



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 2 September 2021

Session 6



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SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE

2nd Meeting 2021, Session 6

CONVENER

*Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)

*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)

*Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab)

*Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)

*Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

*Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Salena Begley (Family Fund)

Fiona Collie (National Carer Organisations)

Ben Macpherson (Minister for Social Security and Local Government)

Andrew Strong (Scottish Government)

Kate Thomson-McDermott (Scottish Government)

Colin Toal (Lanarkshire Carers)

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Claire Menzies

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament
**Social Justice and Social
Security Committee**

Thursday 2 September 2021

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Interests

The Convener (Neil Gray): Good morning, and welcome to the second meeting of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. Apologies have been received from Natalie Don. I welcome Evelyn Tweed, who is attending as Natalie's substitute. The first item of business is for me to invite Evelyn to declare any interests that are relevant to the committee's work.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I confirm that I am a councillor at Stirling Council. I am also a member of the GMB trade union.

The Convener: Thank you, Evelyn.

**Decisions on Taking Business in
Private**

09:01

The Convener: The second item of business is to decide whether to take agenda items 6 and 7 in private. Does the committee agree to do so?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That is great—thank you.

Agenda item 3 is another decision on taking business in private. Do members agree to take consideration of our draft stage 1 report on the Carer's Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill in private at future meetings?

Members indicated agreement.

Subordinate Legislation

Welfare Foods (Best Start Foods) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/221)

09:01

The Convener: Under agenda item 4, the committee has been asked to consider the Welfare Foods (Best Start Foods) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2021, which increase payments and uplift the income threshold for some of the qualifying benefits under the Welfare Foods (Best Start Foods) (Scotland) Regulations 2019 (SSI 2019/193).

The proposed updates to the regulations are welcome, and I am pleased to see them. However, I note that there was a manifesto commitment to remove the income threshold for universal credit over the course of the parliamentary session. There is also a question about the use of “no recourse to public funds” as a qualifying criterion. I think that colleagues would be interested to know the Scottish Government’s position on those matters.

Do members have any comments to make before I suggest a way forward?

As members do not have any comments to make, I propose that the committee write to the minister to ask for further clarification on those points. Are members content for me to do so?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Carer’s Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

09:02

The Convener: Our main item of business consists of two evidence-taking sessions on the Carer’s Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill. I put on record my thanks to everyone who responded to the committee’s call for views over the summer and acknowledge the tight timescale in which they did so. I also thank the clerks and the committee team for pulling all that together ahead of today’s meeting, which I know involved a lot of work.

I welcome our first panel, the members of which are joining us remotely. Salena Begley is partner engagement manager for the Family Fund; Fiona Collie, who is policy and public affairs manager at Carers Scotland, is representing the national carer organisations; and Colin Toal from Lanarkshire Carers is an unpaid carer.

Before we kick off, I would like to make a few housekeeping points about the format of the meeting. I ask witnesses and colleagues to wait until I say your name or the member who asked the question says your name before speaking and to allow our broadcasting colleagues a few seconds to make sure that your microphone is on before you start to speak. Witnesses can also indicate that they wish to speak by putting an R in the dialogue box in BlueJeans or by raising a hand. I or my clerking colleague will try to get to you as quickly as possible. Please do not feel that you have to answer every question—if you have nothing new to add to what has already been said by others, that is okay.

We have a lot to cover this morning, so I ask everyone to keep questions and answers, and any follow-up questions, as tight as possible.

Colleagues in the room should indicate to me or the clerk if they wish to ask a supplementary question. As I have said, I will do my best to get to everybody, as far as possible. Committee members who are participating online should use the chat box or WhatsApp, if possible. We are tight for time, but I will try to give all members an opportunity for questioning.

I invite colleagues to ask questions in turn, starting with Jeremy Balfour.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Good morning to the panel. I hope that you can hear me.

Does the doubling up of the money go far enough to help carers, particularly after the past 18 months, or is there something else that could or should be done?

I do not have my glasses on, so I cannot see who is sitting where, but I will start with Fiona Collie and work round.

Fiona Collie (National Carer Organisations):

It is important to say how much we welcome the proposal to double the carers allowance supplement. That is an important recognition of the huge contribution that carers make. As our response shows, a significant proportion of carers do not benefit from that, but even those carers who do not benefit spoke positively in our survey about the doubling of the carers allowance supplement.

There are other things that could also be done. In our response, we focused on developing a Covid recovery plan that would look at carers' financial situations and their health, wellbeing, employment and more, so that existing inequalities and impacts are not exacerbated.

Salena Begley (Family Fund): The parent carers whom I spoke to welcomed the additional payment and its timing. Carers have additional costs throughout the year, but we know that winter and Christmas bring particular pressures. Family Fund's research shows that the carers whom we support who had savings before the pandemic are likely to have drawn on those savings and used them during the pandemic because of additional costs and lower income. This winter will be harder for carers, so the payment and its timing are welcome.

Our research throughout the pandemic has taken into account financial wellbeing, health and the support that is available to carers of disabled children and young people. We know that support in one area will be welcome and beneficial, but that can be only part of a wider range of targeted support.

It is important to say that, although we are discussing financial support for carers, we cannot separate the needs of the carer from those of the person being cared for. We must also look at how we support them. Family Fund supports families on low incomes who care for a disabled child or young person. The national carer organisations work with a spectrum of carers. We know that carers are having to take on additional caring tasks and that that has an emotional cost as well as a physical one. The financial support is welcome, but it must be part of wider targeted support for carers' health and wellbeing, and it must be considered alongside support for the person being cared for. I am happy to answer any specific questions about that.

Colin Toal (Lanarkshire Carers): The next tranche of money in December 2021 will be welcome, but it has been delayed for too long after the previous additional tranche. I am trying to

reflect the needs of people who are in that situation. The 18-month gap is too long. The extra money is, of course, appreciated, but I just feel—I am hesitant about using the phrase “too little too late”, but that would be my instant reaction to it.

The second aspect is that it affects only 91,000 out of 1 million carers, or 9.1 per cent. Its scope should be widened to bring a greater number of unpaid carers into an environment in which they can physically benefit from the money.

Jeremy Balfour: Thank you all for those answers. I will follow up with my final question.

The doubling of the carers allowance supplement is not a permanent fixture, but do you think that it should become permanent? As Fiona Collie has said, perhaps the doubling should be permanent every December, when costs are higher. Would you like to see that included in primary legislation?

Fiona Collie: Yes. We heard from carers through the survey that they thought that the increase—the doubling of the carers allowance supplement—should be permanent. We would support that. In addition, I echo Colin Toal's point about the double payment being 18 months after the previous one. That is a good point, and doubling the payment permanently would respond to that point, going forward.

Salena Begley: Given the demands on carers during the winter months—particularly over Christmas—the parent carers whom we support are likely to welcome the doubling being a permanent element of support, as it would offer them some level of security around how they would manage over those winter months. We know that many of our families now have increased debt. That is an area that we would like to see targeted support for, as well. For this year, it is likely for many that the payment will be swallowed up by existing debt and outstanding bills that they have fallen behind on. For the future, anything that can offer carers security for how they will manage and look after their own health and wellbeing, particularly during the difficult winter months, would be welcome.

Colin Toal: I agree with both speakers. Basically, in the situation of being an unpaid carer, the time horizon that you are looking to survive for runs from month to month. It does not work on a yearly or two-year basis. You have a short horizon and think, “Can I manage this? Can I manage that? Can I manage the next thing?” If, as Mr Balfour suggested, the doubling was a permanent inclusion in an unpaid carer's budgeting, it would give them a relatively fixed idea of the income that they would have over a year or two years. It would therefore give them more ability to look at what is ahead. Please do not let me go on too long about

this, but a carer's horizons become shorter and shorter, and you cannot look too far into the future.

The Convener: Thanks, Colin. That is very helpful. I also thank Jeremy Balfour.

The next set of questions is from Pam Duncan-Glancy.

