



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Social Security Committee

Thursday 25 October 2018

Session 5



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SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE
20th Meeting 2018, Session 5

CONVENER

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

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

*Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)

*Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con)

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green)

*Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Evan Adamson (Instant Neighbour)

Laura Ferguson (Trussell Trust)

Mark Frankland (First Base Agency Dumfries)

Joyce Leggate (Kirkcaldy Foodbank)

Mandy Nutt (Tain Foodbank)

Steve Wright (Edinburgh City Mission)

Aziz Zeria (Crookston Community Group)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Anne Peat

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Social Security Committee

Thursday 25 October 2018

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Bob Doris): Good morning and welcome to the 20th meeting in 2018 of the Social Security Committee. I remind everyone present to turn mobile phones and other devices to silent mode so that they do not disrupt the meeting.

We have received apologies from George Adam MSP and Mark Griffin MSP.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on whether to take an item in private. Does the committee agree to take item 4, which is consideration of evidence, in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Social Security and In-work Poverty

09:01

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is the third evidence session in our inquiry into social security and in-work poverty. The focus this week is on the increased use of food banks.

We are very grateful to the witnesses who have come along this morning. Rather than reading out everyone's names, we will go around the table and everyone can introduce themselves. I am Bob Doris MSP and I am the convener of the committee.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I am the deputy convener.

Steve Wright (Edinburgh City Mission): I work for Edinburgh City Mission.

Mandy Nutt (Tain Foodbank): I work for Christian Community Action Support Team Highland. We facilitate the food bank in Tain, Ross-shire.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I am an MSP for Lothian.

Evan Adamson (Instant Neighbour): I work for Instant Neighbour and run a food bank in Aberdeen.

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): I am the MSP for Dundee City East.

Laura Ferguson (Trussell Trust): I am the Trussell Trust operations manager for Scotland.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am the MSP for Na h-Eileanan an Iar—the Western Isles.

Mark Frankland (First Base Agency Dumfries): I am from The First Base Agency food bank in Dumfries.

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): I am an MSP for South Scotland.

Joyce Leggate (Kirkcaldy Foodbank): I am chair of Kirkcaldy Foodbank.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I am an MSP for Lothian.

The Convener: We were keen that this should be a round-table event rather than a formal evidence session in which MSPs just pitch questions to witnesses. I will open up with an initial question to get the conversation started. This is not directed at anyone in particular.

There has been much discussion in the public about the changing face of food bank usage. Our

inquiry is on in-work poverty and we are keen to find out the witnesses' experience over the past few years of those who are using food banks. Has there been a change in food bank usage? Have you seen many people who are in work using food banks?

Joyce Leggate: A fairly small number of people in work come along to Kirkcaldy Foodbank—only about 5 per cent of our total admit to being in work. There is quite a lot of seasonal work in fields and car washes and so on in Fife, so the number could be underreported. Like every food bank, we have had a huge increase in the number of referrals, particularly over the past year. There has been a big increase in the number of families who are presenting to the food bank. Previously it was mostly single males. Although there are still more single males, families now make up about 46 per cent of our total.

Evan Adamson: An average of 10 per cent of our users admit to being in work. Although there has been a 10 per cent rise in new users, the number of people in work is rising consistently, too.

The Convener: Are you saying that although more people who are in work are using food banks, it is not an increasing percentage of the overall number of users?

Evan Adamson: That is right—the percentage seems to stay the same.

Steve Wright: Edinburgh City Mission has a network of nine food banks. There has been quite a dramatic increase in the number of referrals. This year we will see a 50 per cent increase on last year. The year before that, it was a 22 per cent increase, and the year before that it was a 26 per cent increase.

About 20 per cent of those referrals are connected to in-work benefit problems, perhaps because someone's in-work benefits have been frozen or they are still being paid the basic wage rather than the living wage. Prices are increasing. For people who are in work, salaries have been frozen over the past three years. People have struggled along but have got to the point where they have no resilience and no resources. The number of children included in those referrals is really quite frightening.

The increase is not just a spike this year; it is a problem that has been building and has reached crisis point.

The Convener: Some of you have described the reasons behind the increase in food bank use, which we will be exploring in a moment, so that is really helpful.

Would anyone else like to comment on whether there has been a change in the demographic? Are

more people in work going to food banks? What has the pattern been?

Laura Ferguson: The Trussell Trust has 53 food banks in Scotland. Last year we distributed more than 170,000 food parcels—a 17 per cent increase for Scotland, compared to a 13 per cent increase in the rest of the United Kingdom. Some of our food banks, in areas where there has been a full roll-out of universal credit, are seeing increases of 50 per cent and even 80 per cent. That is a massive concern to many of our food banks, two thirds of which are in areas of full roll-out. One in six households to which we have given out food parcels have been in work. They have needed food parcels primarily because of part-time or insecure work, which means that they cannot rely on their wage from week to week.

Mark Frankland: When I have a conversation with people who are in work, I tend to tell them that they should really have come to us six to eight months earlier. In that six to eight months, the credit cards have been completely maxed out and mum and dad cannot lend them any more money. I would say that that is almost entirely down to stigma. I get the impression that we might be getting to a big cliff edge, because going to a food bank is the absolute last resort for people in work. I do not know whether that is down to what was almost a concerted media campaign—the shirkers and scroungers story and the endless poverty documentaries. You get the feeling that a lot of people are coming to that cliff edge. When they come us, it could take quite a lot of dealing with.

Mandy Nutt: We have a similar story in Tain. It is a very small rural area and yet we have doubled our storage capacity. That is because we are now in a universal credit area. We have seen it again and again. Everyone who was vulnerable and on a benefit is now being moved on to universal credit.

The people who we work with are similar to the people who Joyce Leggate works with. Most of them are vulnerable, long-term unemployed. We work with people who are getting into work and receiving universal credit. I know that there has been an attempt to change the waiting time—people are now getting some advanced payments—but it seems that part and parcel of universal credit is that people get themselves into work, wait five weeks, get into debt and borrow off everyone they know. That is what people are asked when they ring up to get money: "Have you asked your friends? Have you asked your family?" These people do not have any more people to ask. The more people they borrow from, the more stress there is, and the more they have to pay back when they get their meagre £317, which is what they get for four weeks. It has become part and parcel of universal credit that people have to get into the food bank system.

We have gone beyond people being too embarrassed. When you are desperate and you have got kids waiting for breakfast, you go to the food bank. That is what we are seeing again and again. The system is very hard on people. You have to wait five weeks. You have people who were never in debt. They were on housing benefit, their rent was secure, their home was secure and suddenly they are five weeks in arrears. Not only that, but the council writes to them and says, "You're five weeks in arrears. Where is the money?" When I ring up the council and say, "This person is only in arrears because of universal credit", they say, "Yes, we know why, but it's a standard letter that we send out."

It is more stress and more worry for people when they are trying to work. I am sorry—I will stop in a moment, but I am passionate about this. We had one guy who got a job and could not wash his uniform because he could not afford to put the electric on. It was his first job in seven years but he lost it because he could not pay for the electric and could not turn up for work. That is the situation. It is dire straits. It is very difficult for people.

The Convener: Can I ask you not to say that you are going to stop talking? The whole point of your being here is to share those experiences, and we thank you very much for doing that.

Mandy Nutt: I just thought that I was taking longer than everyone else.

The Convener: I think that Alasdair Allan wants to take the discussion forward.

Dr Allan: I am interested in what Mark Frankland said about the reasons why people do not come forward and the stigma that still exists. I and, I am sure, other MSPs who have spoken to their local food banks find the same messages coming through. As you said, some people—perhaps older people in particular—feel that stigma. Do you feel that that creates an impetus and a requirement for all of us in the public domain to speak in reasonably respectful terms about people who are on benefits?

