what will be my last question. Jeremy Balfour has a supplementary question and my other colleagues want to come in with a whole range of questions.

Are there any payments that are not value for money? I am sorry, Emma—you can swerve that if you like.

Emma Jackson: I was just going to give some reflections on your question about value in relation to some of the disability and health-related payments. I repeat that social security is an investment in all of us; indeed, it is a human right. What has been invested so far is absolutely essential in addressing the harm that groups across our society in Scotland have been forced to endure because of systematic failure and systemic issues.

What has been provided is value for money, but we need to go further. We know that disabled people disproportionately face some of the worst poverty that people experience in Scotland; our evidence from across the citizens advice network shows as much, with more than two thirds of all people who seek advice from a local citizens advice bureau having a disability or long-term health condition and needing advice across multiple areas. The payments that are made are absolutely essential in going some of the way towards tackling the harm that people experience.

However, as I have said, we know that disabled people face exceptionally high costs just to navigate life, and something that we have not looked at so far is the adequacy of the disability payments that are made. There was a comprehensive and excellent review of ADP, but adequacy was out of its scope. Although what we are doing is good, we absolutely need to go further if we are to tackle the harm that sick and disabled people face.

The Deputy Convener: Thanks. I will bring in Jeremy Balfour to ask some supplementary

questions, but it might be reasonable, when he asks his questions, if he brings in Edel Harris to comment on some of this, given the previous comments that we have had.

Over to you, Jeremy.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind): Once she has heard my question, she might not want to take it.

I welcome the witnesses—thank you for coming. I absolutely agree with everything that you have said so far about social security being an investment. I should remind members that I am on ADP myself.

Going back to what Chris Birt, Emma Jackson and others have said, I would say that we want to focus on the most needy people in society and ensure that those who are the most vulnerable are able to get the most. However, any social investment comes with a cost, and we have all seen the figures for where the money will go over the next few years. Have you given any thought to how the money might be targeted better, so that, say, people who are on higher incomes might not get it, particularly ADP? I know that there are issues with how we would do that, with passporting benefits and so on, but, in principle, do you think that would it be better to take that social investment and use it in a different way to give more to those in need, rather than necessarily giving it to someone like me, who is on a reasonably good salary? Has any thinking been done on that?

The Deputy Convener: Who is that question for, Jeremy?

Jeremy Balfour: Anyone at all.

Professor Sinclair: We need to broaden the discussion and analysis well beyond social security. A wide range of choices has to be made; choices have already been made that have not been directed at the neediest but which have the greatest value for money.

The Scottish Government is, of course, entitled to make those choices, but there has to be a rationale and justification for that. The Government has to tie up its commitment to the eradication of child poverty, which is welcome and has been repeated, with some of its actions. For example, there are good reasons for the pension-age winter heating payment, but is it directed most efficiently and effectively at the most needy? Should it be targeted by demography or other circumstances?

Similarly, there is the policy of concessions on travel for everyone over 60, which is a very expensive policy in the long term. Is it targeted at the most needy? Again, there might be other justifications for doing that, but the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament must be held to account for those sorts of decisions.

It is important to broaden the discussion. I agree with the principle that we should focus on need and the value added of any expenditure.

The Deputy Convener: I am deferring to you, Jeremy, if you want to come back in.

Jeremy Balfour: I think that Emma Jackson might want to come in. She was nodding, but I do not know whether she wants to say anything.

Emma Jackson: I am happy to come in briefly. Stephen Sinclair has raised an important point about broadening the conversation. ADP is an additional-costs payment to try to meet the additional costs that disabled people face. In the fullness of such a conversation, we need to look at other ways in which we can remove the barriers that disabled people face in society and tackle other issues in the right places. An example is the very high energy costs that disabled people face. Across the policy portfolio, we need to tackle issues as far upstream as possible and look for solutions in the right places. The issue with energy costs is that we have broken energy markets and we need a social tariff, which would be of great help to those who are on low incomes or have unavoidable high use.

It is right to highlight the need for a full conversation to ensure that we tackle issues at source and do not prop up failure demand.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As a relatively new member of the committee, it has been enlightening for me to hear about where we are. In answer to the deputy convener's questions, Emma Jackson said that 20,000 people had been supported through the citizens advice network to receive or progress to ADP. That is quite a large number of people to contend with. Was that because those people were not aware of ADP? Were they signposted to it by your organisation? There has been quite a large campaign to try to identify individuals. It would be good to get a flavour as to why those people felt that your organisation would help them through that process.

Emma Jackson: Just for absolute clarity, in case I was not clear, we provided advice 20,000 times during that period, so there will be individuals who came multiple times.

The citizens advice network is a household brand that people trust. We have a footprint in almost every community in Scotland and, I hope, a wide and open door, so people can come along with the smallest question that they might have, right the way through to asking an adviser to draw up alongside them and help them to fill out a form. That is an essential service that our advisers provide week in, week out.

Undoubtedly, our advisers would attest that the ADP process, since it began in Scotland, has been a smoother and better journey than the previous experience with PIP, for example. However, that is not to say that progress could not be made on making that a better journey for the individuals who apply for the payments and for our advisers in working alongside them. A colleague was on the expert group that worked alongside Edel Harris on the ADP review, so I know that there is definitely room for improvement there. Indeed, Social Security Scotland is committed to continuous improvement, so there are opportunities for progress to be made.

