OFFICIAL REPORT
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Equalities and Human Rights Committee

Thursday 1 October 2020

Session 5

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Thursday 1 October 2020

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EQUALITIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
19th Meeting 2020, Session 5

CONVENER

*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)
*Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con)
*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
*Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Ian Bruce (Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector)
Anthea Coulter (Clackmannanshire Third Sector Interface)
Neil Cowan (Poverty Alliance)
Natalie Masterson (Stirlingshire Voluntary Enterprise)
Lucy Mulvagh (Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland)
Meg Thomas (Includem)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Claire Menzies

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

Scottish Parliament

Equalities and Human Rights Committee

Thursday 1 October 2020

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Pre-budget Scrutiny 2021-22

The Convener (Ruth Maguire): Good morning, and welcome to the 19th meeting in 2020 of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee. Our business today is our first evidence session on pre-budget scrutiny 2021-22 and the impact of Covid-19 on equalities and human rights. We have two witness panels, and I am grateful to all the witnesses for their virtual attendance today.

I welcome our witnesses on the first panel: Anthea Coulter is the chief executive officer at Clackmannanshire Third Sector Interface; Ian Bruce is the chief executive of Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector; and Natalie Masterson is the CEO of Stirlingshire Voluntary Enterprise. Thank you for being with us this morning; you are all welcome. We will move to questions shortly.

I remind members that, if your question is addressed to a specific witness, you should identify that witness by name. Otherwise, we will work to the order in which witnesses appear on the agenda. Witnesses, if you feel you have nothing to add in response to a question, please do not feel the need to speak; you can simply say so. I will then go back to the member for any follow-up questions. Once they have finished, I will invite the next questioner, and so on until the evidence session is concluded. I expect this panel's session to last for no more than one hour, so please try to keep questions and answers as succinct as possible.

Also, please allow the broadcasting staff a few seconds in which to operate your microphones before you begin to ask your question or provide an answer.

With all that being said, we now move to questions. Our first question is from Alison Harris.

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): Good morning, panel. What has been the impact of the pandemic on the groups and communities you work with?

Ian Bruce (Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector): We have heard from a lot of our member organisations in the city about the sense that the pandemic is a storm that we are all in together, but our members are saying that we are clearly not all in this together; we are not all in the same boat. Inequalities have been widened through the pandemic. Those who were furthest from our society or most disadvantaged before the pandemic have become more so—those who were at the margins of poverty have been plunged into poverty and have not been able to put food on the table. We know that minority communities have been hit hard in terms of some of the health outcomes, and we have seen services being withdrawn from people with disabilities. There has been a clear impact on equality.

There have been some positives. We have seen neighbours coming together, which has been valuable, but we do need to recognise some of the negative—[*Inaudible*.]

Anthea Coulter (Clackmannanshire Third Sector Interface): I reiterate what Ian Bruce said. A huge focus on place has come through, and more collaboration has happened. "Partnership on steroids" is a good way of saying it, in some respects. Some fantastic things have come out where we have seen strong community organisations or partnerships.

We have been lucky in Clackmannanshire. The local authority gave up five community access points approximately 18 months ago, and communities came forward and took over those CAPs. In doing that, they formed charities, started working in partnerships in their communities and became much stronger. When the pandemic came along, they were able to react much more quickly to the impact because they were flexible, resourceful and agile. We therefore saw quick mitigation, and the intelligence that TSIs could get on the ground was able to help that. In our more rural and smaller communities, we have seen similar reactions happen much more easily.

Small amounts of money have had a very quick impact. I have to be honest—as a TSI ,I funnelled that money very fast into the communities. I did not wait for someone to give me the okay on that; I was able to do that hot-foot to make sure that people were getting the responses that they needed. We identified a particular issue for people with sensory impairments and learning disabilities. Those two groups are being affected in the long term; the centres have not reopened and they do not have the carers. A lot of carers are under a lot of strain. Those are the particular issues that I see being created.

The Convener: Natalie Masterson, what is the impact of the pandemic on the groups and communities that you work with?

Natalie Masterson (Stirlingshire Voluntary Enterprise): The societal and economic harm of Covid is felt by people on the ground and the organisations that support them. As Anthea and

Ian have mentioned, some groups in society have been disproportionately affected. The inequalities that have been witnessed during the pandemic have always existed, but they have been exacerbated and a light has been shone on them. They are deep-seated inequalities, but the pandemic has really shone a light on the issues that we desperately need to tackle. Learning disability day services were all but stopped except in the most pressing cases. People with sensory loss have told us that they felt trapped in their own homes, not even able to venture out for a once-a-day walk. Across Scotland, there are nearly 400,000 additional unpaid carers, which tells quite a catching story about what those people are experiencing during the pandemic.

As Anthea and Ian have indicated, there has been a great impact on organisations that support people, although it is important to mention that it is fantastic that we have been able to get funds out to groups immediately. The local aspect has been critical, because we have known where the gaps existed and where we needed to get money to. However, it is important to say that the on-going issues around funding sustainability that affect the third sector have been felt during this period. As well as the economic and social harms that are being directed to some groups, economic harms have been directed to third sector organisations. They were already struggling for long-term funding, and the crisis of funding sustainability is at the core of that.

Alison Harris: Where have you seen an increase in demand for services, what type of services have increased and have any decreased? Also, which client groups have increased or perhaps dropped off the radar? [*Interruption*.] I apologise—that is my dog barking.

The Convener: Thank you, Alison. The witnesses have touched on that issue, but could you expand on that?

Ian Bruce: It is a complex picture. Some services have been in immediate demand in the short term. In particular, an immediate response was required around things such as food. There has also been a huge increase in—[*Inaudible*.] Surprisingly, in the early days, some of our members reported a reduction in demand for things such as mental health services. Colleagues at Cancer Support Scotland have told me that people who were in the early stages of cancer or who thought that they might have a symptom of cancer did not seek help from the national health service in the early days because they did not want to put themselves at risk or add pressure on to the NHS at a difficult time. Cancer Support Scotland therefore saw a higher demand than it normally would because people turned to it instead.

We are now starting to see a dramatic increase in demand for mental health services, and there are similar increases in demand for advice services and unemployment and employability-type services. The demands on those services are increasing—[*Inaudible*.]

Anthea Coulter: I will add to Ian Bruce's comments about food, which was what one of the immediate responses was about. We had four or five new pop-up food banks—they were called food larders—some of which took a very dignified approach and allowed people to choose what they wanted. We have one or two of those still in place, but a lot of that has fallen back. Elderly people, in particular, and particularly in our rural communities, were affected very significantly. Proportionally, Clackmannanshire has the highest number of older people of any local authority. Therefore, a high number of people were shielding.

We saw collaborations come about, with people dropping prepared food at people's doors. That face-to-face contact was almost more important than the food, and that contact has continued, which is really good. There have been some social economy-type developments on the back of that, and people are still paying for that service in some of those areas. That might be critical as we experience localised peaks of the virus, potentially. There are some good results on that.

I reiterate the point about employment. By the end of July, 835 new people had signed on to universal credit in Clackmannanshire, which is a huge number for a small area. It has not been possible to reintroduce face-to-face services in that regard, so there is a sense of panic and crisis among people who are wondering how they are going to overcome the issues that they are facing. There are various options: Clackmannanshire Citizens Advice is offering an online service, and there is a national online Citizens Advice service as well, so it is doing as much as it can to mitigate those issues.

We are also working with Save the Children and some other local providers, such as Home-Start UK and Action for Children, to get small, short-term grants through, particularly to single-parent families with children under five.

The Convener: Natalie Masterson, I appreciate that you covered a bit of that in your first answer, but do you want to expand on the second point, about the increases and decreases for different client groups?

Natalie Masterson: I agree absolutely with everything that Anthea Coulter and Ian Bruce have just said. I also point to the increase in demand for services from third sector organisations, but the other aspect is that the third sector and community

support really rose to the challenge. Such organisations would not necessarily define themselves in a service context but as people helping people, and we have seen that very clearly during the pandemic.

I also point out that one of the good-news stories was the volume of people looking to volunteer. However, although that was fantastic, I was also aware that that was not universal. The volunteering opportunities of those members of our community who have volunteered in the past but who require additional support to do so—they might be young people requiring additional support or adults with learning disabilities—have been incredibly limited during the pandemic. There has not been the opportunity for them to take part in volunteering. That activity in their lives has been taken away from them. Therefore, we need to consider how we can continue to support volunteering opportunities for everyone during the crisis.

The Convener: That is helpful. Alison Harris, do you have any follow-up questions?

Alison Harris: [*Inaudible*.]

The Convener: Your microphone was not on but I think that I was able to lip-read that you are content for me to move on.

Alison Harris: [*Inaudible*.]

The Convener: Gillian Martin is next.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): Anthea Coulter and Natalie Masterson mentioned that we are not rid of Covid yet and that, sadly, there may be peaks and further lockdowns. You mentioned some of the innovations in the third sector to deal with the initial lockdown and crisis. Are there any aspects of your response in rising to the challenge on which we should concentrate and that we should enhance for the longer term? Covid has not gone away, and we need to learn from what has happened in the past six months.

09:15

Anthea Coulter: It has been an exciting time. More than half the organisations that responded to our TSI network survey—that is more than 600—said that they were collaborating more as a result of the Covid pandemic. That is very exciting.

Bringing together funding to enable action in the long term is the struggle. That goes back to Natalie Masterson's point about long-term sustainability. Sometimes, there is capacity and there are people who can pay for a service, which is great. However, sometimes, that is not the case in certain situations in more deprived communities. We must make sure that we do not miss those people.