Mark Frankland: Yes. I completely agree with that. The whole "shirkers and scroungers" narrative has left a lot of damage to people. It is another form of othering, I guess.

I will give you an example. A local minister who is one of our volunteers has been trying for a year now to deliver some food parcels to a couple of families near Lockerbie who are in dire straits. Everything has gone wrong with the benefits. The various sickness benefits have not come through. Even though she said, "I will bring you this food in plain bags and no one is going to think anything whatsoever", they still would not take it. Eventually she found out that they are going down to the local

service station at 3 o'clock in the morning and pulling food out of the skips, rather than face the prospect of the neighbours getting to hear.

In meetings that I have had with local food banks, there is always a debate about what the criteria are and what means testing food banks should adopt. We set a really low bar. We have food available through 25 collection points across the region, most of which are in local libraries, and we just say to the librarian, "If someone needs food and they come in and ask for food, give them one of our food parcels." We reckon that, for every person who might technically get some food that they are not entitled to, there must be at least eight or nine people who are not coming in because of that sense of stigma.

In our view, all food banks should be setting as low a bar as possible. For an awful lot of people, it is really hard to walk through the door, and if the first thing that they see is a clipboard and there are a load of really intrusive questions, they are not going to come.

The Convener: Shona Robison has a question, but I said that I would give preference to the witnesses, so I will bring her in in a moment. Steve, do you want to add to that?

Steve Wright: Yes—I just want to pick up on what Mark Frankland said. When we started the project in 2006, it was a referral-only service. The thinking was that, if somebody had recognised that they had a problem and had sought help with it, they would be open to other kinds of help. Four years ago, we reviewed that, because we were having people coming in who had no connection with support workers or social workers and had never been in the system. We therefore started taking what we call self-evidence referrals, and the number of those has grown substantially. There is a raft of folk who already find it difficult to ask for help because it is their first time, and we do not want to put barriers in their way. Now, we have people walk in and we will give them one bag of food—a blessings bag—and it gives us an opportunity to find out what their real problems are.

On the flipside of that, we have seen a massive increase in Scottish welfare fund referrals from the local council. My concern about that is that there is no bar. People can just ring up and press the button for option 5 and they will get a food bank referral. We at the front end are having to do more and more of the filtering and the investigation, which is putting massive pressure on our resources—both manpower and food. Last year, we gave away 100 tonnes of food, and this year the amount is going to be substantially more than that. We are totally reliant on donations. There is that side to consider as well. I do not want to say that we make it too easy, but we might create a

problem in our ability to provide our service and we may have to close one or two food banks just due to lack of resources.

09:15

Joyce Leggate: Kirkcaldy Foodbank has always allowed self-referrals. Over 81 per cent of our referrals are self-referrals, and we do not restrict the number of parcels. It is a very free, open-access food bank. That said, we know that 89 per cent of our clients do not abuse the food bank. They will come a maximum of five to 10 times. The very small percentage who come more than that frequently have complex mental health issues and complex benefit issues. The amount of debt that people are accruing on universal credit is crippling them.

From a personal point of view, I see people's mental health deteriorate when they have to come in week after week and they get ground down by the system. They think that their benefits are being sorted, and then they get a massive clawback of debt that they have accrued, usually to the council—either to the welfare team and advance loans or for rent and council tax arrears.

The Convener: Thank you. A couple of committee members want to come in, but I will bring in Evan Adamson first.

Evan Adamson: I want to address the point about self-referral. We are an independent food bank and it is totally self-referral that we deal with. Interestingly, in the past 12 months, I have been on universal credit and used food banks. I have literally just started with Instant Neighbour as the community connector. I was fortunate enough that, even though I was made homeless and I was jobless, I had things that I could sell. I had belongings, and that is how I managed. Initially I did not see the problem with universal credit. Once I had sold everything that I had, that is when I started noticing issues.

I had no idea how to be referred to a food bank. When you Google it in Aberdeen, the Trussell Trust comes up, but I could not get a referral to it. I did not know how to use food banks. An issue that I have seen with universal credit and the benefits system is that they do not want to tell you anything. When I was offered an interview for my job, I did not have suitable attire for it, but I found out that I could get a grant for a suit. I started the job at the start of the month, on about the 8th, so I knew that I had three or four weeks when I had to get to work but I did not have money for bus fares. At the jobcentre, my job coach arranged for me to get a bus pass, but I was told, "Don't tell anyone."

Mandy Nutt mentioned her client who had to give up his job. Finances are available for these things—they are in Aberdeen, anyway, through

our jobcentre—but you are told to keep it quiet. However, if you do not ask, you do not get. I am stubborn and I always ask why. If I am refused anything, I will say, "Why? What am I entitled to?" However, the despondency of many of the clients that we deal with means that, if they are told no, they think, "Oh well, stuff it. I'm not going to have anything to do with it now. I don't care." That is what we are dealing with—that despondency. They do not care about coming into the food bank. We issue parcels every 14 days and they queue up on their 14th day to come in. There is no embarrassment about using the food bank. They just do not want to deal with the benefits system.

The Convener: I am sure that most of the MSPs in the room give out referral vouchers for food banks. I cannot imagine a situation where I or my office would not give a referral. If someone is in food need, we hand out the chitty and give the referral, and off they go. I have had that discussion with the Trussell Trust as well, and it has said, "If there are repeat referrals for individuals, we would like to work with them to see whether anything else is underlying it that we can support them on, but don't not give a referral. Give the referral. We need to feed the people."

We have had an interesting conversation about what the point of a referral system is in the first place. In my experience, I have never known anyone not to give out a food bank referral. If the gate keeping involves sleight of hand because no one is going to not give out a referral, we could argue about why we need the referral process in the first place. I appreciate that there could be management issues in relation to that. Sorry—Laura Ferguson wants to come in.

Laura Ferguson: No, carry on. I can come in—

The Convener: No. I am breaking my own rule here, so I am going to stop talking.

Laura Ferguson: I was just thinking that it is a really delicate balance. Whether we have a referral system or not, we want to recognise the invaluable work that food banks do in our communities. There is no doubt that food banks save lives. They provide emotional support and wrap-around services to help people in their situations. However, we cannot forever rely on food banks to pick up the pieces of a failed welfare state. We cannot further institutionalise food banks. They do amazing work, but we cannot just be here forever.

The Convener: I note that, under the next item on our agenda, we will look at that point.

I will break my own rule twice, because the deputy convener has been incredibly patient for the last 20 minutes, trying to get in. Mark Frankland, I will take you after Pauline McNeill.

Pauline McNeill: It is timely that Laura Ferguson went before me; I think that she has hit the nail on the head. We are beginning to see the picture of what food banks are doing and the added burdens that they are taking on. I would describe what we have ended up with as almost a shadow social security system. You asked the key question for this committee and the wider work of the Parliament, which is how we are going to get out of this situation in which people are now so dependent on food banks, and not just food banks, but different types of banks, such as clothing banks for people who need a suit for a job interview or whatever. It is easy to see how things could expand.

My big question is how we will turn this around. As you answer that, could you also talk about a few other things that I am interested in? I do not know much about who donates to food banks, and I was not aware that there is so much self-referral. Obviously there are lots of people who are referred, but what do they do the rest of the time? Is there another network of people? What do people do in between referrals?

The Convener: Mr Frankland, I will take you in a second. Mr Zeria, I apologise; we had to start the meeting, although you were delayed in getting here. However, this is a good opportunity for you to come in.

Aziz Zeria (Crookston Community Group): My apologies for being late; we were held up in traffic.

I want to add two things to support what Evan Adamson said. With respect to referrals, there are people who do not wish to go down that route. I will give you a few examples. In one case, a policeman who had been recently divorced and who was having to pay for the upkeep of the child as well as having a lot of other financial commitments did not know how to go about referring himself and ended up coming to us. We helped him over a period of time to get through the situation. There was also a situation of another divorced man with two children who had not eaten for days—he survived on water for four days. He had no gas or electricity and he received three parcels from us over a period of time, plus some top-ups so that he could have utilities in his house. That allowed him to see his children for the first time in many weeks. Eventually he got through.