The final thing that I would say about that is that, unfortunately, disabled people and people who are ill continue to experience some of the worst stigma and shame piled on them for needing to access such payments. The rhetoric over the past six months as we have seen the welfare reforms pass through the UK Parliament has quite simply been outrageous. Disabled people have felt dehumanised and devalued—some people have said that they have actually felt worthless. We see it as positive that we are actively playing our role to enable people to access the payments that they are entitled to. We are happy to do everything that we can to ensure that people get the payments that they need.

Alexander Stewart: Thank you.

The Deputy Convener: Before I move on to Marie McNair, I am conscious that Edel Harris has not had the opportunity to comment on some of the things that she has been involved in to her fingertips very recently. Do you have any final comments on this section, Edel, before we move on?

Edel Harris: I echo a lot of what has been said. Means testing was out of the scope of the review—I want to make that very clear. However, what was interesting, in meeting so many disabled people and people living with long-term health conditions during the review, was that some people excluded themselves from applying for ADP because of the stigma, and others said, "I'd rather the money went to people who deserve it more." Therefore, a bit of self-removal from the process is happening anyway, sometimes for quite negative reasons, which is sad to see when you hear those individual stories.

I will try to answer the question by saying, first, that, if we assume that the principle of this is that it is a payment that is made to people to cover the additional costs of disability, means testing does not come into it. Secondly, on eligibility criteria, I have no idea at the moment whether the Scottish Government will accept all or some of my recommendations—we may come to that later in the conversation—but, although some of the

recommendations are about improving the current system, the more radical ones, if you like, are about reviewing the eligibility criteria. Ultimately, the payment should always be given to people who evidence, through their application process and their supporting information, the need for the payment. I will just leave that point hanging there: if you need it, you should, as a human right, be eligible to receive it.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Good morning. I would like to follow up on what you just said, Edel. Thanks for your review of ADP; I look forward to the Scottish Government's response. On the issue of policy, you are aware that the UK Government is moving to entitlement to PIP as a route to the health element of UC. Do you have any concern that the big changes to ADP might impact on how it is viewed as a passport to the UC health element for Scottish claimants?

Edel Harris: Yes, I do. Again, I tried to make that point clear in my report—that the whole area of passporting always needed to be considered, even before the UK Government talked about welfare reform, the work capability assessment and the health element of universal credit, which came quite late in the timeline of conducting my review. I recognised that any UK Government changes to the personal independence payment—whether to eligibility or any other element of PIP—would have an impact on people in Scotland, and vice versa, in that, if the Scottish Government accepted any of the recommendations and wanted to make fundamental changes to what I describe as the PIP framework, which we still use for ADP, that could impact on the arrangement between the UK Government and the Scottish Government.

In the report, I make the point, which came very loudly and very clearly from disabled people themselves, that, if there are going to be changes that will potentially have an impact, the principle should be that nobody is negatively impacted. It is for people who are much cleverer and more knowledgeable than I am to work out how that is done in practice, but it would be awful if disabled people in Scotland were financially worse off as a result of the review and any changes that might be made on the basis of the review.

Marie McNair: That is extremely concerning, and we absolutely need to look at that.

Emma Jackson, I will come back to you on ADP. In your written submission, you highlighted the example of a client who described the experience of claiming ADP as “amazing” compared with that of claiming PIP. Can you say anything about the policy differences that contributed to their feeling that it was an amazing experience?

Emma Jackson: As I have mentioned, as people apply for and receive ADP, they are able to tangibly experience what it looks like to engage with an organisation that is values based. Time and again, we heard people say that the principles of dignity, fairness and respect were what they experienced throughout their journey.

When people talk about their previous experience of personal independence payments and stuff like that, many of them mention a real sense of being retraumatised by having to continually retell their story or feeling challenged when they describe their day-to-day lives and their needs. We have fundamentally shifted the paradigm by anchoring the whole process in a values-based approach that helps people to understand from the beginning that accessing this is a right and that they will be working with an agency that is able to take such an approach.

It would be remiss of me not to say that there are challenges sometimes. Our advisers are very much at the forefront of that with people, particularly as they work alongside individuals in challenging decision making and support folks going through redeterminations. However, we must absolutely acknowledge the very real difference in having a values-based approach to payments such as ADP and all the payments from Social Security Scotland.

10:15

Marie McNair: Absolutely. It is said that social security spend will be something like 30 per cent higher by the end of the decade. Do you feel that that 30 per cent statement is a simplification and that there is a more complex explanation? Is part of the increase not simply a reflection of the fact that the Scottish Government has taken on the responsibility for spend that was already being made at Westminster level? I am thinking of, for example, attendance allowance transferring over to the pension-age disability payment and the industrial injuries disablement benefit going to employment injury assistance.

Chris Birt: I can come in on that. Although the 30 per cent figure is accurate, the Scottish Parliament information centre paper also highlights that the block grant adjustment will rise significantly over the period.

Some of the questions were about our concerns on this, but as I said in our submission, I am not concerned, because the Scottish Government has, in the main, made positive choices to do things that we support. I am thinking, for example, of the changes that you have just heard about in the handling of ADP. If the number of people applying increases, because they are less put off than they would be with a DWP system, that is good—it is a

policy success. I said this when I met David Wallace recently, but I am not sure that comparing Social Security Scotland with the DWP is that useful a benchmark any more. We should aspire to better.

Things such as the Scottish child payment and the mitigation of the two-child cap mitigation and the bedroom tax are all positive choices by the Scottish Government. That is what devolution is for. It will create spending pressures, as we will come on to discuss, but that is politics. That is what this Parliament is there to do. If the Scottish Government is making positive choices and making those changes, that is good, and then we can discuss how to pay for them.

