



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Social Security Committee

Thursday 6 February 2020

Session 5



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE

4th Meeting 2020, Session 5

CONVENER

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

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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

*Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)

*Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con)

*Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green)

*Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Shirley-Anne Somerville (Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Anne Peat

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Social Security Committee

Thursday 6 February 2020

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:36]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Bob Doris): Good morning, and welcome to the fourth meeting in 2020 of the Social Security Committee. I remind everyone to turn their mobile phones off or to silent so that they do not disrupt the meeting. We have a full house this morning: we have received no apologies, and all committee members are present.

Agenda item 1 is to decide whether to take business in private. Does the committee agree to take in private agenda item 3, under which the committee will consider evidence that we will hear on benefit take-up and an issues paper?

Members indicated agreement.

Benefit Take-up

09:37

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is the committee's final evidence session in our inquiry into benefit take-up. I welcome to the meeting the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People, Shirley-Anne Somerville; Ann McVie, who is deputy director of social security policy in the Scottish Government; and Ruari Sutherland, who is benefit take-up team leader in the Scottish Government. I thank all three witnesses for being here.

I invite the cabinet secretary to make an opening statement.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Thank you, convener. Good morning. I am grateful for the opportunity to engage with the committee's inquiry and for the insights that it has already provided, which I have followed with interest.

I was delighted to lay our first benefit take-up strategy before the Parliament on 21 October 2019. The principles and initiatives that are set out in that strategy reaffirm my commitment to a Scottish social security system that actively encourages and supports people to access the financial support that they are entitled to.

Increasing take-up is about building a system that is approachable and accessible; that has easy-to-navigate application processes which are based on clear eligibility criteria; that uses transparent decision making; and that challenges stigma. In short, we should have a system that has no barriers to applying.

Our approach to social security is a rights-based one, with dignity, fairness and respect at its heart. We are in the fortunate position of having been able, from the starting point, to design those core principles into the fabric of the benefits that we deliver and into our promotion of benefits to encourage and increase take-up. That is supported by our work with experience panels, extensive user research, and close engagement with stakeholders. From the inception and development of our take-up strategy, just as in its implementation, we will continue that engagement.

Encouraging take-up is also embedded in Social Security Scotland, so that the whole system is aligned and pulling together to fulfil our aspiration to maximise the numbers of people who access support. Social Security Scotland's communications teams are embedded in the service design process for each benefit from the start, and tailored strategic communications and

marketing plans, which are based on clear user research and client insights, are produced.

The benefit take-up strategy was published on the same day on which the call for written evidence to this inquiry closed, which meant that there was no opportunity for one to inform the other. I have therefore been pleased that much of the evidence to the committee has been consistent with the Scottish Government's approach. I will give a few examples to illustrate that.

Enable Scotland highlighted the importance of local initiatives, and Professor Paul Spicker said that outreach and human contact are likely to improve benefit take-up. Those views are very encouraging, given Social Security Scotland's clear emphasis on local delivery and national engagement, and the reasons for our introducing our benefit take-up and income maximisation funds. The level of interest that has been shown in those funds is an indication that stakeholders want to be part of the process.

Many organisations highlighted the importance of designing application forms and processes in partnership with those who use the system. Such co-design is commonplace in everything that we do. Clear and consistent communication that is tailored to specific benefits and targeted at relevant audiences has been recommended. As I have said, that has been embedded in our system from the start.

Family Advice and Information Resource—FAIR—suggested that

“specialist services that are accessible and personalised to the client's needs”,

such as home visits, are vital. That is another key area in the delivery of disability benefits. It is also key to our encouraging take-up, as is our entire narrative in saying that people are entitled to financial support and should apply for it.

That feeds into another clear theme in the evidence, which is the need to challenge the stigma around claiming benefits. The principles that social security is a human right and an investment in the people of Scotland are written into the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 and run through everything that we do. We are determined to shift that narrative in Scotland. That approach can be embodied in our principle of starting from a position of trust in what people tell us.

As the committee has heard, our approach is in direct contrast to that of the Department for Work and Pensions, which does not have an explicit benefit take-up strategy. It does not have legislation or a strategy to tackle child poverty, as the Scottish Government has, either. That said,

the DWP has stated that it is committed to tackling poverty. That is important, given that eligibility for low-income benefits such as the best start grant and the new Scottish child payment is based on entitlement to low-income benefits that are reserved. I have therefore written to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Thérèse Coffey, to seek assurances that the spillover provisions in the fiscal framework will not pose a fiscal threat in the face of our statutory duty to promote and encourage benefit take-up.

The synergy between the benefit take-up strategy and evidence that has been submitted to the committee's inquiry is encouraging. The rich body of evidence that has been made available, along with the committee's own recommendations, will be a guiding light as we implement our current benefit take-up strategy and in the development of the next one.

I am happy to take questions.

The Convener: Thank you very much, cabinet secretary.

I will come to spillover in a second, but it is only reasonable that I start by referring to the publication of the Scottish Government's benefits take-up strategy, which I welcome. The strategy will run for two years, until October 2021. I appreciate that it is the first such strategy, but we might still ask what success would look like for it. What benchmarks are being put out there so that the Scottish Government and the committee might make a judgement on how successful the strategy is?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The strategy is still very new, and it is too early at this point to tell how successful it is. It contains a series of new activities and initiatives to increase awareness of benefits and to remove barriers to claiming them. Everything that we are doing to remove such barriers requires to be tested against what we see in the take-up strategy. We must be challenged on whether we have done everything that we could have done at every single point, from the design of benefits all the way through the application and decision-making processes to the final stage of asking how people feel about the service.

There is a tendency to think of benefit take-up strategies as being simply about marketing campaigns. Our strategy demonstrates that it is about so much more than marketing campaigns—important though they are. The success of the strategy in Scotland will, rightly, be analysed against our ability to remove barriers at every single point and for every individual who touches the system.

The Convener: I absolutely agree that such a strategy should be about more than marketing campaigns. In preparation for this meeting, the

Scottish Parliament information centre drew the committee's attention to the English example of Haringey Council's targeted campaign to improve the uptake of pension credit. We have no details of how successful or otherwise that campaign was, but we are told that it used as much granular information as possible to make reasonable judgments about who might qualify for pension credit and reached out to them personally rather than simply through a marketing strategy. Is the Scottish Government considering doing that through its two-year strategy?