That takes me to the slightly different matter of the fair food transformation fund, from which we received a grant. This is to answer the question about what happens if food parcels are given. The fair food transformation fund helps people to share food, reduce wastage and provides support for people who want to get through the week but cannot, and who are not in a situation of complete destitution or lack of food.

The Convener: Thank you. Mr Frankland, do you want to come in?

Mark Frankland: Yes, I will pick up on something that gets me really frustrated. When we hear politicians on television being asked about food banks, we often hear that phrase, “The disgrace of food banks.” I know that they do not mean that we are disgraceful—rather, it is the whole concept of food banks in the 21st century that is disgraceful. I think that that is a ridiculous attitude. Take our organisation, for example. We hand out between 5,000 and 6,000 emergency food parcels a year through 25 collection points. We have a staff of two, both of whom earn £20,000 a year. We have 50 volunteers, most of whom provide their own vehicles. What would it cost if the council tried to do that?

It is often discussed that we are an ageing population. There are an awful lot of retired people with fantastic life experience and abilities. They do not want to just sit there and watch daytime TV every day. They are really keen to volunteer and do something. The food bank model has been created over the last 10 years or so, enabling huge numbers of people concerned about what they see on the TV about so many people living in poverty, to help. A food bank is a vehicle for that and yet everyone seems to want to close the food banks down, go back to the council doing everything and, if someone is hard up, means test them and hand them a tenner. I really do not understand it.

The attitude should be that this is something that is working incredibly well, is largely volunteer based, completely rooted in the community, completely local and has an incredibly low cost for what we do. Yet, at the moment, the rest of the welfare estate in Britain gets £300 billion a year, the food banks get nothing and they say, “We must in fact get rid of them altogether and somehow reabsorb them.” I do not understand the thinking, when food banks can tap into so many brilliant volunteers who have loads of talents. The average age of our volunteers is 65 and they are really pleased to do it.

The Convener: I suppose that the question might be that if the welfare state were to impose further benefit cuts, that would drive up further need, which would mean food banks would have yet again to expand to pick up that need. I think that the deputy convener was saying that there have been food banks out there for a long time, but on a much slimmer scale. The question is whether food banks should in effect become part of the welfare estate and save Governments money by meeting people’s day to day needs, or whether they should be the exception, providing for the extremity of need. There are a lot of people out there who would say that the state should step

in and should meet the most basic needs. When that fails, food banks are wonderful, amazing, volunteer-led organisations that we all really appreciate and welcome. I appreciate the point that you are making, Mr Frankland.

Steve Wright: I agree with what Mark Frankland said. When we started, we were very much about crisis intervention, but my concern is that we have got to the point at which the state is dependent on food bank provision. Looking around the room, I see that none of us working in food banks want to create a relationship of dependence between the people who use our food banks and ourselves. We want to be a stepping stone.

There has been a trend over the last few years, however, in that the third sector is now expected to pick up the slack and to fill the gap. Councils and, dare I say, the Parliament abrogate responsibility to some degree because we are all working with limited resources. I will not say we are broke as a nation, but we certainly have less money, so we have to make some difficult choices.

The third sector costs very little—I agree with Mark Frankland totally about that. Our food donations come from a variety of sources and, looking around the room, I guess that the other organisations here get food from a variety of sources. We are totally dependent on our work in schools, some supermarkets, local collections, churches and things like that. We have created a culture, or we are in danger of creating a culture, in which people think, “This is what we do now.” I certainly do not want to see food banks close where there is a need, but I am concerned that we are not doing the education and prevention. We are so busy dealing with the crisis that we cannot address prevention.

We have a fairly open-ended referral time and we provide parcels on a case by case basis, but there comes a point when we do end the referral. My concern is that folk just move to a food bank somewhere else and that that creates more dependency and a merry-go-round of clients using different food banks.

09:30

I would love to be able to put the genie back in the bottle, but for the life of me I cannot see how we would do that. I am not asking other people to fund what we do, but there needs to be recognition and some kind of provision.

Two years ago, we took a radical step. Every one of our volunteers now goes on applied suicide intervention skills training because they are dealing with folk day in, day out who show signs of perhaps harming themselves. That service should

not be run by volunteers. We have had to start debt management services. Again, the reason why we volunteer that service is that neither Citizens Advice Scotland nor the council provide the resource locally. If we as the third sector do not do it, no one will do it. If we do a root cause analysis of issues, and if we want to address the root causes, those are the things that we have to address. If we do not, food banks will continue and probably grow and expand.

Shona Robison: I want to probe a bit more into the changing nature of food bank use. We have just heard some more about the expanding roles. I think that Laura Ferguson mentioned that you are seeing more people come through the doors in the full roll-out areas, and it would be interesting to hear whether the profile of those people in the full roll-out areas is changing. I get the feeling that, initially, a lot of younger men were coming through the door, but that perhaps you are seeing more families and more women. Is that an accurate observation?

Secondly, on the idea that food banks could be overwhelmed, we have heard evidence about those who will be coming on to universal credit from working tax credits. There is a whole group of people who see themselves not as part of the benefits system, but as getting tax assistance through Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. I have concerns around the transitional protection arrangements that are being mooted to maintain incomes unless there is a change of circumstances. As we can all imagine, some family breakdowns and abusive relationships could be very concerning in that context.

In the full roll-out areas, are more women and families coming forward? What are your concerns about that further group of people who may require your services? Could that add to the point about food banks and the work that they do being overwhelmed?

Laura Ferguson: The vast majority of our food banks have seen more families come through their doors. Over the summer, there has been a massive increase in the number of normal, everyday families who are struggling to meet the need over the summer holidays.

Previously, we had a lot of single males coming to the food bank—in fact, we still do—primarily because they were the ones who were making new claims to universal credit and so were affected by universal credit first. More families are now being affected in full roll-out areas. Moving from feeding primarily single people to feeding families has put a massive strain on our food banks, because they are giving out more food. Some of our food banks are struggling with the increase in demand.

None of us would say that food banks are a bad thing. They are absolutely a great thing and we all would help our hungry neighbour in any way that we can. I just think that the current level of need is unsustainable. Food banks cannot continue to meet that need.

Shona Robison: I am sorry to interrupt, but I am interested in what you said about summer holidays. Do families who rely on school meals during term time face an issue around food poverty in the holidays? I know that some local authorities have been doing a lot of work on that.

Laura Ferguson: Absolutely. Some people use the term “holiday hunger”, but the poverty happens throughout the year. The families get free school meals in term time, but when it comes to the summer holiday period the parents want to do things for their children and to be able to take them places. However, the reality is that there is nothing in the cupboards at home and they struggle to put food on the table. Parents—mothers in particular—will go without food themselves in order to make sure that their children have something over the summer holidays.

Joyce Leggate: I agree absolutely. We are seeing a huge increase in the number of families. About a third of our recipients are children and that is an increasing trend. On the issue of advice, our local citizens advice bureau has a three-week waiting list to give people an appointment because of the demand on its services, so people are having to come into the food banks.

It is distressing that in the school holidays—the October holidays in particular—we had an increase in the number of children who are opening up the parcel while they are in the food bank to see whether there is a packet of biscuits or anything that they can eat on the way home. If we have any bread to give out, it is being eaten before they get home. It is quite shocking to see that level of hunger in children.

Aziz Zeria: A young child who had been eating tomato sauce at school came to us for food. We received a note to say, “Thank you for giving my mum food so that we could have something to eat.” Some situations are very critical. Quite a high percentage of the people who access our food banks are on benefits and the issues are complex, ranging from debt to housing issues to mental health.