Marie McNair: Your “Meeting the moment” report proposes increasing take-up of the Scottish child payment from 87 to 100 per cent. What policy change or system change would be needed to do that? That would also rely on co-operation from the UK Government.

Chris Birt: Yes, and do not get me wrong—I think that we have seen positive moves from the UK Government to encourage people to apply for things that they are eligible for, as of course they should. However, we should never consider the job of increasing take-up to be done; we should be pushing it, and the Scottish Government should be doing that through all public services—not just making it Social Security Scotland’s responsibility.

There are excellent organisations such as Citizens Advice Scotland and other third sector advice services, which show the value of advice. Investing in advice—Emma Jackson will thank me for saying this—is great value for money, because it gets people money that they are eligible for and which they deserve.

Marie McNair: Absolutely, and there is a wider duty on us all to carefully explain the budget increase and address any concerns that arise from a particular figure being hijacked or used to undermine the positives of investing in social security, as has been said. Does anybody else want to come in?

Professor Sinclair: There is quite good economic evidence that increasing uptake has a local economic multiplier effect. People who are on low incomes spend their income, and spend it locally, which is better for local services.

We need to supplement the excellent work of Citizens Advice through using intermediary organisations, particularly for groups who are a bit marginalised—say, black and minority ethnic communities. Such organisations are an excellent conduit and can pave the way to achieving what, after all, are citizens’ rights.

Marie McNair: I was quite interested to read in the SPICe paper for last week’s meeting about the lack of take-up of the carer support payment by those from ethnic minorities.

Chris Birt: In our “Poverty in Scotland” report last year, we highlighted that there has been a significant fall in the proportion of families from a minority ethnic background receiving social security. Given that almost 50 per cent of children in those families are in poverty, that does not add up. There might be data quality issues, but both the UK and Scottish Governments should be worried about that.

Emma Jackson: Colleagues have kindly done the heavy lifting to demonstrate the value of advice when it comes to accessing social security payments. That applies not just to the citizens advice network but to all the advice organisations in Scotland. It is important for us to remember that, in any conversation that we have about investment in social security, we need to talk about investment in advice services, too.

Unfortunately, there is huge precarity in the funding of advice. Local CABs and many other services run on one-year funding cycles, which really does not make economic sense. We need to keep moving towards a sustainable and long-term funding cycle for our advice services.

Marie McNair: In the interests of time, I will hand back to the deputy convener, but I will maybe come back in later.

The Deputy Convener: In the interests of not incurring the wrath of the convener, who is not here, I should say that our committee produced a significant report on multiyear funding for third sector and voluntary organisations. The Government has been responding positively to that, and we will continue to follow that up as a committee. I say that for our convener, Collette Stevenson, so that I do not get into trouble.

I will bring in Carol Mochan.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I will move on to one of the things that witnesses said that we might touch on later: the important investment in ending child poverty and meeting the targets for 2030. Can we meet those targets? Chris Birt mentioned spending pressures. What are the spending pressures around that? Can we, should we and how do we meet those costs?

Chris Birt: There are a few things to reflect on. First—I looked this up before I came to today’s meeting—the child poverty targets were unanimously agreed by Parliament, so every MSP who was in Parliament in 2017 voted for them. I do not know how we thought that the targets would be met without significant additional public investment in reducing child poverty. Maybe I am

just not smart enough to see that, but I do not think that that is possible.

We have seen big investment in the child payment. It will make a difference and is doing so, but we have to go further. That is what our “Meeting the moment” report was about. We are not going to write manifestos for folk—there are different ways to do this and, absolutely, social security is not the only solution. There are other solutions, which require just as much effort—and for “effort”, read “investment”.

We have to change how our economy works. Getting relative poverty below 10 per cent requires a significant change to the world that we have today. It means redistributing money within our economy to people on lower incomes. There are different ways of doing that, but we have to ask fundamental questions on targeted versus universal support and the tax burden in our country—it is welcome that the committee is looking at those issues.

Compared with the rest of the world, the UK does not have a particularly high tax burden, although the Scottish Parliament has restricted room for fiscal movement given the taxes over which it has control. I think that, if you voted for those targets, you must want to change the society that we have today. I could do a speech about that if you want, but members can look one up.

At last week’s meeting, there was talk about council tax, for example. It was talked about as if the reason why we have not done anything on council tax is because we cannot. That is absolute rubbish. We can change council tax. We cannot change it overnight or tomorrow, but we can change it. Obviously, the SNP has been in power for a long time but, frankly, each of the political parties in the Parliament should accept that we can change council tax. We should do so, because it is regressive and punishes poorer households. We just have to take that on. We could look at it in a way that reduces the burden on low-income families, which would have a positive impact on poverty, or we could look at it in a way that would increase the spending power of the Scottish Government and local government. Those are things that we have to take on.

Carol Mochan: Emma Jackson is nodding.

Emma Jackson: Absolutely—Chris Birt is right. There are many things that we could and must do to meet the targets, but it is really important for us also to catch that there is no credible way to meet the target without significant further investment in social security. That is something that we must absolutely grapple with.

In addition to the legally binding targets, public attitudes surveys tell us that people in Scotland

want the Government and the Parliament to take action on child poverty and bring about a better future for all our children. There is public appetite and desire to do that, which therefore demands that our Parliament takes action on delivering those things.

On where or how that sort of spend will come, we need to look at the distribution of existing budgets to target support to those who are experiencing the most harm, so that we can meet the targets. We have legally binding targets, and the Scottish Government has outlined that eradicating child poverty is its number 1 mission. If that is the priority and those are the targets, we need to see budget allocations that match that ambition, so that action can be delivered.

