



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Social Security Committee

Thursday 24 May 2018

Session 5



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SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE

13th Meeting 2018, Session 5

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)

*Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con)

*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green)

*Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)

*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Rosemary Agnew (Scottish Public Services Ombudsman)

Alison Jack (Office of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman)

Niki Maclean (Office of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman)

John Stevenson (Office of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Anne Peat

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Social Security Committee

Thursday 24 May 2018

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Interests

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning, and welcome to the 13th meeting in 2018 of the Social Security Committee. I remind everyone to turn their mobile phones to silent, as they might disturb the broadcasting. No apologies have been received for today's meeting.

We welcome Michelle Ballantyne to the committee for the first time. She is replacing Adam Tomkins. I invite Ms Ballantyne to declare any relevant interests.

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): The only thing that I should declare at this point is that I have just been made patron of a food bank. That will shortly appear in my entry in the register of members' interests.

Decisions on Taking Business in Private

09:30

The Convener: Under agenda item 2 we will decide whether to take in private item 5, which is consideration of today's and previous evidence on the Scottish welfare fund, and item 6, which is the work programme paper. Do members agree to take those items in private?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I also seek the committee's agreement that next week's meeting, which is a briefing from the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland on the process for appointing the chair and members of the Poverty and Inequality Commission, be held entirely in private.

Members indicated agreement.

Scottish Welfare Fund

09:31

The Convener: Our next item is the continuation of our evidence-taking sessions on the Scottish welfare fund. We welcome Rosemary Agnew, the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. From the ombudsman's office, we have Niki Maclean, director; John Stevenson, head of improvement, standards and engagement; and Alison Jack, Scottish welfare fund review team manager. I warmly welcome you to the committee and thank you for the written briefing that you sent us ahead of the meeting.

I will open with a question that I asked other organisations at last week's meeting. Has your review of casework indicated any particular pressures for the Scottish welfare fund?

Rosemary Agnew (Scottish Public Services Ombudsman): I am not sure that we see pressures, as such—it is relatively early for identifying trends. We see inconsistencies, however, and there is clearly pressure on the amount of money available. As we know from other briefing, that can influence decision making and what gets paid where. The better person to answer that in more detail is Alison Jack, because her team are the front line; they do the day-to-day work and have the contact.

Alison Jack (Office of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman): We have definitely started to see some of the impact of welfare reform. A number of councils have come on board with universal credit full service roll out, but it has been difficult to track particular patterns because there has not been a full year's results to compare with the previous year.

We get about 40 per cent of our casework from applicants in Glasgow so, when Glasgow comes on board in September this year, we anticipate that there will be a bigger impact because more people will be affected. Welfare reform is certainly a pressure that we see in our day-to-day casework for applicants.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): A number of witnesses have raised issues about the Scottish welfare fund. In your experience, have applicants been treated with dignity and respect, or have you found cases in which you felt that that was not the case?

Alison Jack: In some of our findings, we have indicated that some of the language that was used might have been judgmental. We fed that back in our criticism to the relevant council.

One of our main concerns has been about access to the scheme and the review process. We

were keen to make the independent review process as accessible as possible, so we accept requests for review by telephone. However, for the first-tier review process—the stage before us—applicants still have to apply to the council in writing. We have raised with the Scottish Government that that is a barrier for some people. Although the guidance says that, under exceptional circumstances, an exception can be made, we have recorded examples of applying in writing being a barrier because of disability and, more commonly, for financial reasons. Someone might not have data credit on their phone, or the bus fare to travel to submit their first-tier review in writing. That is a concern from the point of view of fairness and access to the scheme.

In our annual review of the guidance, we reinforced councils' duty to make reasonable adjustments, because there are a couple of examples from our casework where we have assessed that that has not necessarily been done.

Rosemary Agnew: To put that in perspective, we do not see a huge number of cases compared to the number of applications that are received. However, the message is that if we are seeing them, they must be there. We cannot quantify what the number might be in its entirety.