Mark Frankland: We have heard a bit around the table about the fact that we are getting towards breaking point. Three years ago, I spent a week in Athens visiting food banks to get a feel for what they were doing. Since the euro crisis and Greece’s problems, the voluntary sector there has consistently been feeding 2.5 per cent of the

population. I did the maths: there are 100,000 people living in the area that we cover, and we are giving out 125 food parcels a week. The Greek equivalent is 2,500 a week, so we should be very careful when we say that we are at breaking point and that this is as big as it is going to get. Our situation is nothing compared with Greece.

We can say, “Oh, that won’t happen here”, and I hope to hell that it does not. I welcome coming here today, because there should be a strong connection between councils, Government and the food banks. Whether anyone likes it or not, we are the place of last resort. If something goes badly wrong, people will come to our door and we do not turn people away.

Like everyone, the majority of the uplift that we have seen over recent months has been in universal credit, but I think that we can get too focused on that. First Base might be a bit different from other food banks in one regard: we do not get in all our donated food, divvy it up and stop giving out food when we have run out. Each of our parcels has a set list of ingredients; if an item is not donated, we buy it. Last year we were spending £1,000 a month buying food, but this year it is £2,000 a month.

When we shop, we do not shop at Waitrose. We go to each supermarket’s value range and try to buy the items as cheaply as possible. I looked at a list of 10 of the main items that we buy and did a comparison between October 2017 and now. They have gone up 70 per cent. You hear on the TV about food inflation being at 3 per cent, but that is for your Heinz beans—check out the value ranges. A really big thing that has happened this week is that Tesco no longer sells the value long-life milk. It is gone. Last year, long-life milk was 49p a litre but as of today it is 79p.

You can imagine the number of families who have been struggling for years with incomings just matching outgoings. They shop on the value aisles. They do not go to the expensive aisles. Suddenly, they will be hit by a £20 to £30 a week increase. We should never say, “This is as bad as it is going to get.” That is what going to Athens taught me. It is miraculous what the Greek voluntary sector has done—I will never know how it has done it. However, this could get much worse before it gets any better.

Mandy Nutt: I want to comment on what the deputy convener asked about. What is the solution? It is all very well to say that the third sector is picking up the pieces and that that is not right, but it is not just the third sector that is picking up the pieces. We get donations of food from people who are paying their taxes, and who are probably struggling themselves, whatever wage they are on. They are not the third sector. They are not voluntary people. They did not volunteer

for the food bank. Those people go to work and generously give us food so that we can give it to members of the community who they probably would not even see.

We are very similar to committee members in that we never turn anyone away. We ask about the criteria so that we can feed information back to the Trussell Trust and enable it to tell members why it is or is not working.

You asked how things can be put right. I feel very much that it is about putting support in; it is not just about paying for the food banks. Once the Government starts paying for the food banks, we may as well just give up because that will go the same way as everything else has gone. There will be cutbacks and cutbacks, and we will have to be very hard on people when they come to us because we will be more accountable to the Government.

At the moment, we get a lot of grace. We supported one man who was sanctioned for five months. He never had anything in his house. He had no food, and no way to get any money. That guy was supported and kept alive, and now he has a job. He has got his life back on track. That was a long process.

The process has got worse since the introduction of universal credit. The problem is that it takes budgeting and timing to live your life on universal credit; that means financial planning, which vulnerable people and the long-term unemployed do not do.

I rang up universal credit to find out about the process, because we do not work with a lot of people who are in work; it took me 15 to 20 minutes to get through to someone who could tell me how the system works. It seems that people have a window from the 18th to the 17th of each month to report their earnings. They cannot report earnings until they have got their earnings, so they are already in debt before they start. They ring up and say, "I earned £300 this week" and they are told, "But we gave you a universal credit payment, so we're going to take that back and we're going to take back 63p in the pound of what you have earned." Those people are earning £2.96 an hour. Most people say that they get £317 on their universal credit. They might get £500 of rent, so that comes to £817. To get out of that trap, someone would have to consistently work 26 hours a week at a living wage. That is not just a job at Tesco where they have X amount of hours, or zero hours, and maybe this week they can cover for so and so who is off on holiday. There is a huge budgeting issue.

We need more support that helps people to plan their money, because people cannot do that. The whole idea of universal credit was to get people

into this idea of getting a job and working. When we work, we get our money, and we spend it. We spend money on our kids, and we take them somewhere and do something with them. These people cannot do that. They have to say, "Right. I have earned £300, so I won't get that next month on my universal credit. I will have to pay my rent and so on." There are no luxuries. There is no extra.

We are relying on the generosity of people who donate and who are paying their taxes and trying to live their own lives. That is how food banks are surviving.

Laura Ferguson: One of the things that frustrates me is that people end up at a food bank, but could have received help from elsewhere beforehand. There are resources out there; for example, there is the Scottish welfare fund, which Steve Wright mentioned. In Edinburgh, someone can phone up the Scottish welfare fund and press option 5 for a food bank referral, no questions asked. That to me is a waste of an opportunity and a waste of a resource. Why are people who are saying that they need a food bank referral not going through the application process to receive a crisis grant from the Scottish welfare fund to have the cash?

We had a meeting with the Scottish welfare fund team in Edinburgh. We said to them, "This is not best practice. It does not happen in other areas." They were willing to remove option 5 to make sure that people were actually receiving more support, but a councillor then got involved and that was taken off the table. Option 5 is there to stay. It frustrates me that people who are ending up at a food bank could receive resource from elsewhere.

09:45

Alison Johnstone: You have hit the nail on the head. A constituent wrote to me about our meeting this morning, asking what the impact would be on the Scottish welfare fund and other entitlements if food banks did not exist. I understand where Mark Frankland is coming from, but for most of my life food banks were not a thing, and now they are very much a thing—they seem to be becoming part and parcel of the welfare state. As Mandy Nutt has just pointed out, they are entirely reliant on people donating their time as well as money and food. That is the safety net—totally voluntary, non-statutory organisations made up of people who do not want to see folk in their communities in crisis. Frankly, I do not think that that is good enough. I have concerns about that.

We have heard a couple of views. For example, it was Mark Frankland, I think, who said that it is really hard to walk through the door. One constituent—a woman whose disability benefits

were changed—said that it was the worst day of her life when she had to take her two children to a food bank. Evan Adamson said that some people are quite relaxed about going to a food bank, but others who have contacted me have said, “If only I could get from the jobcentre the same warmth, empathy and advice that I get from the people at the food bank,” some of whom have obviously developed great expertise. There seems to be some best practice going on that we might want to take into our statutory services.

It is clear that some people would rather go to a food bank than get into discussions with the Department for Work and Pensions and the whole bureaucracy around that. Is there an opportunity for you to feed back about that ethos?

Laura Ferguson: Scottish welfare fund advisers came and sat in our Glenrothes food bank centre. Normally, people access the Scottish welfare fund through a telephone or online application. Fife Council managed to fund advisers to come to the food bank, and food bank referrals dropped by 30 per cent. That happened because people went through the application process and received money. Fife Council said that that was such a success because it involved face-to-face contact. People were not so annoyed and frustrated with the system. They felt that somebody was in front of them, listening to them and doing their best for them. It was quite special just to have someone in the food bank centre, meeting people at the point of need, getting them a crisis grant and reducing food bank referrals. We should think about doing that elsewhere.

Joyce Leggate: That is really interesting. Glenrothes is only 10 miles away from us in Kirkcaldy. We tried to get somebody from the welfare team to come along, but they could not accommodate us regularly, although they came along twice. We use various premises—churches and so on—and there is nowhere private for them to see clients. Clients do not want to sit in a foyer speaking about private, personal matters. I think that accommodation, facilities and resources influence what we can manage to do.