As Chris Birt indicated, we also need to look at using every other possible lever to raise further revenue. Taxation is a vital tool for tackling inequality, and opportunities exist—they might be difficult, but they exist—to look at wealth and land taxes and how they might be useful. Organisations such as Tax Justice Scotland are presenting lots of solutions that could be interrogated in this space so that we take every opportunity that we can take to generate the revenue that we know would make a difference.

Professor Sinclair: I echo the point on taxation. The Poverty and Inequality Commission produced a report—this was before I joined it, so I can praise the report with no embarrassment—that offered a range of options that are within the Scottish Government’s powers, including some that would require agreement with the UK Government for raising revenue. I commend that.

The minimum income guarantee expert group identified a number of tax revenue activities that could raise, I think, £800 million to meet some of the demands.

It is important to reiterate that it is not good enough for the Parliament to will an outcome without taking the action. In repeated statements, we have had a unanimous commitment that eradicating child poverty is the first priority of Scotland. That is excellent, but we then have to execute it.

The scrutiny report that the Poverty and Inequality Commission published in 2024 called for a cross-party convention or conversation on the subject so that we can put to one side the potential political hazards of addressing toxic issues such as the council tax. No one wants to be the first mover on that because of the political consequences that could follow, but we all know that it is an indefensible system that is based on property values of 1991. It is an embarrassment that we still have that. I understand the political

hazards of engaging in that debate, but the issue needs to be addressed seriously.

I emphasise that addressing child poverty can be a short-term expense, but not addressing poverty is a long-term catastrophe for Scotland's economy and Scotland's people. The Institute for Public Policy Research has estimated that the health impacts alone of dealing with the consequences of child poverty amount to more than £2 billion. As Emma Jackson pointed out, that is failure demand. Short-term investment is required, but the long-term pay-offs are considerable for people and for all of us.

It is definitely within the capacity of the Scottish Parliament to meet the targets. That is non-negotiable. Unless you want to repeal the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, that has to be something that we do.

Carol Mochan: Does Edel Harris want to add anything?

Edel Harris: There is not an awful lot that I can add, because the review that I conducted was very focused on people's experiences of ADP and I did not look more widely at issues to do with Scottish Government policies on poverty. However, I will say one brief thing.

One factor or driver for the increased demand for disability payments—across the whole UK and not just in Scotland—is the on-going cost of living crisis. I accept that there is a combination of factors and that that is not the only driver. The obvious point is that, if we invest in adults who care for children—assuming that a number of claimants of ADP have children of their own—that will, in and of itself, support the child poverty agenda.

10:30

Carol Mochan: I have one last wee question. We are hearing that we have to get the money—the additional payments—to people, but we also need to do other stuff. How do we get the balance right? Will you remind us of what else it is important that we do to meet those targets?

Chris Birt: I think that there is just one thing to balance. I was at an event earlier this week where a member of the Educational Institute of Scotland was speaking. He was a nursery teacher who works somewhere in Lanarkshire. He said that the first hour of the day at nursery was often spent making sure that many of the kids had food, clean nappies and clean clothes. Households do not have enough money, and social security puts that money into households—that is a crucial part of it.

There absolutely are also longer-term things that matter, such as education and the quality of

that education. However, it is not a zero-sum game: you can do both.

Another thing that is directly in the target is housing. Again, I think that the family resources survey is rosey on its housing affordability data when it comes to temporary accommodation figures and so on. However, a good, high volume of social housing, which is energy efficient and all those things, keeps down household costs. Housing is one of the main reasons why child poverty is lower in Scotland than in England and Wales.

Then there is how we support people into work. It is really worth looking at the priority families that the Scottish Government has identified. How do we support disabled people? How do we support single parents? The solutions for those groups are not necessarily the same, although some of them are.

Childcare is a massive solution to all those things. We cannot rest on the childcare system that we have today, because it has not opened up enough. We need to work intensively with families to support them and we need to work with employers to create greater flexibility. We should not kid ourselves that the solutions are somehow wild and innovative. For example, Fife Gingerbread has worked with local care homes to create new shift patterns between 10 and 2 o'clock for single parents. That enables parents to take their kids to school and nursery and to work in the care homes. It also allows the people who are doing the early and back shifts to get a break in the middle of the day. That creates a better service for the people in the care homes, income for those parents and a healthier home life for those kids. It is a win-win.

This is not rocket science. There are things that you can do, but you have to try. You have to get people out into communities and supporting them, and so much of that has been wound back over the past 10 to 15 years.

Professor Sinclair: Carol Mochan is right—we do not want to hang everything on social security, although I have to emphasise that it is the principal lever and it has the most immediate effect, too.

We could try to stop making things worse for households, too. The rigorous pursuit of public debt is not helping anyone. When people are in debt, for example, for council tax, the better local authorities—those that are more attuned to local people's needs—regard that as a warning sign that those families need help. Very few people are actively avoiding the payment of council tax.

We could reduce the poverty premium; I am sure that Emma Jackson will have more to say about that. It is expensive to be poor. It costs

people more in terms of credit and quite a number of other expenditures.

We could reduce the cost of the school day. Excellent work has been done on that in Scotland—and, in fact, in the UK—but it is patchy. There should not be a penalty in an education system, such as facing exclusion and stigma, for not having the right kit or equipment. That should not mean that children cannot take part in educational activities.

Making some of those changes might not have an impact on the targets, but it would have an impact on reducing mental stress and improving child wellbeing. It would be an investment in the future of our children.