I will refer to some of the anecdotal evidence that we have received in Clackmannanshire. We have large families, often with four or five children, which creates a certain amount of strain. Some of the families received payments during the summer, and the free school meals payments were made directly, which mitigated some of the issues that were presenting.

As a result, we saw a shift in whom the critical food supplies were being given out to through the food larders and the food banks. They started going to people who were, unfortunately, new to poverty, whose situation was unexpected and whose circumstances were changing. However, people with a small amount of extra money were able to adapt even though they would normally be in critical situations.

That is one thing that has changed a little bit. We need to keep an eye on that, to identify whether that is a way of enabling us to reduce services, to make sure that people in need are getting that support.

Natalie Masterson: One of the things that I definitely want to keep hold of is the focus on the local. TSIs have always operated in that way, but, during the pandemic, everyone realised how important local is. People simply could not travel further than a few streets away to get their essential supports. I think that we need to grasp hold of that aspect a bit more.

During the pandemic, it was not about providing third sector support in Stirling or even in Raploch; it was about providing third sector support to people in their own gardens. That is really important, because that is where people make connections; it is where people live, where they want to be volunteering their time and where they want to be able to get their essential supports. Giving support at that level, in one place, is really important for the whole system and for all our decision makers.

The Convener: I see that Anthea Coulter wants to come back in. I will go to Ian Bruce for his reflections, and then we will come back to you.

Ian Bruce: I very much agree with everything that Natalie Masterson and Anthea Coulter have said. I have an example, which I suppose is not necessarily an innovation but a change in practice. We also saw the importance of local, which Natalie Masterson mentioned, particularly with regard to local collaboration and the bringing together of public and third sector organisations, communities and people willing to step up and help each other. How we maintain that culture is as much to do with how we fund. Many third sector organisations were not only given enough money to do what they wanted to do but were given the space and the freedom to do things well.

We talk a lot internally about the importance of unrestricted funding during the pandemic. Many national funders' existing grants were restricted to one purpose, but they unrestricted the grants and gave organisations the freedom to act. That enabled organisations to collaborate and try new things. Keeping that aspect is really important.

Gillian Martin's question is a good one. So many people in Glasgow are just coping. People have been through six months of the pandemic, and their capacity to keep coping and responding to the changing impact of restrictions on the scale of Covid is—[*Inaudible*.]

The Convener: Anthea Coulter wants to add something.

Anthea Coulter: I was going to make the point about place, which Natalie Masterson and Ian Bruce have picked up on. We are trying to identify where the gaps are. Gillian Martin asked about how we are responding. We are trying to be proactive in quickly considering what we can do in places where there was no community response and we had to parachute in a different solution. TSIs sometimes try to knit together a solution for a community.

It might not be very long before there are lockdowns in some areas again, so we are trying to make our response more robust. That is not straightforward, but it is what we are trying to do. That is definitely the way forward. We need to look at how we fund that response, so that it is sustainable for our most deprived communities. Glasgow has a large and significant issue, and it might not have been given the same resources.

Gillian Martin: An issue that strikes me as leading to inequality is digital connectivity, which many of us have relied on over the past six months. I am an MSP for a rural constituency, so there are issues for my constituents in that regard. A lot of people are also excluded from access to connectivity because of their financial situation. That might have compounded the isolation and loneliness. How have the witnesses tackled digital exclusion? Has the connecting Scotland programme been of help at all?

Ian Bruce: I recognise your point about poverty. More than 40 per cent of the 5 per cent of Scotland's most deprived communities according to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation are in Glasgow. Obviously, that is a stark challenge for us in reflecting on digital inclusion.

The sector has responded very well on the issue. Even before the connecting Scotland programme, third sector organisations came together to find equipment and buy people a year's or two years' supply of the MiFi devices that enable people to connect easily, without tying them to a contract or requiring an installer to go into the home. Organisations have stepped up to help people to use technology, and they have also stepped in when people have not been able to access technology to ensure that they are still connected. That is really important.

Digital exclusion is a huge issue for us. In the next two years and beyond, if people are not digitally included, they will be less able to access public services, live an independent life and get into the employment market. There is a real need for us to think collectively about that issue.

The connecting Scotland programme is great, but there are challenges relating to the resources that are available for third sector organisations on the ground to help people. The provision of a device is only one element. Although third sector organisations are signing up to support people with their needs, that is not being resourced as part of the programme. There is a long-term challenge and, without the work being scaled up, there will always be that challenge. We need to move towards recognising internet access as a basic public service to which we should all be entitled in the same way as water is automatically provided for homes.

Anthea Coulter: We started our techshare scheme the first or second week into the pandemic. We were approached by Transform Forth Valley, which is a third sector drugs and alcohol support organisation that runs a programme to support children and young people in families that have issues with drugs and alcohol.

The immediate problem was that there were not enough devices for the families—it was as simple as that. We therefore got devices donated, cleaned them up and gave them out as quickly as we could, with MiFi attached, so that people could at least connect to a grandparent or another carer in the family. The benefits of that were huge, and Transform reported that it got much greater engagement from young people, so there were positives on the back of the negatives.

I reiterate what Ian Bruce has said. My TSI has also taken part, because we run the local digital champions programme. I think that we got eight iPads and five Chromebooks, and they have all gone out to people who were either on the shielding list or unemployed. Those people had very little digital experience previously, and it has been incredibly time consuming to equip them to use the devices. There needs to be revenue to run alongside the capital investment. I understand that that might be coming in the next round, although it is not in the round that is currently open. We have directed local organisations to that so that they can get the equipment and perhaps have one of their volunteers support those who get the devices. However, in the longer term, that

investment needs to be part and parcel of the connecting Scotland programme.

Natalie Masterson: I echo what Anthea Coulter and Ian Bruce have said. Stirling has a large rural area, and broadband connection is an on-going issue for many of the communities in rural Stirlingshire. Many of those communities have come together to explore the issues and find a solution, and some have set up organisations in order to get 5G into their areas. There are great examples of communities coming together pre Covid to find solutions, but not all communities have the resources to take on that type of endeavour.

During Covid, it has become clear that digital inclusion is a significant equalities issue. It is a significant issue for people who are trying to access any services, including the most basic services that we need to live full lives, such as those relating to food, social connection, seeing loved ones during the pandemic and even schooling. That has all been constrained by the lack of digital inclusion.

The Convener: We have touched on funding, but I want to ask about how well Government funding has worked. Were your organisations involved in the design of the funding scheme? How easy has it been to access funding quickly and get it to the people who need it? Was the communication good and was the process straightforward?

Ian Bruce: Certainly, when I speak to colleagues south of the border, it seems that Scotland has probably done things faster and better compared to what has happened there. That is an important starting point. The level of resource has been welcomed and has enabled the sector to respond quickly, which has been helpful. However, there have been gaps, and some third sector organisations have fallen through the cracks in the programmes. That stems from there being different strands, which creates a bit of confusion for organisations and the potential for some to fall through the gaps.

We were involved in some of the decision making on the wellbeing fund, as were TSIs across the country, and it was helpful to be able to bring a local insight to the process. However, it is important that there is genuinely local decision making and prioritisation. In effect, we were asked to okay the projects that were eligible. In my view, that is significantly less strategic involvement than our taking a higher-level view on how a certain amount of money for Glasgow might be spent.

09:30

I reiterate the points that I made earlier about the challenges in Glasgow and the need to ensure that, in future, it gets a share of the national funding that genuinely reflects the need in the city. As I said, 40-plus per cent of the 5 per cent most deprived communities in Scotland are in Glasgow, and we need decision making on how funding is distributed that reflects that.

The other point about the supporting communities programme is that the funding was distributed via anchor organisations. That is a really interesting model because it furthers collaboration in a really positive way. Because of the speed with which things have had to be done, there have been challenges with ensuring that we are reaching the right anchor organisations in each community and that we have fair coverage across the country. However, for me, how we get money directly to communities and enable them to decide how it will be spent in that model needs to be considered in future.

The Convener: I want to press you a little. At the beginning of those remarks, you talked about organisations falling through the gaps. Will you say a bit more about why you think that happens and what type of organisations they were?

Ian Bruce: Yes. There are a few things. First, when we have multiple strands, we end up with multiple criteria and people fall through the gaps between them. For example, with the wellbeing fund—do not quote me on the exact figures here—organisations could ask for only 25 per cent of their income, but they had to ask for at least £5,000. That unintentionally created an inability for organisations with incomes of less than £20,000 to apply for that funding, which was unfortunate. I do not think that that was intended. The approach was taken with the best of intentions, but such things happen.

Secondly, much of what was needed in the city was needed by people from particular groups, such as people who are disabled, and black and minority ethnic populations. They were looking primarily towards disabled-led and BME-led organisations for support, but we saw that BME organisations in particular were not applying. I cannot comment confidently on the reasons for that, but they either did not apply or were not successful. There are challenges in that regard.

There is a challenge for the committee to consider in relation to human rights the approaches under which funds are designed and decisions are taken. It is not enough to consider just one of those things.

The Convener: That is helpful. Does Anthea Coulter want to comment?

Anthea Coulter: I would reiterate most of what Ian Bruce said. We have to look at how people are enabled to apply for grants. How can we enable those communities to make the decisions in future

about what works best for them? How can we ensure that that happens? It is vital to build capacity with communities and give them the skills and the confidence to do that. Sometimes they have great leaders, but putting it down on paper is quite difficult.

We must recognise that we need different ways for people to approach getting funding into their communities. At present, they may have the spirit of participation and good numbers of volunteers on the ground, but they cannot get the piece of paper right. One of our jobs as TSIs is to try to enable that and help to overcome those issues. I agree with Ian Bruce that there is a real opportunity for the committee to get participatory budgeting and engagement right for the future.

