



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

Tuesday 27 October 2015

Session 4

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WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

18th Meeting 2015, Session 4

CONVENER

*Hugh Henry (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab)

*John Lamont (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)

*Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP)

*Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)

*Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Donna

Jake

Phyl Meyer (Inclusion Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Simon Watkins

LOCATION

The Sir Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)

Scottish Parliament

Welfare Reform Committee

Tuesday 27 October 2015

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Hugh Henry): Good morning everyone, and welcome to the 18th meeting in 2015 of the Welfare Reform Committee. I ask all those present to make sure that mobile phones and other electronic devices are switched to airplane mode.

Item 1 is a decision on taking business in private. Do members agree to take item 3 in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Your Say—Work Programme

10:01

The Convener: For item 2 we have a slight change to the original plan. I welcome to the meeting Phyl, who is an Inclusion Scotland support worker for Diane. Diane is unfortunately unable to attend, I think for family reasons, but Phyl has agreed to read out her statement. I also welcome Jake and Donna. We appreciate you taking the time to come to the meeting today.

We realise that giving evidence can be quite a stressful experience for people who are not familiar with parliamentary proceedings. I assure you that we will do everything that we can to make you feel comfortable today. If at any time you are not sure of anything or if something that is said is not clear, just stop me or any other committee member, so that you are able to play as full a part in the proceedings as you can; we appreciate you coming along.

I start by asking Phyl to read out the statement from Diane. It is my understanding that you will just read the statement and that there should be no questions or comments. Is that correct?

Phyl Meyer (Inclusion Scotland): I am happy to take questions and to answer them as best I can. I have been working with Diane quite closely so there may be questions that I can answer.

The Convener: Okay.

Phyl Meyer: I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to make sure that Diane's statement is heard. I have an email from her that I will read first and then I will go on to the statement. She says:

"I am really sorry, but having discussed things with my GP this morning, I have to take medical advice and say that the"

committee

"will be just too much for me tomorrow so I won't be attending.

The problem with my statement is that it doesn't say that I claim"

employment and support allowance

"and am in the"

work-related activity group,

"though at the time of the"

work capability assessment

"a Job Centre Plus advisor"

suggested

"I ought to appeal that as I was so ill. Unfortunately I didn't feel able to do that as although I had been referred to the Community Mental Health Team by my GP I had not at that

time seen a psychiatrist and so did not feel able to appeal the outcome ...

I would of course be"

happy

"to answer any questions ... on any point in my statement by ... email or meeting ... in private when I am a little less agitated and upset."

I will move on to Diane's statement.

"I've been on the Work Programme for"

some time.

"I applied for a paid internship opportunity because I was hopeful it would be the next step in my journey towards recovering enough to go into more substantial long-term employment. I was giving up a volunteering placement which had been running"

quite

"successfully to do this.

I have a generalised anxiety disorder, and once I get anxious about things (whatever the trigger, and no matter how minor they seem to other folks) this becomes increasingly difficult to manage and I engage in self harming behaviours and have persistent overwhelming suicidal thoughts which are very difficult to cope with. I also get very upset and very agitated very easily which is difficult for others to cope with"—

as you will have seen.

"It takes ages for me to regain some sort of equilibrium. To have made the move from doing voluntary work to sustaining this paid internship I really needed things to go smoothly. I also have a vestibular condition which means I can be badly affected by certain types of movement and activity on computer screens.

I wanted to get Access to Work help for equipment to help me with my vestibular condition, which means I really need an especially wide screen so that I have enough space to have everything on screen rather than swapping between windows all the time. Unfortunately my Work Programme advisor did not seem to really know anything about applying for Access to Work. With the support of the internship project staff—"

that would be me—

"I got an application started and was hoping for a quick assessment that would get the equipment I need. In order to make it easier for me I attempted to authorise ATW to communicate with the support staff member from Inclusion Scotland on my behalf.

However, it turned out that my claim could not be processed until DWP reset a flag on my benefit claim".

That was something to do with permitted work. Diane's work programme supervisor did not know about it and it took time for access to work to alert her to the situation.

Diane's statement continues:

"Because the application was not proceeded they didn't process the third party permission form so I had to deal with them directly. There had to be a process of the permitted work being approved by a different decision maker in the DWP, separately to both my Work Programme advisor and my Job Centre Plus advisor.

Communication between them all did not go smoothly ... and was very stressful, at one point even leading to one member of DWP staff saying that they would be submitting a complaint about another's handling of the matter ...

By the time that it was sorted out, over six weeks had passed since I began the placement. Not only did this mean a long period of me trying to manage without the right equipment and support that I needed, but it meant we missed the normal six week time-frame for applying to Access to Work. This could mean that Project Scotland ... could end up footing some of the bill for any equipment their assessors recommended, or at least there would be negotiations with Access to Work about it. I have been very anxious about causing Project Scotland additional costs in this way ...

"this issue ... has been a major barrier to me returning to work. Both the actual difficulty in getting the right equipment and the anxiety I have felt about causing such an expense/difficulty to Project Scotland. It is not at all Project Scotland's fault that this has happened.

I did also want Access to Work to fund a support person for me who is an employability specialist to help me sustain the internship. This was eventually funded from a different source via my Work Programme provider, for which I am tremendously grateful ...

"There were also two times that my housing benefit was suspended",

incorrectly,

"both related to this change in my circumstances. In both cases they were sorted out quite quickly but both caused a lot of stress and distress at the time. In neither case was there any warning that this would happen and in each case the shortfall was more than £500 which is a considerable sum when my total income a month is about £1100 (including the PS salary), and my rent is £650 ...

So you see, there have been a lot of issues which have impacted on how sustainable the internship has been for me, and I have really been very unwell as a result. It has been a complete nightmare and my GP has been very concerned about me. In fact the only positive thing to come out of all this is that I have been 'fast tracked' onto a NHS treatment program which was first recommended by my consultant in November 2013.