Emma Jackson: One of the unique things about getting advice from your local CAB is that, although you might be going in for advice on one thing, such as social security, you will have the opportunity to get a listening ear, a friendly face and a cup of tea, and the adviser can unpack all the things that are happening in your household's life. Time and again, the fact that issues from everywhere are colliding is making life difficult for families, forcing them into poverty and keeping them trapped there. We have heard of challenges with housing, childcare and transport—that is another issue that I would raise—as well as with a lack of employer flexibility and with energy costs. Our observation is that there seems to be a lack of coherence around the policy issues that are causing harm for families and around our delivery of joined-up solutions in those spaces to lift people out of the challenges that they are facing.

Stephen Sinclair is absolutely right that social security is the biggest lever that we could pull. However, to really make a difference in families' lives, we have to join up all the issues, because they are not happening in isolation.

The final issue that I would raise is the different experience of families who live in remote and rural communities. All the issues that we have just described are even more profoundly felt if people are living in a remote or island community. For example, on average, households have energy debt of about £2,500 when they come to Citizens Advice in Scotland. In a remote or rural community, that debt is £3,200. That is just the tip of the iceberg for some of the issues, so we need a real focus on what the child poverty issues look like in remote and rural communities, too.

The Deputy Convener: I need to give a bit of a time check—it is partly my fault, because I spent so long on theme 1. Time is catching up with us a little bit, so my apologies in advance if I step in to move things along.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I am going to discuss the

increased disability benefits case load. It has already been touched on quite a bit so, in the interests of brevity, we will try to just tease out some more responses to it.

If you look at the narrative out there, the increase can be seen in some quarters as a terrible thing, and in other quarters as the best thing. It is our duty to look underneath the screaming headlines that we sometimes see in newspapers, which I think lead to a toxic discussion about it and, perhaps, knee-jerk proposed reforms.

Has any real research been undertaken to understand what is driving the increase in people applying for and being successful in receiving disability benefits right across the UK? We are seeing it in every place and we have touched on some of the reasons, but if anybody could add any more detail, it would be really helpful.

Edel Harris: I would be happy to. During the course of the review, I looked at that increase in case load and tried to unpick some of the reasons for it. A lot of my report references other people's reports, but if you look at things such as Scotland's economic and fiscal forecasts, a piece of work was done to look into some of the reasons for the higher number of applications in Scotland compared with the rest of the UK. From the data that was available to me by the end of the review, which was around June or July this year, the gap between the rest of the UK and Scotland is narrowing, so there is not a huge extra number of applications for ADP in Scotland.

However, on the main reasons that people told me about—which is more qualitative, conversational evidence—there was a lot of talk about mental health conditions. Without any doubt, they were a factor in some of the stories that were shared with me about issues around people waiting for access to healthcare appointments, for example.

I have already mentioned the cost of living crisis, which I think probably alerted people to the need to look at where they might be eligible for additional income. In Scotland, specifically, one thing that came to light during the review is that because Scottish Government policy is to undertake what Social Security Scotland describes as "light-touch reviews" to maximise take-up of ADP, there is a decrease in the number of people who are exiting the case load. As well as looking at additional people applying for ADP, we are seeing fewer people exiting the case load when compared with the Department for Work and Pensions, because of that policy.

Chris Birt: One point that is worth making—and it partly links to the question about advice, too—is that, even though the Social Security Scotland

process is friendlier, as it were, getting ADP or PIP is still a really invasive process, so people who are getting it are eligible for it, and it is right that they should claim it. However, as we noted in our written response, it is perfectly legitimate to ask what is going on, because these are bad outcomes for people. People living longer with ill health is a bad outcome, and we need to look at that.

I know that the committee took evidence from the Institute for Fiscal Studies last week. We commissioned it to do part of the work of looking at the case load across the UK. The reasons that Edel Harris just mentioned are important, but we need to look at that in more detail. It is quite a difficult thing to pin down, because there are many different factors involved. Covid's impact on young people in particular is real—it has had real impacts. When we work with people with lived experience, poor mental health is part of that experience, and the lack of community services is undoubtedly leading to the worsening of those issues—issues that we could prevent and cut off at an earlier point—so we absolutely support any efforts to get greater insight into this, because it will help us to make better policy.

Elena Whitham: What I am hearing from you both—it is what we have heard from the rest of the witnesses, too, I think—is that there is an element of failure demand driving up ill health or exacerbating health conditions that then tip into worsening health conditions, which perhaps leads people to apply for benefits that they might not have applied for before. However, underpinning that, there is the cost of living, which also drives applications from people who perhaps would not have applied in the past. Is that a correct summation?

Chris Birt: Yes, it is a mix of all those things. To underline that point, it is not the case that you just walk into Social Security Scotland and somebody hands you ADP. You have to be eligible for it, and you have to go through a rigorous process to get it. Stephen Sinclair has already spoken about this: this speaks to the broader impacts of poverty across our society, such as the demand for the national health service and all those things. It is really difficult in the UK to compare the situation in which we had a much more equal, much lower-poverty society with the society that we have today and to understand the impact that that has on the demand for other public services.

Elena Whitham: I have heard a young person who is in receipt of a high-level child disability payment question their own eligibility because of the narrative that is out there. That young person will not be an isolated case, and there is a broader conversation to be had about the toxic narrative.

Emma Jackson: I have a more general reflection on your question. It is really important for us to grasp the fact that disability can be both a consequence and a cause of poverty. We absolutely need to take measures to improve the health and wellbeing of our nation, full stop. All action that can be taken on that is a positive thing in and of itself, but it could also make a positive contribution to social security.