Natalie Masterson: When I reflect on everything that has been done in a short few months, I think that, overall, the process has been successful. The people who were operating the funds tried their hardest to make sure that money got out of the door and got to the people who needed it as quickly as possible.

There was a sense of partnership working throughout the system. It did not matter who a person worked for—whether that was the Scottish Government, local government, or a national or local third sector organisation; we were in it together. That said, in a time of crisis, people will do what they have always done; they will do the default decision making—[*Inaudible*.] I think that that is why more funding was designed at the national level and less planning was done with a local-level-first approach. We need to shift towards that place-based planning approach so that it is embedded in national decision making, whether that is about funding in future or other issues.

We could probably make the point that a human rights approach is a place-based approach. Human rights approaches are all about participation and empowerment, which happen when organisations come together to make decisions with the people whom they work with at a local level. It was therefore great to be involved in the wellbeing fund. We had a positive experience of it, and we know that money got out of the door quickly. In future, as a country, I would like us to embrace an approach that puts place and locality at the heart of decision making. That cannot be done overnight, and we need to make a concerted effort as a country to do that.

The Convener: All the witnesses have touched on the learning that we can take from the situation. Ian Bruce mentioned organisations in the rest of the United Kingdom. Is there anything that we can learn from what has happened in the rest of the UK or elsewhere in the world? Obviously, we are in a global pandemic, so everyone is having to adapt and change.

Anthea Coulter: I am not necessarily thinking of the rest of the world, but we have reflected on and discussed mental health. We had our integration joint board meeting last week. Only 33 referrals were made to acute mental health services in the first quarter. However, Wellbeing Scotland, which is based in Alloa and provided a service across Scotland, took 814 referrals in the same period. We have done quite a lot of promotion of its service, because it has offered a range of options. We did a little *Love Local Mag* that went out through all the doorways to promote it, and that might also have helped. Once people got their assessment, they could be directed to befriending or stress control online groups or, if required, more intense counselling sessions.

It is interesting that, by upstreaming that money to an organisation, we have seen far more direct self-referral and take-up of services. About 200 people have been referred to befriending services. That happened directly, and that is a great example of what can be achieved by upstreaming services away from acute services. Do not get me wrong: acute services are needed, and we always see a rise in suicide levels during depression periods, so we must not take our eye off that ball. However, there are solutions that have come from communities and groups working together and using volunteers, and national organisations using safe practices. There is some good learning about how innovation has come out of this period and how we can keep people away from some of the services and instead use more place-based and community-based responses.

Natalie Masterson: I am looking forward to having the opportunity to share some learning with my colleagues from across Europe at the Centre for European Volunteering conference, which is taking place online. I hope that, in a future session, I might have more European learning to share with the committee.

At the moment, there is rich learning from all the different areas in Scotland and all the small localities. We have been focusing on facilitating that learning from people who are on the ground, not taking it for granted that we did a great job and patting ourselves on the back in some areas. What did it actually feel like to be in different areas in Stirling, and how was the experience of the pandemic different for different groups? We are taking our learning and looking internally at the moment, but we are also keeping an eye open, because we can always learn from different areas, and we can share our own learning.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I will start by asking about volunteering. I had not intended to do that, but this question lends itself to some of the subject matter that we have covered. I am the convener of the cross-party

group on volunteering. What impact will there be on volunteering in the third sector, particularly given Covid-19 restrictions on free association?

The Convener: I see that Ian Bruce wants to come in again on the previous question. You can pick up on that, Ian, and then answer Alex Cole-Hamilton's question.

Ian Bruce: I apologise, convener—you caught me on the hop with the previous question. I was reflecting while others were speaking. It is not entirely funding specific, but there is absolutely learning from elsewhere in Europe and the world that we can take forward. We have been running an online event called our world reimagined, which has been looking at ideas from around the world that we could incorporate into building a new future in Scotland.

A couple of ideas that really stand out for me are about how we think about funding. One is around community wealth building and how we develop a culture of ensuring that resource flows naturally into and stays in our most deprived communities. The second is asset-based community development and how we support communities to find their own solutions. The third is around participatory democracy and how decisions can be taken at a more local level. All of those are tied together.

I have a number of points on Alex Cole-Hamilton's question. Over the past six months, volunteering has been really interesting. The sector has probably never seen more people interested in volunteering. For many, especially those on furlough, it will have been the first time that they have had time to volunteer. It has come across clearly that people have a desire to help each other, either through formal volunteering in organisations or just by helping each other out, which is to be lauded as well.

In the short term and particularly during Covid, many organisations do not have the ability to maximise that and involve as many people as they would like. Many organisations are struggling with their survival and with how they plan and redesign services internally, and they struggle to have capacity to bring in new people. We have definitely seen a cohort of organisations in that situation.

Data from Volunteer Scotland suggests that, although older people in particular do not volunteer in significantly higher numbers than the general population, those of them who volunteer do so for a significantly larger proportion of their time. If those people are forced into shielding, that adds a challenge. To what extent is volunteering a part of their social identity and their ability to have social connections with others? It is a challenge to ensure that volunteering is inclusive going forward.

Anthea Coulter: Going forward, we need to keep everything as inclusive as possible. One of the central tenets of the TSI network manifesto, which is just about to come out, is about volunteering. An incredible number of volunteers have come forward in Clackmannanshire—we have around 700 people who are new to volunteering. Some 300 have gone directly to the TSI and 400 have gone to organisations. We have been able to pick up those numbers. They have largely been people who have been furloughed and who have used the opportunity to get involved for the first time. It has been an amazing response.

09:45

We now need to capitalise on that, ensure that those people still feel engaged and try to place them in organisations that are close to their homes and that they feel engaged in and want to take a role in. We also need to ensure that people who are from more deprived communities and who have less opportunity have volunteering opportunities, too. Those people need to be equal in the response. TSIs, as the organisations on the ground, can offer that, but it needs to be resourced to an extent. We need a long-term view if we want that real engagement and activity to continue. It has been a really positive thing for us.

I reiterate Ian Bruce's point about older people. They are a big concern for me. A large number of elderly people volunteer in Clackmannanshire. That keeps them healthy, but health inequality could kick in quickly if they are not given different opportunities to continue and they deteriorate.

Natalie Masterson: The impact on volunteering is mixed. Overall, there is a brilliant good news story. Lots of people have wanted to volunteer and have come forward for formal opportunities through Ready Scotland or, more importantly, they have simply got in touch with their neighbours, helped each other out and joined mutual aid groups. That is all fantastic to see. However, if we scratch the surface, we see that the picture underneath that is mixed.

As I indicated in my opening remarks, the opportunities that are available for people who require support for their volunteering are now extremely limited. We must look at that, and we cannot overestimate its impact. In many cases for people with a learning disability who require supported volunteering placements, that will be their life. I have spoken to many people who volunteer for a significant part of their week. They love their volunteering opportunities, as they give their lives structure and meaning. Those people engage in work-related experience that may enable them to take part in the work environment later on.

Such opportunities are limited at the moment for very good reasons. Organisations are struggling with their capacity and with social distancing measures. That is all understandable, but it is having a big impact. The nature of volunteering has shifted much more towards informal opportunities, which is brilliant for many people, but it has a real impact on some of our equality groups.

I concur with the point that Anthea Coulter and Ian Bruce made about older people volunteering. Locally, we are seeing that, although shielding has ended, our older population is quite nervous about leaving the house. In the settings where they volunteer, some are starting to wonder whether their volunteers will come back and restart their volunteering. In many cases in that age group, volunteering is about running a group such as a bowling club or lunch club. The volunteers are older people who are giving back. However, they are potentially frightened to leave their house because of the public health messaging, which is quite right.

The situation is worrying. Sports clubs in Stirling are wondering whether many groups such as bowling clubs and curling clubs will close completely.

The Convener: Thank you for those full answers. I ask Alex Cole-Hamilton to come back in with more budget-related questions.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I will do—sorry.

Can the panel speak to the medium and long-term picture for the financial sustainability of the voluntary sector—[*Inaudible*.]

Ian Bruce: I missed the end of the question, but I heard enough to gather that it is about the long-term financial context for the third sector—[*Inaudible*.]

The Convener: It is about the medium and long-term context.

Ian Bruce: To be honest, the situation is really challenging. As a sector, we have been told that organisations should diversify their income away from grant funding and move towards trading, fundraising and contracts. That has been regarded as good practice. Ironically, during the Covid period, that income—which was regarded as more sustainable—has vanished and organisations that are primarily grant funded have been more stable. A number of organisations are struggling to identify how their trading income and fundraising income might get back to what it was over the next year, or possibly longer.

Alongside that, we anticipate that many independent funders will be hit hard by the impact of Covid. On a practical level—this is an assumption rather than something that I have heard from the lottery itself—it was hard to buy a lottery ticket over the counter in the first few months of Covid. That will undoubtedly have an impact on its income and therefore the amount that it can distribute to the sector.

It remains to be seen what the impact on public sector finances will be. That is in the gift of the chancellor to a great extent. There is also the Brexit context—I am sorry to be the first to mention that word, but we are in the last funding process in Glasgow; it is the last EU funding that is being allocated to the sector. We are unclear what things will look like beyond that.

The short version of that answer is that it looks bleak.

The Convener: I am conscious that we are coming to the last 10 minutes, so I will bring in Anthea Coulter and Natalie Masterson. Do you have anything further to add to what Ian Bruce has said?

Anthea Coulter: I do not have much to add. It is about planning for the longer term. I completely agree with Ian Bruce's point about social enterprises and those that have traded. My passion is to try to help organisations to diversify, and that is my background but, my goodness, in the past few months, I have had to give a lot more help to organisations that have traded just to try to enable them to access funding. Some of them have not been grant funded for the past few years and have been fantastic examples of successful charities, but they have been hit the hardest during the current period.