Just to add to what Alison Jack said, "in writing" can also mean email. There is an assumption that because the civil service can be accessed digitally, it is easy to access, which is not always the case. If we bring it down to actual, real people, if someone has nowhere to live, how are they going to get paper and a pen? If someone has nowhere to live, they may not be able to get a contract. We are bringing this down to the very basic level of vulnerable people getting access. If people cannot get access at the first tier, it does not matter how accessible the ombudsman is.

Pauline McNeill: Are improvements needed to the overall scheme to ensure that that is taken into account, given the vulnerability of those who apply for the grants in the first place?

Rosemary Agnew: It would be a combination of improvements and adjustments to the scheme to make access clearer.

There is also a big issue about communication. We are having an input on that, too, because as well as making review decisions, we comment on practice. Alison Jack's team points out issues of practice and we have held an event for practitioners and third parties. We see examples of good practice, too, and if we can continue that improvement and learning approach, over time we will be able to raise everybody to the level of the best.

Niki Maclean (Office of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman): We could ensure that

some really simple things are happening. For example, councils are meant to provide a freephone number, but if you look on their websites it is really hard to find the number. We did a quick review and there are only a couple of council websites where it is really obvious. There are some basic things that could happen very quickly to make the scheme more accessible.

Pauline McNeill: Is all that information publicly available?

Niki Maclean: The reference regarding the freephone numbers is not publicly available at the moment, but obviously information is on local authorities' websites for everyone to see.

Pauline McNeill: How would people access that from your office?

Niki Maclean: We have a freephone number and, as Alison Jack has highlighted, a high number of people who come to our service do so via a telephone system. However, that is not replicated in councils.

Pauline McNeill: Should a broader range of options for grants to vulnerable people be considered?

Rosemary Agnew: Did you have anything specific in mind?

Pauline McNeill: Only two forms of assistance are available. Given the casework that you have looked at, do you think that local authorities should look more widely than the current provisions?

Rosemary Agnew: If there are too many options, there is a risk that it will be confusing to someone who is trying to apply for assistance. However, it might be helpful if there is as broad a scope as possible within the existing options. I do not know whether Alison Jack wants to add anything from her experience of direct contact.

Alison Jack: I echo what Rosemary said and add that we have made efforts to ensure that the existing criteria are interpreted correctly. For example, there is a qualifying criterion of exceptional pressure that was being narrowly interpreted as applying only to families. That was not our interpretation of the legislation: in fact, we felt that very vulnerable single people were missing out as a result of that one criterion and we upheld a number of cases on that basis. Through discussions with the Scottish Government, it became clear that that criterion is open to individuals as well as families. The issue is more about ensuring that the existing criteria are correctly interpreted.

Pauline McNeill: That is a helpful response. I will conclude my line of questioning. Does any more work need to be done to ensure that local

authorities take that into account when they run schemes in future?

Alison Jack: Yes, and we are very much looking to be a part of all the learning and improvement work that is planned. We do a lot of work with councils. Every quarter, we hold a sounding board meeting, at which we look at case studies and have decision makers present. The Scottish Government also runs a practitioners forum, which will next meet at the end of June. We have been out to visit more than half of the councils, to meet their teams. We are doing a lot of learning improvement work on guidance and interpretation and we definitely plan to continue that.

Pauline McNeill: Are you reasonably confident that if local authorities were asked whether the support that is available would apply to individuals, they would now agree that that was the case?

Alison Jack: Yes. That message has definitely been made clear now.

John Stevenson (Office of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman): I will add to that by picking up on what we have already said about access to the system and making reasonable adjustments. In our improvement and engagement role, we develop tools and resources to help bodies to deliver complaints handling and welfare fund applications handling. In our business plan for this year, we have set out an objective to develop a quality assurance tool for welfare fund decision makers. The tool will look at the process from accessibility to receipt of applications, to proper identification, assessment of and decision making on needs, right through to good governance of the decision-making process. Our experience with complaints is that such an approach can deliver consistency across the sector. Supporting decision makers and councils is an issue that we will work on this year.