09:45

Shirley-Anne Somerville: For every benefit and payment that comes out, there is a take-up strategy that assesses the best marketing channels. The channels will be very different, depending on the type of audience that the benefit targets. Every benefit that has been launched to date has had, and every benefit that we will launch in the future will have, a communication strategy that looks at marketing channels and what works best. They are not short-burst campaigns, although they can play a role. In effect, it is about always being on. There is no point in running one campaign for the best start grant or for funeral support payments, because a person might not be eligible for, or interested in, those benefits at one point, but they could well be six months down the line.

The challenge is to not run short-burst campaigns, but to embed marketing in the journeys that people are already on in their lives. For example, the Scottish Government has very important links with health visitors and schools and other areas to which people's lives are already taking them. If Social Security Scotland's messaging is embedded within a person's journey, there will be a much greater likelihood that benefit take-up will increase. Short-burst campaigns may result in an initial spike of activity that then tails off, with no overall and long-term effect.

The Convener: The committee received information about the best start grant. The use of relevant partner agencies and third sector organisations, including nursery and primary schools and health visitors, led to a much greater than anticipated initial uptake of the best start grant across all ages and stages. I commend the Government for getting that right. Its approach involved not just general marketing; it involved targeting and signposting trusted individuals and groups within communities. We now have figures that show that the uptake is 53 per cent for those who have a first child and 77 per cent for those who have a second child and that, on average, the uptake is 67 per cent. The approach in the first flurry of using partner organisations to

communicate information about the best start grant is now embedded, but we are sitting with a 67 per cent uptake rate. What is the strategy to push that uptake rate higher still? That is why I referred to Haringey Council, which has tried to identify individual families that might benefit. Can we expect to see that approach from the Scottish Government?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We will certainly look at every endeavour that we can in order to do that. It is really important to look at the issue over a longer period of time. We have had information about only the best start grant pregnancy and baby payment so far, because it has been running the longest. That uptake has gone well, and the payments are going better than the previous payments under the DWP, but we are certainly not resting on our laurels.

One of the challenges is, of course, that the agency and the payments are brand new. I ask committee members to cast their minds back to our initial carers allowance supplement payments. Our first challenge was to introduce people to the agency and to the fact that they were going to get that supplement and that it was not a scam. We need to build up a lot of knowledge in stakeholders and the general public.

I point the committee to my recent visits to Inzievar primary school and Holy Name primary school, where we were promoting the closure of the application window for school-age payments. Many of the mums whom I met that day knew about the best start grant and had applied for it and found the process very easy, but there were some whom we still had not been able to reach and get that message to.

As people apply for the best start grant when their child reaches early learning or the school-age payment, we will see the take-up increasing, because it will become known about and talked about at the school gates. Word of mouth is exceptionally important. I spoke to mums who had told other mums that applying for the grant was really easy, that it took five minutes to fill in the application form, and that the payment got through very quickly. Word of mouth is absolutely vital in building trust with people who have not heard about the agency, never mind the benefits. We have the challenge of having had a standing start in that people had not heard of some of the new payments.

I point the committee to the material with which we have raised the awareness of all MSPs this week. We sent out to MSPs information about the proactive campaigns that we are running and material that is available to our stakeholders, and we have encouraged MSPs and MPs to feed that information through to their constituents.

The Convener: That is welcome.

Young people in a couple of families in my constituency get the young carers grant because of information that the Scottish Government sent to me. Although I welcome that, the uptake for the best start grant currently sits at 67 per cent. Should we anticipate the figure being higher next year? I understand that there is no specific target, but would you naturally expect a higher figure? I will get to spillover in a second.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I certainly hope that uptake will be higher. We have not set targets for the benefit's uptake because doing so is very difficult without a baseline to measure from. We are, in effect, setting the baseline at that point. I know from speaking to people in the agency that everyone always wants to do more in relation to marketing and to learning whether we need to do anything else, such as change the application forms once they have been used for a period in order to get user feedback and ensure that we have got the process correct all the way through.

I repeat that there should be no barriers. There is no point in running a marketing campaign if people find it too difficult to apply. We are always learning as we go, and we are keen to ensure that we build the number up. I hope that uptake of the best start grant increases: we are determined to ensure that we do everything we can to get in touch with everybody who is eligible for it.

The Convener: Let us move to spillover. I know that some of my colleagues will want to ask questions on it. Our briefing paper says that, in October 2017, the Scottish Government ran the "You've earned it" campaign on pension credit, which was targeted at over-65s. The campaign was relatively small—there were 400 calls to the helpline. It sign-posted people to Citizens Advice Scotland, not to the Government, which was supporting it to maximise benefits for over-65s more generally, which is positive. Do you have any outcomes? Four hundred calls is a relatively small cohort, I must say, but it is an example of the Scottish Government dipping its toes in the water in relation to uptake in Scotland of reserved benefits.

The committee has heard concerns about spillover. We know that it can take two forms. First, a policy change in the Scottish Government might increase uptake, which it would then have to pay for. That is clearly understood, and is an entitlement issue. There could be, as we have talked about, a benefits drive for behavioural change in people who do not normally apply. That could start a financial claim from the United Kingdom Government on the Scottish Government for spillover. We have been told that that would happen only in exceptional circumstances and that

both Governments would have to agree before it happened.

Understandably, there has been a lack of clarity around that. We have sensed nervousness from various partners about whether the Scottish Government should go forward with such a process without that clarity. You mentioned that you had written to Thérèse Coffey, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, in relation to spillover.

Other committee members will have their views, but I would like to see a more co-ordinated partnership campaign to drive up all benefits, whether they be devolved or reserved. Did the secretary of state give any positive feedback that could give the Scottish Government the reassurance that it will not be penalised for benefit uptake campaigns relating to reserved benefits?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I have not yet received her reply. I expect it in due course and I will inform the committee of that. The tone of my letter to the secretary of state was that she and I have a joint responsibility to ensure that people who are entitled to a benefit receive the payments.

We are taking that seriously through our benefit take-up strategy. If we move to encourage take-up of reserved benefits—because of what we do to increase take-up of the Scottish child payment—we will need to be clear that there will be no detrimental financial implications for the Scottish Government. You saw from evidence from the DWP that the two Governments are on different wavelengths when it comes to proactive benefit take-up strategies. I am keen that we do not allow those differences to get in the way of the Governments working together as well as possible, in order to ensure that people up here get the money to which they are entitled.