We do not want to lose that group of organisations, because they have challenged themselves and got to a place where they have been successful. Luckily, Scottish Enterprise has been effective at looking at the viability of organisations during January or February, and some of them have been able to get funding through that route. We certainly want that to continue.

Natalie Masterson: We can accurately predict what the long-term economic and social harms of Covid will be, particularly on equalities groups, and we know a timeframe for that, so it is not sensible or prudent for us to simply continue with year-to-year funding when we know that, for example, it will take many years for mental health service demand to go down. It is much more prudent for us to take a long-term view on how we will challenge the effects of Covid by funding organisations to do that.

We can do interesting and innovative things by bringing programmes together. We can bring together guaranteed employment schemes with third sector services that can support people or organisations. We know that the long-term labour

market scarring will be particularly bad for disabled people, young people and ethnic minority people. Therefore, guaranteed employment scheme change should be focused on the societal and economic harms that those people will experience.

The Convener: That is helpful.

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): The areas that I wanted to ask about have mostly been covered, but I will begin by asking about increased demand on services, which has been mentioned. We have heard this morning about increased pressure on mental health services and services to support people who are falling into poverty. Do you see any other new areas where services will be under pressure? Who should be involved in developing a long-term recovery plan?

Ian Bruce: On the long-term recovery plan, it is critically important to listen to communities and the local voice. It is positive that the Scottish Government has launched the economic recovery and social recovery discussions, but we do not think that the local voice is necessarily being heard round that table. It is important that that voice is heard.

On other areas of demand, employability will be a huge issue. We have already seen a significant upturn in youth unemployment in the city. The furlough scheme will end this month, and the new job support scheme is significantly less beneficial to employers. We are hearing from third sector organisations that they might have to consider making redundancies at that point.

Mental health is a broad area. There will be increased challenges around the impact of long-term social isolation on some people, and we will need to address those.

I do not want to take up all the time that is available, but another significant area is how we ensure that people who use social care services get the support that they are entitled to.

Anthea Coulter: I reiterate the point that employability will be critically important. There is a particular issue for young people, as has been identified, and that is particularly important in Clackmannanshire. A number of apprenticeships are disappearing, so a gap is being created. The kickstart scheme is on offer, but it is difficult for companies in which people are working remotely to bring on a young person. At the moment, a number of people have come to us through the community jobs Scotland programme, and it is difficult to keep them motivated and focused from afar. They need certain kinds of support.

We are also seeing mental health issues creeping into young people in a significant way. Some identifiable help with the transition period from youth to adult services is critically important. I know that funding has been directed to mental health services for young people, but it is important to consider that point of transition. I am keen for the Government to look closely at that area to ensure that we are not aggravating what is already a difficult situation for young people.

I reiterate Ian Bruce's point about community wealth building. We can try to get more jobs closer to people's homes and ensure that young people do more stuff in their communities. Sometimes, we have to be a bit innovative in that space to make that happen. That is certainly something that we want to be able to do.

Natalie Masterson: Anthea Coulter and Ian Bruce have answered the first question well, so I have nothing to add to that.

On the economic recovery, I agree with Engender's response to the committee that there should be a gender-based analysis of the budget to ensure that the impact on women and girls is understood. We are seeing real issues with women, such as the retraction of women from work environments because of caring responsibilities due to Covid and other pressures. It is important that the budget reflects the impact on women.

10:00

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning.

We have already touched on the funding packages that were made available. Back in March, £350 million was given to the sector by way of different funds—for example, the third sector resilience fund, the supporting communities fund, the connecting Scotland fund, and the food funds. As has already been indicated, and as I know from Natalie Masterson and Anthea Coulter and from the Stirling and Clackmannan area being part of my region, many organisations fought really hard to ensure that they received some funding from those sources. However, some of them did not get enough or were unable to progress applications.

Has the funding process been fair, and has it been seen to be fair? My experience is that some organisations have felt that it was not fair to them.

Anthea Coulter: [*Inaudible*.]—overall, we got the money out quickly. We tried very hard to get it out to the groups that we knew were working directly with people and in neighbourhoods. It is a challenging question. There was quite a field of options, which I think was possibly confusing. I think that Ian Bruce has touched on that.

This morning, I looked back at the funding that went out, just to remind myself. It was a few thousand pounds here and a few thousand

pounds there. TSIs tried to mitigate that by using our own funding as well, funnelling that to groups as much as we could if we thought that there might be an issue or a gap.

We also pulled together locally a couple of other things that helped. One was the food and financial network, which included all the groups that had come together. We also worked with the council, which provided vans so that FareShare food was delivered. We were able to work collaboratively to fill the gaps.

We also now have the Clackmannanshire business support partnership, which produces a weekly bulletin in which we all pool our information to try to help organisations. As I have said, some charities have been able to get money from Scottish Enterprise funds, rather than from a third sector fund. That has helped, as well.

I am not saying that it was perfect, but we did as much as we could. The power of TSIs is in their being based right in the heart of communities, and in being able to get people around the table every week—even virtually, as with this meeting. Chief officers across Scotland were doing that weekly; we were able to bring to the table a lot of shared experience.

The Convener: Natalie Masterson, do you have anything to add in response to Alexander Stewart's question about the fairness, and perception of fairness, of the funding allocation?

Natalie Masterson: I would echo what Anthea Coulter has said. The different streams of funding operated in quite different ways, which was quite confusing for people. TSIs tapped into our local knowledge and intelligence mainly for the wellbeing fund. TSIs understood why organisations were not receiving funding, and there was more understanding about what we could do in the long term to support such organisations while getting additional funding for them in the interim.

I will mention local authorities. We worked very closely with Stirling Council, which played a key role in getting funding to local organisations through the business improvement district fund.

There was a plethora of funds but—to go back to one of the points that we made earlier—the way in which funds have been structured has often made an impact.

The Convener: I am conscious that, at the beginning of the meeting, Ian Bruce covered groups that fell through the gaps. Do you have anything to add, or would it be okay for me to move on?

Ian Bruce: I will keep my remarks brief. Although the overall package of support amounted to £350 million, significantly less than that was for the third sector. A chunk of it went directly to the Scottish welfare fund and some of it went to local authorities. Some of that might have made its way to the third sector, but less than half was targeted directly at the third sector.

The point about fairness is valid; I addressed that previously. In an effort to get money out the door quickly, decisions were made that, in retrospect, people would probably not have made. The importance of local knowledge is an issue, as Natalie Masterson and Anthea Coulter said. We must ensure that resource gets to local areas, where it can be distributed and be spent best, based on local knowledge.

Alexander Stewart: I have a follow-up question for Ian Bruce.

Do you feel that your area—Glasgow—as an urban area, was at a disadvantage in comparison with Clackmannanshire, which is a very rural area, and Stirlingshire, which is half rural and half urban? Was that a specific issue for an organisation that represents an urban area as big as Glasgow?

Ian Bruce: We must recognise that much of the need that emerged was less a result of Covid than it was of poverty. People needed additional help because they were already struggling, and I think that that created a disadvantage with regard to how we ensured that resource was focused towards the areas that need it most. You will appreciate that I will argue that those areas are predominantly in Glasgow, although poverty is an issue across the country.

There is an additional challenge that relates to the complexity of the city and operations in it. As an organisation we were, along with the council, able to play a co-ordinating role in distribution of funding directly to organisations through multiple routes. That complexity made bringing together an overall city response a bit more challenging.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Good morning. Do you think that equalities impact assessments and human rights assessments were considered as part of the funding system? In the interests of time, I will roll my questions together. Do you think that the system—[*Inaudible*.]

The Convener: Fulton's sound broke up a bit, so I will go over his questions. He wanted to ask whether equalities impact assessments and human rights assessments were considered as part of the funding system. His second question was about how the system could have been improved.

I think that you have all mentioned the need for a human rights approach to budgeting, so perhaps you could say a few words about that, too.

Ian Bruce: I will be brief, because I think that I touched on that earlier. It is important to ensure that equalities impact assessments are carried out on the funds themselves and on how decisions about them are taken and, separately from that, on the decisions themselves. I cannot comment on the equality impact assessment of the funds in Glasgow, but I can say that, when we looked at the outcome of the funding process, we saw that organisations that served ethnic minority populations in the city did less well than we might have hoped. That has created a significant challenge for us as we go forward, and we must ensure that that is addressed.

We were clear in our submission on the importance of human rights budgeting. If we do not create a world in which budgeting reflects our human rights values, there will be a serious flaw in how we make decisions about funding disbursal.

Anthea Coulter: I agree—I think that more work needs to be done on equality impact assessments. We need to consider how particular communities are engaged and how funding is discussed with them. Yesterday, the three of us discussed the attainment fund. There are two parts to it, one of which goes directly to communities. If we are going to be bold and challenging, is that how we should look at the issue in the future?

We need to look at equalities in the context of a particular area or a particular group or community interest to find out how well the issue is being addressed through funding at grass-roots level. Is the funding cascading down to that level? On community justice funding, for example, I question whether it gets out to the wee corners of Clackmannanshire as it should. It is also questionable whether funding is reaching some grass-roots organisations that support people with learning disabilities and people with sensory impairment. More work definitely needs to be done on that. We would welcome the enabling of such work at local level to look at the impacts. It would be crucial that the TSIs be involved.

The Convener: Natalie, do you have anything to add?

Natalie Masterson: [*Inaudible*.]

The Convener: I am sorry. Your microphone was muted.

Natalie Masterson: I have nothing to add on that. Anthea Coulter and Ian Bruce have covered the issue.

The Convener: Thank you very much. That brings our questioning to a conclusion. I thank our witnesses for joining us.