A disabled person and disabled people's organisations would say this much more eloquently than I can, but we need to catch ourselves and caution against the mindset that disability is something that can be cured or that we can just make everyone in our society well enough. The contribution that disabled people make to our society and to our economy should be celebrated and valued. Additional-cost disability payments are a vital part of enabling disabled people to live full, thriving lives and to contribute effectively to society.

Alexander Stewart: You have touched on the criteria for ensuring that disabled individuals are supported. Many individuals who have a disability want to work, but there are still difficulties in accessing work. There are still far too many barriers to disabled people's opportunities to get some kind of employment.

Emma Jackson, earlier, you touched on the difficulties for people in rural communities. We know, for example, that it is much harder for a disabled person in the Highlands, Moray or Orkney to be given employment opportunities, and we see quite considerable gaps in those areas. I can understand why more people are trying to apply for benefits, but what are we trying to do to change the cycle and ensure that people who want to work get the opportunity of employment, which would help them to progress through other areas of life and take away some of the stigma that you talked about? It would be good to get a view from the witnesses on how we tackle that, because, if we managed to achieve some of that, we would see benefits in other areas, and it would help individuals to progress.

10:45

Professor Sinclair: I agree with that—your diagnosis is spot on. Not that you have implied this—it does come up at UK Government level, too—but what I would emphasise strongly is that the problem is not the benefits system; the problem is, I am afraid to say, the labour market. We have jobs that are not fit for contemporary family life—they are not compatible with care or with where people live. We have some quite good employment support policies, but the no one left behind programme is not delivering either for

disabled people or for black and minority ethnic communities.

Again, I strongly emphasise the value of collaborating with experts by experience and with intermediary organisations. Fife Gingerbread, for example, does excellent bespoke tailored support for its particular community, and that model has been shown to be relatively cost effective. We need to reduce the barriers, so I am afraid to say, again, that a large investment in childcare is required. Childcare should be seen as equivalent to the education system, which we regard not as an expense but as an investment in people and necessary for a modern economy.

There is also a fair work programme that the Scottish Government is looking at. I have spoken on behalf of the commission with the Institute of Directors and Business in the Community, which are quite supportive of some of these measures, too. They include, for example, minimum standards across sectors; they have to be competitive, but a race to the bottom in a labour market helps no one. We have such agreements in construction; we could have them in the care sector, which is largely publicly funded, and we should try to explore the capacity to have them in services such as retail and tourism, which would, to a certain extent, address the rural dimension. We need to work with our partners and aim for win-wins that are good for employees and for employers.

Chris Birt: The tenor of your question is absolutely right, and what you have highlighted is particularly right in rural areas. Social care will often be a barrier to disabled people's participation in the labour market, and it is more difficult to provide such care in rural areas.

I think that councils and integration joint boards need to show more flexibility in these sorts of models, because people can be employed in them, too. These are not seasonal services, and the nature of employment in rural areas is that it is often very seasonal. The question is how councils can provide flexibility and allow local communities to provide social care that disabled people can work with as well as benefit from. Frankly, such things will not be designed within Parliament; they will have to be designed within communities, but they will require public funding and support, and they will, as you have said, potentially have transformative impacts on people's lives.

Alexander Stewart: Thank you.

The Deputy Convener: Do you mind if we move on, Alexander?

Alexander Stewart: No, I am quite content.

The Deputy Convener: I apologise—it is just that that might enable us to end the meeting at the appropriate time.

Jeremy Balfour, I believe that you are going to lead on the next theme.

Jeremy Balfour: First, I think that we would all want to give a big thank you to Edel Harris for all the work that she and her colleagues have done. It will be interesting to see how not just the Government, but every political party, responds to your review. We could spend the next 12 hours discussing it, but I suspect that I will not be allowed to do that, so I will limit myself to a couple of questions.

Your report talks about the 50 per cent rule, fluctuating conditions and the 20m mobility rule. If I were to lock you in a room and say, "You can't come out until you tell us the first thing from your listening exercise that you would do", what, from all the good stuff that you have produced, would be the one thing that you think the disability community would want to happen first?

Edel Harris: I apologise—my house phone is just going off, but it will stop in a moment.

That is such a tricky question to answer, as you would probably expect me to say. As you will see, the report contains 58 recommendations, so being able to pick one or two is pretty tricky. However, if you look at the first three categories, they are, to some extent, all concerned with—*[Interruption.]* I am so sorry about the timing of the phone.

The first three categories are all concerned with improving the client experience of the current system—in other words, improvements that can be made to the systems, processes and experience within the current PIP eligibility criteria. If I were forced to make a choice about what would be most effective, as it were, I would point to recommendations 41, 42, 55 and 56, one of which is about having a comprehensive review of the eligibility criteria to make sure that they reflect modern life and people's real experiences of living with a disability or long-term health condition.

On replacing the 50 per cent rule, there was a huge amount of evidence, storytelling and conversation about how the current eligibility criteria do not work for people who live with fluctuating conditions. Recommendation 55 is to do with planning and following journeys, and 56 is on the mobility component. Again, why do we have the 20m rule? I am sure that you have read the report, and I go into that in a lot more detail there. It is a very arbitrary measurement to use when considering people's mobility in the round. Instead, we should take into account where they live, what type of environment they live in and whether they have access to public transport.

I cannot choose one recommendation, but those four would be at the top of my list.

Jeremy Balfour: That is helpful; thank you for that.