We might have different views on the need for a benefit take-up strategy and particular campaigns, but the Governments can share the understanding that it is important that people receive the benefits to which they are entitled. That is the tone that I have taken in encouraging the secretary of state, to ensure that she is of the same mind that I am, in order that, as we move to encouraging take-up of—for example—the Scottish child payment, it will have no financial impact on the Scottish Government.

I am aware that there have been different interpretations of the fiscal framework and of spillover from witnesses and organisations. It is important to stress that those are interpretations. I am keen to ensure that I have the same interpretation as the secretary of state on that, so that we can move forward with encouraging Scottish child payment take-up. That joint

interpretation is very important, as we can see from the scale of the financial challenge that the Scottish Government would face if we had a different interpretation.

For example, if the Scottish working-age benefit case load rose by 10 percentage points, that would increase expenditure on benefits by £540 million in Scotland. That is a seriously large number that would have implications for the rest of the Scottish budget. We need to move forward with a balanced budget. That is why a shared understanding is important. I hope that the secretary of state will appreciate where we are coming from on that, and that we will be able to move forward jointly on that basis.

The Convener: That is a staggering figure. We are getting different interpretations from different individuals—all of them well respected. If the price could be £540 million, I understand the nervousness. However, our understanding was that it would have to be agreed by the UK and the Scottish Government that the behavioural impact had caused spillover, leading to that cash grab. Is that your understanding?

I am also conscious that the fiscal framework is about to be renegotiated. To put it diplomatically, the mood music from the Boris Johnson Government means that the UK Government is now more different from the Scottish Government than other UK Governments have been. Is there concern that that could impact on renegotiation of the fiscal framework and on the interpretation of spillover?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Again, I stress the point that those are interpretations, and that the only way that spillover can be resolved is through agreement between the Scottish and UK Governments. That discussion is on-going in the joint exchequer committee. I must be mindful of the risk of policy spillover. We could have a policy that the Scottish Government does not think will have a spillover effect and I could move forward with it, but if in the future the UK Government were to say that it has a different opinion, both Governments would have to work through that challenge. Even if there was a compromise, the number could be substantial.

The risk of spillover might be reasonably small but, if it were to happen, the implications could be very great. Therefore, I am keen to work with the UK Government—directly with the secretary of state—to see whether we can break up the logjam that we are in at the moment.

10:00

A review of the fiscal framework is going on, and there are discussions within the joint exchequer committee about the process for behavioural

spillovers, but we cannot wait for that to happen. Because of the timetable for the Scottish payment, I require clarification in a different timeframe from other parts of Government.

I am hopeful that we will get an understanding from the Department of Work and Pensions about the specific interpretation, so that we can move forward jointly.

The Convener: The committee agrees that our constituents just want the money that they need and to which they are entitled, irrespective of whether it is a devolved or reserved benefit.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning, cabinet secretary. In your answers to the convener, you have covered a chunk of the policy area that I am interested in. Other members share my concern—you do, too—about the risk. The risk is high if there is no shared and clear understanding before there is any policy spillover, and there is risk to the social security budget and the wider Scottish budget. That is serious. Every time I ask the question of different people, I get a different answer. It is confusing for the committee.

However, I remain alarmed. I am working my way through this to check that I have the same understanding as the cabinet secretary. There are three things. First, when there is new Scottish Government policy, it will be clear that the Scottish Government, not the UK Government, will pay for that new policy. Secondly, there could be increased uptake of reserved benefits, with no policy spillover. In that scenario, is it your understanding that the UK Government would pay for uptake?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is my understanding that an increase in uptake of a reserved benefit should not be part of the spillover, but my understanding is not enough to reassure me that we can just crack on and ensure that that happens. In my letter to the secretary of state, I am trying to ensure that we have a shared understanding of that matter.

Pauline McNeill: Yes. There would be no policy change; you are talking just about existing benefits. However, there might be an increase in the number of people who get their benefits—people who should have been getting them in the first place.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Indeed. The challenge might be if we have a policy on benefit take-up. If I have a policy to increase take-up of reserved benefits, is that a policy change? I do not think that it is.

Pauline McNeill: Therefore, it is still a grey area.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That is the challenge of the grey area. My interpretation is that that

would not be spillover. I want to move ahead on that basis, because maximising uptake of the Scottish child payment could make a staggering difference. However, I repeat that the implications of that grey area and our having a different interpretation from that of the UK Government are too stark. There is an agreement between the two Governments on how to deal with direct spillovers: if we have a policy change that impacts on passported benefits, that is a direct spillover effect. However, there is not a current agreement on behavioural spillover. That is what I am trying to get sorted quickly, so that everyone is reading from the same page, and we are not talking just about interpretations and hoping that we are correct.

Pauline McNeill: Exactly. Therefore, you need that understanding before we get to the point of having a campaign.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Yes. Again, that is not the only thing that will impact on take-up of the Scottish child payment, but it is an important aspect of it. In due course, we will get a reply from the secretary of state that I hope will move us along.

Pauline McNeill: So that I understand the matter, I am trying to separate increased uptake of reserved benefits from the issue of the child payment. That payment is a matter for the Scottish budget, but through promoting it, there could be policy spillover, because if we encourage people to take that payment up they will notice that they have not had other benefits. Is that a third, separate grey area?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We could argue that that is a behavioural spillover. That is an area where there is no agreement between the UK Governments. Again, I hope that it is not insurmountable.

Pauline McNeill: When will you get that shared understanding? Do you have any timescale in mind or any meetings arranged?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: No. We are due to have another meeting of the joint ministerial working group on welfare at the end of February, so that is another opportunity for us to discuss the matter face to face. Those meetings are useful for discussing things at ministerial level; if it comes to it, we manage to move things along reasonably quickly. Again, I say that we have not heard from the secretary of state on the matter. I need to give her time to consider it properly and get back to us. I will let the committee know about that. We still have time to hear back on that and, if we have a shared interpretation, for it to have no impact on how we move forward with the Scottish child payment. At the moment, the timeframes do not bother me.

Pauline McNeill: Thank you.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): We are clear about what direct policy spillover means and there is agreement on that between the Governments. However, we have spoken about the lack of an agreement on behavioural spillover. I am glad to hear that the Scottish Government's view is that a campaign to increase uptake of a reserved benefit would not be covered by a behavioural spillover. Given the absence of an agreement between Governments on the impact of a behavioural change, is there a possibility for the UK Government to make a claim on the Scottish budget?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: There absolutely is the possibility that the UK Government could do that. There being no agreement does not mean that one Government could not claim that something has happened. That is why I am keen to move more quickly than the joint exchequer committee and the review of the entire fiscal framework. Our timetables are different. While that remains a possibility, it would be useful to move forward and get that problem lanced and reach a joint understanding.