Your contributions have been extremely helpful. If there is anything that you did not get to say, please feel free to write to the committee. You can continue to watch the meeting on Scottish Parliament TV, if you so wish.

I suspend the meeting to allow broadcasting staff to set up the second panel.

10:12

Meeting suspended.

10:16

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome the witnesses on our second panel: Lucy Mulvagh, director of policy and communications at the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland; Meg Thomas, head of programme design and policy manager at Includem; and Neil Cowan, policy and parliamentary officer at the Poverty Alliance. Thank you for joining us and for finding the time to answer questions from the committee.

I will give a quick recap on how the session will work. I will invite members to ask questions; I remind members that if their question is addressed to a specific witness, they should identify that witness by name. Otherwise, we will work to the order in which witnesses appear on the agenda. Keeping questions and answers succinct will be helpful and will allow us to cover everything that we want to cover. Please give broadcasting staff a few seconds to operate your microphone before beginning to ask your question or to provide an answer, as that will ensure that we hear everything that you have to say.

The first questions come from Alison Harris.

Alison Harris: Good morning. What impact has the pandemic had on the groups and communities that you work with?

Lucy Mulvagh (Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland): I thank Alison Harris for that question, and I thank the committee for the invitation to attend this session; I really welcome it.

The alliance has noticed that there has been quite a severe impact on our organisation and our lived-experience members. From an organisational perspective, the previous panel gave a very good indication of what the impact has been on the TSIs and their members. Funding has been particularly badly affected, including for the national health and care organisations. Early on, members of ours, including Crohn's and Colitis UK, Cancer Support Scotland and Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland, reported huge drops in funding, mainly as a consequence of the cancellation of activities such as face-to-face fundraising events, the closure of charity shops and other venues and, of course, a completely understandable drop in

public donations as people began to experience increased pressures on their household incomes.

Those organisations provide vital services and support directly to people, which help them to enjoy their right to equality and a whole range of other human rights. We know, because it is now well rehearsed, what the impact of the pandemic and the responses to it has been on particular population groups. At the same time as there has been a drop in funding and resource for many of those organisations, there has been a significant increase in demand for their services. For example, Crohn's and Colitis UK reported a 400 per cent increase in demand for its services, and Scottish Autism reported a 101 per cent increase in demand.

I hope that that provides a rounded picture of the impact on organisations and on the people they work for and with.

Meg Thomas (Includem): Thank you for the invitation to attend.

We work with young people and families who are on the edges of care and who are at risk of coming into formal care. Invariably, they are in entrenched poverty and were in entrenched poverty prior to the pandemic.

For our families, there has been a reduction in statutory service support, and they have sought out more support from the third sector. Interestingly, our families say that that feels right for them—they value the input from those who seem supportive rather than those who might create pressures and stresses. For us, the biggest issue is the effect on finances. Our families say that they are having to choose on a daily basis between which of the basics they can afford. They cannot afford heating, they cannot afford food or they cannot afford transport, which has a knock-on effect on where they can go to buy food. More than half our families say that, on a day-to-day basis, they are struggling just to meet those basics.

The knock-on effects of that are significant. Families are digitally excluded. Many services expect people to engage digitally, but those who are digitally excluded cannot do that and so are potentially seen as not complying with the statutory requirements of services. Our families feel trapped and, as a result, 82 per cent of them say that their mental health has got worse since Covid. That is a result of a combination of all the stresses around finances and engaging with services, along with the expectations that that has created.

Neil Cowan (Poverty Alliance): Thank you for the opportunity to attend.

The clearest impact of the pandemic that the Poverty Alliance along with our member organisations and community activists have seen or experienced has been the rising levels of poverty, hardship and real income crisis. For example, for people on low-paid work who were furloughed and so received only 80 per cent of their income, that served only to lock them more tightly into poverty. Others had their hours cut, which again put them into hardship. We can see the impact from the numbers of people who are now claiming universal credit in Scotland and across the UK. We can also see it in the rise in food bank figures and in Scottish welfare fund applications. People are experiencing real income crisis, with all the manifestations of that, such as food insecurity.

It is clear that the income crisis and increased hardship have been disproportionately experienced by particular groups, as was touched on earlier: low-paid women; lone parents, who are disproportionately women; people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds; disabled people; unpaid carers—they, too, are disproportionately women; and larger families. The people and groups who have been impacted fairly neatly coincide with the groups that are identified by the Scottish Government as priority families in the tackling child poverty delivery plan.

To reiterate a point that has already been made this morning, the groups and communities that are most impacted are the same groups that were already most likely to be locked into poverty. The inequalities and issues that have been foregrounded by the crisis, such as food insecurity and an inadequate social security system, did not begin with Covid. It is really important to remember that, pre-Covid, more than 1 million people in Scotland were living in poverty.

It is important to be clear that the labour market disruption has overwhelmingly impacted on particular groups, such as low-paid women. We know that women are concentrated in lower-paid jobs in sectors that have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, such as cleaning, care, retail and hospitality. Similarly, disabled people and people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds are more likely to work in sectors that have been disrupted by the pandemic and are therefore more likely to have been pulled into hardship.

Therefore, the overarching impact has been on people who were already living in the grip of poverty; that grip has only tightened over the past six months. At the same time, many more people, particularly those from the groups and communities that I mentioned, have been pulled into poverty for the first time. What started as a

health crisis is now a poverty, inequality and—by extension—human rights crisis.

Alison Harris: Panel members have answered most of my second question—I had been going to ask whether there has been an increase in demand for services. For what types of services has demand increased? Has demand for any services decreased? Have any client groups increased in number or dropped off your radar? Would you like to add anything to what you said in your extensive answers to my first question?

The Convener: Are there any specific examples that you can provide?

Lucy Mulvagh: I mentioned that some of our organisational members experienced huge increases in demand for services; unfortunately, that came at a time of desperate decreases in the availability of resources to provide those services.

As far as particular population groups are concerned—this might pre-empt a future question—with the understandable suspension of many health services during the pandemic, many people have been excluded from very necessary services such as rehabilitation for multiple sclerosis, chronic pain services or services for people with cancer or who are awaiting cancer screening. Those are not homogeneous groups of people—there are sub-population groups within those groups—and, from an equalities and human rights perspective, it is important that we take an intersectional approach.

Such services are beginning to remobilise, but we do not know what will happen if there are further waves of Covid or further pressures on the NHS and other services because of winter flu. We are keeping a weather eye on all that, because we expect that specific, targeted interventions will be required for particular population groups, because of the conditions, disabilities and impairments that they live with.

The Convener: Meg, you answered the initial question quite fully, but if you have anything further to add, we would be happy to hear it.

Meg Thomas: I have two points to make. The first is that our families rely heavily on the finances that we and other organisations have been able to provide, such as Aberlour's urgent assistance fund. They say that, although that support is good, such short injections of cash are not sustainable for them in the long term, because the debt and financial pressure are increasing. They need services that allow them to plan ahead with their finances. It was difficult to access benefits advice when they were digitally excluded, because that was mostly provided online. It is a complex system to negotiate at the best of times, without that added stress.

As I touched on already, the other issue in relation to gaps in services is that our families say that their mental health is significantly poorer. It is already well recorded that it is difficult for young people to access mental health support. There is a long wait for child and adolescent mental health services; often, people are rejected by or are not able to access those services. As a result, young people are really struggling. The appropriate community resources are not available. Many excellent third sector organisations support mental health for adults, but very few support young people's mental health.

School counselling is in place, but with the schools being shut, young people were not able to access those resources. Therefore, we had a perfect storm for young people in impoverished situations, which often meant that they were in inadequate housing and did not have gardens to escape to. They were sometimes targeted in the community by the police if they were out in large numbers, as teenagers like to be. They did not have the support for their mental wellbeing that would normally be accessible; moving forward, we need to look at that, particularly if there are future lockdowns.

The Convener: Neil, do you have anything to add about particular groups that have perhaps dropped off the radar?

10:30

Neil Cowan: On the type of demand, at the start of the pandemic, it was very much a case of meeting people's most basic needs. The level of fear and insecurity was extremely high, and many organisations redesigned or shifted what they did to address that fear and insecurity, but also to address other basic needs, such as the need to pay electricity bills or make phone top-ups.

Because of the disruption to the labour market, we have also seen greater demand for welfare rights advice. Many people have fallen out of work for the first time and perhaps have no experience of navigating what is quite a complex social security system or of accessing their right to social security. Older people who have fallen out of work for the first time, but also younger people—young women, in particular, have been disproportionately impacted by labour market disruption—might never have experienced the social security system before. It is imperative that welfare rights advice is available to them to help them to navigate the system and access their right to social security.

On other increased demand, employability services will be critical. There will be huge demand for employability services, particularly those services that support fair work, such as support for the payment of the real living wage. There will also

be demand for services that are really flexible, so that people such as lone parents, who often find it difficult to engage with employability services, can engage with those. We have already seen growing demand in those two areas of welfare rights advice and employability services, but, given the context, we will continue to see growing demand in the months ahead.

The Convener: I think that we have probably covered Alison Harris's questions, so we will move on to Gillian Martin.

Gillian Martin: I do not know whether the witnesses were watching the previous evidence session. I asked about innovation in the third sector that might need to be boosted in the future, given that Covid is still with us and that, sadly, there is the potential for future lockdowns and local spikes. All the witnesses said that local delivery is a key factor, and they spoke about innovation in delivering services and the response to the pandemic at the very local level.

What has your experience been of that? How did the third sector and your organisations adapt? What worked, and what would you like to see continue so that we can hit the ground running when people are in that situation again?