Our volunteers, like everyone’s, do a great job. We are a 100 per cent voluntary agency in Kirkcaldy. We rely entirely on the generosity of the local community financially, with donations of cash, and for food. However, that is not sustainable. Demand is overwhelming, even with the 100 volunteers that we have. It is just so difficult. We have more than 200 people a week coming in, but unfortunately no one is able to come along and give that front-line advice.

Steve Wright: We were fortunate: we worked with a citizens advice bureau to get a floating adviser across the network in a project that was funded for three years. When it came to the end of

the funding period, there was no further funding. The average increase in benefit payments was £175,000 a year. People came in—people like Evan Adamson, who did not know what he was due under the benefits system—and were able to access benefits to the tune of £175,000 per year. I know that, given the increase in the number of people coming through the door, there would have been a substantial increase in that figure of £175,000, but then the funding stopped. We do not have the expertise in the changing benefits system to offer that service, and there seems to be no funding to allow us to provide it. It is about joined-up thinking, joined-up access and being able to monitor benefits so that you can show that there is a cash benefit, not just for the clients, but for the state. I dread to think how much benefits money just sits in a fund, not claimed. We just do not have the resources to access it.

People talk about needing money to buy food, but I would argue that we also need some money to stop the cycle and increase access, which would solve the problem at source, rather than maintain it.

Dr Allan: I have a brief question. The five-week wait has come up in the conversation; it also came up in the Trussell Trust’s written evidence. What is the witnesses’ experience of the impact of that wait on the people they deal with, and what could be done better to avoid it?

Laura Ferguson: The five-week wait is a massive issue for people claiming universal credit. What are they supposed to do? They put in an application for universal credit and have no money for five weeks. I would not be able to cope with that. Even if they have savings, how do they cope for five weeks without any money? There is the advance payments option, but a lot of people do not know about that. Even if they know about and get an advance payment, they are still paying it back for the next 12 months, so they experience a drop in income over those months and get into debt. I do not know; maybe one of my colleagues has a specific story from somebody who uses—

Mandy Nutt: People now have the option to get universal credit paid every two weeks, which is great.

When I started doing this work 17 years ago, people would go into a face-to-face interview in the jobcentre or a benefits office to be told what was available to them. Those staff knew everything. It seems as if it is a bit of a secret now, yet there seems to be a concern about unclaimed benefits. I do not know why they are not telling us things.

We had exactly the same situation that Evan Adamson faced. When one guy rang up the jobcentre to say that he had an interview, he was

told, "Well, good luck with it." I then rang up another jobcentre—it was in Dingwall, which is probably just 20 miles, or half an hour, away—and I was told that there was money available for the guy to get an outfit for his interview. That jobcentre was able to do that for him. What I am trying to say is that it seems that different places give out different information.

We have to take people to the jobcentre to do their application or to do the identification check after they have done an online application, because it is 20 miles away and it costs £10 to get there on the bus. I could run a bus service. I pick people up on the A9 going back and forth to the jobcentre—they are told to thumb a lift. These are young women who are being told to thumb a lift down to the jobcentre.

People are told at the jobcentre that they can get universal credit every two weeks, which they love because that is what we are used to—we love money coming in every two weeks. That is why a five-week wait fails: people are used to getting their money regularly; they just have to get by. I know people who get their money on the Tuesday and will not get any more money until Tuesday week. When they have spent all their money, they say, "Well, I'm am getting paid next week." They still have a week and a half to go, but in their heads money is coming next week, so that is as far ahead as they plan. They can get it every two weeks, but that is after the initial five weeks. They cannot get it straight away. They have to do the five weeks, then they wait another two weeks, then they start to get it every two weeks. Of course, it feels like a pittance. It is £317 after four weeks, but it is £100 and a bit—it is half—when they get it.

The jobcentre can now tell people that they can have a benefit advance, which is okay. However, I was with one boy—a chronic alcoholic—who had come out of prison and was just given £500. I continually say to people, "You've got to pay it back," and now he is paying it back at £40. He has nothing to live on because that option was given to him. It is great that it is available, but it has to be done carefully. It just cannot be thrown out there, because people who have no money will take it.

You can get universal credit now every two weeks, but you have to cover the initial five weeks, and your rent is still paid at a different time. Money comes out at different times, and people pay rent at different times. If you add getting a job into the mix with all that and try to work out what's what, you can see that it is just a mess financially. It is hard enough for us to work out, let alone someone who is not used to budgeting and planning.

Evan Adamson: I think that that is the big thing. I have just started with Instant Neighbour, so next month I will have the joy of my first pay packet and

my last universal credit in the same week. Yes, it is great, but I find that there is a general feeling of entitlement among long-term benefit users and a lot of the guys I work with. There are addictions and mental health problems, but a lot of people say, "I want that phone. Why shouldn't I have it?"

A lot of the guys who come in to use our food bank have top-of-the-range phones, or they or their kids are wearing designer clothes—all of that kind of stuff—because society today tells them that they want those things. They feel left out by not being able to get them, so they would rather go and buy them and use food banks. They rely solely on food banks for their food. We have more than 20 food banks in Aberdeen, and most of them are self-referral so people can come back in 14 days. We tell clients, "Yes, you can go to that one next week", and they travel around Aberdeen using all the food banks.

I think that I still have two universal credit payments coming because of when I started working—I will get another one, a partial one, next month. If you have been getting no money through universal credit and you get work, you are expected to pay back the debt that you have built up through being on universal credit. Then, all of a sudden, you are handed your universal credit on top of your wages. You are going to celebrate getting a job. You are going to go out and blow your money by buying yourself something nice. I know that I will have to battle with that when those payments come through because I have debt to pay back. All of sudden, my bank account will have more money in it than it has had for years because of the five-week wait.

I do not understand. When I was looking into it, I was told, "We will give you this in arrears"—there is almost an assumption there is a lying month with jobs now. Very few companies do that now, especially not a month. When I was younger and getting paid weekly, I remember that there would often be a lying week, but never a month. All of a sudden, all this money is being put into the hands of people who have been on universal credit. A lot of them have started drinking heavily just to cope, or have even got into drugs, and they are handed all this money. A lot of them will end up unemployed again. It is just a nightmare system.

Laura Ferguson: Food banks tell me all the time about what people have done to get through that five-week period before coming to the food bank. They will have borrowed from here, there and everywhere, starting a cycle of debt that they are constantly trying to pay back.

People self-disconnect from their prepayment meters for heating their home—they will not put any money in for heating, but they are still charged every day for having a prepayment meter. Even when they get money and want to put money in

their meters, a lot of people find that the debt is taken off first unless they know and have the confidence to ask for the debt to be pushed back. It just puts people into a downward spiral—it is a vicious cycle, I think.

Mandy Nutt: It also feeds into the antisocial side of things. People get into booze and end up borrowing from everybody. To a certain degree, I agree with Evan Adamson about the fact that there will always be an element of people who abuse the system. Universal credit is set up so that people cannot abuse it, but people who play the system will play any system—they will find their way around anything. I am more concerned today about the people who are not playing the system and who genuinely need help.

10:00

When universal credit was first piloted—this came out when people first applied for it—the biggest problem that we had was with a question on the application form. People were asked, “Do you pay rent?” They said no, because they did not pay their rent; housing benefit paid their rent. That was a huge problem, and we had to go back and get all that rent paid into people’s systems, just because of that. I think that that is sometimes the issue. Certain people think that universal credit tops up their lives because they do not earn very much and what they earn is theirs, so maybe universal credit will still pay the rent. Again, people just need support. We do housing support, so we are able to work very closely with people, but not everyone gets that sort of support, and I know that the jobcentres are very stretched. They are supposed to have work coaches who work with people, but all that is done through the computer now. People have a journal, they speak to someone and eventually someone gets back to them. It is very difficult.