Mark Griffin: The ideal scenario would be that both Governments agree and we move forward quickly to get people what they are entitled to. If no agreement can be reached, what is the Government's position? Would you rule out a benefit uptake campaign for reserved benefits?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We would have to consider a campaign carefully because of possible implications for the budget. The risk of it happening is small. The UK Government would have to submit that claim and there would be discussions between the Scottish and UK Governments about the implications. I keep going back to the fact that the implications, if spillover is agreed to have happened, are very significant. It would have to have a bearing on what we are looking at, because it would be exceptionally difficult to run a campaign when the financial implications could be so great. We are talking about a variation in some benefits' take-up of 1 per cent, which is about £30 million. It is a substantial challenge to build that into a demand-led budget that we are still moving forward with. It is important for us to look at that seriously and to analyse the risks and implications.

Mark Griffin: Thank you. I have no further questions on that.

The Convener: Members will want to come back on other aspects of that. I think that Keith Brown wanted to come in on that area.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I was going to come in on the automaticity issue.

The Convener: That is easy for you to say. Are there any more questions on spillover?

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): You have gone into some detail. I have a question linked to what you have said. We are aware that many of the devolved benefits will be linked in some way to reserved benefits, so clearly there is a strong relationship when it comes to take-up. I have asked before about joint working to promote benefits and to break down barriers so that people can access benefits. There are local advisers who can talk about reserved benefits and direct people to those, and we could say the same about jobcentres and the DWP. Am I right in thinking that a joint agreement by both parties to promote benefits and to support people to access them would de-risk the chance of spillover?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is important that local delivery client advisers do not simply tell people what their devolved benefits are and send them away to find out about other benefits by themselves. We are keen to make sure there are warm handovers between Social Security Scotland staff both locally and nationally and bodies such as Jobcentre Plus. Communication is going well. We see it working when somebody phones Social Security Scotland but is calling about a reserved benefit, or when somebody phones the DWP but is calling about a devolved benefit.

I hope that we will see local jobcentres being able to promote and advise clients about the job start payment. They will see those individuals. Seamless working is very important and it works both ways. It is not the job of local delivery staff to provide pre-application support for reserved benefits as they will for devolved ones, but it is important that we do not think only about our own responsibility without taking an interest in the client's overall journey through the wider social security system.

I like to think that we could have a joint understanding. That may not lessen the risk of spillover. A joint understanding and an appreciation of reserved benefits will assist us but will not de-risk it entirely, because it will not stop the UK Government being able to come in and make that claim. The risk is reduced, but it will not go away entirely until we get that joint agreement.

Michelle Ballantyne: Are you looking at working more together on that?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We are always looking to work together. We are not just starting now. Ever since the best start grant came in for the pregnancy and baby payment, there has been a warm handover between agencies for people who phone Social Security Scotland but have a query about a reserved benefit. The jobcentre is

again the best example: we look very seriously for every benefit that comes in at what material would be in jobcentres and what training the work coaches would need to assist people to get that information. That has been working well.

There is still more to do. The job start payment will be the next test. I would be happy to update the committee on our discussions with the DWP about the job start payment to show how that is working in practice when we launch it.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I think that that is clear. It is just that the most recent statistics show that more than 3,000 applications for best start—about 5 per cent of all applications—came from outside Scotland. That may also happen the other way around, with people in Scotland applying for a DWP benefit. A clear referral process should be in place. I would hate anyone to miss out because they had gone in the wrong direction.

10:15

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Both Governments are taking that responsibility very seriously. Referral pathways are being developed with organisations that will point people to where they should go—a kind of tell-us-once approach, if you like. The issue of people applying for the wrong benefit—the cases in which people should have applied for a devolved benefit but instead applied for one that is available in the rest of the UK—is being taken very seriously by both Governments. I stress again that, although we have our political differences with the DWP on a variety of issues, I am content that we are working well at the operational level and through the programme. I will give an example of what we do. When we are designing our system and what happens for people, we make sure that we do not just tell them that they are not eligible without signing what they should do after that. It is our responsibility to make people's journey as seamless as possible.

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): I want to touch on the issue of people who are hard to reach and are still out of the system. What more can be done in that space to encourage people who have, for whatever reason, missed the messages or the campaign? Would using relevant partner agencies work better? Has any analysis been done on people who are harder to reach that shows that the best way to reach them is through relevant partner agencies? Is there an evidence base for that and, if so, can more of it be done?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is important to look at the direct contact that we can have with clients, whether that is through marketing or other initiatives, and at the importance of using already-trusted stakeholders. As I say, we are near the

beginning and coming from a standing start as a new agency with new payments, but we need to look at how we can amplify our message quickly. We can do that by reassuring trusted organisations that we are serious about removing barriers for people, who will get a good experience with the agency, and the organisations can pass that on to their network of members, clients and so on. Whether they are carers organisations, young carers groups or funeral directors, they are a touch point for people who are already on a journey. It is not people's responsibility to come off that journey and somehow find out about Social Security Scotland and our benefits; it is about how we can link into the journey that a person is already on. The touch point may be the national health service, a trusted local group of carers or people who have been bereaved. All the points where people already trust someone are important for us.

Word of mouth is important, because we are able to demonstrate that we have people's trust and that the experience has been a good one. With the best will in the world, you could run a multimillion-pound campaign to encourage people to take up universal credit and I doubt that it would have the impact that the money spent might suggest, because people are fearful of the system, find it difficult to apply for and are worried about its financial implications. It is not enough just to tell people about it; they need to be reassured by people whom they trust that the journey will be simple and the outcome will be fair.