Lucy Mulvagh: The alliance has been responding since very early doors in relation to Covid. Everybody would recognise that community and third sector organisations were first out of the traps to respond; they got into gear very quickly, adapted and took very flexible approaches. Some of them had to change substantially the way that they did business in order to provide vital services and support to people all over the country.

We began gathering those stories in a series called "Community in Action", all of which are available on our website. Some of them are incredibly inspirational and some of them are award winners in our self-management awards, which were held earlier this week.

Much of the shift early on—as you will see in some of the stories—was because of lockdown and shielding. Many of our member organisations work with people who immediately fell into the shielding category, so we had to be mindful about people connecting face to face. Early on, there were substantial difficulties in accessing adequate personal protective equipment. That seems like an aeon ago, although it actually was not long ago. Much of the shift that took place was about switching to telecare and digital support and so on. However, other face-to-face support also changed and continued.

Members such as the Mel-Milaap community centre, which provides day-care facilities for older people, moved to providing hot meals. The Scottish Commission for Learning Disability developed a knowledge-sharing hub to make sure that information was available in easy-read documents and other accessible formats for people who have learning difficulties and intellectual disabilities, simultaneously, or as close to simultaneously as possible, with the information that was coming out in English. Moray Wellbeing Hub adapted to deliver all its services remotely. There are countless stories like that.

There is a lot of valuable learning to be done about how we might want to continue into the future. Fundamental to that will be long-term sustainable funding and resourcing. It cannot happen without that. It also requires flexibility and adaptability from the point of view of donors to and the funders of that kind of work.

What has also worked for a lot of our members has been a welcome reduction in the amount of bureaucracy and paperwork that has been required by funders and commissioners, so they have just been able to get on with the job of delivering services.

I know that we have spoken about this previously, and we might come back to it later, but there is also the whole area of digital accessibility, or lack thereof, to consider. I will not go into that now, but we might be able to pick it up later.

Meg Thomas: I would echo a number of things that Lucy Mulvagh has just said. One of the positives was that third sector organisations, which have often been pitted against one another in competition for funding, came together in true partnership. Third sector organisations were able to mobilise more quickly than statutory agencies, and we were able to divert funds more readily to provide the immediate assistance that families needed, whether it was for digital connectivity, food, paying a fuel bill, buying them a bed or making the home environment slightly better.

For me, the biggest take-away will be a strategic collaborative funding model that does not pit local third sector organisations in competition with one another for small sums of money, but instead allows for a strategic community-based fund that is directed by those who use it and who are saying that that is what they need, and which allows third sector organisations to continue the partnerships and the work that they have done so well during the pandemic, which traditional funding methods and mechanisms and systems definitely do not allow.

I also echo Lucy's statement about bureaucracy. The fast pace at which some of the funding was released during the pandemic shows that it can be done without the normal level of bureaucracy. It is disappointing to see that we are already moving back towards more formal tendering processes and that there has not, at the funding level, been a

demonstration of learning about some of the things that we did innovatively at the start of the pandemic.

Neil Cowan: I will largely echo Lucy Mulvagh and Meg Thomas. In terms of innovation, we saw across Scotland community organisations redesigning or reconfiguring their services at incredible speed. Mental health community organisations were meeting people's food insecurity needs, and welfare rights advice was being shifted online or delivered via the phone or in other different ways, again at incredible speed. There have been lots of innovations, workarounds and creative thinking on show at a community level. As Lucy Mulvagh said, third and community sector organisations have displayed enormous flexibility.

At a national level, what has been shown is that things can be achieved in partnership at pace. The pandemic has really showed us the art of the possible. We saw that with the Scottish Government very quickly releasing funding to local authorities to help families with free school meals, for example. That was done at great pace. We have, essentially, eradicated rough sleeping; that was done at pace, and it, too, shows the art of the possible.

On digital exclusion, programmes were put in place at speed in order to get people online to address their needs. Although that approach might not have been new, the crisis clearly foregrounded it.

I echo what has been said about funding partners being more flexible. That came up in our discussions with Poverty Alliance member organisations, which were being told to do what needed to be done and to deal with immediate needs without necessarily going through the usual levels of bureaucracy. That was particularly welcome for smaller community-based organisations that work at the grass roots, and which do not necessarily have capacity to deal with the normal levels of bureaucracy. That would be an important change to lock in.

Gillian Martin: Let us talk about digital exclusion, which you have all identified as an issue. A lot of the innovations have been digital; the national health service's Near Me service is an example. However, digital services have the potential to exclude people not only because they do not have access to equipment, but because, as I mentioned to the other panel of witnesses, people who have never accessed such equipment do not know how to use it. I want to zero in on the issue of people needing training and support. They need assistance to help them to use the equipment, perhaps even before the organisations give it to them.

The Convener: We will go to Neil Cowan first.

Neil Cowan: That is an important point. Addressing digital exclusion is not just about getting tablets to people or getting them online; it is about ensuring that they have digital skills.

It is also important to ensure that people have the cash to use digital devices. Supporting people by supplying them with tablets and getting them online must be accompanied by adequate financial support.

In addition, we need to ensure that people who, for whatever reason, do not necessarily want to engage digitally can access their rights in other ways. I give the example of the Scottish welfare fund, which is a lifeline fund for people who are experiencing income crises. We know that some local authorities make it difficult for people to apply in any way other than online, so it can be difficult in some areas for people who are not online to access that fund. Digital skills are important, as is having adequate financial support to run the devices, including paying the electricity bill, but it is also important to ensure that people can access their rights in non-digital ways, if they would prefer that.

Meg Thomas: I would echo much of what Neil Cowan said. It is interesting that some local authorities are now rolling out schemes to give young people access to iPads. However, the expectation is that the iPads will be charged at home, which adds to existing fuel poverty.

A lot of our families have expressed considerable concern about it not being clear, when they sign the home-school agreement, who is responsible if the iPad is lost or damaged, which discourages young people from even using them for fear that they will be damaged and they will then be liable for those costs, which they would not be able to meet.

I want to cover a different angle on digital exclusion and inclusion. On the question about digital support, a lot of the support has been for people who are not used to using digital devices. In our client group, we have seen a significant increase in young people being exploited due to their online activity having increased significantly because they are staying at home and are socialising online.

We have seen many parents who have not been equipped to know how to keep their young people safe online and how to prevent them from being exploited digitally, and we have seen an increase in people who would exploit young people taking advantage of the situation.

Therefore, any system on digital exclusion and inclusion must include not only advice on how physically to use a device and how to get online,

but parental advice and teaching on digital safety and the complex and significant issues that come with use of TikTok and all the other online media platforms that make young people significantly more vulnerable.

Gillian Martin: I want to come in quickly on the back of that, convener. Is one of the other consequences that people are, in a similar way to how young people are being exploited, susceptible to financial scamming?

The Convener: Are you putting that question to Meg Thomas?

Gillian Martin: Yes.

10:45

Meg Thomas: Some of our families have fallen foul of online scams. I suspect that Neil Cowan will have more to say on that, because we work in such a niche area. However, what you are touching on is exactly why we need to think more broadly about what education needs to come with digital devices. It is not as simple as being about only how to negotiate various software packages; it is also about how people keep safe online from financial or other exploitation.

Neil Cowan: That issue has not come up significantly with our member organisations or community activists, but it makes sense that that might be a risk or an issue. I will go away and have a chat with our membership to see whether it has come up, and I will feed back to the committee if that would be useful.

The Convener: Thank you. That would be useful. Lucy, would you like to answer Gillian Martin's questions on digital exclusion?

Lucy Mulvagh: I will not reiterate what Meg Thomas and Neil Cowan have said, which I completely agree with. I will add only two things. First, Gillian Martin mentioned NHS Near Me, which had been stuck in the long grass of its piloting period. When the pandemic hit, it went up a gear and there was a massive roll-out of it at an unprecedented scale. That is to be welcomed; maybe that was what was needed in order to get NHS Near Me going.

We welcome the fact that the Scottish Government is doing work on digital inclusion; alliance colleagues are involved in that work. One of the issues that we are concerned about for the future is that, rather than just being a general question of exclusion or inclusion, NHS Near Me should, as everything should, be seen in the context of equalities and human rights and a person-centred approach. As Neil Cowan said, it is about choice and control. It should be one of many different means of engaging that people who access services have the right to choose from, and they should get the same quality of service and support, irrespective of which route they are using. They should also be able to swap between routes; if someone decides to engage digitally, they should not be stuck in a digital ghetto and be no longer able to have a phone conversation or face-to-face meeting.

The second thing that I will add is that, particularly in the context of mental health services, our members and partners have said that they are concerned about the fact that a twin-track approach might develop. It will not be acceptable if patients are told that they can be seen next week if they can take a digital appointment, but if they want to speak to and see somebody face-to-face, that will take a month. We need the same standard of services—the best possible—irrespective of the means through which people choose to engage.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The subject that I wanted to talk about has been covered but I will go back to the issue of long-term sustainability and impact for your organisations and the sector in general. How does that look in the medium term, particularly around grants that you would perhaps have received, which might be drying up? More importantly, how does it look for the long term?

Lucy Mulvagh: I am not sure that I caught the very end of that question, but I think that it was about the medium and longer-term financial sustainability.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: It was.

Lucy Mulvagh: Brilliant—thanks. That has been an issue on which the alliance has been campaigning for a while, and we had issued a call for the creation of a third sector recovery fund. We are delighted to see the Scottish Government deliver a £25 million fund. Before the pandemic, the long-term financial and otherwise sustainability of third sector health and social care organisations was always an issue, and it is more urgent now. The Scottish health survey from 2019, which came out earlier this week, already reports that the proportion of adults in Scotland who are living with one long-term condition has slightly increased to 47 per cent. That was before the pandemic, and we know that the number of people living with conditions—long Covid-related or otherwise—will increase and that there will be ever more need for those organisations.