I will raise two specific things. The first is about whether review periods should be longer or should be phased out, particularly for people who have permanent conditions. I am interested in that, and I am up for review at the moment. If I suddenly get two hands, it would be on the front of the *Daily Mail*. Is it a good use of taxpayers' money to call people who have permanent conditions in for review, rather than just telling them to come back to Social Security Scotland if something changes dramatically?

Edel Harris: That is a great question, and it is one that I asked during the course of the review. I learned an awful lot through the process, but in the context of that question, I really learned something. When I asked the question, I came at the issue, exactly as you have just said, by saying that many people live with disability and long-term conditions. I have a son who has fragile X syndrome. That is not going to go away, so he is living with that as a long-term condition, as are you with your disability. I came at the issue exactly in the way that you have asked the question, but there was another side of the coin, which was that people's circumstances can change, and it might be that they could go on to the higher rate of either the mobility component or the daily living component, and having a review would be in their interest.

You will see in the report that I make a recommendation about review periods. Social Security Scotland has a list of conditions, and, obviously, its decisions are based not on the disability or condition but on the impact that that disability or condition has on someone's life. It looks at the issue all the time, and if you look at Social Security Scotland's data, you will see that the maximum review period, which I think is currently 10 years, is being used in many cases. Some of that data is not in the public domain.

I absolutely get your point, and you will see in my report that I talk about review periods for long-term health conditions and disabilities. That is an issue that I recommend should be looked at again.

Jeremy Balfour: My final question is probably slightly more controversial. Your report says that face-to-face consultations

"play an important role in the decision-making process."

Many people—we heard this from Emma Jackson—have had a bad experience when they have gone for their face-to-face PIP consultation. Is it possible to devise a scheme with face-to-face consultations that are not quite as confrontational

or uncomfortable as the ones that many claimants have experienced? I am interested to hear your view on that. Often, if you meet somebody face to face, you can get a better view of how the disability actually affects them. Perhaps that is why so many people are successful at appeals, because they are seen by people rather than their case just being read on paper. Is it possible to devise such a scheme while making sure that people feel comfortable with it?

Edel Harris: That is another really good question. That issue came up consistently throughout the review. One of my recommendations is that the choice of whether to have a consultation should sit with the client and not with the case manager. The overwhelming reason for that is that, of the hundreds of people I spoke to during the review, pretty much nobody wanted to bring back the DWP-style assessments—that was absolutely not on. One thing that I considered as an alternative to the current point-based system was a conversational-type assessment. However, the overwhelming majority of people I spoke to categorically did not want to bring back assessments, so that idea was parked.

We heard that consultations are being carried out in only a minority of cases, when the case manager does not have enough information to make a decision. They are being done in a way that is not confrontational and involves getting from the person information that the case manager needs to make a decision. However, I also heard from quite a lot of welfare advisers and disabled people, particularly people with a learning disability, that they actually wanted to talk to someone, because the decision affects their life—it is a big decision that will be taken about their life and it will really matter. They felt that they were disadvantaged by having to put their life story and the impact of their disability or long-term condition into an application form, so they wanted to have the opportunity to talk to somebody about their life but were unable to do so.

That is what led to my recommendation that we should not bring back assessments or consultations for everybody. Instead, a case manager should actually make an offer to the client and say, "Would you like a consultation?" and give them the opportunity to speak to somebody face to face.

Jeremy Balfour: Thank you. We could discuss that issue for a long time, but I will leave it there for the moment.

Elena Whitham: Earlier, we spoke a little bit about the proposed PIP reforms that were shelved. Do the witnesses have any views on the likelihood of significant eligibility changes to PIP happening in the near future? If such decisions are

made, how can the Scottish Government plan for their financial impact?

Emma Jackson: I am happy to offer some reflections. We are aware that the UK Government is currently carrying out the Timms review. Mr Timms is looking at how to bring disabled people and disabled people's organisations into the expert group to help guide the review.

One thing that they will look at is the eligibility criteria. Our organisation is keeping as close to that conversation as we possibly can and trying to be actively involved, so that we can make the intersection that exists between PIP and ADP unambiguously clear to the UK Government. That relationship really was not clear in the welfare reforms that moved their way through the UK Parliament in May or June, and there seemed to be a lack of understanding of the analogous nature of PIP and ADP, particularly in relation to passporting.

Anything that happens at a UK level absolutely must reflect the voice of people and organisations in Scotland and be clearly aligned with it, so that there is a deep awareness of the impact of potential decision making, including in relation to passporting. We have already spoken about that issue this morning, so I will not go over it again. More pressingly, what will the outcomes of scrapping the WCA be? How will people in Scotland be able to access the health element of universal credit? We have no idea what the answer will be to that question, which is of deep concern to organisations, disabled people, the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government.

I could talk about that issue for a long time, but I know that we do not have a long time. The Timms review really needs to catch the intertwined nature of PIP and ADP. When changes are made at a UK Government level, they absolutely have an impact here, despite our best aspirations for what we might want payments to look like.

Elena Whitham: Look at the big issue of winter heating allowance changes and the guddle that was the fallout; this issue is even more complicated given the passporting and the intertwined nature of that. From this committee's perspective, how we help scrutinise the Scottish Government's response to such changes, should they come down the line, is a huge issue.

11:00

Chris Birt: That comes to a broader point. Now that the UK Government has been a bit rumbled on its reforms, it is vital that it sits down with the Scottish Government to work out some of the practicalities. We cannot pull these horrible rabbits out of the hat at the last minute, and the Governments need to work together.