People do not realise that they get a personal element and a housing element. That is great, because years ago if someone who was on the dole was sanctioned, their housing element did not get paid, and then they had problems. Somewhere, in their wisdom, someone decided that they would still pay the housing element. For example, let us say that someone does not go to their appointments because they have no money, and they get sanctioned. Then they see this money in their account and think, “I didn’t get sanctioned—somebody gave me a bit of grace and I got away with it.” That is actually their rent money, and they use it—it is not paid directly to the landlord. People play the system—I think that there is that element of it—but we still have people who are genuinely in need and they are the ones we need to fight for today.

Mark Frankland: I want to flag up one problem with universal credit that I do not hear much about in the media. About three years ago, it was announced that we were going to be one of the trial areas. At the time, a quite inexplicable drug war broke out between a gang from Liverpool and a gang from Glasgow. It got quite bad for a while. We work with quite a lot of people with drug issues and drug use was dropping quite quickly. We could not understand what was happening, but we quite quickly found out.

In the area of town where this was going on, there were 1,000 people on the methadone programme. Just as the Government was running a trial to see how the roll-out of universal credit would work, the drugs industry decided to do the same thing. If 1,000 people are going to be given an extra £500 a month for their rent, all of a sudden there is another £500,000 a month of business to be had, which is worth anybody going for. The Liverpool gang eventually won the drug war and started offering everyone a £600 credit line. However, they got it wrong: they thought that the roll-out meant that everyone would be switched to universal credit but of course that happened only to new applicants.

The situation was horrendous. Everyone took the £600 credit line, but there was no universal credit to pay the bill. It all got really quite dangerous, with people getting their legs broken. In the end, we had to go to the local papers and say, “For God’s sake, will you put it on the front page that not everyone is getting switched?” The gang then stopped giving out the credit lines. However, that is now how they work. It is big money. They tell people, “You can have your £600-worth of heroin. Meet my man and go to the cashpoint when your credit payment comes in.” It is a choice between paying your local housing provider or paying the guy with the baseball bat. People are getting evicted, because there are some people who are pretty good at getting that rent money.

The Convener: That is a very specific story, Mr Frankland. I did a joint advice surgery with Patrick Grady MP in my constituency about universal credit. I got welfare advisers there and did blanket mailings to the area, asking “Will universal credit affect you?” Lots of people turned up who just assumed universal credit was going to affect them. Clearly a lot of very elderly and frail pensioners were terrified that universal credit was going to affect them, because of what they had read in the newspapers, but it is not going to affect them. Therefore, there is a lack of clarity out there among the wider public. The public see the car crash of universal credit coming towards them but, although of course it is going to hit a lot of people, it will have no impact on others. You said that there is a complete lack of understanding and

clarity about who universal credit will impact, and I think it is quite important to put that on record.

Steve Wright: There is a lack of clarity across the nation about the implementation of universal credit. The fact that it keeps being pushed back in itself brings uncertainty and insecurity, which will feed on people's mental health.

Shona Robison asked how the changes are hitting in-work families. Whenever we discuss food bank issues, we go to the vast majority of people who use food banks who have addiction or alcohol issues or whatever, but I will bring it back to the families. A quick calculation shows that, this year, the number of families using our food banks has increased by 130. They are working and they are struggling to understand universal credit. The more shocking thing is that there are 120 children connected to those families who are not being fed because breakfast clubs do not run and there are no school meals during the summer holidays.

That is quite indicative of the fact that, in this nation's capital city, these benefits are having an effect on people who work. We need to address that to restore some sense of aspiration and some sense that it is worth working. If you get out of bed and do your job and you still struggle, but you see people next door who do not work and who do not seem to be struggling quite as much, you will think, "Why should I bother?" With that insidious eroding of social fabric and aspiration, not just in the large housing schemes but in the suburbs, we are building up a potential problem that will explode.

Shona Robison: That is my specific concern about working tax credits, which I think have been quite a success because they have given people the support in work that they need to make work pay. My worry is that, with all the publicity that there has been around universal credit, the fact that working tax credits will become part of what is seen as bad benefit system will make some people say, "I am not even going to go there—it is more hassle than it is worth." Do you share that concern?

Steve Wright: That is definitely a concern. Another issue is this. Whether you agree with it or not, we have agreed as a nation that a certain level of benefit is required to allow people who work to enjoy a certain standard of living. It is ironic, then, that we have frozen in-work benefits; that means that, because of inflation, we are not maintaining the level of provision that we as a nation have identified that we want to pay, so by default, people are condemned to poverty. That poverty will hit children. I am not sure of the figures in Scotland, but I recently read in a report that 4 million children live in poverty in the UK.

With the issues around food banks and emergency food provision, we lose sight of the fact that the problem is now affecting very different people from when I started nine or 10 years ago. The social profile has changed. The Trussell Trust is fantastic at providing statistics and I am sure that it would say the same thing. Those around the table will probably have experienced the same thing. The profile of our service users—our guests, as I prefer to call them—is changing and it is changing quite quickly. That is my concern.

Mandy Nutt: We are seeing that through three or four generations now. It is not so much that people say, "I could go to work and I could struggle on, but I am looking at the family next door and none of them work and all the benefit gets paid and they seem to have phones and so on." We are now seeing not just one generation but two or three generations in the same position. We see children whose dad never worked and granddad never worked, so no one is doing that. We are seeing the same thing repeating itself over and over again. It has been around a long time. We are really seeing the fruit of that now.

Joyce Leggate: Another demographic that we are starting to see in Kirkcaldy Foodbank is pensioners. Fairly recently—over the past six months, I would say—we have been seeing more and more people who cannot survive on their basic state pension.

I go back to Mark Frankland's point about the cost of food. Pensioners as a group are very reluctant to come to the food bank. We have just started to gather data on that, so we do not yet have very good or complete data, but, anecdotally, we think that there are a lot more people who cannot survive on a basic state pension. The transfer on to the various benefit systems is causing quite a lot of pain.

The Convener: Thank you for putting that on the record.

I will do a time check for the purposes of the meeting—my apologies for having to do this. We have about 10 minutes left.

Somebody—it may have been Evan Adamson—mentioned a few comments ago the options that work coaches in jobcentres have to provide support. That is being given out freely, professionally and supportively by some but not at all by others. There may be another group who would like to give extra support but who are working in a culture where that is not really seen as the right thing to do. That would worry me greatly. My reason for bringing us back to that is that our inquiry is about in-work poverty. The group of people that Shona Robison was talking about are going to be in the ambit of Jobcentre Plus and the DWP and may be sanctioned for not

increasing their hours or their hourly rate. If there is help and assistance that can be provided at a jobcentre but the culture in some jobcentres is not to be transparent and open about where that assistance sits, that would be quite worrying.

Next week, the Public and Commercial Services Union, which represents jobcentre staff, is coming to the committee. The week after that, we will have senior management from the DWP, who have to make the system work. I put that in your heads because there may be certain things that you would quite like us to ask them when they are here. We will not be short of questions to ask them, of course, but there might be questions that you want us to ask them, based on your experience. That may be personal evidence—and thank you for sharing some of that—or it may be from people you have spoken to across various food bank networks. Is there anything that anyone would like me to ask?

Evan Adamson: I have one question. I have a client, who is also a friend, who is self-employed. He works three to four months of the year on good wages and the rest of the year earns about £100 a month. He has just gone on to universal credit. He has been self-employed for about three or four years. There seems to be confusion with universal credit about whether the minimum income floor applies to him. In his first month, he made far more than the limit, so he got a nil award. He has health issues and is going through health rehab, so he went to join the gym at one of the local sports centres, where he needed proof that he was on universal credit. He knows that, over the year, he will get awards, but in a month in which he has a nil award, the letter states, “You are no longer entitled to universal credit.” It does not just say, “You are not getting anything this month.”