Shona Robison: Do you think that there is a universal understanding of that among the partner agencies? To take the NHS as an example, there appears to be good practice in some areas, with health visitors seeing it as their role to make sure that people understand about benefit entitlement. However, on one of the committee's visits, we got the sense that that is not universally the case. Is there more work to be done with those partner agencies, particularly the NHS, to make sure that the practice is more common across the piece and that health professionals—any professional who has contact with someone who may be missing out on their entitlement—sees it as their role to help that person to get that?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is very important that we share that good practice, whether in the NHS or in councils. For example, there is some fantastic work going on to ensure that mums are receiving information about the best start grant pregnancy and baby payment when they go for their midwifery appointments. I recently visited another excellent example of good practice in Glasgow, whereby everybody who registers a birth is asked whether they are aware of the best start grant. Somebody may have missed all the brochures that were available during their pregnancy and when they were in hospital having

their baby, but they all have to register the birth. Glasgow City Council's approach of having that sense check again and providing information to assist people when they are doing something that is part of what already happens is a great example of how something can be built into a system. I hope that other local authorities will look at that good practice with interest.

The approach is the same whether it is the NHS or other organisations; it involves looking at what can be done at different stages. It is obviously the agency's responsibility to ensure that we have materials for the handover, so that there is a simple process that is clear and understandable for people. In Glasgow, the technology is available for people to apply online immediately after they have registered the birth.

Shona Robison: It sometimes feels as though it is just about simple things that everybody should be doing. Are you confident that other authorities or health boards will take up the obvious things that are demonstrably simple and that work?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We have close relations with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and we are ensuring that that good practice is being shared. Local authorities are very interested in it and some of them have approached Glasgow for more information about what it is doing. That does not mean that the practice will be universal across the 32 local authorities. There may be other mechanisms that some local authorities feel will work better for them than the Glasgow model, but it demonstrates what we can do to move things on. As you say, it is not a big change; it is something that can be fitted readily into what a council is already doing, but it can make an enormous difference to the client.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am sure that others will come in on this issue, but I want to ask about the automation of benefits. Is there anything more that you can say about the Government's ambitions in that area and about the scope for working on it with local authorities or the UK Government?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am interested in taking that forward as much as possible and we will continue to explore it. I stress again that it will develop over time as the agency moves forward. There may be aspects of automation that do not exist at this point but that we will look at for the future. It is not an easy task. It is exceptionally complex, not only in terms of building the programme and technology to allow it to happen but in terms of the information sharing responsibilities that come with it. Information sharing with local authorities is something that the agency is proactively looking to do, but that will require 32 different information-sharing agreements so that we can have a two-way

information-sharing system with each local authority.

The evidence that the committee gathered on automation was very interesting. It was not black and white, with everybody thinking that it is fantastic and something that we should look at. People also recognised that there are sometimes risks with automation and that it takes away the human factor—the ability to have human contact. We need to look at the principle of automation, which I am personally absolutely bought into, and to challenge it against the practicalities of how it would work, what it would mean for the client and whether it would genuinely make it easier for the client to get everything that they are entitled to.

Dr Allan: You almost touched on this point, but it came through in the evidence from some witnesses that you might find it easier to deal with local authorities than with the DWP, specifically on information sharing and automation. Do you share that view?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: No. I think that they are just different challenges.

We require to share information with the DWP all the time. We do that at the moment for pretty much every case that comes through the agency. Again, it is just a matter of working out the interface for that, and ensuring that the legal channels are all in place. We do not have a difficult relationship with the DWP on that; it is just a matter of ensuring that legal and technical requirements are in place. Sometimes that might take longer than either side would like, but there is a shared understanding. Both Governments appreciate that there are joint clients, particularly when it comes to disability assistance. We have a very serious responsibility to ensure that we are sharing information as much as possible.

Dr Allan: You mentioned that there is a good relationship in many ways but that there are challenges. Specifically, can you give a picture of those challenges? What would need to be overcome, in the short to medium term, to ensure that automation becomes a more realistic possibility in more areas?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: A lot of automation rests with local authorities rather than with the DWP. Local authorities run many of the schemes that we would need to have in place, such as school clothing grants.

With the DWP, it is slightly different. We share information at the moment. We will have to move into an agreement with the DWP if we wish to share more. The most obvious example is data on the over-sixes who would be eligible for the Scottish child payment. We do not have that data at the moment, and there is no interface to allow it to be shared. Although the DWP has the data, and

we would like it, it is not just a matter of the DWP agreeing that it would be good for us to have it. We would have to agree on the interface for that to happen, as well as any legal boundaries. Those are the challenges that we need to work through.

Keith Brown: When I hear the word “automation”, I just think of a big machine in which you pull a lever and something happens. I am talking more about automaticity, where something happens automatically.

You have mentioned a number of ways in which different agencies or individuals can help take-up. The committee heard last week that the UK Government has no take-up strategy and, unlike the Scottish Government, has laid no onus on itself to ensure increased take-up by writing that into law. It has done no substantive research on take-up, including the reasons why people do not take up benefits.

I have been worrying away at this for a while. People always say not to make the perfect the enemy of the good, but we should not make the good the enemy of the perfect. Is it not possible to start with how it could be, which is that everybody would be proactively told what benefits they were entitled to, with automaticity around that? We would still have to leave with the individual the autonomy as to what they would do, but everybody would be told, in the same way and with the same persistence that people used to pursue us over payment protection insurance or minor car crashes that we were never involved in.

We heard one encouraging comment last week from the DWP about its thoughts on changing the Digital Economy Act 2017 to help get past some of the obstacles involved with the general data protection regulation, while still complying with GDPR. Is there scope for the Scottish Government to get involved with that?

I understand that you want to constantly improve, but benefits are going to keep on changing. Different agencies will become responsible for them. People will keep on changing. You will always be trying to get that bit better. Is a quantum leap not possible, so as to get a much bigger improvement?

10:30

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I will stick to the word “automation”, because I find it easier to say than Keith Brown’s alternative. However, I take his point about the issue. It is important that we give people as many opportunities as possible. At the beginning, if people are on the Scottish child payment, we can tell them that they will be eligible for a best start grant and encourage them to apply. Although that is good, we are interested in whether we can move that a step forward for full

roll-out and instead say to people, “You are on the Scottish child payment, you are therefore entitled to the best start grant and we will pay that to you automatically without you having to make an application”.

There are different levels to automation: you can prompt, but you can also have the ability to read across the information and say that, because a person is entitled to this, they are definitely entitled to that and you will pay it to them directly. We often hear GDPR being used as a reason not to do things. Although the data protection legislation is particularly important, it is there as an enabler—to ensure safe information sharing—rather than as a blocker. That is how it is intended and how it should be considered. It is about how you do what can be done within the law—whether on data protection or elsewhere—in sharing that information in the best interests of the client.