Michelle Ballantyne: One of the elements of the new Social Security (Scotland) Bill that was passed a week or two ago was about equality of access. In the evidence that we heard at last week's committee meeting, there was an implication that, once the bill becomes statute, falling foul of that requirement will put a lot of councils in difficulty, as it was suggested that many of them were not currently providing equality of access. How big is that gap? Are we a hop, a skip and a jump away from being able to deliver on that or is there a big gap?

Rosemary Agnew: I am not sure that we can add much more over and above what we have said about telephone access and people actually knowing that they are able to have that. Niki Maclean might want to add to that. Our view is pretty much that there is work to do on access,

such as making freephone numbers available. The Social Security (Scotland) Bill might be the catalyst for local authorities and other agencies to make it clear that there is a single freephone access point—for any benefit, not just for the welfare fund.

Niki Maclean: One of the differences in the way in which we operate the tier 2 review—in contrast with when local authorities undertook tier 2 reviews—is that, in every single case, we automatically phone up the applicant, talk through the evidence that they have provided, explain the process very clearly and ask them whether they have further evidence. Such telephone contact and communication are absolutely key in ensuring that we fully understand the applicant's circumstances and take all the facts and evidence into consideration. I know that we are focusing on telephone contact, but it is key that you do not rely on people to provide information in writing, because that restricts their ability to present their case, and we have found telephone contact to be effective in dealing with tier 2 applications.

09:45

Michelle Ballantyne: I accept that, but what about people who are deaf or unable to talk to you by telephone? Equality of access and wider access will mean facilitating access for everybody, regardless of circumstance.

Rosemary Agnew: My take on that is slightly different. First, it is about how people get into the process, which concerns accessibility. The freephone number works for many. We expect any public body to clearly signpost support or advocacy services. You would expect, where possible, telephones to come with loop systems; British Sign Language users can access services, too.

Although that is one aspect of accessibility, Niki Maclean is highlighting the need for accessibility throughout the process. Whether the conversation is by phone or face to face, the whole process must be accessible: it should not be accessible only at the start point; how the money is paid at the end point must also be accessible.

I cannot speak for local authorities about how prepared they are. From what we see, some will be a hop, a skip and a jump away; others will face a big challenge. One of the bigger challenges is resource. We are not overresourced in the welfare fund review team. In fact, we are right at the limit of delivering our service, but that does not stop us making the phone calls, talking to and engaging with people. That would be a very big challenge if you had not done that before; it would take more resource in those circumstances. Perhaps we should say that although it might take more

resource at the delivery point, delivering a better service is likely to take fewer resources and need fewer reviews. In addition, if you have reviews, they are easier to consider, because you have more information available.

I highlight that authorities have not said that they are a hop, a skip and a jump away, and different authorities will need different amounts of work to get there.

The Convener: I think that it is safe to say that one of the committee's concerns is the disparity of service across the 32 local authorities, which I am sure is a theme that will come through our questioning. You have given us the national figures for the decisions that have been overturned by your office. Given what you said about telephone conversations, have you seen a trend that poor decision making or a lack of information has led to the wrong decision being made for people?

Alison Jack: The most common reason for overturning decisions in this financial year and the first year in which we delivered our service was councils incorrectly interpreting the information that they had available to them. I will give you a picture of what that might look like in practice. We commonly see evidence not being weighted correctly when considering the priority of certain items. For example, a single person might not be awarded a washing machine, but the council has been advised that the person has a mental or physical health difficulty or a reason why they could not go to a launderette. That information has been available throughout the application process, but it has not been picked up.

The next most common reason is the statutory guidance not being followed. All councils should follow the statutory guidance. Rosemary Agnew's point that we see small numbers is valid and we see good examples day to day, but it is fairly common for us to assess that the guidance has not been followed in casework. Rules of thumb are commonly used. Take, for example, somebody who was awarded carpets on one occasion and has had to move for good reasons, but the council has said that it will not make a second award. The reason for us to overturn the decision making in such cases is that we assess that it has not been fair and reasonable.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I have a number of points. I will pick up first on delivery and accessibility. Have you considered, based on your analysis, whether in due course delivery through the social security agency would provide benefits of consistency, economies of scale and the accessibility that you said is not necessarily there across the board?