How is that being on the Work Programme, which is meant to help me get into work, means that when I get offered work and want to do it as 'permitted work' as part of a gradual process towards coming off benefits and gaining sustainable employment, means that I can't even apply for the very support that I needed to be put in place right away until a complicated process of getting permission takes place? How is it that nobody seemed to be able to be particularly clear with me about what was needed, promptly, and ensure that the right things were done?"

I thought that it would be useful to quickly summarise what happened to Diane, before I finish reading out her statement. Diane has a serious mental health condition as well as some physical and sensory impairment. She was told that she was fit for work and she tried to get into work. She was put on the work programme, but although the adviser was well meaning, friendly and supportive, they clearly lacked the training to support her needs. She volunteered, working hard to get ready for work, and took the internship to try

to get into paid work. Her housing benefit was stopped twice and she was denied access to work support for months—she still does not have it, and it has now been a lot longer than six weeks—due to the bureaucracy at the Department for Work and Pensions. The work programme adviser seemingly knew nothing about access to work in the first place. All of that has resulted in mental health damage that has caused her significant harm and risk of suicide.

Diane's statement concludes:

"How is it that my earnest efforts to get into work should result in my being financially punished, twice (albeit temporarily) through incorrect automatic suspension of benefits payments? The very system that is meant to be helping me into work has set me back greatly in my process of doing so. It is hard not to feel like the system is deliberately designed this way in the hopes of encouraging people like me to just go away and give up."

Thank you.

The Convener: Thanks very much, Phyl. We will leave questions or comments until we hear all the statements.

Jake and Donna are supported today by someone from the poverty truth commission. We are interested in hearing your experience of the work programme. What issues have you faced? What improvements can be made? We have already heard the quite harrowing account of Diane's experience on the work programme. What has it been like for you? Jake, would you like to go first?

Jake: Thank you for inviting me. My name is Jacqueline, but I am known as Jake. I live in Glasgow. I was on the work programme just under two years ago, with Ingeus. I am part of a self-reliance group in Glasgow, which originally set up a cafe and is now trying to run a laundry business. I do that as a voluntary thing, but it only caused problems when I was on the work programme.

I had six advisers during my time on the work programme. That is one of the problems: you keep getting moved from one adviser to another. Sometimes they make you sit on the phone from 9 to 5 each day making calls for jobs, even though you know that you are not going to get anything. It is depressing. I did not like the fact that the place is all open plan and you get no privacy.

I referred myself to the business gateway for help to start up the launderette business. The business gateway could not take me on because I was on the work programme and said that I had to wait until I was finished.

The only thing that really helped me was when I referred myself to Jobs and Business Glasgow, where I got some support through the employability fund for things that I want to do. Some of the training days have been good, too,

such as the first aid course. I also did a food hygiene course.

The main problem for me was the volunteering: I volunteered for four years, and I am still doing it. We run a wee business in a church, but I do not get any income off that just now. I can only do so much and they look on it as a problem, but for me, it might be my way out of this situation.

At that time, many of my friends had been sanctioned, but I did not get sanctioned when I was on the work programme.

In the end, I felt that I was bullied into getting a job just to get them off my back. So I work from half five in the morning to nine o'clock in the morning, then I do my voluntary work every day of the week, running the wee launderette business from the church.

That is a wee bit about my experience of the work programme.

The Convener: Thank you.

Donna: My name is Donna and I come from Glasgow. When I was first made redundant—I was off for six months—I got really sick worrying about being sanctioned and things like that. The reasons why I was made redundant also made me stressed, so I ended up very stressed. I was on the panel for being on the sick for six months and I was called into the work programme.

I got a letter from the work programme asking if I needed any help or support and it seemed really encouraging. When I turned up, the first person that I was given to help me was a guy who made me feel very bullied. Maybe he thought that he was being encouraging, but he was saying, "Look at you compared to all of them over there!" He made me feel like I was imagining my problems—as if I did not have any.

I had worked all my life and I thought that I was going to go to the work programme to get encouraged to work. I had some ideas about other areas that I could work in, because I have lots of life skills, and I was quite excited to meet the adviser, but he just said, "You could do that job the now—it's no as if you've got a leg missing." That is the kind of thing that he was saying to me. Each time he made me greet. I already had the lowest confidence because of being made redundant and he put me right down there.

Then I got a second adviser, who was great, but I had him for about two weeks before he moved on. Finally, they gave me another person. She has been brilliant and very supportive. She sat down and gave me some time. She asked me about myself and treated me like an individual.

The first adviser sent me on a confidence-building course, because I told him I had lost a lot

of my confidence. There were about 25 people in the room, aged from 18 to 64, with totally different backgrounds. There was nothing confidence building about it—it was just a tick box exercise to say that we had done it. The people on that course said that they always get more people in than they need, because a lot of people do not turn up for the courses. That was the first one that I did. I had worked for years and years, and that was supposed to be me getting confidence-building training, but I have nothing in common with an 18-year-old. I felt like it was a waste of time and energy.

10:15

Now I have a Working Links adviser who has helped me to get self-employed. She has listened to what skills I have. Like Jake, I will probably need to work just now while I try to get myself self-employed—that will be on the back burner. However, I will still have that person to advise me. They treat me like an individual, so I do not get demoralised.

When you go into these places it smells of Red Bull and there is a horrible, fearful atmosphere. A lot of the time, the staff drink Red Bull along with the people who come in. Nobody is happy. It is not a happy space.

People are told by their doctor, “You don’t need to work; we’ll put you on the panel”, but then they get a letter saying, “You need to work or else you’re going to get sanctioned.”

We need to look at people as individuals. The situation is demoralising. If you need to get your bus fares back, there is no discreet way of doing that. You can’t get it done at the desk; you have to walk up in front of everyone so they all see you getting your £2 or your £4, and then you have to sign a form, which is photocopied. I know that they need to keep track of the money, but there must be an easier way of doing that. I feel embarrassed having to do it that way.

If you get the right adviser, it is a great experience. However, if you get someone who does not have empathy and just wants to get their job done, there is no way that you are going to be helped.

The Convener: The issue of bureaucracy has come up in each of the three contributions. Jake talked about having six advisers, which is just incredible. Where is the continuity and the personal relationship in that?