09:15

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the organisations for their submissions, and the people whom they represent—unpaid carers across Scotland. They have done an incredible amount of work in the past year and a half during the pandemic and before. I know that it has been hard and I see the work that you all do.

It is clear to me that many carers are unable to use the payment to benefit their own wellbeing and instead need to use it to pay bills or, as Salena Begley said, to pay off debt on household costs. As it stands, as an income replacement benefit, is the carers allowance and the carers allowance supplement adequate to cover the care that is carried out? How does that make you feel?

The Convener: We will go in reverse order this time and start with Colin, then move on to Salena and Fiona.

Colin Toal: The carers allowance is totally swallowed up by the costs of general care. I cared for my mother. The allowance was not for me but to provide help to get to the next period and then the next period and so on. I found my needs increasing as my mum came towards the end of her life, so I consider that any amount of money that can be diverted to unpaid carers is extremely valuable. I do not particularly recall any periods of unemployment that I had in my life, but it seems like carers are valued less than those in other sectors that are given assistance.

The Convener: Thank you, Colin. That is good insight.

Salena Begley: Thank you for the question. I cannot comment specifically on what amount would be preferred or needed, but I know what the carers whom we spoke to told us. One in particular said:

"The money just isn't spent on you at all. We ... are not able to benefit. It's welcome but I'd value just being able to have something for yourself. I'm caring for 3 people and we never get to go anywhere. You don't have anything to look forward to."

Carers have told us that the supplement, and the additional supplement, is welcome as practical financial support and as an acknowledgement of their caring role. What they want and need is for society to recognise their role as a carer, as Colin Toal said. One said:

"It's difficult to stand up for your kids and be that person. It has taken a long time for me to say I am a Carer. I need other people to recognise my role as a Carer and value it."

We cannot get away from the fact that an amount of money communicates the value that we put on things, including on jobs or roles in society. Therefore, there needs to be careful consideration of whether the amount is sufficient, in terms of providing practical support and as an acknowledgement of the role that carers are undertaking, which often takes place in private spaces. However, we know from those who work with carers that there is a cost to carers financially and to their wellbeing. Therefore, looking at whether the amount is sufficient would be welcome.

Fiona Collie: I would definitely say that the amount is not sufficient. We have talked for many years about the low level of carers allowance. Although the supplement has been really welcome in bringing up the level to at least that of other income replacement benefits, when you consider that that covers 35 hours of care a week, it amounts to about £2 an hour. When we start equating such work to paid work, we see that the amount really does not recognise or value carers in the way that we might want to in the future.

I return to Salena Begley's points about looking at carers as a whole. We were trying to make the same point with regard to the idea of a Covid recovery plan. You could at any time have such a plan to address each of the different elements of the impact on carers and what can be done to improve their lives in those areas. The financial impact is one issue, but we also need to think about the physical and mental impacts, the impact on employment and so on.

We also have to think about the long-term impact on carers of being on carers allowance. Some people might have to be carers for only a very short time; for others, it might mean a lifelong commitment, which means that they will have to live on that low income for perhaps the biggest part of their lives. Even when their caring role ends, they will experience significantly more poverty as they move towards pension age, as they have not been able to save into a private or occupational pension to top up their state pension. I would therefore welcome it if we could look at carers in their entirety and the opportunities that might exist not just in the carers allowance, but in other passported benefits and other areas to see how we can make an appreciable difference.

The Convener: Do you have any more questions, Pam?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Yes—I have just one more. I thank the witnesses for their answers to my previous question. I really appreciated them.

How many of the people with whom you work and who get the carers allowance supplement are living in poverty? Are all the carers identified as living in poverty in Scotland getting carers allowance, or are there others?

Colin Toal: I defer to the professionals on that.

Salena Begley: I am not sure of the exact proportion, but in our previous family survey in Scotland, 66 per cent of respondents were in receipt of carers allowance. Our main grant fund supports parent carers on a low income who are entitled to means-tested benefits such as universal credit or tax credits. In other words, we work with a particular population in our grant scheme.

From research and feedback from carers, we know that they really struggle to get the information that they need in an accessible way. Even when they are entitled to certain social security benefits, they are either unaware of that entitlement or unsure of how to go about accessing those benefits. The submissions to the committee clearly highlight an issue around whether people feel that it is worth their while to apply for carers allowance. There might be a population who would benefit from accessing such support, but they do not know that applying would benefit them. That area needs to be considered further, because it would be more than unfortunate if people had an entitlement but they were not accessing it. Carers get little enough support, so it is important that they get all their entitlements. I hope that that answers the question to some degree.

Where there has been targeted support to enable parent carers to access the benefits to which they are entitled, such as the disability premium of the child tax credit, you can see the benefits. We have had some additional funding from the Good Things Foundation to ensure that parent carers are aware of their entitlement. Work such as that needs to be looked at, to see whether there is a population that is not accessing all that they are entitled to.

Fiona Collie: We can probably come back with more data, but the allowance certainly does not touch all carers who experience poverty.

We know some things. For example, we know that a person is more likely to be caring for a lot more hours if they live in an area of multiple deprivation. However, we do not yet have detailed information on other things, such as hidden poverty.

Having an income is very different from having disposable income. Our family resources survey found that there are huge additional costs for households with disability and caring duties. Care costs are one thing, but there are additional heating and laundry costs. Parents with a child

with a disability also sometimes have to replace furniture, clothes and other things regularly, and those costs are never accounted for when we consider whether carers face poverty in the same way.

We are talking about people who are on low incomes anyway—a number of carers do not qualify for carers allowance because of the earnings threshold, which is set at about 15 hours at the national minimum wage, so they do not get carers allowance at all if they earn a penny more. We know that there is a group of people across the population who work in paid employment but that that work does not meet their household costs. There are different measures of poverty.

We would be happy to send information on the issue.

The Convener: That would be very helpful—thank you.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I want to carry on with the theme that all the witnesses have touched on: carers who are not entitled to payments. Specifically, I want to look at the issue of young carers during the pandemic. What have your organisations picked up on the subject? We know from some of the submissions that we have received that young carers cannot get the young carer grant if they are in receipt of carers allowance. What have you heard from young carers about their experiences? How do we consider potentially targeting support for young carers?

Salena Begley: We know from our research on the impact of the pandemic on families of disabled children that there has been a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of siblings of disabled children and young people. We also know from the research that the Sibs charity undertook, about the experience of siblings in lockdown, that the pandemic has further exacerbated health and wellbeing issues for siblings. We need to take that into account when considering what is required.

Some siblings have a physical caring role; other siblings' roles are more around prompting, providing supervision, providing emotional support and communicating on behalf of their sibling and so on. During the pandemic, particularly during the period of lockdown, we often spoke to families who were perhaps in inappropriate housing, did not have access to play spaces and had more than one child in the house. Many of the families whom we support also have more than one child with additional support needs, so they were trying to balance those aspects.

We know that it has been an extremely difficult period for families, including for siblings in the family who might be young carers. Like disabled

children and young people, they will need targeted support to reconnect and recover.

09:30

Many young people have missed out on key social, educational and leisure opportunities that would have opened up future opportunities for them. However, we have to look at that aspect in relation not only to young carers but to parent carers.

We have parent carers who are worrying about the impact on their disabled child and any siblings in the family. I spoke to one family in which the elder child is a young carer, and the parents are concerned about how they will afford that child going to university. Such opportunities are really important, so I welcome the focus on young carers. I also welcome consideration of the particular needs of siblings of disabled and seriously ill children and young people.

Fiona Collie: The research that Carers Trust Scotland undertook with young carers and young adult carers reflects exactly what Salena Begley said. Young people are caring for more hours, and their mental and physical health is getting worse. They feel less connected and are worried about the future.

The young carer grant is for a relatively small number in the young carer and young adult carer population—I think that the most recent information showed that about 3,000 people had received a payment.

The young carer grant is part of the picture, but it is also about young carers being connected and their important transition points, such as making choices about what they will study at school, whether they will go to college or university, whether they will work, and whether they will continue their caring role alongside or instead of those other options.