Rosemary Agnew: In effect, you are asking about a centralised model versus the dispersed model that there is now. We do not have a specific policy view on that. The points made about consistency are good, but our work over and above deciding reviews takes us towards consistency, and the benefit of that approach is that we are able to pick up good and poor practice. A more local service has benefits of integration, local knowledge and the fact that other benefits services can be used to maximise income, as Dundee City Council has done. Although economies of scale can be achieved for such things as administration, a local version is probably much more focused on people and what is needed on the ground in an area. Although I cannot say so for certain, there is a risk that centralisation might lose that local focus. I hope that that is helpful.

Ben Macpherson: That is very useful. We looked at that point in last week's evidence session as well.

Alison Jack said that she has noticed that issues with universal credit have increased demand. Could you expand with more detail on the issues that have emerged? Has the benefit cap had an effect on casework and demand since its introduction last year?

Alison Jack: Casework has had one or two examples of the benefit cap, but it has not been particularly common for us—those are very small numbers when compared with the whole fund.

We have seen issues to do with the wait period at the start of universal credit, although that is sometimes mitigated by benefit advances.

It is fairly common for us to see applicants who face difficulties due to the deductions that come off universal credit, which can be quite substantial and might lead to applicants facing repeat crisis situations because they are expected to pay back over a relatively short time. Some recent changes may help to mitigate that.

We have had quite a number of cases where sanctions have been an issue for applicants. Links to universal credit are quite prevalent in our casework.

Ben Macpherson: And sanctioning as well?

Alison Jack: And sanctions as well, yes.

Ben Macpherson: You said that you have had only a limited number of cases in relation to the benefits cap. Was there any connection between those and high housing demand and higher housing costs? Or is that knowledge not available?

Alison Jack: I am not sure that I can answer that.

Ben Macpherson: That is no problem.

In the paper that you helpfully provided to the committee, you say in paragraph 18.1 that your future work will help councils to

“develop quality assurance mechanisms for checking their own casework.”

Could you expand on what that means?

John Stevenson: I can answer that question; I alluded to that earlier. We are looking to replicate what we have done for complaints handlers. Rosemary Agnew mentioned the conference that was held in February, at which we discussed issues around communication, access and decision making.

The plan is to develop a quality assurance tool that looks at an applicant's journey from how they access the service through to the way in which the application is received and acknowledged. It will include things like reasonable adjustment, which Michelle Ballantyne asked about. It will then go on to properly understanding what the application is for, whether it is a community care grant or a crisis grant, and what the need is; then it is about properly assessing the application and making a decision on it.

The quality assurance tool will provide a number of criteria that a decision maker should look for in order to ensure that there is an appropriate and consistent decision. That is the work that we are planning this year to support bodies in their decision making.

Ben Macpherson: Is that in order to help get consistency in quality?

John Stevenson: Yes. It is about having consistency throughout the process. It is about making the correct decision, identifying the correct needs and giving the assurance that the full application has been considered and awarded as appropriate.

Rosemary Agnew: Quality is not just about making the right decision, but about how the individual who is making an application is treated and about the interaction with the service. We try to capture all that in our development. The other side of it is that if both we and local authorities have a limited resource, the more that we can do in developing tools that others can use, the better. If they identify something that they might need more help and support with, they might ask us to do something extra for them on that. It is about trying to provide an efficient way of improving quality and rooting the responsibility for it with local authorities, because they know their organisations better than we can ever know them. We are trying to do all that through the quality assurance toolkit approach.

John Stevenson: One final thing to mention on the quality assurance approach is that, as we have mentioned a number of times, the cases that we see are a small proportion of the total population. The learning and improvement lies within the sector, so part of the quality assurance tool will be about asking what has been learned, how services can be improved with councils and how that can be shared across the wider sector. Learning and improvement will be a big part of quality assurance.

Ben Macpherson: Thank you very much.

The Convener: I have a supplementary question based on evidence that we received last week. Some third sector organisations said that it is difficult to access or understand your decisions in order to roll out good practice and inform the local authorities. Will you comment on that?