Do the people who are helping you have targets, and do targets help if they are trying to develop a personal relationship?

Jake: In the work programme that I was on, some of the Ingeus advisers said that they were

working to targets and that they needed to put a certain amount of people through the process. There were incentives. If someone was taken on for six months, there was a £1,000 incentive and there was another £1,000 bonus if they were still in employment after six months. However, that money went to the work programme higher up—the big business scheme. I heard that a few times.

Not all the advisers are bad. There were good ones and bad ones. Mostly, however, you were treated like a piece of dirt. You tried to explain your situation but they did not listen. They just said, “The Government is giving you money; you just do what you’re told.” If you did not do that—if you did not fill your diary in or whatever—you were sanctioned.

The Convener: Jake and Donna, you both mentioned self-employment. That can be hugely stressful, because you are out there on your own, living day to day, week to week, in a sense, and you do not have the same employment rights and conditions to fall back on as people who work for employers have. Was self-employment something that you thought was a desirable destination or was it something that you thought that you would try because there were no jobs available? Why did self-employment come up in the discussion?

Jake: It came up because I was part of the self-reliance group that started in Glasgow. A group of eight women from the area got together and we asked ourselves what we could do for our community. We started a wee lunch club for our pensioners.

I have worked for years and years but due to personal problems that my partner and I had, I had to stop work and concentrate on bringing up my three sons. Two are 20 now and one is 18. One of them is in the armed forces, one is working and one is in college.

I worked in a laundry business in student accommodation, doing all the washing, and I had a wee idea that, now that I can find a lot more time, I would like to run my own laundry business. Being part of a group of eight girls in my area, I told them my story and we got all that together. We kept putting a pound in a pot towards it. It is a long story; it is a bit too long for you to hear, but that is how I got from the work programme and going to the job centre to our laundry business, which we have opened through our wee club. Although we have opened our wee business, I cannot take a penny out of it just now because I am earning. A business adviser is working with me, helping us to go through the process piece by piece and making it quite easy—it is not harrowing.

The Convener: Donna and Jake have talked about the big rooms that they were in when they

made the calls. Jake talked about sometimes being on the phone from 9 to 5 each day, looking for jobs.

You are both from Glasgow, and Glasgow has changed hugely over the years. My family came from the east end, where in those days there was heavy engineering, steelworks, the forge and other places where men would traditionally go to work. There were also places for women to work—my mother worked for Macfarlane Lang & Co. There is nothing now in the east end, and other parts of Glasgow are the same. When you go to these places to make phone calls, are jobs realistically available or are you being put through that just because that is what the process demands?

Donna: It is going through the motions—it is a tick-box exercise.

The Convener: What kind of jobs are you asked to phone about?

Jake: You put down your specified jobs—cleaning, catering, housekeeping and laundry are my specified areas. Your adviser checks on the computer and gives you a booklet with all these businesses in it. You then have to sit down and go through all the businesses' phone numbers. I would phone them up and say, "Hi. My name's Jacqueline. I'm looking to see if you have any vacancies at the moment." You go through the rigmarole and tick "No", "No", "No", "No".

The Convener: You do not even know whether a job is available—you are just phoning on spec in case there might be one.

Donna: My reason for going self-employed was child tax credits, which were a good initiative when they came out. They worked well for me as a single mum. Where is the security when you are employed on zero-hours contracts? If you are working for yourself, at least you know—

The Convener: Was your experience the same as Jake's? Did you have to phone without knowing whether there were any vacancies?

Donna: No. I think that Jake has been with her adviser and in the programme for longer than me. I am getting encouragement to set up my own business as well as to look for part-time work that I can do.

The Convener: What kind of business is that?

Donna: Therapies. I run a music workshop for kids on a voluntary basis, but I also do massage, reiki, acupuncture detoxification and things like that. That is missing, not just in our communities but in our societies—we need to relax a wee bit. Because of the need for therapies, that is one avenue that seems to be growing, which is why I chose that area. We are much more stressed in

our society, and I am trying to get in and get started.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): We will need to get you in here.

Donna: Yes.

Phyl Meyer: The experience that Diane had seems to have been quite different in terms of the amount of pressure that she was put under to apply for jobs. She has not talked about being made to phone a list of numbers speculatively. It seems as though she was not expected to get into work, so the adviser did not spend a lot of time on her, because they were unlikely to get their payment for her. It was not through their efforts that she found her internship programme—she went and looked for it herself. She put the effort in, applied to us and was offered the position.

I do not know, but it is possible that, even though the process has not gone very well because of the issues that I have told the committee about, the company will still get the outcome payment, despite having contributed nothing to what little success there has been. In fact, Diane's progress was held back, because someone did not know that they had to tell her that she needed to get her permitted work signed off before applying for access to work.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I am always interested to hear what folks have done previously. Jake said that she was involved in doing student laundry before bringing up her kids. What job did Donna have before?

Donna: I was a development worker for the Church of Scotland. I worked there for four years voluntarily, then for the past six years it was paid work.

Kevin Stewart: Given the work that you have done and the fact that you have brought up your kids and all the rest, nobody could say that you have skived, as the United Kingdom Government seems to think.

Donna: No. I have always worked.

Kevin Stewart: You have always worked. When you go into these places, it seems that folks are often pretty demeaning about the situation that you find yourself in. What does that do to your confidence?

Donna: You are instantly stigmatised. Because you come from the east end of Glasgow, you have built up a shield anyway, but it feels as if you are labelled. You are seen as not trying—all the negative stuff that the media tries to portray about the east end. You take that label on board. I do not think that we should take it on board; I think that we should shrug it off, because many communities

bring a lot of love, hope and togetherness. I am sorry—I am getting sidetracked.

Kevin Stewart: It is all right. I am happy to hear about love, hope and togetherness.

Donna: For an impoverished area, some great things are coming to the east end.

People should be encouraged to find a job. If I had stuck with my first adviser, who was totally negative, I would not even be trying for a job and I would still be depressed. Because I had somebody who believed in me and was kind to me, that made all the difference. She had humanity—she gave me hope.