We need to look closely at what support young carers need right now as well as going forward. Given that 85 per cent of young carers are worried about their future, it is important that there is targeted work, either in relation to employability, in education or in mental health services, to ensure that we do not lose those young people as a result of the impact of Covid and the changes that have taken place.

Colin Toal: I said that I did not have anything to say in response to Pam Duncan-Glancy's supplementary question. However, when I carried out my caring role, my difficulty was finding out what benefits, if any, I could qualify for. I was a 58-year-old man with no experience of the social security system, so the situation was haphazard at best. It was only through the guidance that I

received from Lanarkshire Carers that I managed to get carers allowance.

That is my reflection on Pam Duncan-Glancy's question, but I cannot contribute on the point in relation to younger dependent people, as I do not have experience of young people who require care.

The Convener: Lanarkshire Carers is based in my Airdrie and Shotts constituency and I can confirm that it does excellent work.

Salena Begley: I want to reflect briefly on the findings of our research. Almost nine in 10 families—87 per cent—reported that the pandemic had negatively impacted on their other children's health and wellbeing. The most prominent impact had been on their mental health, with four in five families—84 per cent—reporting that it has been negatively affected by the coronavirus pandemic. I wanted to make members aware of those significant figures. Obviously, many young people are being affected.

One of the carers whom we spoke to specifically about the bill and the carers allowance supplement raised the issue of the age criteria for the young carer grant. They had twins in the family who were just a little below the eligibility age for the grant, and they thought that there should be consideration of the age range being lowered. They welcomed the support that is available through Young Scot, and her young people had accessed that during the pandemic, but she thought that it was not fair that they were missing out, given that they had been affected by the siblings' need for additional support, particularly during the pandemic.

Miles Briggs: Thanks very much for those answers.

We know that, during the pandemic, more than 300,000 of our fellow Scots have become carers and have taken up a caring role. I want to touch on what Colin Toal said. Although I asked about young carers, there is a question about where people can access information about support. Do any of you have views on support that is available outwith the social security system, such as carers breaks and respite care? I know that those services have also been hit during the pandemic. What difference would that support make? I know that local carer centres in my region are doing different things to support people. What does the national mix of additional support that is available that you have seen during the pandemic look like?

Colin Toal: To be honest, during the 2019-20 period, the additional benefits of respite care did not come into my mind. My sole consideration was my mum and making her life as comfortable and rewarding as it could possibly be. I realised the importance of respite probably four or five years

earlier, but at the two-and-a-half to three-year stage of my mum's decline, it was important that I was with her. In 2019, I spent two to three nights a week staying with her. That went up to six to seven nights a week in 2020. Wild horses would not have dragged me away.

Fiona Collie: We have seen some opportunities through the short breaks fund and the grants through the time to live programme through carers centres, and, obviously, there is the support through Young Scot that Salena Begley mentioned. Those supports are available. However, it is absolutely vital that we start to get back in place the supports that provide carers with a break. In surveys of the things that carers need, a break from caring is always at number 1.

Imagine working for a whole year with no break. In the carers week research in June, around 70 per cent of carers said that they had cared for over a year with no break whatsoever—not an hour, a day or a week. To be honest, that is not uncommon. We talk about Covid and the pandemic, but many carers do not get regular breaks.

It is important to get services back up and running now and to get financial support—the Government has put some financial support into that, which is very welcome—so that we can build carers up from their current low level of health, which is a result of caring for so long. We also need to consider how we ensure that, moving forward, carers have those regular breaks and that they are easily accessible.

We know from our research that it can be many years before a carer even knows that they are a carer. That has impacts across the piece in relation to practical and financial support—people struggle on alone because they do not see themselves as carers. There is a lot of work to be done to raise the profile of carers so that, when someone becomes a carer, they recognise that and know where to go to get that first piece of information.

Salena Begley: We are one of the organisations that support the Scottish Government in the delivery of the short breaks fund. We administer take a break Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Government, and last year we were able to support 2,660 carers through the fund—an increase of 23 per cent on the previous year—due to receiving additional funding.

Through research, surveys and our outcomes reporting, we know that breaks are vital to sustaining carers. It gives them something to look forward to, something to enjoy and build memories around, and something to look back on and sustain them when times are really difficult.

When we reported on last year's take a break scheme, which was administered during the height of the pandemic, we said that 89 per cent of carers reported that they could not have afforded a break without the support of the grant. Targeted support to enable carers to have a break is really important.

There is a financial aspect to that, because carers are unlikely to have savings to enable them to take a break and are likely to have debts. However, as Fiona Collie said, it is also important that the opportunities are available. Talking about the benefits of the supplement, some carers told us that they need opportunities that take them away from their caring role and allow them to be themselves, such as extra leisure or recreational activities or a night in a hotel. We welcome the voucher scheme that will be introduced as part of the tourism recovery strategy. That is just one element of that support.

I could talk all day long about breaks. They are absolutely vital for the carer and the cared-for person. They take many shapes and forms—there is a spectrum of what a break looks like. A wide range of support needs to be available to carers to enable them to take a break. Of the carers who responded to our survey, 86 per cent told us that their overall health and wellbeing had got worse since the beginning of the pandemic and 38 per cent told us that they think that it will take more than a year before their lives return to normal. Many of the other respondents were unsure when life would return to normal and about 10 per cent thought that it never would.

Being able to reconnect with one another outwith what was for many people the pressure cooker of lockdown, and enjoying activities that benefit physical health and emotional wellbeing, either with the cared-for person or independently, will be absolutely vital to supporting people to recover from the detrimental impacts of the pandemic.

The Convener: My question for the group is about scrutiny. Section 2 of the bill is about the regulation powers that would be given to the Scottish Government to uprate the carers allowance supplement in the future. What is your view on how much scrutiny should be brought to bear on that? There was a mixture of evidence in the written submissions about whether there should be maximum scrutiny, involving the super-affirmative procedure, which would go to the Scottish Commission on Social Security, or whether there would need to be very little scrutiny and the negative procedure would suffice. What are your views on that?

09:45

Fiona Collie: We sat in the middle on that. We felt that the affirmative procedure should be used, but we also felt that there should be committee scrutiny and that sufficient time should be given for the commission to look at the issue, as well. On whether that needs to be defined as absolute, I honestly do not have a strong feeling. However, I think that it is good practice to have such scrutiny for every regulation and piece of legislation on social security. The commission has a broad overview of not just one particular regulation but legislation as a whole. I understand that the bill has had a pretty quick turnaround in order to move it through the parliamentary procedure quickly. However, as we move forward in a planned way, we should try to ensure, if we can, that legislation goes to the commission as well.

Salena Begley: We have not been able to research carers' views on the issue. However, there is clearly a balance to be struck. It is important that carers receive support when they need it, and there is clearly an urgency at the moment around enabling people to recover from the pandemic's detrimental impact. We know that carers' situations are affected by the pandemic, which is a key example of something external having a huge impact, so it is important to be clear about carers' current concerns, issues and circumstances. In order to be clear about that, there has to be consideration of up-to-date research on the current situation.

I cannot give a clear answer on carers' views on the issue, but I know that a balance has to be struck. As we said in our earlier responses, it is important not to believe that carers' needs have been met by an additional financial payment. As Fiona Collie said, it is important that carers' circumstances in Scotland are always on the agenda, that there is continuous or regular consideration of them and that any intervention that is undertaken to respond to them is appropriate. In order for that to be the case, perhaps some level of scrutiny is needed. I hope that that makes sense.

The Convener: Absolutely it does—thank you.

Colin Toal: I believe that parliamentary scrutiny is important, because it keeps the issue in the public's and the Parliament's focus. I cannot tell you the difference between the affirmative and super-affirmative procedures but, as far as I am concerned, the more Parliament talks about the carers allowance, the more everyday people will understand its importance to carers. I am shocked by the fact that, of 1 million potential carers in Scotland, only 91,000 get unpaid carers allowance. The more the allowance is talked about, the more Parliament will come under pressure to address the situation to make it better

and to help the 910,000 people who are not in receipt of carers allowance.