It is not just for gym memberships or council-run things. If anyone needs dental treatment or anything like that, that is the letter that they get. It has taken him two months to get a letter from the local jobcentre stating that he is on a universal credit award. That is just the way the letters are worded. I pushed—I ask, I am stubborn—and I encouraged him to do the same, but there are a lot of people who would get that letter and think, “Hang on, I need to go the dentist, but I cannot get my free dental treatment.” What happens with a lot of these subsidiary benefits that people should be entitled to through universal credit if they are getting letters that say, “You are no longer entitled to universal credit”?

The Convener: That is a very helpful specific point. We are going to have the PCS here next week. Individual employees might think that that is a ridiculous letter to be sent out, but they are employees of the DWP and they cannot comment publicly on that. However, their union

representatives of course could do so. That is a helpful individual point. Any other points would be welcome.

10:15

Mark Frankland: The design of universal credit and the way the jobcentres apply it grossly underestimate how many people are illiterate or have fairly chronic learning difficulties or zero computer skills. There is an assumption that such people are a tiny fraction—a minority of maybe 1 per cent—but they are not. Of course, if you do not have the ability to go on to a computer, if you cannot read and write at all, or if you have a learning age of 11 or 12, you just cannot do what you are required to do. There is very little help for people like that. They are very often the ones who not only are not on any kind of benefit but cannot get on any kind of benefit. Someone from the Scottish Prison Service said to me that the illiteracy rate in the prison system is about 20 per cent. It is obviously not 20 per cent in general society, but I think that it is higher than Jobcentre Plus accepts.

We have seen guys coming in who may be on a sanction because they have not been keeping up online. Somebody in their 50s who left school at 15, worked country jobs—drystone dyking or farming or forestry work—and who has never had to read and write because they are good with their hands is suddenly told, “You have to go on this computer and you have to do this, this and this.” Those kinds of people just cannot do it. There is no acceptance that there are people with those kinds of problems who need the requisite help to be made available. The number of people in that boat is underestimated.

The Convener: We will be sure to ask what additional support there is for people with learning disabilities or poor levels of literacy and numeracy presenting at jobcentres and what additional time work coaches have to help those folks. That is a very important point.

Mandy Nutt: A worrying thing is that it seemed for a while as if each jobcentre was being run autonomously; one would hand out one thing and another would not. I would question whether there are blanket rules that cover all the jobcentres.

When universal credit was first run out, it was very difficult. It really was like in “Little Britain”—“Computer says no.” There was no way of talking to anyone. Our jobcentre in Invergordon has absolutely changed now. I could not do the work that I do if it were not for our jobcentre. It is very open. Staff ask whether people have literacy problems and whether they want to address them; very often the answer is that they do not, but the staff do ask them. The staff refer people to us. We

have an open-door, easy-osey type of referral system between the pair of us and it is great; it works very well. I just mention that, because it is working very well. Whether that is standard across the board or whether we have just struck dead lucky in Invergordon, I do not know.

Invergordon jobcentre has employed a huge number of staff. At the beginning they were running blind. They were the ones put in the front and they were handing this out, saying, "This is the new credit—deal with it." They did not know themselves how to deal with it. It was a mess. It was a car crash. Now, however, staff are getting to grips with it and they are very helpful to us.

The Convener: I think that that was Evan Anderson's point about the inconsistencies. It is a patchwork.

Mandy Nutt: There are definitely inconsistencies.

The Convener: I will take Aziz Zeria in a second, but time is almost upon us. I will give all our witnesses the opportunity, if they want it, to make a final statement or comment. Maybe the conversation has taken a turn that has not allowed you to put on the record what you wanted to say here today. This will be your opportunity to put it on the record. Once we get those final comments, we will have to close the session.

Aziz, you get two bites of the cherry, because you get to comment on this and then we will get you contribute to the general mop-up as well.

Aziz Zeria: It is a vicious circle because, literate or not, people who have difficulty with finance may not have the money to have internet access and they may not have the equipment. What do they do in those circumstances? What support is available so that they can access the internet and the equipment to do it? Where do they go if they do not have those things? That is something to be wary about.

The Convener: Time is almost upon us. Mr Wright, we will start with you. Do not feel obliged if you think that it has all been said and there is nothing more that you want to say, although I suspect that that will not be the case. If there is anything at all that you want to say, whether it is just a general comment or a steer for the committee, this will be your opportunity.

Steve Wright: I have found today really helpful. I have learned things from different people's experiences. My overall impression, however, is that in a world of diminishing resources, where access to services is being eroded, we are working in a situation that is being eroded from all sides and it is really important that we look to address fundamental issues rather than just the crises.

Mandy Nutt: Four of the clients who have used our food bank this year have died over the past six months: three drug-related deaths and one suicide. As horrific as that is, I believe that the number would be significantly greater were it not for the invaluable work of the food bank. It offers practical help by way of food provision, advice and guidance in a non-judgmental way, but, more important, it keeps people connected and known to the services, which has proved again and again to help to preserve lives. Whether people are playing the system or not, it keeps them alive if we are putting food in their stomachs.

I want to thank you. You have given us a chance to come here. I cannot tell you how many times I have ranted to people who could do nothing about this system. I am very grateful that you have invited me and everybody else here to put these points from the sharp end to you. I hope that you take them on board and that some changes are made. Thank you.

Evan Adamson: My passion is to get people proactive. Many of the clients I deal with have got used to being in the system and my aim is to encourage them to be proactive. The way I look at it is that, if I can do it, anyone can. Everyone can have a little bit of luck. Everyone can have a little bit of good fortune come their way but, at the end of the day, keeping your mind active is the most important thing for these folk.

My main point as far as universal credit goes is that there should be more transparency about what other little grants and things are available, because people do not know about them. In my experience, if people do not ask, those things are not offered. You have to ask; you have to push. I would appreciate that being addressed with the system, because if such things are available—if people can get bus passes to go to job interviews, for example—it gives people hope, and at the end of the day, that is what we need. As food banks, we are trying to instil hope in people and give them something to work towards.

Laura Ferguson: We cannot rely for ever on food banks to pick up the pressure that has been pushed on to us in the third sector. We have to start addressing the underlying causes of why people need emergency food provision. We have to start looking at where the best place for people to access that support is and how that support is best delivered. We cannot forever think that giving out food parcels is okay.

Mark Frankland: Like many of the charities that are involved in running food banks, we are always nearly running on fresh air. We often only have enough funds in the bank to see us through a month or two or three months, which creates a lot of pressure when we are feeding a lot of hungry

people, because I hate to think what would happen if we did not open the door.

For some time we have had a proposal for how the Scottish Government could give some genuine support to food banks. First, it could create a register of official food banks in Scotland. It could check whether they have governance and whether they have a stock of food; and it could check with local councils and MSPs that those running the food banks are not crooks and that the food banks are genuine. Then any food bank on that list could, at the end of the month, look at how many parcels it has handed out and invoice the Scottish Government £5 for each one. If everything gets better, unemployment falls through the floor and universal credit is perfect, and we as a food bank go from 500 parcels a month to 100 a month, instead of invoicing the Scottish Government for £2,500, we will invoice for £500. If we go a few miles down the road towards Greece and we start giving out 1,000 a month, then accordingly our invoice will go to £5,000. In that way, the Scottish Government would be saying to food banks, "We have not completely got your back, but we know that you have to pay your rent, your electricity bills, your phone bills and your volunteer costs."

We cannot do this on nothing. What we propose would almost be a deal whereby the Scottish Government says, "We will give you enough to pay your overheads and, hopefully, the community will continue to donate the food and the food banks will make it happen." It really is time not just for new funding schemes that have to be for some new and creative, happy-clappy idea but for some reliable, long-term funding to pay for the nuts and bolts of what we do, or a contribution towards it. Give us some stability, rather than mere kind words, which is all we tend to get at the moment.