We obviously need to make absolutely sure that we safeguard clients’ information as much as possible. An important point in relation to dignity, fairness and respect is that we are holding the client’s details and data on their behalf—it is not our data as such. It is really important that we look at how—with a client’s permission—we can passport information to, for example, local authorities and the DWP, to allow that encouragement through a prompt. Keith Brown is correct to say that one prompt is, perhaps, not enough. That is, it is not enough to say that we have sent them a letter, and it is up to them what they now do with that; it is about how we continue to do that. In addition, his example of the persistence that is used in other aspects and walks of life, which we have not seen to date in encouraging people to apply for what they are entitled to, is an important one.

Keith Brown: The cabinet secretary mentioned the example—one that I have used previously—of somebody having a baby, and that being when they have to interact with the state in registering the birth. People also interact with the state when they get married or enter a civil partnership in a way that provides the state with information that might tell it automatically that they are entitled to certain benefits—probably reserved benefits in that case. Benefits are also applicable when a person dies. The state has that information, but there is no co-ordinated basis for collecting it. I have proposed that it might be possible for an information technology system to cope with that kind of approach, and we have heard different responses from different witnesses.

I note with interest that such an approach is being launched by the Improvement Service—with Wallet Services—to help disabled people to access entitlements. It is doing a proof of concept, which mentions some of the stuff that I have been

talking about, such as stopping the need for people to have to continually come back or repeatedly provide sensitive personal information.

It is perfectly possible to have safe public agencies and places for information—as I think that the project calls it—to get a complete picture of somebody’s entitlement, with minimal involvement from the person themselves. It is also possible for the state to have to do the heavy lifting of making sure that people are aware of every benefit that they are entitled to. However, there has been scepticism pretty much across the board from the witnesses that the committee has heard from. It would be good to know that the Scottish Government would be willing to consider that kind of proof of concept and pilot to see how we can get well beyond where we are.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I will certainly take an interest in the pilots that are being discussed to see how they are developed. Keith Brown mentioned a really important point about people continuously having to prove something. One example of that is blue badges, whereby a person has to prove—usually with the original copy of their disability living allowance entitlement letter—that they are still eligible for something that they were previously eligible for.

Clearly, there are areas in the system in which we are not making things as easy as they could be—and by “we” I mean public agencies in general. Such difficulties often come down to information sharing. One example is considering how local authorities could use the information that Social Security Scotland holds about individuals to test their eligibility for blue badges without those individuals being required to find their original eligibility confirmation letters, and how such a process could be signposted directly to local authorities. We are working on that example and others to see how we might take them forward.

I do not think that we could adopt a big-bang approach, whereby we could expect all such pieces of information to materialise in a single database at once. However, as we move forward, especially with the running of Social Security Scotland, at every single point of the process we should challenge ourselves by asking what more could be done to remove other barriers. Such barriers might relate to people’s receipt of not only the devolved benefits dealt with by Social Security Scotland but the passported benefits or entitlements that they might move on to. Such things will develop over time, but we should be able to move forward with them. We will not get everything correct on day 1, and we will need to keep challenging ourselves to remove barriers for people.

The Convener: Cabinet secretary, I have recently written to you on behalf of constituents on

the subject of Glasgow City Council's administration of the blue badge scheme. In my correspondence, I made the point that information on people's underlying entitlements could be collected when they move over to or claim the new Scottish disability assistance benefit. Local authorities could just ask Social Security Scotland for confirmation of that information without any passing of data other than a simple assertion from the agency that such individuals could get badges in those areas. That would be preferable to the current process, in which people such as my constituents have to send local authorities a lot of deeply personal information, which, quite frankly, they do not want to have to share. They simply want their entitlement to be recognised, but the problem is that the information sits somewhere else.

Can we expect to see such changes as the new Scottish disability assistance is rolled out and embedded in the system? Might there be a positive reply to my letter?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I always attempt to give a positive reply to you, convener—and, indeed to everyone else, I hasten to add.

We are considering such an approach very seriously. However, not all aspects of it are within the gift of the Scottish Government; some relate to how local authorities administer particular schemes. In the agency programme we are challenging ourselves to consider how we could design the process to make it as simple as possible so that information could be shared if the correct agreements were in place to allow that to happen.

That approach should work not just for the client, although that is exceptionally important because, as you have rightly pointed out, convener, the less trauma and difficulty that exist, the better. It should also work well for local authorities, because if, at national level, we could make it easier for them to share such information and get what they require, that would remove some of the challenges of administering the system. We are actively looking at that approach, and I am very interested in it.

The Convener: Excellent. I look forward to receiving the reply to my letter.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Good morning, cabinet secretary, and thank you for coming to our meeting.

I have a couple of questions. The first is on your aim to make the process as easy as possible, especially in relation to applications and the first bits of advice that people get. You have already discussed that in your evidence.

In your note on the relevant regulations, which were laid last week, you said that you do not think that the Government will incur extra costs in funding advice shops or other agencies. I appreciate that this question might seem slightly left field, given that we are discussing benefit take-up, but if we are encouraging more people to take up benefits, will more of them not then go to citizens advice bureaux and advice shops? More staff will have to be employed there, so we will have extra costs to cover. Will you say a wee bit about that? If you would prefer to come back at a later stage and reply more fully, I would be happy with that.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We have an absolute responsibility as a government to increase benefit take-up and to make that as simple as possible. That responsibility is not just for the clients; it is also for the organisations who provide that advice.

One way we hope to do that is through the benefit take-up fund. It is closed for applications and we will make an announcement on that soon. The fund will ensure that organisations are in a good place with training, or with their own materials, or with the online advice hubs that they use for staff and volunteers, so that they are ready for the changes that we are going to make. I recognise that, because we are changing the system, there is a requirement for agencies such as Citizens Advice Scotland to work to adapt. We have recognised that and put that fund in place.

The other important part is the pre-application support that people can get directly from Social Security Scotland. We have more than 100 staff in place, and that number will grow this year. I recently visited local staff in Barrhead. Voluntary groups are embedded and not in isolation. That again creates a warm handover that means that somebody who comes in to discuss something can be directed to Social Security Scotland staff. Those staff will also do outreach work in myriad places in each local authority. We are taking the implications for third sector organisations seriously. That is why the fund is in place.

We also take seriously the obligation for the agency to directly provide pre-application support. People can easily phone the agency and speak directly to client advisors to ask for advice. People can quickly get through to someone and discuss a query.