The Convener: Thank you—that is helpful.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I thank our witnesses for their submissions, which have been very helpful. I will cover the theme of how to promote better take-up of carers allowance supplement.

You will all be aware that some carers are in receipt of universal credit. The full amount of any carers allowance that they receive is deducted pound for pound from their universal credit. It seems that because of that, some carers do not claim carers allowance, because they do not believe that they will gain financially from it. That perception is wrong, because in Scotland being in receipt of carers allowance means that you can also get carers allowance supplement. Are you aware of carers who have been deterred from claiming carers allowance supplement because of that perception? Can you comment on what you have done to tackle that perception? Is there a role for carers organisations in promoting take-up?

Salena Begley: I am not sure that I can talk specifically about take-up of that benefit but, as I said earlier, we know that, given that carers are often juggling many different things and time is something that they do not have very much of, they often struggle to know what their entitlements are and how to access them. There absolutely is a role for carers organisations to play in that, because they reach many carers and some carers do not have any other support network. I am sure that Fiona Collie will have comments on the role of carers centres and so on.

We are a grant-making organisation, but over the almost 50 years for which we have been providing grants we have recognised that families have much wider needs, a big part of which is understanding what their entitlements are. Therefore, where possible, we signpost to expert advice and to information organisations. We have also done specific work on uptake of disability living allowance and of the disability premium on tax credits. We know that that kind of targeted support has had success. For those who had not been accessing their entitlements but are now able to, that can be life-changing. It can make a huge difference.

If we are aware that there are carers who are not accessing all their entitlement and are missing out on the carers allowance supplement as a result, it is important that there is a strategy to address that. It is certainly right that the carers organisations have a key role in doing that.

Fiona Collie: We are aware that carers are deterred from claiming carers allowance in those circumstances, and actually it is about simplicity. If

you are claiming universal credit for your household, sometimes it is just easier to do things in that way. Often the carers do not realise that issue with the carers allowance supplement and that there is an opportunity to be better off.

We try to promote that information. Carers centres pay workers to deal with welfare rights, and they do better-off calculations with carers directly. That is done not just in carers centres but across the piece, by organisations such as Money Advice Scotland, Citizens Advice Scotland and local authority welfare rights departments.

We need to have targeted campaigns on the issue, because it is not simple. That is, in the scheme of things when it comes to claiming benefits, claiming carers allowance is relatively simple. Claiming universal credit is perhaps less simple, but it is all in one place, so it feels simpler. When we start talking about crossovers, it feels a bit more complex to people, and as Salena Begley said, when you have so many other things on your plate, simple is best.

It is not just for carers organisations but for Government and local organisations, such as disability and citizens advice organisations and local authorities, to run specific campaigns together to talk to carers about how they would be better off. It is also critical that they get someone to help carers to claim that benefit because, if we are leaving an additional task in carers' hands, it is not really an incentive. We need to help carers to do it.

Colin Toal: I agree with what the two professionals have said, in that unpaid carers are not given any clear signposting of where to go for help. My circumstances may have been different, with the mortgage having been paid off and stuff like that, but there is a definite lack of clear guidance on what people can get. Lanarkshire Carers prompted me to apply for carers allowance.

Marie McNair: I had a few other questions, convener, but they were about the role of other organisations, and Fiona Collie has covered that.

Evelyn Tweed: Good morning, members of the panel. It is good to see you here, and thank you for the evidence that you have already given us. It is important that we understand and recognise the role that carers play in Scotland. It has obviously been a very difficult time during the pandemic, with all that they have had to go through.

I am particularly interested in how we make the payments. I was very interested in what Colin Toal said about how carers have been struggling during this time. I wonder what the panel's views are on weekly and monthly payments. That has come up in the evidence that we have received.

The Convener: I am happy to go to Colin Toal and then Fiona Collie and Salena Begley. We have a maximum of 10 minutes left for this evidence session, so please be as brief as possible.

Colin Toal: I will be as brief as I can. I personally do not feel that it would make a lot of difference to have weekly payments as opposed to monthly payments. The advantage of having an on-going benefit is that it lets people plan months in advance. Most bills come in monthly, and there would seem to be a logical tie-in with that. However, to stress what the two professional ladies said earlier, if the carers allowance supplement became a regular annual thing, that would allow people to take the higher outgoings that they have in the winter months—heating, electricity, gas or whatever—and calculate those into their own family budgeting.

Salena Begley: I, too, will be brief. We have not done any specific research on this point, so my answer will be limited. The timing of the payment in December seemed to be particularly welcome, as I said earlier, because of the additional costs over the winter months and Christmas, although the downside of it was that people were potentially inclined to spend it on those additional bills, higher energy costs, Christmas presents, other Christmas-related costs and so on, which would benefit others rather than themselves. A regular payment can help people to budget and manage week to week.

For parent carers, the summer months are a period when children and young people are at home more. There are additional costs in giving them meals during the day, with higher energy bills and so on. There are probably pros and cons, and we would be happy to consider that in more detail with the families we support, if we are able to. However, I do not have terribly much to say from the research that we have undertaken to date—sorry.

The Convener: No—thank you very much, Salena.

10:00

Fiona Collie: Anecdotally, we have found, from the limited amount of surveying that we have done, that carers have mixed views on the value of having a regular payment or two lump sums during the year. I put forward the same offer as the Family Fund: the national carer organisations would be happy to survey carers on that question in more detail, if that would be helpful.

The Convener: Thank you very much. Have you concluded your questions, Evelyn?

Evelyn Tweed: Yes—in the interests of time, we should probably move on.

The Convener: Many thanks for your brevity; it is greatly appreciated.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I echo members' thanks to everyone who is giving evidence today; all the other committee members and I have found it very valuable.

I note that the theme of eligibility keeps cropping up. The Scottish Government has said that, in the early stages of carers assistance, there will be limitations on how much eligibility can be changed, and improvements to the application process and the administration will be able to come in earlier. Do the witnesses feel that those changes, including greater visibility and providing various options for communication, will make a big difference to carers in their experience of claiming the benefit?

Colin Toal: I am sorry, Emma—there was a fire alarm going off here. Could you restate your question, please?

Emma Roddick: Do you think that the changes to the administration and application process for carers assistance early on will make a big difference to carers' experience of claiming the assistance?

Colin Toal: Yes, I think that they will. If the whole process can be streamlined and simplified in any way, that is bound to benefit the people who receive the benefit. I just hope that the scheme can be extended to encompass more people.

Fiona Collie: I agree with Colin Toal. When things are more straightforward, and if you build publicity around the process—and the more ways people are able to apply, the better; Social Security Scotland will have multiple ways to apply—that has the potential to make a difference.

The national carer organisations will still be pushing to see whether we can get some quick wins to support more carers by increasing eligibility for those coming forward. I can think of two quick wins straight away. One involves the full-time study rule, which is a significant barrier to young people in particular going to university or further education, and to carers going back into the workplace or lifelong learning. The second concerns the earnings threshold. The figure for overpayments through the Department for Work and Pensions relating to the earnings threshold was around £80 million, because of the complexity of that aspect, so perhaps it could be made simpler.

In addition, the allowance should not be aligned with the minimum wage. If we are talking across the piece about fair work for others and paying the real living wage, it should be aligned with the real

living wage. We could talk about that and try to understand some of those complexities. I know that it will be difficult in the transfer period, but any possible quick wins for carers, and increasing and expanding eligibility, would be very positively received.

The Convener: Salena Begley can have the final word.

Salena Begley: It clearly offers an opportunity, as others have said, both to further promote the benefits and to ensure that people recognise their potential entitlement. Family Fund also welcomes the opportunity to consider those who have multiple caring roles, which is something that we regularly come across with the parent carers whom we support. They are either caring for more than one disabled child or caring for a parent or spouse as well. There is definitely an opportunity there, and anything that can be done to make the allowance more accessible is welcome.