Niki Maclean: Over the coming year, we intend to look at a way of producing a quarterly digest of case decisions and case summaries. Very early on in discussions with the Scottish Government, we said that we were conscious of the funding levels for our service. With complaints, we provide a published summary of every decision that we reach. With the welfare fund, we do not have the funding to do that, and we did not request it, but we appreciate that it is really helpful for us to provide examples of our decision making. As Alison Jack said, we do that at the moment through sounding boards with stakeholders and through the Scottish Government working group. However, the more that we can publish, the better, within the confines of the resources that we have been given to do that.

Rosemary Agnew: Between us, we are also looking at how we can leverage more from our main communications function. We want to try to use learning from other areas to do the annual report for the welfare fund in a slightly different way so that there is more focus on cases and less on our performance, which we can report in our annual report and accounts. We are part of the way through a journey, so it is helpful for us to get feedback on what people would like to hear about. That will enable us, as Niki Maclean said, to look at how we use the resources that we have to get a more meaningful set of information out there.

The Convener: Thank you.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Last week, the committee heard evidence of members of the public who would qualify for an award being discouraged from making applications to the welfare fund. I realise that it is unlikely to reach your door if people are discouraged and do not take forward an application, but do you have any evidence of that? Have you come across anyone

who has been discouraged from applying in an effort to manage budgets?

10:00

Alison Jack: I cannot comment on whether that situation is linked to budgets, but we have recorded a couple of examples of what I would call gatekeeping. Basically, an application should be taken for every applicant, even if the assessment is that it might be declined at the first stage of the process, perhaps due to an application history. Applicants have told us that they have not been allowed to make an application to the council. In those cases, we contact the council on the applicant's behalf and query what happened. To gain an accurate picture of demand, those applications should be taken. If they do not enter the process, as you have pointed out, we can never review the decisions. The number of examples is few, but it is a concern when applicants are not able to make applications—it is important that that does not happen.

Niki Maclean: That issue goes back to the previous point about the value of sharing our case summaries. It would be easy for us to clarify through published case summaries the point about the need to take every application on its merits and not on the basis of a judgment of what somebody has previously applied for. The guidance is clear on that, and it is easy to clarify.

Rosemary Agnew: A higher-level strategic point is that, if not everybody who wants to apply does apply—whether or not they are then turned down—we cannot know about unmet demand. That situation does not mean that there is a cost saving overall; it simply means that money has not been paid from the welfare fund. It is important to remember that we are talking about the most vulnerable individuals in our society so, if they do not get money from the welfare fund, it is very likely that there will be some other social cost. Although it is probably almost impossible to quantify, if somebody does not get a crisis grant or community care grant but they have to feed themselves or provide basic things, where will those come from and what is the cost to society, through things such as survival crime? I am not sure that we can ever know, but I want to make the point that the issue is not just about access for the individual; it is also about us collectively.

Mark Griffin: Thank you—that is helpful. I ask Ms Jack whether any local authorities are worst offenders in that regard.

Alison Jack: I could not single out any authority. The examples are from a mix of authorities, so I could not say that there are worst offenders or otherwise.

Mark Griffin: Do you have evidence of applications where a grant award would have been made but the budget that was set aside by the local authority had been exhausted by that point in the financial year?

Alison Jack: No, but we are aware of a few local authorities that have gone on to the “high most compelling” priority level, in which there is a higher threshold for people to be awarded a grant or certain items. The guidance states that councils can go on to that level as their budget declines throughout the year. That should not happen towards the start of the year; councils should manage the budget so that the move to that rating would be only in the latter part of the year.

Mark Griffin: I have been contacted by constituents who made applications in February or March and who were told that they would not be successful but, if they held off until April, they would likely get an award. What is your view on the fairness of that system?

Rosemary Agnew: Your question about its fairness is a good one. The system is fair in the sense that the public bodies concerned are applying the guidance and the system that is there. If they are open and transparent about the reasons, the question of fairness is really about whether it is fair that there is a discretionary level. The question is whether there should be set criteria so that anyone who applies for a grant and qualifies gets it, irrespective of their priority level. It is probably not within our remit to give any formal policy view on that. However, I understand the point because, looking at the matter objectively, the reality is that, for example, someone could get something in one council area in February that they could not get in another. That is really a question for the policy makers.