The Convener: For transparency purposes, Mr Frankland, I should point out that our next agenda item is connected to some of the things that you said but may not quite strike a chord with everything that you said—part of it, but not all of it. Because our next item will be in public, I would not want you to make that comment and then find out that our next agenda item directly related to what you said without our saying to you, "It will all become clear if you hang about for the next item." I wanted to draw that to your attention.

Aziz Zeria: We already do a lot of signage work with the people who are on our food bank. We work with financial management, jobs, mental health services, and training, but in some ways I support what the gentleman was saying. We are very volunteer heavy and it would be useful for the work we do to get supported as well so that we can do it more efficiently.

Joyce Leggate: The inequality gap is widening—poor people are getting poorer and

there is food poverty and every kind of poverty—and that gap just cannot be sustained. It has to be closed. People are losing heart and they are stopping trying. They are giving up. That is a dreadful thing in this country.

The Convener: Thank you. All that remains for me to do is to thank you all of you for coming along and being so forthright, frank and passionate and sharing your direct experience. MSPs also have direct experience but, let us be honest, it is not to the same extent as the experience of all of you who are doing this work consistently, every day and every week. We should also say thank you for what you do. Despite the fact that we would love food banks not to exist, please do not go away. Please stick at it. We appreciate what you do. Stay involved in what I would have to say is a relatively short inquiry. We will keep you updated with our recommendations and how we seek to take some of those recommendations forward. Thank you, everybody.

10:26

Meeting suspended.

10:33

On resuming—

Public Petition

Food Banks (Funding) (PE1571)

The Convener: Welcome back, everyone, after that short suspension. Agenda item 3 is consideration of petition PE1571, by John Beattie, which calls on the Scottish Government to provide direct funding to food banks. I refer to the note that has been provided by the clerk, which is paper 3. The petitioner was notified that the petition would be on the agenda today, but no acknowledgment or response has been received and there has been no contact with the petitioner since the petition was referred to us in 2016.

The petition has been about for some time. I will read out the recommendations. Then, given the session that we have just had, it would be reasonable to discuss the recommendations before we decide whether to close the petition. The committee is ready to close the petition on the basis that

“1. it agrees with the Scottish Government that providing direct funding for food banks would effectively bring food banks into the welfare state, something that is not supported;

2. a longer-term approach has been taken to tackling food insecurity across a range of policies.”

In closing the petition—if that is what we decide to do—the committee nevertheless wishes to acknowledge the work of food banks and the growing pressures on them, which is undeniable, given what we heard under agenda item 2. Before I ask whether members are content to close the petition, we should have a discussion. Would members like to comment?

Dr Allan: I agree that that is a sensible approach, given what we have heard today. We have heard a lot about the great work that is being done by food banks and about the consensus, which you mentioned, that food banks should not be—I think that they would not want to see themselves in this way—part of the welfare state. What you are suggesting seems to be a sensible way to bring the petition to a close.

Michelle Ballantyne: One of the important things, which was mentioned during the previous debate, is that people feel able to go to food banks partly because they are not a state provision. As they do with many other support organisations in the third sector, people come in and talk and share their problems, and they get support because the food bank is not a state provision. I certainly support food banks staying in the voluntary sector and staying free of the bureaucracy of the state in

what they deliver. I support the suggestion to close the petition.

Shona Robison: Some of the issues that were raised around the table in the previous evidence session coincide with some of the issues around the petition and can probably better be picked up as part of our inquiry and reflections. No doubt there are issues that we can take forward by picking them up in the report that will eventually be produced from our inquiry. That would be appropriate, so I agree that the petition should be closed.

Alison Johnstone: I, too, am content that the petition be closed. We have obviously learned a great deal this morning and from ongoing work with the “menu for change” project, for example, which is a partnership between the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland, Nourish Scotland, Oxfam Scotland and the Poverty Alliance—to encourage a shift away from emergency food aid as the solution, and towards preventative and rights-based measures that increase the income of people who face crises.

We have heard from several most excellent commentators this morning that when people with the right expertise and advice knowledge work with food banks, that has a really positive impact. I would like the committee to keep an eye on what is going on, because food banks are clearly finding themselves in an increasingly difficult position when it comes to supplying people with emergency food aid.

I also think that we have to look at the extent to which food banks are masking a problem. Are they a symptom? Are they showing that people are not getting the help that they need from other agencies? I would like us at least to keep a watching brief on that.

The Convener: That was helpful.

Jeremy Balfour: I am also happy with the recommendations. We should put on record what we have heard today—that it is not just about the third sector, but about civic society in general. That very good point was made by a couple of individuals. The third sector delivers the food banks, but the food comes from the whole of civic society in different ways. It is important to note that.

A related issue that the committee needs to keep an eye on, but which is probably not for today, is third sector funding. I agree that we do not want food banks to be getting direct money, for reasons that have been outlined, but we have to make sure that the third sector is getting appropriate financial support from the Scottish Government and local authorities. We need, as a committee, to keep an eye on that over the next number of years.

Pauline McNeill: I agree and I am content to close the petition. However, I have a few points to address. It is a dilemma for any Government that sees the proliferation of food banks and so on that they are struggling for help with the good work that they do. The fundamental principle is that if we fund them we will be going down the wrong route—acceptance that it is okay that they exist.

However, every time we discuss the issue, I learn more and more about the work that is being done, the range of services and their impacts. I do not, for the reasons that members have mentioned, support the idea that the Government should wholly fund food banks, but there is a need for a more precise picture of provision and of what food banks are doing. I believe that we need at some point to address the question where we begin to start turning things around. I fully appreciate that that is a much bigger debate.

We have all rehearsed the arguments in the chamber. I believe the start of the process is the scrapping of the current universal credit scheme, but I realise that that debate is for another day. However, it is worth considering whether we think that the Government should put some resource into ensuring that it has all the facts and a full picture of what food banks are doing.

The Convener: I will make a few comments myself before I ask members what their position is. In the previous evidence session Mandy Nutt mentioned the conflict between funding food banks and the independence of the food bank network. We should be slightly cautious in relation to that.

I note that supporting food banks and funding them from time to time will not be ruled out by our closing the petition. However, I think that there is consensus around the table that offering a direct structural relationship between the Government social security system and food banks, which would in effect bring food banks into the welfare state, is not desirable. That is not to say that we did not hear in the last evidence session some pretty good ideas for things that we, as a committee, could explore further and which would not need the petition to be continued. They include mapping of where food banks are, and what support has been provided in the past and might be provided in the future.

Given that a significant number, if not the vast majority, of referrals to food banks are the result of UK welfare reforms, I do not think that we should look only at the Scottish Government in respect of who supports the sector. I do not think that the situation is as simple as that. We should also, to be quite frank, also look at the UK Government, local authorities and more widely. We should find out what support has been given in the past and what could be provided in the future; I think that it

is important to put that on the record now. Given that the Scottish Government has said that it is keen to see a longer-term approach being taken that goes beyond food banks, it is also important that the committee pledge to take responsibility for following some of that through, as well.

The wider point that I am seeking to make is that it should not take a petition, well-intentioned though it is, to ensure that, as core business for the committee, we look at the Scottish social security system, how it interacts with the UK social security system, the winners and losers within the systems, those who are in absolute need and hardship and how they have become increasingly reliant on the third sector and others in society for food and other needs. We should be doing that as the core business of the committee, anyway. Recommending that we close the petition is not a recommendation not to follow through on many of the issues that were raised in the previous evidence session. There were some pretty good suggestions from Mark Frankland about ways in which we could follow through.

I am sorry that those comments were so long-winded, but it is important that we treat the matter pretty seriously, given the evidence this morning. Is the committee content to close the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Thank you for your forbearance.

10:44

Meeting continued in private until 11:09.

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