The Convener: Does Emma Roddick have anything to add?

Emma Roddick: No, convener—my questions have been covered.

The Convener: That is very helpful.

I thank you all for your evidence this morning, and I echo my colleagues' thanks for your work in representing carers and, Mr Toal, for your work as an unpaid carer. It is greatly appreciated, and your personal testimony and insight are very helpful for the committee in our scrutiny of the bill as it goes through Parliament. I thank you very much indeed for your time this morning, and I hope that you have a lovely day.

10:05

Meeting suspended.

10:08

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome everyone back to another evidence-taking session on the Carer's Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill. We are joined by our second panel: Ben Macpherson, Minister for Social Security and Local Government and Andrew Strong, senior policy officer, carer benefits policy, from the Scottish Government. They are supported remotely by Kate Thomson-McDermott, head of case transfer and carer benefits unit, and Stephanie Virlogeux, solicitor, also both from the Scottish Government.

I invite Mr Macpherson to make an opening statement.

The Minister for Social Security and Local Government (Ben Macpherson): Thank you,

convener, and good morning. I welcome you and, indeed, committee members to their roles. I had the privilege of serving on the Social Security Committee between 2016 and 2018, and I am honoured to be back again as the social security minister as, together, we look to take forward the proposals that lie ahead of us over the next five years. I look forward to working with everyone on the committee.

I will start by expressing my gratitude to and admiration for the thousands of unpaid carers across Scotland who make an immense contribution to our society. In the three years in which we have had the legislative powers to introduce social security benefits, we have introduced 11 benefits, including seven brand new ones, to support the people of Scotland. The first was the carers allowance supplement.

We invest more than £350 million a year in supporting carers through carers allowance, the carers allowance supplement and the young carer grant, and we are committed to supporting carers to protect their health and wellbeing so that they can continue to care, if they so wish, and, just as important, to have their own life alongside caring. We recognise that carers have had added pressures to deal with as a result of the coronavirus pandemic; indeed, many carers have had to step in to provide care that would normally have been provided by statutory services such as schools and day care centres.

In 2020, therefore, we delivered extra support to unpaid carers in receipt of carers allowance by doubling the amount of carers allowance supplement paid in June of that year as part of the wider package of Scottish Government support to help mitigate the impacts of coronavirus.

If the Parliament agrees, the bill will increase the amount of carers allowance supplement paid in December 2021 to £462.80 for all carers allowance supplement recipients. That will not only mitigate the negative impact of the virus on carers, their finances and their wellbeing, but help them to continue to play their vital caring role.

We recognise that the pandemic has highlighted a need for greater flexibility in how we support carers experiencing changing circumstances. As a result, the bill includes a power to enable ministers to introduce regulations that could increase the amount of the carers allowance supplement for a future period. We are also committed to improving the carers allowance and are working with carers and stakeholders on developing a replacement benefit called Scottish carers assistance.

In closing, I want to put on record my appreciation of the committee's work in securing an expedited timetable for the bill. Together we will need to meet the various deadlines that we are

required to meet if we are to increase December's carers allowance supplement payment.

I look forward to members' questions.

The Convener: Thank you for those remarks, Mr Macpherson. I welcome you to your new role. Obviously, you now have an important remit, and I congratulate you on your appointment.

Moving to questions from members, I think that it would be helpful if colleagues highlighted the person to whom they were referring their questions. I suspect, though, that I know who it will be.

I invite Jeremy Balfour to ask the first question.

Jeremy Balfour: I welcome the minister to the meeting. It is nice to have him back at the committee again.

In the previous evidence-taking session, we explored budgeting and the ability to budget ahead. If the bill goes through and becomes an act, it will provide for a double payment this year, as well as give you powers to think about future years. However, that does not give people a particularly clear picture when it comes to budgeting. Has the Government thought about just making a double payment every winter? If not, why not? If you were going to introduce regulations in that respect, what timescale would we be talking about in order to allow people to budget?

Ben Macpherson: We know from our experience with the best start foods payment that individuals like such payments to be made early in December, and part of the reason for the expedited timetable is to ensure that we can deliver that.

As you would expect, I listened attentively to the previous evidence. We were unable to make the payment in June because of the Parliament's timetable in the run-up to the end of the parliamentary session and the fact that there was no capacity to consider primary legislation. However, as was pointed out in the previous evidence session, the timing of this payment—in December—will be very welcome to many, given the budget pressures that people face at that time.

With regard to future years, the allocation has been made in this year's budget to make the payment proposed in the bill. There are questions with regard to what will happen in future years, which is why we are seeking to create this enabling power, and it will be a question for the budget process, which will begin shortly for the whole Parliament, whether resource will be set aside and applied next year. In the bill, we want to create the enabling power to facilitate that, should that be the Parliament's decision.

10:15

Jeremy Balfour: With other benefits, such as the personal independence payment, there is a guarantee that they will be paid under future budgets. At the moment, the Scottish Government is not guaranteeing that the supplement will be a permanent fixture—every year, it will be the subject of negotiation between the Minister for Social Security and Local Government and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy.

Ben Macpherson: We committed to the carers allowance supplement in the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018, so that is guaranteed every year and has been since 2018, when it was the first devolved benefit to be introduced. The additional amount, which we paid in 2020 and are seeking, through the bill, to pay again in December in the budgetary year 2021-22, will be guaranteed if the bill is passed.

We are creating the enabling power for that to be able to happen next year, should that be the will of the Parliament, but I do not think that it is prudent or correct, at this point, to set a position for future years. Of course, we will introduce Scottish carers assistance. Collectively, we will make decisions on what that will include and how it will be set.

We are creating an enabling power that will mean that, should there be a requirement and a desire from the Parliament to make a payment again in the next financial year, we have the mechanism to enable us to do that. There will, of course, be questions around resource and adequacy in our collective considerations around Scottish carers assistance.

The Convener: The next question comes from Pam Duncan-Glancy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Welcome to your role, minister. You will have heard this morning and seen in the submissions that what is being provided is too little, too late, and that the supplement will get swallowed up as people pay the bills, especially given the time of year at which it will be paid. We understand that the payment is important, but a lot of it will be swallowed up in paying off debt or paying the bills.

What is your analysis of the adequacy of the supplement? Will you consider increasing it?

Ben Macpherson: Our analysis is based on our ability to deliver a payment and on the feedback that we had on the difference that it made last year, as well as on our engagement with stakeholders and carers organisations. We were told how much of an impact the payment made during the pandemic.

I appreciate the wider concerns about carers assistance and the level of provision for carers

more generally. That is an important question for all of us as we work towards the introduction of Scottish carers assistance. However, we can feasibly deliver the supplement, both in practical terms through the mechanisms of Social Security Scotland, and within the budget that has already been set for this financial year. We have secured the resource that is necessary to make the payment.

I know that there are pressures on carers and family budgets. That is why the Government is taking a range of measures and actions to assist communities and families across Scotland with those pressures. The proposed payment is an important further contribution to support carers at this time, but I appreciate that some people will still face pressures on their finances. We are very aware of that.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Earlier, we heard that there is a significant level of poverty among not just the 10 per cent of carers who will access the supplement, but the 90 per cent of unpaid carers who will be unable to access it. That is an incredibly important issue, and delivery is important, as you have said.

I understand that the bill includes regulatory powers that would allow you to set the rate at a higher amount if you wished. The Scottish Parliament information centre has shown that if the carers allowance supplement were calculated based on the rate of universal credit, rather than being based on jobseekers allowance, as it currently is, that would increase the standard payment to £711.46.

Given that you and your Government agree with many of us that, for example, the uplift in universal credit is essential to bring people up to enough money to live on, have you considered using the regulatory power within the supplementary bill to increase the carers allowance supplement in line with that and making it £711.46?