Mark Griffin: Thank you.

Michelle Ballantyne: I want to pick up on something, although I do not know whether the panel can give an answer or an opinion on this. There was a change to the way in which the budgets were delivered. Initially, there was an agreement with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, but then the approach changed to using the Scottish index of multiple deprivation but with a weighting, and now it purely uses the SIMD. Do you have a view on whether that is working? Some areas that are not high on the SIMD have deprivation, but it is scattered, which means that we do not get that same impact.

Niki Maclean: As far as I am aware, the change has not been noticeable to us in the cases that we see. The way in which the fund is distributed is a policy decision. From our perspective, as long as the system is open and transparent to everybody, that is as it should be. However, as far as I am

aware, we have not seen examples relating to changes in funding arrangements.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): You mentioned additional pressure on the welfare fund as a pot that a local authority has. I certainly know from my time as a councillor that the ratings changed. Can you identify what put the extra pressure on the welfare fund in areas where the threshold had to be raised? You mentioned universal credit and sanctions. It is useful for the committee to understand whether the issue is sometimes the roll-out of universal credit.

Alison Jack: I do not think that the council that I am thinking of is a full service area yet; at least, it was not until very recently. The issue there was linked more to high levels of deprivation and demand in the area. Who is to say, though, whether the move to full service might not have an impact in other councils? However, I have not been able to see a direct relationship between the roll-out and the move to the high most compelling priority level.

Ruth Maguire: It would be interesting to have for the record the proportion of cases that you deal with versus the proportion of our constituents who receive awards. Obviously, you review a fairly small number in relation to how much money goes out and how much local authorities are giving. What are the proportions?

Rosemary Agnew: We have the figures, but we do not have them to hand. Can I send them to you afterwards?

Ruth Maguire: Yes—that would be helpful.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): There were increases on the previous year in the number of cases that you dealt with relating to community care grants and crisis grants. It is fair to say that the panel that we heard from last week was of the view that, if grants were given when they were required, that could be a preventative measure and we might end up saving a fortune. For example, we could save several hundred pounds by not giving a grant, but a failed tenancy could cost a great deal more than that. Has enough attention been paid to that point? I know that you look at specific cases that come in, but Homeless Action Scotland and Shelter have both raised the issue of the impact of the lack of access to crisis grants or community care grants when people need them.

Rosemary Agnew: That is almost a “How long is a piece of string?” question. Considering the grants in isolation would not necessarily give the answers to questions about how much support is there and whether it is well used and is all appropriate. If, as Alison Johnstone suggests, we should consider the issue in the context of somebody’s entire situation, more research

probably needs to be done to find out what the full cost might be of an individual's life journey, as opposed to their welfare fund journey. If we look at it in that way, we see that there is a cost saving relating to tenancies, but there might be other things down the line, and I am not sure that we have the data on that. Equally, I am not convinced that the available data has been collated and looked at holistically to see where the true costs lie. The answer could be as simple as preventing somebody from going for a short-term or doorstep loan by ensuring that they have money to get the essentials, such as food. I would welcome further research, and we would gladly contribute what we know, but there is more work to be done to understand the situation.

Alison Johnstone: It certainly seems that more work needs to be done to ensure that people are aware of the links to other services, so those links must be widely advertised, and the services must be available when they are needed. It also seems that there is a need to ensure that best practice is shared across the country.

Rosemary Agnew: I agree. I return to Niki Maclean's point about the telephone calls and the conversations. It is not always enough to advertise what is available; at an individual level, you often have to help somebody to understand what is available. If a person is not easily contactable by email or they have reached crisis point and need help, they are unlikely to be able to access the channels that would give all that information. Therefore, personal contact is important. That probably goes back to the local model, which puts a different emphasis on integrating the welfare fund and delivering it in the knowledge of other things to help people holistically, rather than simply giving them a grant for just one element.

Alison Jack: The overall applications for crisis grants have gone up slightly, while those for community care grants have gone down slightly. Community care grants are the more preventative spend, so there is something to be said about the fact that applications for them are going down.