With all that in place, we are not just launching benefits and leaving everybody else to pick up the pieces to explain them: we are also doing it ourselves.

Jeremy Balfour: You say in your note that the agency is not independent. It has a different role to other agencies.

Carers allowance needs to keep pace with the increase in the national minimum wage, so that carers do not lose allowances when the minimum wage increases. Will you look at that to make sure that carers do not lose out?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We deliver the carers allowance through an agency agreement with the DWP. That requires the Social Security Scotland aspects to work in tandem with DWP areas. Until we move to our devolved Scottish carers assistance, we must work within the agency entitlements that we have with the DWP. We have that agency agreement to allow us to put in the carers allowance supplement at the earliest opportunity.

We are absolutely committed to working with carers organisations to look at what they would require from a carers allowance in the future. That is one area that has been brought up. We will have a full public consultation on that; we will ask for advice from the disability and carers expert advisory group. I am sure that that is something that will be brought up as we move forward with that consultation.

Jeremy Balfour: Is there no guaranteed link between the minimum wage increase and an increase in carers allowance?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Because of the agency agreement, we follow what the DWP is doing. Unless the DWP changes that aspect, there can be no change until we move forward with our carers assistance package.

Jeremy Balfour: When you take over the supplement, will that guarantee be there?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We are holding the public consultation so that people can tell us what they want. That is obviously coming through strongly, as are other aspects. Let us have the public consultation on that and see what comes back.

10:45

The Convener: I have some questions about how we fund welfare rights advice and support across Scotland. Do you have any idea what the global figure is for the spend on that in Scotland? Local authorities, citizens advice bureaux, DWP work coaches, a variety of valuable independent advice sector agencies in all 32 local authorities and, increasingly, Social Security Scotland advisers all provide advice and support. Do you know what the global spend on that is, or at least what the Scottish Government is investing?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I can certainly provide information in writing about the Scottish Government expenditure to support that provision. As you say, convener, the landscape of how rights

advice is funded in Scotland is exceptionally complex. Funding does not simply come from the Scottish Government. It can come from local authorities, and for some projects it can come from lottery funding. Through not my portfolio but Aileen Campbell's and Jamie Hepburn's portfolios, the Scottish Government provides support to various agencies including Citizens Advice Scotland, the Child Poverty Action Group and One Parent Families Scotland. If it will assist the committee, I can provide information in writing about the Scottish Government's support, even if it does not sit in my portfolio.

The Convener: That will assist the committee—thank you. There is always a tension between a multilayered, complementary approach to welfare rights advice and assistance and a fragmented system that lacks co-ordination. Those two expressions could be used to describe the same system, depending on our point of view.

Given that we now have a national strategy for devolved benefits in Scotland, who will take it forward at local authority level? Unsurprisingly, citizens advice forums and local authorities would probably both say that they are best placed to co-ordinate that locally. Who should co-ordinate what our welfare advice and support strategy looks like at local authority level?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: There is not one simple answer to that. It will vary across the country depending on the circumstances of the area and the agencies that are on the ground there. From the perspective of the Government and what we are achieving with Social Security Scotland, we need to work with what is on the ground and with the partner agencies regardless of who they are and how they are set up. There is an important obligation on our local delivery leads to work within the communities that already exist in different parts of Scotland and to embed themselves in that community landscape. That will be different depending on which part of the country they are in and who takes the lead in certain circumstances.

It is not the case that one size fits all. Our obligation is to ensure that, regardless of the approach, our local delivery leads play a serious role in it.

The Convener: Okay. There are clear reasons for the question. We heard from Richard Gass of Rights Advice Scotland, who is Glasgow based, and he said:

“The welfare rights advice sector is stretched to capacity.”—[*Official Report, Social Security Committee*, 21 November 2019; c 28.]

There are additional burdens because of the fast-evolving devolved Scottish benefits. There is some financial support this year in relation to that,

although I am keen to know whether that financial support will carry on into future financial years. However, if we cannot map out what advice and support exists at local authority level for benefits uptake and the like, how the heck will we know whether we are spending enough money, how stretched the sector is or what additional moneys we need to invest?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I again point to the importance of the local delivery leads in that. On the ground, in every community in Scotland, we have not just client advisers to give direct pre-application support, but people at different levels of seniority who are there to work within the landscape, whatever it is. We have given ourselves the challenge of making sure that our local delivery leads are aware of what is happening in their areas and are working well within that landscape. We also have a stakeholder take-up reference group, which is looking at take-up at national level. It includes COSLA, the NHS, the third sector and so on.

On the funding, we will see how successful it is this year and what difference it can make. It is there to ensure that organisations are ready for the transition to the new benefits. Once they are in place and the organisations are ready and know what our new benefits look like, we will have to review whether that is the right way to support agencies or whether there is a different way to do it.

The Convener: I am not trying to create an issue that is not there, but does that mean that there will or will not be funding in the next financial year? When the benefits are embedded, will all that funding be cut, or will it be tapered off gradually? What is the Scottish Government's thinking on that?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The funding is here as one-off funding as we move forward with the transition. Once the benefits are in place and organisations are no longer required to train their staff up on what is happening with new benefits coming in or what the changes are, we will be in a different place. It is about keeping an eye on the requirements of organisations as we move through the different steps of the journey with the devolution of social security. It will not be the same every year. Organisations will face different challenges depending on whether we are a couple of years away from launching a benefit, whether we are just about to launch a benefit or whether a benefit is in place and we have moved to a steady state.

The Convener: The committee has spoken about a one-Scotland approach to benefit entitlement and uptake and to welfare support and advice so that, whether it is a local authority entitlement, a Scottish Government social security

system entitlement or a UK DWP entitlement, there will be no wrong door and people will get advice and support.

As I mentioned, a variety of organisations deliver advice, including the NHS, which has an increasingly important role to play—Shona Robison made that point earlier. I do not want to create a bureaucracy, but I still get the feeling that there is a need for a mapping exercise to be done at local authority level. Will the Social Security Scotland local delivery leads co-ordinate local authorities, the third sector, the NHS and health and social care partnerships to map all that, including how it is financed, be it through the UK Government, the Scottish Government, the lottery, the NHS, local authorities or integration joint boards?