Ben Macpherson: Through the evaluation that we published in December 2020, we have a good understanding of the impact on carers of the carers allowance supplement, and we know that it makes a difference. The questions around what can be financed within this year are also part of the budgetary process. That is the question that differentiates this payment from future budget considerations, where we would be thinking as a Parliament about what we would set in the forthcoming budget, in order to make those payments in the year ahead. We have had to secure that resource within the current budget and we have been able to do that at the rate that we paid previously, which we know, through our evaluation, has made an impact.

Does Andrew Strong want to make any further points?

Andrew Strong (Scottish Government): With regard to the finance points, we are not making that payment permanent. In this financial year, we are reaching more than 800,000 people and investing £3.5 billion in the forecast social security payments, and that money will go directly to people in Scotland. It is worth making the point that carers allowance supplement is already an increase to carers allowance; it increases it by 13 per cent. The coronavirus carers allowance supplement is an increase on an increase that has already been made, specifically to help mitigate some of the impacts on carers of the coronavirus restrictions.

Ben Macpherson: That will mean that those who are in the most intense caring roles who, as Pam Duncan-Glancy understandably emphasised, tend to be on lower incomes, will receive up to £694.20 more than the equivalent carer south of the border, so we are already stepping up and making that additional difference. I do not know whether you have any further supplementary questions on that.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Would that be okay?

The Convener: Yes.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you. I understand that there is an increase and that the supplement applies to that. However, as a measure of whether it will get to the carers who are providing the most care and the highest number of hours or the people who live in most poverty, the eligibility for carers allowance does not capture all those people. For example, it is set at a rate that is, basically, 15 hours at the minimum wage, which is quite a low rate. People who are on 15 hours on the minimum wage are also likely to be living in poverty, so it does not capture all those people. A number of people are missing out with regard to caring hours because, for example, of the overlapping benefit rule or the full-time study rule. Those people are still providing more than 35 hours a week of care but they are not able to access carers allowance or the supplement for those reasons. Therefore, the measure does not address any of those concerns about poverty or the intense number of hours that those people are putting in.

Ben Macpherson: Those are all incredibly important points. Although the interactions between carers allowance and universal credit continue to be a key consideration in developing Scottish carers assistance, there are no feasible delivery mechanisms in this primary legislation to address that. That is why we need to work collectively on the delivery of the new benefit of Scottish carers assistance and consider all those

points around eligibility, which are extremely important.

I do not know whether the committee will touch on Scottish carers assistance later in today's considerations; I can come back to some of those points in due course, if that is okay.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you for allowing three questions, convener.

Marie McNair: Good morning, minister. You will be aware that carers allowance pays the lowest amount of all the benefits that the DWP defines as earnings replacement benefits. For example, the personal allowance in jobseekers allowance is higher than carers allowance and the jobseekers allowance rate is different from the one that is used to calculate the level of carers allowance supplement.

Is the policy intention for CAS about topping up the amount received by low-income carers to the level of jobseekers allowance, or is it to give the CAS payment to all carers in Scotland who are on DWP earnings replacement benefits? You will be aware that a lot of carers have an underlying entitlement to CAS. What are the main barriers to CAS payments being made to those carers?

Ben Macpherson: The passporting considerations that you have highlighted are some of the main barriers. We should be mindful that a key aspect of the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 was that carers allowance supplement was a temporary measure to provide assistance as quickly as we could while we continued to build up and deliver Scottish carers assistance. The fact that, at £67.60 a week, carers allowance is the lowest of all working-age benefits was part of our considerations around that and why we wanted to act.

Under the overlapping benefits rule, carers with an underlying entitlement will typically be in receipt of benefits that are paid at a higher rate. Carers can be in receipt of both the carers element of universal credit and carers allowance and, therefore, the carers allowance supplement. There is a helpful element there in extending eligibility for the coronavirus carers allowance supplement, which was what we did last year under the coronavirus legislation.

To include carers with underlying entitlement would have required significant resources from Social Security Scotland and social security staff in the Scottish Government, and engagement with the DWP to develop new processes. That is a real challenge and remains so, so it would have taken longer to deliver the payment and it would have needed to be supported by the DWP.

That is why the priority for Social Security Scotland was to make sure that people continued

to apply for and receive existing benefits. Extending eligibility for existing benefits would have put additional pressure on those services when they were needed most, which is why we decided to make an additional payment through the carers allowance supplement to get the resource to people as quickly and expediently as possible.

Marie McNair: Aligning the carers allowance supplement with receipt of the DWP benefit, carers allowance, brings a lot of challenges, as you know. Getting usable information from the DWP on underlying entitlement to carers allowance is difficult. I note that the Glasgow City Health and Social Care Partnership's submission to the consultation suggested that council tax reduction data could perhaps be used to identify low-income carers without relying on the DWP. Is that something that your officials have considered?

Ben Macpherson: As you will know, I was Minister for Public Finance and Migration during the pandemic. Rightly, considerations to do with the council tax reduction scheme regularly crossed my desk and, of course, measures were taken to assist with that.

The council tax reduction scheme reduces tax liability based on an assessment of household income, household composition, household characteristics and other factors, as you rightly highlighted. Carers can get a carers premium added to the calculation, potentially meaning that they will get a greater council tax reduction and pay less council tax. The majority of households that get a carers premium in council tax reduction are already on 100 per cent council tax reduction, or close to it, and analysis shows that, in practice, increasing the level of carers premium in council tax reduction would not have a big impact on carers generally. We continue to consider across Government what support we can give to carers.

On the point about data, we have to work with the DWP on these matters because of the considerations around passporting and ensuring that nobody's entitlement is affected as an unintended consequence of our actions. We continue to consider what data is available but, as matters stand, we have to co-ordinate with the DWP when it comes to the payment mechanism and operating within the law.

The Convener: The next question comes from Foysoil Choudhury.

10:30

Foysoil Choudhury: Congratulations on your new role, minister.

The bill is scheduled to move through the Parliament at a faster rate than legislation tends to. I appreciate the need to ensure the passing of the legislation in time to make the payment, but what is your analysis of the impact that that has had on the ability of carers and representative organisations to effectively participate in the legislation?

Ben Macpherson: That is an important question. I highlight the point that I made in my opening remarks that we acknowledge the expedited timetable and appreciate the engagement of all in that. Over the course of the past year, we have engaged with carers organisations on the positive effect of the additional payment in the Coronavirus (Scotland) (No 2) Act 2020. There was wide support for that payment. I engaged with carers organisations during the summer recess on those points, as did my officials.

The need to pass primary legislation to make the payment in early December—we want it to be then because we want people to have it in good time for the festive period—means that we have expedited the process. However, the bill is narrow in scope and is focused on enabling us to make the payment. We would of course normally want to engage in a longer legislative process but, given the timing of the election, the start of the new parliamentary session and the hard deadline of wanting to make the payment in early December, I think that a reasonable course has been taken.

Foysoil Choudhury: Most social security regulations that come to the Scottish Parliament are subject to the super-affirmative procedure, which means that they are subject to scrutiny by the Scottish Commission on Social Security. Why is that not the case with the bill?

Ben Macpherson: That is another important question. I record my thanks to SCOSS for all the work that it does and, in particular, for all the work that it has done in recent months.

I presume that Mr Choudhury is referring to the enabling power in the bill.

Foysoil Choudhury: That is right.

Ben Macpherson: Given that, under the enabling power, the regulations would be limited to increasing the level of the supplement for a specific period or periods, it was considered that the enhanced level of scrutiny that is provided by SCOSS is not necessary. The regulations would have a very narrow scope.

Foysoil Choudhury: Thank you.

The Convener: From the evidence that we have taken this morning and from the written evidence that has come in, the payment is obviously welcome. The minister has made

interesting points about the need that exists and the fact that carers in Scotland are getting substantially more than those elsewhere in the UK. The bill is to be welcomed, and I certainly welcome it.

My question is a practical one. Is there any reason why the sections of the bill will be commenced at different times? Is it a practical issue?