Kevin Stewart: I come from a deprived area, too. I have lived there for a long time. Sometimes I get a similar reaction when I tell folk where I come from. Is part of the problem that some advisers look at your postcode or address and make a judgment?

Donna: Definitely, especially with the types of jobs that I am going for. I come from a poor area and the jobs that I want are usually given to the middle class. I find the barriers difficult in general. I am coming from being unemployed now, so it is hard to get back to work. A lot of the time, I find that it is jobs for the boys. I tried to set up a new business, but the charity money and things like that are all going straight to the middle class, as usual—all the big charities get all the money. It is hard to set up something new. I know that that is not quite what we are talking about, but it is the same kind of area. It is all right for them, but it is not all right for us.

Kevin Stewart: So, as well as ticking boxes to meet their targets, as you described, are they putting you in a box?

Donna: Yes—as we come through the door.

Kevin Stewart: Would that be fair to say?

Witnesses: Yes.

Kevin Stewart: I will ask Phyl Meyer about Diane's situation, which involves some complex problems. Her statement says that some staff have done their level best. It seems that, when that has not happened, some of the folks who have been involved in her case have wanted to complain about others who have been handling her case. Is that true?

Phyl Meyer: I do not know too much of the detail, but my understanding is that the person who was meant to process Diane's approval to do permitted work did not do it correctly. I am not entirely clear why, if someone is on the work programme, they need permission to do permitted work, but apparently that is the case. In dealing with that situation, that person had quite a poor attitude to Diane and her adviser. My

understanding is that the adviser was talking about going above that person's head and raising a complaint. I am afraid that that is all the detail that I have.

Kevin Stewart: Was that a dispute between the DWP and whatever organisation was dealing with the work programme?

Phyl Meyer: No. It is another department that decides whether someone can do permitted work, and I believe that the dispute was between Diane's job adviser at the DWP and someone in that other department.

10:30

Kevin Stewart: So it was a bit of a rigmarole.

We have been told that such programmes are designed to boost folks' confidence and get them back into work. Did the work programme boost your confidence or did it make you more depressed? Donna talked about Red Bull and depression in the office. Did the work programme do anything to build confidence?

Donna: Regardless of where someone is, if they are given the right adviser—someone who believes in them—they can work in any environment, but it is hard to find the right adviser.

If people who go to the buroo—I use old-fashioned language—to sign on were asked, "How are you today?", instead of being made to feel inferior, I am sure that that would enable them to believe in themselves and to go out and do a job. If people keep putting them down, they believe what they are told. It is hard to get around that.

Kevin Stewart: Does Jake feel the same way?

Jake: Yes—I did at the time. As I said, my experience was two years ago. I spent a full two years being passed from pillar to post. I would ask the job centre for advice and be told, "You need to deal with Ingeus, because you are on its paperwork now." When I spoke to Ingeus, it was a case of, "See the job centre." Every time I went in, I could have been put in a box until I came out of the box and dealt with things myself.

Kevin Stewart: Does the same go for Diane?

Phyl Meyer: Absolutely. She has been confused about whose job it is to do what. It has been unclear to her whether she is supposed to go to her work programme adviser, her job adviser or whoever the other person is who has to sign off the permitted work.

I was doing my best to support Diane as a disabled person in getting into work. That is specifically what the programme is for. Getting access to work quickly was vital, but it could not happen.

Kevin Stewart: I wish you all the best with your businesses and I hope that they are a great success.

The Convener: I want to come back to the phone calls that you have to make in looking for a job. Are you given a list of vacancies to follow up? What response do you get when you phone companies cold to ask whether they have any vacancies? Is it quite a curt response—"Nuh"—and that is it? How does it make you feel when you get that kind of brush-off?

Jake: The booklet that I got listed all the cleaning and laundry companies. We had to phone up and say that we were looking for work. Most of them said, "No—and don't phone here again." We had to mark down the names of the companies that we had phoned.

The Convener: They got annoyed, because if you were phoning them up, God knows how many other people were doing it.

Jake: Yes. I have some friends who work in one of the big council buildings. They said that a lot more mail was coming in, which they knew came from lots of different work programmes. They were told to just shred it all.

Neil Findlay: Could we get a copy of what people are given? If people are given a booklet with a list of numbers and some instructions on what to do, it would be useful if we could get our eyes on that.

The Convener: Which company were you with?

Jake: Ingeus.

The Convener: Ingeus is to appear before us next week. We will see whether we can get that document ahead of next week's meeting.

Neil Findlay: If the process is as it has been described, in effect that is state-sanctioned cold calling. I have no reason to doubt what Jake has said, but I would like to see the booklet that people are given.

Jake: You go to the computer desks, where everyone is sitting with their booklets and phoning companies. That is marked down. You go back the following week and are told to refresh the process: "Did you phone them again?" The answer is still the same.

The Convener: Dear God.

Donna: If companies see which organisation the call is being made from, they do not even entertain it. I tried to get a job while I was at the agency, but no one could get the application to move forward to the next stage—the adviser had to get involved. Six people were trying to access the application form for the job that was in the advertisement, but it was really difficult. I sent an

email to ask for an application form and I got one after about five days. I am sure that that would have been different if I had done that from my home—it was all because I did it from Working Links.

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Thank you very much for your contributions—we really appreciate your coming in. Were you at any time given an opportunity to give feedback, particularly on the confidence course? Was there an assessment sheet to fill in at the end that asked whether you found it useful? Was there quality control at any point on the work programme?

Donna: I got an apology, because too many people had turned up. Normally, the course would have happened, but so many people turned up that they did not have a chance to run it on the day.

Clare Adamson: Did you get an opportunity to do it another time?

Donna: I asked my adviser whether my complaint could be taken, and I said that I had found the experience demoralising, that I felt embarrassed and that I had less confidence afterwards. That was not written down, but it is what I told my adviser.

Clare Adamson: So you got an apology, but not an opportunity to do the training that you said you needed.

Donna: Or a second confidence-building class.