I agree that there has been a multilayered approach, but how can we make sure that provision is co-ordinated at local level without mapping it out? Has that mapping begun? Is it the responsibility of the local leads that you mentioned?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: No. The local delivery leads are there to be part of the community that already exists in local areas. They are absolutely not there to come in as new kids on the block and co-ordinate people who have been there, in many instances, for decades as part of the community. It is important that they fit in seamlessly to what is happening in the community. It is not their responsibility to come in and take over or co-ordinate things that organisations already have in place. There are already means of co-ordinating support and information sharing between organisations. That will vary among local authorities.

The Convener: That is helpful. I would appreciate it if we could get some detail on what is and is not funded by the Scottish Government and partner agencies so that we can get a better picture of what is happening across Scotland.

I apologise to committee members—I was asking my questions because I did not realise that they still had questions. I had better bring in my deputy convener first, followed by Alison Johnstone.

Pauline McNeill: I will be brief. I have read the information in our briefing about where you believe that automation will and will not be possible. To be honest, however, I am concerned about what you have ruled out. Our briefing states:

“Perth and Kinross Council and Rights Advice Scotland note that had CTR”—

that is, council tax reduction—

“been included as a qualifying benefit for Scottish social security, local authorities would be able to do more to encourage take-up”.

It adds:

“There would also be no need for verification with the DWP.”

However, it is suggested that

“the Scottish Government disagreed saying it is not a consistent proxy for low income.”

I am sure that there is a perfectly good explanation for that view, but what does that leave us with? Which passported benefits could we focus on and automate?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I would certainly not like to leave the committee with the impression that there is a closed door on that or that there are aspects that we are not looking at. I go back to the way that I described it to Keith Brown. There is not a big-bang approach whereby we will look at what we could automate on day 1 and then walk away. I am very interested in automation and in what we can do in that regard with our links with local authorities, because it is not all within the Scottish Government’s gift. Once we have the information-sharing agreements with local authorities in place, it will be up to each local authority to determine what it wants to automate. I hope that that will happen and that local authorities will see that there are benefits for them, just as there will be benefits for the agency.

There is not a closed door in respect of looking at those aspects. Some will be more challenging than others and some will be more expensive to implement than others. It is more the case that there will be different priorities, rather than there being a closed door to anything.

Pauline McNeill: I am happy to hear that, and I understand that it has consistently been your position. As I understand it, however, the Government’s position is that you disagree that council tax reduction is a consistent proxy for low income. I wonder why you have ruled that out, because it seems a good place to start.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: When we looked at the best start grant, certain organisations thought that that should be part of the eligibility. You are right to say that one of the reasons for council tax reduction not being part of the eligibility is that it is not a good proxy for low-income households. The challenge when we were considering eligibility was to ask what else we could put in place to make sure that we widened the net as much as possible. Other people might take a different view on that, but I am certainly still satisfied that we have moved the eligibility to ensure that we maximise the number of low-income households within that.

Alison Johnstone: We all warmly welcome the £600,000 of funding to support the take-up strategy, but some groups and organisations have expressed concerns about how it was arrived at. I would like to understand a bit more about where the figure came from and how it was decided on.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As with all the aspects, it was my call or my responsibility, when I looked at that issue with officials, to ensure that we had something in place that could make a difference. The funding, which is substantial, is there to deal with the particular issue that organisations will be required to make changes in order to continue to provide the level of support that they have been providing. The decision to put the fund in place and the decision on what the level would be were taken in Government, as all such decisions are.

Alison Johnstone: If it becomes apparent that more funding is necessary, will you be willing to consider that?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: There will be further discussion on the budget today, and we look forward to future processes. I am sure that, if other parties feel that we should be doing more on that or any other aspect of social security, it can be deliberated on during the budget discussions.

Alison Johnstone: Engender raises in its written submission a concern that

“86% of cuts to the tax and benefits system will come from women’s resources.”

It stresses the importance of understanding what is going on in relation to protected characteristics and equalities impacts, stating:

“Without equalities data it is impossible to measure the success of efforts to target take-up.”

I know that it has been in discussion with the Scottish Government about its belief that the minimal information that is required to access the best start grant perhaps means that we are not collecting the data that organisations such as Engender would, for good reasons, like to be collected. Can you update us on that? Engender says:

“While we have now had assurances that Scottish Government intends to address the data gap as a matter of urgency, the details of this are yet to be fully discussed with us.”

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I have had useful discussions with Engender and other women’s organisations about their concerns on that issue. That is why I am pleased that, as one of the continuous improvement measures that we take within the programme to update what the agency uses, we have changed the way that equalities data is gathered. That has been in place since the turn of the year.

We still have a challenge to make sure that we are gathering all the data that might help us, but I have taken action to deal with the challenge that we had because we were not collecting enough equalities data. That has been actioned and the data collection is live in the agency's systems.

Keith Brown: We have heard from a number of witnesses that what has been described as a “big bang” is not possible, or that it is not possible to have a system that makes it all automatic. However, we have not heard much detail on why that is not possible, and we have heard even less about why it is not worth considering. I think that we will have to go back and try to look at that.

I am pretty sure that I know the answer to this question, but I will put it to the cabinet secretary because, if a secretary of state from the DWP is ever willing to come to this committee—that is a big “if”—I intend to ask them the same question.

Michelle Ballantyne: You had to bring that up.

Keith Brown: Sorry?

The Convener: Please ask your question.

Keith Brown: Is it your belief that the aim should be that every person gets every benefit that they are entitled to?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That is absolutely the determination of the Government. In fact, it is a requirement that the Parliament wished to place on us with regard to how Social Security Scotland delivers benefits and how we move forward with it.

I go back to the underlying principles that we have within social security. It is a human right and an investment, and there is therefore an obligation on the Government to ensure that those who are eligible for payments not only know about them, but know that the application process is simple, understand the eligibility and know that will get a fair decision at the end. If the Government takes all those responsibilities exceptionally seriously, as we do, we will move to a position where there can be increased take-up.

I know that the committee has heard a lot about the stigma that people feel in applying for payments that they are entitled to, and we must challenge and remove that. That is part of the wider landscape of taking away every possible barrier at every stage of the client's journey from pre-application support all the way to a decision. I hope that the UK Government will share those ambitions and ensure that it facilitates anything that needs to be done to ensure that the Scottish Government can deliver on that.

The Convener: I thank the cabinet secretary and her officials for coming along to give evidence. It has been very helpful. We will report in due course.

11:04

Meeting continued in private until 11:28.

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