Ben Macpherson: Just for clarity, I point out that, as members will know, it is normal procedure to wait for two months after a bill receives royal assent to commence the provisions in it. However, given the need to ensure that the provisions in section 1 are in force in time for the December payment, we have instead proposed that sections 1, 3 and 4 will come into force on the day after royal assent, which is as quickly as possible. As the same urgency does not apply to the enabling power in section 2, we intend to commence that in the normal way. That is the only reason for the difference in commencement.

The Convener: That is helpful—thank you.

Miles Briggs: I welcome the minister to his position. I have a couple of questions about eligibility and the work that the Government has done to evaluate its policies. The committee has received evidence that there is no official estimate of the number of people who are eligible for carers allowance but do not go on to apply for it. What independent evaluation of past payments has been carried out?

Ben Macpherson: There are wider questions for us all about how, collectively, we continue, as we are obligated to do in the 2018 act—the Government takes this very seriously—to raise individuals' and communities' awareness of what benefits they are entitled to and to encourage people to apply. Social Security Scotland does that on a regular basis, especially towards particular milestones of applications opening or closing. You will have seen that in the activity that Social Security Scotland undertakes, and members play an important role in raising awareness of that.

We take the evaluation of our policies very seriously. In Social Security Scotland alone, we have invested £165,000 in policy evaluations, to date, and we are currently considering our future evaluation programme. We will provide updates on that shortly.

Miles Briggs: That is helpful. It would be useful for you to provide the committee with information on what independent evaluation—as opposed to internal evaluation—has taken place. If the cost is associated with evaluation by independent organisations, it would be useful for us to have that information.

What reporting duty is there—I did not see any attached to the bill—in relation to progress towards taking over and delivering other devolved benefits? Is that something that you would engage with committee members on?

Ben Macpherson: For clarity, do you mean a reporting duty on the development of Scottish carers assistance? Could you be more specific?

Miles Briggs: I mean on that benefit and the wider devolution of social security reforms and benefits.

Ben Macpherson: As members will be aware, the Scottish Government updates Parliament as appropriate, and as Parliament would rightly expect, on the delivery programme for Social Security Scotland. In relation to progress towards Scottish carers assistance, we have developed our overall aims and options for improvement. As the committee will be interested to know, we are currently discussing those with carers organisations and engaging with stakeholders to carry out a detailed options analysis on what Scottish carers assistance could and should include, and we will consult on proposals in winter 2021-22. That work is progressing at pace and we will keep the committee updated as appropriate.

The Convener: The next questions are from Evelyn Tweed, who joins us remotely.

Evelyn Tweed: Good morning. I understand that some of the respondents were keen to consider weekly and monthly payments, although the timescale is quite short. Is it feasible to look at that at this point?

Ben Macpherson: I noted with interest the differing opinions on the first panel on that issue. That is a point of consideration for our future benefit of Scottish carers assistance, but at the moment we need to stay focused on the window for the December payment and the fact that the carers allowance supplement is the only feasible mechanism that we have that does not risk the on-going delivery and consideration of the live benefits that we currently deliver and the roll-out of new benefits.

The issue that Evelyn Tweed raises is a point of consideration, but at the moment we are very focused on delivering the December payment.

Evelyn Tweed: I want to press you on that, minister. Going forward, is the issue of weekly and monthly payments one that can be considered?

Ben Macpherson: Absolutely. We will consider it, and I look forward to doing so with the committee.

The Convener: Emma Roddick will ask the next set of questions.

Emma Roddick: In your letter to the committee of 10 August, you stated that changes to eligibility for Scottish carers assistance could not be made until after the end of case transfer. When do you expect carers assistance to be introduced? How quickly do you expect case transfer to be completed?

Ben Macpherson: With regard to the on-going considerations around Scottish carers assistance, I have already specified that we are engaging with stakeholders on a detailed options analysis, and we will consult on proposals in the winter of 2021-22. That is forthcoming. Detailed analysis is also going on through our engagement with the carer benefits advisory group and other stakeholders and individuals. We are having the kind of wide engagement that you would expect us to have.

As members will know, the development of any of our new benefits involves significant engagement with the DWP on passporting and case transfer. In our consultation and in developing Scottish carers assistance, we will look at the changes that we can potentially make to eligibility in Scotland without affecting the passporting process and creating unintended consequences and losses for people.

We will endeavour to transfer cases from the DWP as quickly as possible, although members will be aware that Shirley-Anne Somerville updated Parliament in the spring on the wider issue, when she said that we were working towards 2025 with regard to case transfer. It is a very important process that needs to be safe and secure, and stakeholders understand that that is a priority for all of us to ensure that nobody falls through the gaps and people get their support.

From an information technology infrastructure and delivery perspective, we need to build capacity in Social Security Scotland, which turned three years old yesterday. It has developed at a remarkable pace and is delivering for and serving the people of Scotland well, but we need to continue to build that strength in the organisation. After all, it needs a very strong foundation if it is to deliver for decades to come.

We are moving forward at pace and are looking to make a meaningful difference with the delivery of Scottish carers assistance.

Emma Roddick: I appreciate the concern around ensuring that carers will not be worse off as a result of getting this benefit. You said that you were having discussions with the DWP. Do you expect to be successful in the discussions on different options for the treatment of carers assistance in relation to reserved benefits?

Ben Macpherson: There are more conversations and discussions to be had. Officials have good working relationships with their

counterparts in the DWP, and we are grateful to DWP officials for working with our officials in Social Security Scotland and the Scottish Government to deliver for the people of Scotland and to bring our new benefits programme forward in a responsible and effective way.

Of course, Scottish ministers will raise these matters with UK ministers, too. In fact, we will be meeting UK ministers shortly to discuss all these points with them and to get clarity on the issue of passporting, not just with regard to Scottish carers assistance but more generally. We want to ensure that we are all clear on what the position will be, and we will be happy to engage with the committee again on those points in due course.

I would be grateful, convener, if I could bring in Kate Thomson-McDermott, who may wish to say more about that.

The Convener: Of course.

10:45

Kate Thomson-McDermott (Scottish Government): Just to reiterate what the minister has said, we are in regular engagement with our counterparts in the DWP with responsibility for carers allowance, and with the DWP devolution team. We will continue to work with them closely.

We are currently carrying out a multicriteria analysis process on a range of options for making changes to Scottish carers assistance. Within that, we factor in a wide range of issues, including the impact on passporting and the interaction with the reserved benefits system more broadly. We have a good understanding of what those impacts are likely to be. We are working on narrowing down to preferred options and proposals to take forward, and we will of course continue our engagement with the DWP and HMRC to consider what can be achieved to make provision for passporting.

The Convener: Thank you both, and thank you, Ms Roddick. It is interesting to note the further discussions that are going to be had between officials and between the Scottish and UK Governments, and the ministerial conversations that are still to be had. We, too, have extended an invitation to UK ministers, and we hope that they might be able to give evidence to us soon.

I appreciate everybody's brevity thus far this morning. We have the opportunity for further questions. I note that Miles Briggs would like to come in and, if anybody else would like to speak, they should indicate to me that they would like to do so. We have a wee bit of latitude left.

Miles Briggs: I appreciate that, convener.

I want to ask specifically about young carers, a matter that I raised with the first panel of witnesses

this morning. We know that young carers cannot get the young carer grant if they are in receipt of carers allowance at the time when they apply for the young carer grant. What reforms are ministers looking to pursue around that? Should those individuals who receive the young carer grant be able to qualify for CAS?

Ben Macpherson: Mr Briggs raises some important points. Of course, the introduction of the young carer grant was an initiative that the Scottish Government has delivered. It represents a change, utilising the powers that we have.

You may or may not be aware of this, but just last week we received an interim evaluation of the young carer grant. We will consider that evaluation and the points made by Mr Briggs, and we will continue to consider—as we do on a regular basis with all that we deliver—how stakeholders and clients are responding to and receiving the benefits that we provide and whether improvements can and should be made. We will consider the evaluation and we will keep the committee updated as appropriate.