Clare Adamson: Phyl Meyer said that the most difficult people to reach—if you like, they are the people who need the most support—are those who are getting the least help. I know that you are here to represent Diane, but can you tell us whether it is common for there to be delays in putting in place the equipment that is needed to help disabled people?

Phyl Meyer: Unfortunately, delays are extremely common. As a general rule, access to work is hugely underpromoted; vast numbers of employers have never heard of it in their lives. Frequently, when I go in to support paid internships, I ask employers whether they have ever heard of access to work and they say no. The same is true for the interns.

Once someone is further along in the process, it can, if the requirements are fairly simple, be reasonably quick, but reasonably quick still means two or three weeks. A person could be in a job for a couple of weeks without the equipment that they need. We can imagine that for someone who is deaf, say, not having sign language interpreters will be a barrier, but that kind of delay can have a catastrophic effect on people such as Diane who have severe mental health and anxiety-related issues. Diane is much worse off than she was

when she started the process. She was in a much better place and had much better mental health than she has now, and that is not what is supposed to happen.

Clare Adamson: With regard to access to work, does the DWP understand its responsibilities and do those who are involved in the work programme know what is available and deal with such matters properly?

Phyl Meyer: From my experience, a lot of people who are providing the work programme do not have nearly enough knowledge of access to work, what is needed to support a disabled person or the concept of the reasonable adjustments and alterations that can make a huge difference to a work environment. That is not necessarily what they have been trained to address. Access to work is part of that, but it is not just about access to work; it is about understanding where people are coming from. Donna talked about the individual approach, which is key to disabled people, because no two people's requirements are the same.

More definitely needs to be done to make people aware of access to work, and the people who are supporting disabled people into work need to know what they are talking about. Diane is complimentary about her work programme adviser, who is a lovely and friendly person. He tried his best, but he did not have the training that he needed, and that is not his but the system's fault.

The Convener: Just before I bring in Joan McAlpine—I see that Christina McKelvie also wants to come in—I want to stick with the issue of people with disabilities, whether they involve mental health or other issues, trying to get into work. The market in places such as Glasgow is pretty competitive, with a lot of people looking for jobs and not a lot of jobs out there. How successful are the programmes in getting disabled people into work?

For many employers, if they are looking to hire somebody and they have a choice between someone who has a disability or has come through a significant period of mental health problems and somebody who has no issues, they will probably take the easy way out, which is to take the person with whom they do not have to make any effort. How successful are the programmes in helping people with disabilities to get into work? Is it just tokenism?

Phyl Meyer: I am afraid that I do not have the statistics to hand, but my understanding is that the initiatives are woefully unsuccessful. The success rates in getting disabled people into work through the work programme are very low. The work choices programme tends to have better results

because it is a bit more voluntary and is specifically aimed at people with additional support needs.

To give an example, the internship programme that Diane is taking part in is in its second year. That is because, in the first year, we had a great deal of trouble getting disabled people to apply for the opportunities. The primary reason for that was that they had to apply through the DWP—through their job adviser. People who were terrified of being sanctioned were told that, if they wanted to apply for an opportunity that was specifically aimed at them, they had to tell their job adviser that they felt ready for work. That was a huge disincentive. It is a cultural thing. People do not feel that the system is designed to help them; they feel that it is designed to punish them.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I want to go back to the access to work fund. I recently had a meeting with a representative of Leonard Cheshire Disability, who specifically wanted to raise the issue of that fund with me. Basically, she reflected Phyl Meyer's point that, if the fund is used properly and people know about it, it can be very supportive. However, she said that Leonard Cheshire is disappointed that the scheme is not to be devolved. We are devolving disability benefits and programmes and, hopefully, we can design something better. However, the access to work fund will not be devolved, so we cannot bring it into the new design. Would you say that that is a problem?

Phyl Meyer: Diane's story shows that there is definitely a problem with how linked up things are. The access to work scheme is run by the DWP, yet it does not seem to have been designed to function smoothly with the process that people are being put through in the work programme. I have yet to understand why Diane's application for access to work was cancelled because she did not have a piece of paper that said that it was okay for her to do permitted work. Why would she be on the work programme if she was not expected to get permitted work at some point?

The process should have been smooth and seamless and that is what Diane needed it to be. I agree with Leonard Cheshire that the scheme can be a huge source of benefits. It is a wonderful thing—like the NHS, when it works, it is amazing but, if someone is prevented from accessing it properly or barriers are put in the way and it does not operate smoothly, it can be very frustrating.

Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): I thank our witnesses for their testimony. I grew up in Easterhouse, so we have a full set of east end folk here today.

I know about the course on confidence building, but I want to ask about whether the opportunities

that were offered to you were tailored to your skills. Was any analysis done of what you can do, what experience you have and what your aspirations are? Was any of that taken into account and were you offered any tailored courses that would allow you to realise some of your aspirations?

Jake: I explained my situation to them about the voluntary work that I was doing. As I said, they just concentrated on telling me that I had to get a job as soon as possible.

Christina McKelvie: Any job?

Jake: Yes—any job. That is the way that I felt.

Christina McKelvie: Employment, as well as giving you a bit of money to live your life, is supposed to be fulfilling, but there was no interest in that. You were just told to get any job.

Jake: I was just told to get any job on my list or any job that they thought that I was capable of doing and to put my name forward and do the application for those jobs. That was my personal situation.

10:45

Christina McKelvie: Donna, you said that you have specific therapy skills. Have you been offered anything in that regard?

Donna: Yes. The adviser I have now is brilliant. I need to get reiki level 3 to be a reiki master, and she is going to contact people about that for me. She feels that she would like to be more empowered and, if she could give me more help—by paying for more courses, for example—she would. Before, I was under the banner of a big organisation, but trying to get out on my own is not so easy. My adviser has offered to help me get my business online. She is definitely trying to help me as an individual.

The person who demoralised me at the start and the woman who I have now both have the same job title, but the woman is empowering me.

Christina McKelvie: Your experience is of a complete inconsistency among the advisers.

Donna: Yes, there is an inconsistency.