There are innovative and alternative approaches to mainstreaming financial planning and economic recovery that are worth considering in that context. I welcome the Scottish Government's indication in its response to the report of the advisory group on economic recovery that it is looking seriously at some of those issues. However, in the longer term, we have to look at human rights budget work

and gender budgeting. We cannot continue to perceive funding for work on equalities and human rights as part of one programme, project or portfolio. It must be mainstreamed and embedded across all Government portfolios.

That work happens not only at the national level. So much of what we have spoken about this morning is at the local level, so we have to bring in the local authorities. They are an essential partner in the journey to sustainable longer-term funding for the third sector.

Other issues that we could explore are a basic income and participatory budgeting, which has been under way in Scotland for a while. Much more could be done on PB by increasing the amount of funding that we put into it and increasing the involvement of people in the decision-making process.

Ian Bruce, on the previous panel, mentioned Brexit. We still do not really know what will happen and what the impact will be, but there is a double whammy with the pandemic and Brexit. Therefore, there will be no shortage of work for us to do.

Given the current issues, and that the latest reports today show that our economic recovery could take until 2024, now is a prime time and opportunity to think about how to do things very differently from how we have done them until now.

Meg Thomas: I agree with Lucy Mulvagh.

Our services are predominantly funded by local authorities. Over the years before Covid, we definitely saw the impact of austerity measures and decreasing local authority budgets. For children and families work, that has meant that statutory children and families services need to prioritise those who are most at risk and, as a result, early intervention work is falling by the wayside.

There is a significant disconnect between what is being said on the importance of the third sector in delivering that early intervention work. At the start of the pandemic, local authorities quickly saw how the third sector provided that support, yet sufficient local authority budgeting is not in place to continue to support the third sector. We then get into the grant funding world, where, as I said, third sector organisations are often pitted against one another and are in competition rather than collaboration.

We would like a wellbeing economy and we would like decisions to be made on the basis of what affects those who are most disadvantaged. At the moment, our biggest concern is that, when economic decisions are being made, the voices of those who are at the far end are not heard. Those people are excluded because they do not have a voice. That is not just about having a digital voice; it relates to stigma and other issues.

There are significant concerns about the medium and long-term sustainability of third sector organisations. We welcome the promise and the Scottish Government's commitment to fund family support through it, but the current rate of funding that has been agreed is not sufficient to provide the support that our families need in tackling not just issues of poverty but the repercussions that come with that. People in those families are more likely to go into care, more likely to become offenders and more likely to have long-term health consequences if the underlying structural inequalities are not challenged.

Neil Cowan: Most Poverty Alliance member organisations have reported to us that their existing funders have been extremely supportive and accommodating in respect of reporting on the use of funds over the past few months. However, there are definitely growing fears and growing anxiety about the long-term financial impact of the current context. What will happen once the initial batch of Scottish Government funding that has been delivered ends or runs out is of particular concern, given the expectation that demand for services will not decrease in the short and medium terms but will certainly increase further.

To add to that anxiety, organisations that have relied on charitable donations have been hit hard because fundraising opportunities have diminished. Ian Bruce, who was on the first panel, mentioned that. Social economy organisations and those that have been encouraged to develop income-generation projects, such as cafes, shops and room-hire projects, have all been and will be negatively affected.

That absolutely underlines the importance of long-term financial investment and financial security for community and third sector organisations—Lucy Mulvagh and Meg Thomas have already touched on that. Those organisations have shown their absolutely critical role in the pandemic in supporting people through the worst of the storm. The community and third sectors will be absolutely critical to achieving our ambitions as a society, such as meeting our child poverty targets, and that has to be reflected in the national support that they receive. Long-term investment and assurance are vital.

The issue of participative budgeting has been raised. We still spend only a very small proportion of money via participative budgeting in Scotland. That is certainly one area that can help to embed a more human rights-based approach to budgeting and better support community organisations that support people who live in poverty.

The Convener: Does Alex Cole-Hamilton have any other questions?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: That really covers things, to be honest. The panellists have touched on quite a lot of what I was after, and I thank them.

Mary Fee: Good morning, panel. Much of what I wanted to ask about has already been covered in your previous answers. However, you have spoken about pressures on services. Are there any new areas of demand that you think that you will see? You have talked about the pressures on mental health services and employability and on the services that BME communities need. Do you see any additional services being required?

Lucy Mulvagh: Forgive me, but I think that I have already mentioned this issue. People who live with chronic pain or long-term conditions such as multiple sclerosis or cerebral palsy were accessing services that were, completely understandably, suspended. Because of that suspension of services and the lack of access to services and support, particularly during the lockdown, we are seeing reports in the papers and on the BBC today about people's conditions worsening. That is a consequence of their not being able to take part in rehabilitation and reablement support services. As a consequence of that, additional work may be needed to help people who have taken two steps back to improve their health and wellbeing.

We can talk about the impact on particular population groups in general terms and on protected characteristic groups, but they are not homogeneous groups. Women comprise more than 50 per cent of the population. We really need to look at the intersections and take a detailed intersectional and analytical approach so that we are sure that we have the data that we need in order to be able to target services, make the best use of the resources that we have, and deliver what people need and have a right to, rather than potentially taking an equalities and more human rights-based approach that is still a one-size-fits-all one as a result of treating some groups as homogeneous.

11:00

Meg Thomas: I will touch on two specific services that I think will be required. I have already touched on the need for true holistic family support at an earlier stage. That is an intervention that should look not just at what the presenting problems are but at how the family as a whole can be supported. The provision of local, relationship-based support is key. Our families are telling us clearly that the support from which they have benefited most during Covid has been not the support from statutory services, in relation to which there are expectations of compliance with care plans, but the support that is provided by relationship-based services from non-statutory agencies, where the young person and the family are in control of their own care plan. They are saying, "This is what I want to solve, and if I do that, many of the other things will come into play." Relationship-based holistic family support is needed at a local level.

A surprising discovery for many of the children's services in the third sector has been the fact that many of our young people did better with their mental health and their anxiety when education was not being provided at school. Much of the family conflict that had been occurring was a result of parents or carers trying to get young people to attend schools where their school needs were not being met. That tension went away when the schools were closed. We would like a greater opportunity for blended schooling to be available to young people. We would like that to be the case not just when schools are closed, so that if a young person who has mental health or anxiety difficulties says, "I can't manage to go to school today," that does not mean that they cannot manage to learn. Mainstream education does not meet the needs of lots of young people, particularly those with additional support needs.

Angela Morgan's most recent report on the difficulties around additional support needs took into account the fact that many young people are not getting access to their right to education because they are expected to access that right in a highly structured setting. I would like there to be a greater opportunity for blended learning in the future, regardless of pandemics.

Neil Cowan: I touched on employability earlier, but I will return to the issue, if that is okay, because I think that it is important in the context of the current discussion. I welcome the Scottish Government's youth guarantee, which is a significant measure. From our perspective, it is a welcome start on employability, but we have a slight concern that it might lack teeth in the extent to which it will embed fair work and promote payment of the real living wage. As the youth guarantee is currently set out, it says that jobs that have been created by the scheme must come with a stated commitment from employers to move to the living wage within an agreed time period, which will coincide with the economic recovery. Given that it is not too pessimistic to say that the economic recovery is probably some way off, that seems to be the wrong way round. We should be looking at payment of the real living wage as a driver of economic recovery.

When it comes to other services that will best support our economic recovery, it is important to talk about childcare. Especially given the labour

market disruption that has been experienced by many groups of women, delivery of the Scottish Government's childcare commitment will be critical in supporting economic recovery. It is understandable that there has been a delay in the delivery of 1,140 hours of entitlement, but there is a need for it to be delivered as soon as possible. That will make a huge difference to women on low incomes, particularly women who are lone parents. The provision of childcare enables paid work, it supports the realisation of women's rights and children's rights, and it is of particular benefit to the poorest families. Childcare and employability are two critical areas.

The Convener: Lucy Mulvagh wants to come back in.

Lucy Mulvagh: I apologise, but I want to add to my earlier point and to what Meg Thomas and Neil Cowan have said. The number of unpaid carers in Scotland has now topped 1 million as a consequence of Covid. That is partly a result of the withdrawal of and reductions in social care support that people with disabilities and people living with long-term carers were relying on. That is a group that will need particular attention as we move forward.

We already knew that unpaid carers had barriers to realising their rights before the pandemic, and, like other groups, they are experiencing additional infringements and retrogression of their rights as it continues. Therefore, it would be great if we could give thought to that group of the population, too.

The Convener: Thank you for that important point.

Mary Fee: My final question is about the development and preparation of a long-term recovery plan. In their previous answers, the witnesses touched on the need for such a plan. Who should be involved in its development?

Lucy Mulvagh: I think that the previous panel of witnesses gave really good answers to that question, and I do not want to reiterate what they said or pre-empt what Neil Cowan and Meg Thomas will say.

Who should be involved? Obviously, the third sector, community groups, communities, people living with long-term conditions, disabled people, unpaid carers, women, people of all protected characteristics, and others, including the so-called seldom-heard groups, people living in all four corners of Scotland, care-experienced people and survivors—you name it. Everybody should be involved in that.

We have the participation, accountability, non-discrimination and equality, empowerment and legality—PANEL—principles. Fundamentally, if we are taking an inequalities and human rights-based approach, there must be participation, which is the first of those principles. People can and must be involved directly in discussions and decision making about matters that affect their lives and their rights.

I add that—I am not sure that this was picked up by the previous witnesses—I welcome a lot of the indications in the Government's response and in its implementation plan of how central and embedded equalities and rights will be to recovery.