Miles Briggs: Thank you—I appreciate that. A number of points were raised with the first panel about ensuring that respite care is fully returned, and about carers breaks, which I think attracted cross-party support when the initial Carers (Scotland) Bill went through Parliament. In fact, my colleague Nanette Milne lodged the amendment on carers breaks. Could you update the committee on the restoration of respite care, and on funding specifically available for carers breaks? That was something that I really took on board, and the first panel very much emphasised how desperately needed breaks are for carers across Scotland.

Ben Macpherson: I will bring in Andrew Strong in a minute, but you will know that we worked closely and quickly with the DWP to put in place breaks-in-care easements for carers at the start of the pandemic and to extend them for as long as we and stakeholders felt they were needed.

Andrew, you have engaged significantly with carers organisations on those points, and I would be grateful if you could answer in more detail for Mr Briggs.

Andrew Strong: To add to an earlier point, we have a carers benefits advisory group, which we engage with on a regular basis regarding some of the impacts of caring on people in Scotland. Specifically during the pandemic, we have been ensuring that we understand those experiences.

We know that access to respite has been a challenge for many unpaid carers throughout the pandemic and we recognise the impact that that has on people's wellbeing. The guidance on adult social care building-based day services was published on 31 August 2020 and is updated

regularly, and the Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care, Kevin Stewart, wrote to the health and social care sector on 7 June to encourage the reopening of day services and clarify the use of the guidance. More than 290 services have now reopened and we continue to encourage others to reopen where it is safe to do so.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I am a bit concerned about the timescale that has been outlined. Is there anything that you can do to look at an alternative mechanism to make, for example, a Covid recovery payment to carers before 2025? There are a number of people who are ineligible for the carers allowance supplement and will not be able to get any support in that time.

I appreciate that some of the argument against the alternative approaches relates to time, but 77 per cent of the people we are talking about have said that they have not had a break this year, so they know about time and they know how they are spending it. It is important for us as a Parliament and a committee, and for the Government, to do something to put money in those people's pockets before 2025, which is a long way away to consider people's eligibility.

Ben Macpherson: I am glad that Pam Duncan-Glancy asked that question, because it allows me to clarify that, when I talked earlier about 2025, I meant that that is when we aim to have completed case transfer. In the process of delivering Scottish carers assistance, we are looking into what eligibility changes we can make, and we are in discussions with the DWP and others on that. I talked earlier about the fact that we will be consulting this winter and we have engaged extensively with unpaid carers and organisations that represent them over the past five years to consider ways to improve social security support for unpaid carers.

Through that work we have developed a series of aims for Scottish carers assistance and a range of options for change; those include considerations around the earning threshold, removing the restrictions for those in full-time education and increasing the period of time for which payments can continue following the death of a cared-for person. Those are a number of points of consideration and those options are currently undergoing detailed objective evaluation to make sure that we take forward the right combination of changes at the right time and in the right way to ensure the best outcomes for carers.

The important point in Pam Duncan-Glancy's question and my answer so far is the complex interactions between carer benefits and the reserved benefits system, which means that this bill is not the time to try to rush through changes to existing carer benefits. We need to do that through

the development of Scottish carers assistance, because we need to make sure that there are no unforeseen consequences and that it can be delivered.

If Parliament passes the bill, we have the finance secured and the delivery mechanism through Social Security Scotland to get the money into people's pockets in December, which is what we want to do. We need to collectively consider as a Parliament how we support carers more widely in the development of Scottish carers assistance.

I will conclude with some information that I hope will be helpful in answer to your question. At this stage, we continue to make good progress on the launch of Scottish carers assistance. We have finished pre-discovery work with the DWP and have made sure that we have a full understanding of current carers allowance processes. There is a question around processes and delivery and we need to make sure that agencies can successfully get resources to people in a practical way.

As I said, we are about to commence, in the next quarter, feasibility work on how we will deliver Scottish carers assistance. Our aim is to begin build for Scottish carers assistance in the new year, and we expect a minimum of 18 months of build. All that work needs to go in to ensure that the systems are effective and there is robust delivery. Given the complex interactions between carer benefits and the reserved benefits system, we need to be cognisant of that.

I hope that that reassures Pam Duncan-Glancy that work is being undertaken at pace and that we are looking to make a difference for unpaid carers in Scotland as quickly as we can.

Does Kate Thomson-McDermott want to come in with any further points on that, if I have not covered everything that should be said?

Kate Thomson-McDermott: No. I think that you have covered everything well, minister. There is not much to add, other than that we are also working on the commitment on the carers additional child payment, which we intend to deliver as part of Scottish carers assistance. We are looking at how we can extend that in line with the 2021 Scottish National Party manifesto commitment to those who have multiple caring roles for persons of any age. Although our plan is to ensure that there are no changes to entitlement and eligibility before the completion of the case transfer—[Inaudible.]—we are looking at ways in which we can bring the carers additional child or person payment into force much sooner. We are looking at a way to bring that additional support in—[Inaudible.]

The Convener: That is very helpful, minister and Ms Thomson-McDermott. To use an old phrase that is not used so much now, 2025 is your

backstop for case transfer but, potentially, eligibility changes and payments could happen before that. That is what you are saying.

Ben Macpherson: We are looking at all that very seriously and analysing what can be delivered, what changes on eligibility we want to make collectively in due course, and when those changes can be made. We will keep the committee and the Parliament updated as appropriate on those considerations, and I look forward to engagement on those important points in the period ahead.

The Convener: Lovely. I will ask the final question, unless anybody else is looking to come in.

Marie McNair asked the first panel a pertinent question about the interaction between the carers allowance supplement and universal credit, and the general awareness among carers about CAS not being deducted from universal credit. Obviously, I am aware of the obligation that the Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland have put on themselves to ensure that people are eligible for certain payments and income maximisation. What more can we do to ensure that people who are in receipt of CAS are aware that it will not be deducted from universal credit and that they are not hesitant in coming forward to claim what they are entitled to?

Ben Macpherson: I will bring in Andrew Strong, as he has had specific engagement with the sector on that point in order to ensure that we raise awareness of the benefits of the bill and to encourage applications and uptake, should Parliament pass the bill, which we really hope that it will. As you have highlighted, one of the key considerations around that remains the interactions between the carers allowance and universal credit. That is also a key consideration in developing and analysing options for Scottish carers assistance.

Does Andrew Strong want to talk about his recent engagement with the sector?

Andrew Strong: Yes. We are planning to do some direct engagement work to ensure that carers receive information about eligibility for the carers allowance supplement and to try to get across how people can access the carers allowance supplement. A person has to be in receipt of the carers allowance. Obviously, some carers will be in receipt of things such as carer credits through the universal credit system.

Although we cannot give carers specific advice on what they should or should not be accessing, we want to ensure that as many carers as possible know about the options that are available to them in respect of the receipt of the carers allowance and therefore the carers allowance supplement.

We are therefore preparing fact sheets and frequently asked questions for carers and carers organisations to pass on to carers so that they can understand exactly how people can access the carers allowance supplement in advance of the payment.

Ben Macpherson: As always, it is about how we utilise Government mechanisms, the statutory services and interactions with voluntary organisations and representative groups to raise awareness in their networks proactively and within communal space and other means by which people interact or gather together, using proactive communications through social media and other mechanisms, and giving a strong emphasis to the Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland using our channels and trying to get others to amplify through their networks to do all that we can to encourage benefit take-up in Scotland and ensure that people get what they are entitled to, because we want them to have that, and we want to support them.

The Convener: Thank you very much. I am sure that we can do what we can in our report to ensure that that is amplified.

I thank Mr Macpherson, Mr Strong, Kate Thomson-McDermott and Stephanie Virlogeux for their time this morning and for answering the questions. That is greatly appreciated. We will no doubt be in touch again soon, as the bill progresses.

We will now move into private session. Members who are joining us remotely should use Microsoft Teams to join the next part of the meeting, please. The link is in the calendar invite.

11:01

Meeting continued in private until 11:30.

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