Christina McKelvie: Maybe that is something that everybody has experienced.

Donna: I am also dyslexic. That can be a barrier in finding jobs. When I was made redundant, I was frightened that I was going to get sanctioned—because of my dyslexia and having to fill in all the forms and so on, I thought that I could get that wrong and miss out dates and, consequently, my children would not get fed that week. It was a terrifying experience. I am sure that if that system

was not in place, I would not have got so stressed. Do you understand what I am saying?

Christina McKelvie: Yes. Donna and Jake—you have talked about your advisers. What about the work programme? Has that made any difference to the advances that you have both made in your lives? Would you have made those advances anyway? Would you have pursued some of the ideas that you have done with your activity group in Glasgow? Would you have pursued the training and all the opportunities there anyway?

Donna: My current adviser has definitely helped me. I would be in a mental hospital if I had stayed with that other adviser—or I would have shot him. That is the situation in a nutshell. The other one has definitely encouraged me and helped me to grow as a person, because I was down and she helped me to believe in myself again. I am grateful for the help that that lady has given me.

Christina McKelvie: Third Force News had an article on a DWP report that suggested that, as at June, only 24 per cent of people going through the work programme were successful and only 9 per cent were in a job after a year. The article says:

“the DWP had paid providers a total of £1.89 billion since the scheme started”

for that outcome. That is the point that I am trying to get to. Is all that money worth the service that any of you have been given? I see the witnesses shaking their heads. That is a bit scary.

My background is in social work, and I used access to work for a number of people. In fact, as a Unison steward I used access to work for a number of people to get the right adjustments that they needed in the workplace. You are absolutely right that people do not know about access to work. If it is completely failing in that regard, how can we make people more aware of the availability of such services?

Phyl Meyer: A great deal of education with employers could be done. Employers should ask every employee about access to work as soon as they are appointed. The issue should be explored, because a lot of people who could benefit from it may not know how they can benefit. A lot of my experience in working with interns has been to tell them what access to work can do. Nine times out of 10 I would get a very surprised, “Oh, I didn’t know I could get that. That might actually be quite helpful.”

I have used access to work. It was in a fairly minor way but it certainly made a huge difference in allowing me to keep doing my job at the level that I was capable of. The programme is often referred to in my work field as the DWP’s best kept secret, because it seems as though no one is

trying to make it known to people. The programme is being cut, because it is being underused. The problem will be cyclical: if people are not encouraged to use access to work, they will not use it, so the funding will be cut and even less money will be spent on telling people about it and so on.

Access to work is a vital lifeline for many people. Relatively small amounts of money can make a huge difference. If we spend a couple of hundred quid or maybe £1,000 at the beginning of someone's employment, that person could be a productive worker for decades to come but, if we do not spend that money, it will not happen.

Christina McKelvie: The disability benefits consortium has produced a report. I got sight of some of its findings this morning. Donna mentioned her absolute fear that perhaps exacerbated her condition and the fear about whether, if she was sanctioned, her kids would be fed. One of the key elements of the DBC report was to talk to people about the impact that the proposed reduction in employment support allowance would have on them. Of the people surveyed, 69 per cent said that their health would get worse, 69 per cent said that they would struggle to pay their bills, 70 per cent said that they would struggle to maintain their independence—that is vital to somebody's mental health and wellbeing—and 28 per cent said that they could not afford to eat. People are having that experience now, but if a further cut to their benefit puts more pressure on them to do some of the things that Donna said she was made to do, what impact would that have on her and people she knows who are stuck in the system?

Donna: It is squashing folk into their box whether they want it or not. I have been to other countries in the world, and Scotland is a great place—we have lots of great stuff going on—but I feel like we are getting this bit wrong now, which is a shame. I have always valued who I am, where we come from and the way that the Scots think. It is like the rich are dictating to the poor and squashing them into boxes so that nobody watches what the rich do. It is an awful shame that the media is covering only us and not what is happening with the banks, for example.

Christina McKelvie: Do you think that there is a bit of class warfare in it?

Donna: Definitely. It is big propaganda.

John Lamont (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): How easy was it for the witnesses to access their provider and speak to their advisers? Was the provider based locally to where the witnesses live and how far did they have to travel to see their advisers?

Jake: I stay in the east end of Glasgow, up by Riddrie, so I was going into the city centre. It was just 20 minutes down and 20 minutes back home on the bus.

Donna: I am the same. I just stay five minutes from Jake, so that was not a problem. The problem was where I was in my head when I was first asked to go, because I had only just been made redundant and was just on the sick. The next minute I had to go there and I thought, "I'm supposed to be no well." Because of everybody else that I had seen being on the sick for years, I thought that, when you were sick, you were sick. I found it quite frightening when I was asked to go straight away. I was worried about what would happen if I did not go.

John Lamont: How often did you have to go and how long did each appointment last?

Donna: Once a week for anything from an hour to three or four hours, or whenever the adviser advised me to come in. He would say to me, "You could come in here every day and look for a job. I don't see what's stopping you," but looking for a job would be, as Jake explained, sitting with a book and just going through it. Being ignored on the phone all day long does not build your confidence, in my opinion.

The Convener: Politicians go canvassing and phone people. When things go well, it feels great but, when they go badly, it can be demoralising. If we go into an area that is unfamiliar or not natural territory, it is just dispiriting. What is it like to spend three or four hours—or the whole day—on the phone getting the knock-back? What do you feel at the end of it?

Jake: Sometimes, you feel like screaming because you are constantly told no for those three or four hours. You are doing your best to get in contact with somebody who might offer you a job, so you go in a wee bit built up but, when you come out, you just hit the ground. Some people say to you on the phone, "Are you in that office again? Please don't phone here again."

Donna: You are damned if you do and damned if you don't.

John Lamont: We have spoken at length about the difficulties that you have faced. Did you get any help that was particularly helpful or unexpected? Did you take anything positive from your meetings with the advisers and the provider?