Picking up on a couple of the written submissions to the committee's inquiry, we would say that there is a need to ensure that good equalities and human rights competence is at the heart of that process in order to support it. That might mean continuing professional development or training—whatever it might be—for everyone involved. However, there is that expertise and willingness to engage and be involved on the part not only of third sector organisations such as mine or the Human Rights Consortium Scotland but of the national human rights institutions such as the Scottish Human Rights Commission and the Equality and Human Rights Commission. We all need to be resourced to do that work, which we are ready, willing and able to do. However, organisations and people need to be adequately supported to ensure that we can engage freely, meaningfully and actively in helping to lead the recovery as much as in being the beneficiaries of it.

Meg Thomas: I agree with Lucy Mulvagh's comments, so I will keep my answer short. In addition to what she said, I think that the expectation in the current model of tendering for local authority contracts is that the third sector will deliver those, but we are not brought into the conversation before those are written. So much of what we read in children's services plans and community partnership plans talks about what will happen in communities, but the third sector is almost added on at the last minute. It is almost as though "and the third sector" is added at the end of the sentence, because they are not entirely sure about that aspect.

True partnership would be sitting down with local communities and those who commission, deliver and receive services to write the service specifications together and to agree how they should be delivered. That again speaks to moving away from competitive tendering to having truly collaborative design and delivery of services, with the voice of service users at their heart. That is particularly important for our children, young people and families who are most vulnerable and often do not have their rights respected. That would be a good way of putting them at the centre of it all.

Neil Cowan: I echo what Lucy Mulvagh and Meg Thomas have said. It is critical that people who have experience of poverty are involved in the development of all our economic and social recovery plans at the local and national levels. At a time of increased pressure on the capacity of the Government, local authorities and other public bodies, and also at a time of financial constraint, there might be a move towards dropping, marginalising or not fully supporting participatory approaches to decision making and policy making because it might be deemed to be too challenging in the current context. That would be the wrong move. It would be entirely counterproductive, especially for the protection of equalities and human rights. The case for participatory approaches is even stronger and more pressing than it was pre-pandemic. It is important to continue to make that case at the national and the local level.

Alexander Stewart: My question is similar to the one that I asked the first panel. We are well aware that £350 million was given in funding streams for support across the sectors. Do you feel that giving funding to communities and to support the people who needed it the most has been fair, and has it been seen to be fair?

Lucy Mulvagh: Natalie Masterson, Anthea Coulter and Ian Bruce all gave thorough responses to that question. As TSIs, they are much closer to the wellbeing fund and so on than the alliance was. I would not want to say anything different from what they said.

My only general observation about fairness is that we already have useful tools such as equality impact assessments and human rights impact assessments, which can be used to ensure that fairness and transparency are at the heart of funding disbursement decision making, the monitoring of expenditure and underspend and what might be done with that—and where the gaps might be. At an organisational level, we would recommend that, if we are taking an equalities and human rights-based approach to funding, as we all should be, we need to make use of the tools that already exist. There is no need to reinvent the wheel.

Meg Thomas: I have nothing substantial to add to that, but if we can take a step back from that, the reality is that services are needed more than ever, and the pot that services are trying to gain access to is getting smaller. It is not necessarily a question of fairness when distributing across services in general; the question is whether there is fairness in the amount of money that is available to support the most vulnerable in our communities. I suggest that that is the bigger question that needs to be asked. As more and more services are being expected to deliver more with less, how can we do that in a way that ensures that those who desperately need services have access to them?

Neil Cowan: I would not necessarily speak to fairness, but the feedback from lots of our member organisations that accessed some of that funding was broadly favourable. There was some initial concern from smaller, community-based organisations that financial support was not necessarily trickling down to them at the grass-roots level but was focused one or two rungs up. However, that was quickly rectified.

As the earlier panel said, some organisations faced some complexity in navigating the proliferation of different funds and funding streams and, as a result, some organisations probably fell through the gaps. Given the nature of the emergency, there was no focus on equality impacts in the course of developing the funding streams. To some extent, that is understandable, given the need to get money out there as quickly as possible. However, now that the emergency element of the crisis has passed somewhat—at least, it is certainly different from what it was six months ago—that will need revisiting as and when new funding is released in the future, as we hope that it will be.

11:15

Fulton MacGregor: I have a similar question to the one that I asked the previous panel—I do not know whether panel members watched that evidence session. How much were equality and human rights impact assessments considered as part of the funding system? How could the system—[*Inaudible*.]—in this regard?

The Convener: We seem to always freeze on your question, Fulton. I am not sure why that has happened.

Fulton MacGregor is asking about the impact of equality impact and human rights assessments on the funding system and how the system could be improved. If the panellists have any reflections on the difference that a human rights approach to budgeting would make, that would be of interest to the committee.

Lucy Mulvagh: I do not have information on the extent to which equality or human rights impact assessments have been used in funding decisions, although I am sure that the Scottish Government and other organisations that are responsible for disbursing funds would have details about that. Both types of assessment are essential, obviously, but the focus tends to be on equality impact assessments. However, there is also a role for human rights impact assessments, and they seem to be gaining more traction, which is great.

On the disbursement of funds, some of the national third sector health organisations that are members of the alliance were certainly concerned about their access to funding, so, at some point, we would welcome some good analysis of how the funding was disbursed, where it was disbursed to, the types of organisations to which it was disbursed and so on. My understanding is that undertaking such work is part of the plan; we will welcome it when it comes out.

We echo what Meg Thomas said about human rights budget work. As the committee knows, the alliance has been working closely with the Scottish Human Rights Commission and other partners to advance that work in Scotland.

The human rights budget work approach would be to identify what people's rights and needs are, what needs to be done to help realise those rights and meet those needs, and what resourcing is needed to do that, and then to consider how to raise the funding and resourcing and look at where it will come from. The entire process, including the disbursement of funding, which would be based on equality and human rights principles, would be monitored using equality and human rights indicators. We would continue to monitor where the money went and how it was used and, if there was any underspend, we would monitor what happens with that and where it subsequently goes.

At the moment, from an open budget index perspective, the process in Scotland scores quite well in some aspects, but the Scottish Government could do a lot better on transparency and, in particular, participation in the fiscal decision-making process, which are two of the core human rights principles.

The potentially devastating impacts of the pandemic and—the B word—Brexit on the Scottish economy mean that we cannot continue doing what we have been doing up until now. It will not work—we will end up in austerity, with even worsening inequalities across swathes of Scottish society. We see again and again the same population groups being driven more and more to the edges—to poverty and deprivation.

Now is the time to do something fundamentally different. It is an opportunity that we need to seize, but what lies at the heart of that is competence and understanding what doing things differently looks like. We need to draw on the expertise that is available both nationally, at the Scottish Human Rights Commission and elsewhere, and internationally—the Centre for Economic and Social Rights, for example, can support that work, as it has done in other countries to show how it can be done.

Meg Thomas: I whole-heartedly agree with everything that Lucy Mulvagh has said.

For our families, the biggest impact is entrenched poverty and their inability to access the most basic of their human rights: quality food, the ability to maintain their health, and quality housing. We are concerned, and our families tell us that, although they have benefited incredibly from things such as the wellbeing fund and the ability to have a short-term injection of cash to meet that immediate need, they need to be able to plan and to have financial control, which means adequate benefits that allow them to meet their needs.

Our families are disappointed that the Scottish child payment has been delayed and that, when it comes in, it will initially only cover children under six. For our families with teenagers, who can be expensive to keep in this digital world, that payment is needed now. It is too late for them a year or two down the track.

Equally, our families welcomed the Scottish Government's intention in the recent programme for government in relation to housing and what to do about potential evictions because of housing arrears. Some of the Covid legislation that has been introduced means that families cannot be evicted at the moment but, for them, that is just delaying the inevitable. The announcement in the programme for government of a housing loan to meet rent arrears just moves the debt from one place to another and we know from what our families are telling us that, for half of those on income support, their debt is worse than it was six months ago. So much of what is being done is not allowing them to exert their rights or to be financially in control and independent.

We would certainly like to see more immediate long-term budgetable benefits; in terms of that impact assessment, our families need injections of cash.

Neil Cowan: I do not have much more to add to what Lucy Mulvagh and Meg Thomas have said. I completely agree with it all. I will just make a more general comment on the use of EQIAs in designing policy interventions. The extent to which they influence policy interventions, policy decisions and policy design is not always clear and it is not always clear what has changed as a result of the publication of EQIAs. For example, the EQIA for the Scottish child payment was only published in September. Clearly, that is prior to the delivery of the payment, but it was after the payment was designed and it was after the drafting of the regulations. If the purpose of an EQIA is to integrate equalities considerations, it cannot be produced after the fact, and after the heavy lifting on the design of the policy is complete.

A stronger focus in all our economic and social recovery work on better linking of EQIAs and

human rights assessments to policy design at a much earlier stage would be welcome.

The Convener: Thank you. That issue comes up a lot in our committee. I would reflect that EQIAs could be used to spot opportunities to improve things, not just to mitigate things that might go wrong.

Fulton, do you have any follow-up questions for the panel?

Fulton MacGregor: No, thank you, convener, I think that those were fairly comprehensive responses. I apologise for whatever is going on with my signal.

The Convener: It is fine—the picture just froze. This platform is great when it works, but it is stressful when we have issues with connectivity.

That concludes our questions for this morning. I thank Lucy Mulvagh, Meg Thomas and Neil Cowan for their contributions—I know that the committee will find them valuable. The next meeting of the committee will be on Thursday 8 October. We will continue to take evidence on pre-budget scrutiny. That will include evidence from the Minister for Older People and Equalities.

As previously agreed, I now move the meeting into private session.

11:25

Meeting continued in private until 11:41.

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