As part of our annual review of the guidance, we emphasise the importance of people accessing grants within reasonable timescales. We have highlighted that people should not have to wait until they have the keys to a new tenancy before they can apply, because there are waiting times to process those applications, too. We have recommended that change to the Scottish Government, because even a few weeks in a home with no essential items could impact on the likelihood of an individual being able to sustain that tenancy. Improvements can definitely be made to the process.

Michelle Ballantyne: Rosemary Agnew started this evidence-taking session by talking about

trends and your monitoring of them. Equally, as the session has gone on, you have identified that, in many cases, not enough time has passed to identify whether there are trends. In moving from live to full service on UC and with the budget changes from last autumn, how long do you expect to need before we can get an accurate picture of trend and impact, particularly the impact on the Scottish welfare fund?

Niki Maclean: As we have highlighted, you need to bear it in mind that we are seeing applications in the hundreds. As with complaints, we encourage local authorities to analyse their own data, so that we and this committee can get an annual picture. With the best will in the world, the number of the cases that we see will not give you a national picture, so you have to go to the local authority data to identify those trends.

10:15

Rosemary Agnew: It is also important to separate impact and trend because, for example, when universal credit rolls out to all areas there is likely to be some impact, but it might take us much longer to identify the trend. I fully endorse what Niki Maclean said. We should consider whether collectively we can improve statistical reporting—our numbers and those from the councils—because collective information will give us better value.

Niki Maclean: We can compare that to the model for complaints handling across local authorities—all local authorities have to publish their complaints statistics annually, including the learning and improvement that they have garnered from those complaints. There is scope to have something similar for the welfare fund. That is John Stevenson's area of work.

John Stevenson: It would be important to ensure that every council was reporting its performance against the same set of key performance indicators. The data must be gathered and reported consistently to allow for comparison and to enable the local authorities to benchmark performance. That is where the true value lies in identifying themes, trends and patterns.

The Convener: One of the new elements of the Scottish welfare fund is the introduction of family reunion crisis grants. As Ms Jack mentioned, you already deal with a high proportion of cases from Glasgow, and Glasgow and North Lanarkshire are areas that have refugee communities, which might lead to additional pressure. Are there any indications how that element is being embedded in the system?

Alison Jack: It is probably too early to say. We have dealt with several applications involving

refugees. We asked the Scottish Government to add being a refugee to the list of vulnerabilities—there is a list of vulnerabilities and we thought that it was important that being a refugee be included on that. It is a very recent change and it remains to be seen whether cases will come through to the SPSO. I cannot really add any more to that.

The Convener: I thank you all for your attendance this morning. Your evidence has been very helpful as we complete our work on the welfare fund.

10:17

Meeting suspended.

10:19

On resuming—

Petition

Welfare Cuts (Mitigation) (PE1677)

The Convener: Item 4 is a petition in the name of Dr Sarah Glynn on behalf of the Scottish Unemployed Workers Network calling on the Scottish Government to make more money available to mitigate welfare cuts. There is a paper by the clerk on the petition. Does the committee agree to note the petition and consider it later in light of the outcome of its current and planned inquiry work?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Alison Johnstone: At what point is it likely that we will come back to the petition in light of our on-going work? The group is obviously very concerned. I am as frustrated as anyone else that the Parliament is frequently called on to use its devolved powers to mitigate the actions of another Parliament. I fully understand that. However, I also think that we have a duty to use those powers to the maximum. I would appreciate an idea of the timescale so that we do not forget to come back to what is an important issue.

The Convener: Without making a definite commitment, I would say that part of our work today is to consider the evidence. We are going to write to the minister following consideration of the evidence that we have taken on the welfare fund and it would be prudent to wait to see what comes back from the Government on that. We could revisit the petition at that stage. I cannot put a specific date on it, but it would be fairly soon. Are you content with that?

Alison Johnstone: Okay. Thank you.

The Convener: If there are no other comments, we will now move into private for the rest of the meeting.

10:21

Meeting continued in private until 10:39.

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