Jake: If you are going for an interview, they give you a wee list of what you need, such as black trousers and a blouse. You get some clothes and shoes to go for interviews. You also learn interview techniques—they give you wee tips and things like that, which were helpful. Some people go to interviews with tracksuit bottoms on and that

is not suitable for an interview. It was good that you got that help and you got your bus fares.

John Lamont: Jacqueline, you say at the end of your statement that you have now got a job. Can you tell us about your job and how you got it?

Jake: I got it myself. My friends all work for different cleaning companies, so I phoned up one of my friends to ask if there were any jobs going, and there were. I work from half past 5 until 9 o'clock in the morning from Monday to Friday.

John Lamont: Are you enjoying that?

Jake: Yes, I enjoy it. I have an income coming into the house and I do not have the hassle of going to job centres and that. I can breathe a wee bit more easy. I work in the morning and do voluntary work for the rest of the day. I am busy on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday running our wee laundry, which is based in our church.

John Lamont: Does that mean that you do not have to go to see your adviser as often? Do you still have to go to those appointments?

Jake: My experience on the work programme is from two years ago. I have been working and doing voluntary work. I do not know how the programme has changed since I was on it. That is just my wee story.

The Convener: People who are involved in voluntary activity can sometimes be the backbone of the community. Do you find that your voluntary activity is affected because you are being forced to go through the charade of going into offices to make phone calls and look for non-existent jobs? Does that pull you away from helping vulnerable people?

Jake: As I said, we run a wee pensioners club each week. We give them lunch every Wednesday. All the old houses in our community were pulled down and new houses were built, so that took the community away for a good few years. We have brought the community back together and have brought out of their houses people who would not otherwise get out from one week to another. They are making new friends and we do different things. We run wee dances, do bag packing and take them away for the day. We give ourselves a wee treat.

Those are the kind of things that we look forward to doing. We are happy when somebody says, "That was great. I enjoyed my soup and my sandwiches today. Thanks very much and I'll see you again next week." That gives you a wee boost, which is all that you are looking for, because you do not get any money for it. The way that I see it is that you get that wee bit of self-respect because you have helped somebody and you have helped yourself.

Phyl Meyer: A lot of disabled people are in the group—I forget its name—whereby they are not expected to work; they get ESA, which used to be incapacity benefit, and would perhaps like to change that situation and get into work. They might pursue that objective through volunteering, but they are often put off volunteering through fear that, if they do so, the DWP might decide that they are fit for work and take benefits away. It is a catch-22 situation. They want to get into a better situation but they are so terrified of sanctions that they hold off from volunteering. That is not helpful.

Joan McAlpine: I am not sure whether you are aware of this, but the committee commissioned some research into the work programme from the University of Edinburgh. It is significant that the conclusions of the research reflect your individual stories. For example, the research points out that providers may not sufficiently match suitable claimants to specific vacancies. The research says a lot about people's anxiety at the thought of sanctions and points out that the payment-by-results financial model does not reward progress that has been made in bringing claimants closer to work. Another thing that the researcher says—I wonder whether you have come across this—is that they thought that personal advisers were under pressure to meet performance targets. Is that your experience?

Jake: I think that the advisers are set targets to get a certain amount of people into jobs. Some people like their work, but a lot of the advisers say, "I hate doing this."

11:00

Joan McAlpine: Do you think that, because they have performance targets, advisers give advice that is unhelpful or treat you in a way that is inappropriate because it is all about meeting those targets?

Donna: Definitely. If they do not have a target hanging over them, they can treat people as individuals and get to know them. I believe that the first person I spoke to was working under a target system when he started working for his company, even though the company had stopped using a target system. He was still in the habit of getting people out the door and into a job. I asked whether he was getting target money for me and he said that they had done away with that, but that I was able to work anyway. I do not know what is happening in that company now, but I know that the next adviser I spoke to had a totally different attitude. I am sure that that is because she works under a less target-driven regime.

Joan McAlpine: I want to return to volunteering and the flexibility of the programme. Our research has shown that the programme was not flexible—

indeed, it was so inflexible that it stopped people advancing. I was struck by Jake saying that she went to business gateway to get help with her launderette business, which was probably—from what she said about her skills—the best chance of finding work. You found, Jake, that business gateway could not help you until you came off the work programme, which means that the work programme was stopping you advancing.

Jake: Yes. However, when I went to Jobs and Business Glasgow in Easterhouse, an adviser did the business plan with us. He helped me the most.

Joan McAlpine: Was that after you finished the work programme?

Jake: Yes.

Joan McAlpine: So it was only after you finished the work programme that you were able to make progress.

Neil Findlay: This meeting has upset and disturbed me. In fact, what has happened to the witnesses has disgusted me. The atmosphere in the system that we have created is so wrong. The more evidence that is presented to us, the more incredible I find it.

I am also disgusted by what has been done to public servants who are in the front line and have to deal with people who are going through this bloody system. I do not think for one second that the vast majority—99.9 per cent—of them want to treat people in such a way. However, they are in the front line and have to deal with Government policy. What is happening is outrageous.

We have to get away from the view that simply devolving something makes it better. That is not the case—we could devolve some stuff and make it worse. We have to park that to one side and say that the system that we have is clearly not working: there are so many different elements that are not working that I really do not know where we are going to go with this.

Jake—you are clearly doing good work in your community. I see you and many of my pals and others in my community who are doing that kind of work. Where is the sanity of taking you out of a position in which you are able to do good voluntary work to build your community and instead to make you thumb through a phone book and cold call people? That is absolute madness.

What kind of system should we create? I have signed on in the past: going into the job centre was probably one of the most depressing experiences of my life. How do we create a system in which you walk through that door with a bit of hope and ambition and the belief that people are there to help you—and me, when I was in that position—to move on in your life? What kind of system would you like to see being created?

Donna: They could say, “Engineers? Come over here—we’re engineer-friendly over here.” We could be broken up into groups of skilled workers and other types of workers so that we can be treated as individuals. I have nothing in common with an 18-year-old boy.

The Convener: Would it help if, instead of having to cold-call companies, you had a list of the available vacancies either in the east end or the city centre that would allow you to go straight to those companies and ask whether they could give you an interview? Would it help if the work programme had those vacancies there for you?