Why do the two Governments not share information with each other? It comes down to politics: they want to make announcements and such things. However, that is not the most important thing, which is the people who are in receipt of the payments, who, for the past year, have experienced fear and faced stigma in the media. It is therefore incumbent on the UK Government and the new secretary of state in charge, as part of the Timms review, to take a sober approach with the Scottish Government to discuss how this will impact on people in Scotland—because it will.

Edel Harris: I want to take the opportunity to say that, during the course of the review, I have engaged with the UK Government, as you would probably expect me to. I met Sir Stephen Timms on two or three occasions, as well as senior civil servants or senior people from the DWP who were involved in the review. Sir Stephen Timms has copies of the interim and final reports, and we are setting up a time to have a conversation in the next few weeks.

Obviously, whether my report will have any bearing on the review is up to them, but I just wanted to let you know that they have a copy of the final report. To be fair, they seem to have been very interested in the review as it was being conducted.

Jeremy Balfour: I have a question for Stephen, Chris or Emma. Clearly, both Governments have to make their own choices, and it is not necessarily for us to comment on that, positively or negatively. The big issue is passporting. If you get ADP, you passport into other benefits. Is there any way of decoupling passporting so that, if a decision is made at Westminster or here in Holyrood that the other Government does not like, it does not affect people's benefits? Can we decouple, or is that too complicated to look at?

The Deputy Convener: That is a very significant question to try to answer briefly. Perhaps Chris is going for it.

Chris Birt: Okay, I will go for it.

In theory, of course, that could be done, but it needs to be done in partnership with the people who will be claiming. That is why the Social Security Scotland process took so long, because it was really careful to ensure that people transitioned from one end to another. That is what should happen with this, too. Sorry—that does not really answer your question, but it is a tricky one. The UK Government has to, as I have said, sit down with the Scottish Government and soberly work this out for the benefit of the people who are eligible for the payments.

The Deputy Convener: I want to squeeze in a couple of very brief questions. I know that Marie McNair wants to come back in.

Marie McNair: In its written submission, Parkinson's UK said that it is concerned about the pressure that will come in Scotland to cut social security because of the UK agenda. Do you share that concern?

Professor Sinclair: I hope that that will not happen. There are implications, but this is a gap that the Scottish Government and Parliament have stepped into quite a number of times. The two-child cap mitigation should not be necessary in Scotland; we should not have to mitigate the benefit cap or the underoccupation penalty, and we should have a serious discussion about the serious deficiencies and design flaws of universal credit, which impoverish people.

The Scottish Government and Parliament have done the right thing by stepping into this gap. I do not want to exonerate the Scottish Government, given the steps that it could still take, but life would be made much easier if the UK Government addressed the issues that the current Government has inherited but not yet addressed. I hope that the forthcoming child poverty strategy will recognise some of those issues and that, through it, the Government will do the right thing.

The Deputy Convener: Are there any other comments on that?

Emma Jackson: In this morning's conversation, we have not at all touched on universal credit or the fact that it is completely intertwined for those who receive Social Security Scotland payments. Predominantly, those who get advice on Social Security Scotland payments from a CAB get UC advice as well. A review of universal credit is currently taking place, but it does not have terms of reference, a scope or a final report, so it is really hard to understand its direction of travel or what outcomes it will deliver.

We always need to be cognisant of what Stephen Sinclair has described, which is that we need to stop only mitigating and instead use as much of our efforts as possible in our sectors to address problems at source, so that the Parliament and Government can fulfil their ambitions to do the things that they absolutely want to do. That way, we can tackle child poverty, eradicate poverty and make the lives of disabled people as full as we possibly can.

The Deputy Convener: I apologise for waiting until the very end to ask this question, which is about what you would ask for if more money became available. Chris Birt might remember that I asked a similar question last year.

The Scottish Government has invested £1.3 billion in positive policy initiatives, such as the Scottish child payment and adult disability payments, for the purpose of mitigation. That additional investment is now locked into the system. If I said, "I have just found £100 million! Where did that come from?", would you use it to take a cash-first approach? Would you provide other services? Childcare was mentioned, for example. How would you direct the money? What would your priorities be?

I know that you want to say all of the above, but that is not how it works. I know that such questions are for politicians, but you are here today, so what would your main ask be? Ask one thing, if possible.

Professor Sinclair: In terms of reaching the 2030 child poverty targets, the most urgent and immediate impact would come from increasing the Scottish child payment. We also urge the Scottish Parliament and Government to give very serious consideration to the minimum income guarantee.

Emma Jackson: I will take both of Stephen Sinclair's asks and give you a third: the adequacy of ADP. Disabled people continue to experience some of the worst levels of poverty, so we need to look at that payment's adequacy.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you for the sneakiness. I asked for one thing, Stephen Sinclair gave two answers and you took those and added a third one. *[Laughter.]*

Chris Birt: I will perhaps just take their asks, but the stuff around supporting people into work is important. Social security is some families' route out of poverty, so we need to focus on supporting them through social security. However, we are currently piecemeal in our response when it comes to employability, which is messy and not well aligned with the DWP. Local government is not around the table in such discussions as often as it should be, yet so much of everything that impacts on people's day-to-day lives and whether or not they are in poverty runs through councils.

Edel Harris: I will not wear my chair of the independent review hat but answer from my many years' experience of working in charities concerned with disabled people. I echo the employment point. ADP is not means tested, so my point is not directly related to the payment, but my experience is that many disabled people and people with a learning disability have something to offer and could work, but the systems and the right level of support are just not in place to help them do that.

The Deputy Convener: I thank all four witnesses for their time this morning. It has been a long but really worthwhile session.

I move the meeting into private session for
agenda item 4.

11:08

Meeting continued in private until 11:20.

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

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