Donna: Job centres used to work like that: the jobs would be up on a board, you would take one down and then go and sit down with an adviser.

Neil Findlay: Surely that still exists. Is the information not on a computer on which you look up the vacancies. Does that still happen?

Donna: You look for vacancies, but they can be in England, so you try to get something more local. I am in Glasgow, but I am still being directed to Innerleithen or wherever. That is not local to me, but those are the jobs that come up on the screen.

Neil Findlay: The bottom line is that we should not be putting people through endless courses that it is presumed will be the magic ticket to a job. The problem is that there are just not enough jobs, so surely the bottom line is that we need to create more. The other day, someone said something to me that rang very true; they said that we probably have the most educated workforce in our history, but we also have the most unequal society that we have ever had. The solution is therefore not to shove more education down people’s throats but to create a more equal system, which means giving people employment. That is the dilemma that we are having to wrestle with.

I realise that I am not asking you many questions—I just want to express my frustration at the system that you are going through. I can hear the same in your voice and in your evidence, and I hear it from people in my constituency.

Donna: Retraining is what is needed. A lot of folk who are coming out of factories and from engineering in the shipyards have skills in areas that are not needed. We need to change that and get different skills.

Neil Findlay: Where should that training happen?

Donna: The training should happen in a workplace. If I was setting a system up, the first thing I would do is retrain people to give them information technology skills; a lot of factory workers do not have the IT skills to be able to switch on computers and so on. You need to take

away the fear factor to enable people to apply for jobs.

The Convener: What is your experience of people in your community? You stay quite near each other in the Riddrie area, which I know well. What kinds of jobs are unemployed people in the area moving into?

Jake: My area—Blackhill and Provanmill—was quite bad until a few years ago. A lot of the youths had grown up with drugs and drink, but over the past few years they have gone into apprenticeships.

The Convener: They are getting apprenticeships.

Jake: Yes—there are a lot of them in apprenticeships.

The Convener: What about people like Donna who have been made redundant? They might have worked in a factory or an office for a number of years, but what happens when that factory or office shuts down?

Donna: There is call centre work.

The Convener: Is that mostly the work that people get?

Donna: People get call centre work, and there is a lot of cleaning work. There are new houses being built in Glasgow, so a lot of folk are getting jobs through that. Again, however, kids get the apprenticeships but are getting no experience after that.

The Convener: Are you talking about what might be regarded as a proper apprenticeship or about something that has the label “apprenticeship” put on it but which is not really an apprenticeship?

Jake: Some of them last for only a year, but I know people who have started apprenticeships and then moved into other jobs and have carried on their apprenticeship two or three years down the line.

Neil Findlay: I know that the Wheatley Group, which owns the Glasgow Housing Association housing stock, has a guarantee of apprenticeships for the sons and daughters of its tenants. A number of people might be getting apprenticeships there.

Clare Adamson: Convener, we should be careful not to disrespect young people who are going through apprenticeships at the moment. They are doing accredited apprenticeships that have the support of the employers. We do them a disservice by saying that there is something wrong with the system. I do not think that that is very fair to the young people involved.

We will be getting some control over social security and we would like to have more—as Joan McAlpine said. What the witnesses have experienced is down to leadership. We have heard from the Government officials who have come to give evidence and from the UK minister, Priti Patel, complete denial about people’s experience of that leadership. The Scottish Government has said that dignity and respect will be at the heart of the social security system that we will build for Scotland. Do you feel that dignity and respect are part of the current system?

Donna: I would love to see that happen.

The Convener: What is needed in order to make it happen?

Phyl Meyer: I have yet to meet in the course of my work anyone who thinks that the job centre is there to help them to get a job. People think that it is there to take their benefits away if they do not jump through all the hoops. If we could change the system so that people who walk into a job centre feel that they are going into a place where people will listen to them, understand them and meet their needs to help them to get into a job, we will have done a great good.

Christina McKelvie: I have a quick question: Phyl Meyer might be in the best position to answer it. I have read about people with complex disabilities or challenges just being parked by some of the employment agencies, because the agency gets the money for those people anyway. When the work programme was quite new, it was thought that that was happening because staff had not yet built up the skill set to provide dedicated support for such people, and that the situation would get better with time. Do you have any experience of people who have been parked? Has the situation got better or worse?

Phyl Meyer: I cannot say that it has got better with time. I have experience of working with disabled people who have been in the system for some time and feel that it is not getting anywhere. The scheme that we have been running recently has come along and they have grabbed that opportunity with both hands, which has made a big difference. We had a group of interns in the Parliament who did very well indeed. Some of them had been through all the processes—the work programme and so on—and had basically been written off. It was clear that other people felt that they did not have enough to offer to be worth the bother, but they have proved those people wrong.

There is a lack of vision. Disabled people all have a contribution to make—in many cases they have a particular contribution that they can make in work because of their lived experience. However, many things need to be improved to

make that possible. You cannot just point to one part of the system and say that it is the problem. There needs to be more awareness of what can be done to make adjustments to make provision more inclusive.

Christina McKelvie: Does it help to hear Michael Heseltine say that this is the best time for someone to lose their job because there are loads of opportunities? Your silence is a clear answer.

The Convener: I will give Donna and Jake the last word. Clare Adamson suggested that a new system in Scotland should be based on dignity and respect. If there were a couple of simple things about the work programme that you could change, what would they be? How would you make it different?

Jake: There should be more respect in the way some advisers speak to people.

Donna: Advisers should sit down and listen to people, to find out what skills they have, what they can do and where they think they could work. The adviser should try and match the person up with work, rather than dictating all the time. They should ask what the person wants to do and how they can help. That would be great.

The Convener: I know that this cannot have been easy for you, so thank you for coming to the meeting and for helping us to understand a bit better what it is like for ordinary people to go through the process.

Phyl, please pass on our best wishes to Diane and thank her for her statement. I hope that things work out for her.

I thank you all very much indeed.

11:14

Meeting continued in private until 11:39.

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