



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 24 February 2022

Session 6



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SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE
8th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (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:

Laura Caven (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
Kirsty Doull (CELCIS)
Alison Gillies (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland)
Michele Kane (Scottish Kinship Care Alliance)
Linda Richards (Perth and Kinross Council)
Vivien Thomson (Social Work Scotland)
Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)
Gill Westwood (Peebles and District Citizens Advice Bureau)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Claire Menzies

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 24 February 2022

[The Deputy Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Deputy Convener (Natalie Don): Good morning, and welcome to the eighth meeting in 2022 of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. This morning, we will discuss kinship care with a range of stakeholders. Apologies have been received from Elena Whitham and Emma Roddick. Evelyn Tweed is attending the meeting as Elena Whitham's substitute. As deputy convener, I will convene this morning's meeting.

Our first item of business is to decide whether to take agenda items 3 and 4 in private. Do members agree to do so?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Kinship Care

09:00

The Deputy Convener: Agenda item 2 is kinship care. I welcome to the meeting our first panel, who are joining us remotely. Kirsty Doull is permanence lead with CELCIS, Laura Caven is with the children and young people team of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Vivien Thomson is from Social Work Scotland and Linda Richards is from Perth and Kinross Council.

There are a few housekeeping points to mention before we start. Please allow our broadcasting colleagues a few seconds to turn your microphones on before you start to speak. All witnesses can indicate with an R in the dialogue box in BlueJeans, or simply with a show of their hand, that they wish to come in on a question. Everyone should check that they can see the dialogue box on the right-hand side of their screen.

I ask everybody to be mindful of the time, because we have a lot to get through. Please do not feel that you have to answer every question. If you have nothing new to add to what other people have said, that is okay. You are welcome to follow up in writing with any points that you feel have not been covered or that you might have missed, or if you want, after the meeting, to supply further information on any point that has been raised.

I ask for short and succinct questions and answers, please, and I invite all members to direct their questions to specific witnesses.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Good morning. I thank all the witnesses for attending the meeting. I have a couple of questions that are aimed at CELCIS to start us off. I was interested to read in your submission and in other submissions that there seems to be some confusion around the words "formal" and "informal" with regard to kinship care; the categories do not seem to be neatly defined. Can you help me out by saying whether that is simply the way that it will always be, or is there work that we can do to develop better definitions? Does that confusion make a difference in practice?

Kirsty Doull (CELCIS): That is a really important point, and is a good question to start our discussion this morning. The use of "formal" and "informal" to describe kinship care can be a little confusing: this is a good opportunity to discuss that. They can be used as categories to describe different families whose needs and circumstances might be similar. However, it can mean that vital support is much harder to access for some carers than it is for others, based on those categories.

For example, there can often be informal arrangements when a court order is in place, but it can sometimes feel a little bit tricky to describe them as “informal”. Similarly, some formal arrangements do not involve an order that has been granted by the children’s hearings system, but are based on a parent’s consent—for example, under a voluntary agreement through section 25 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995.

We would definitely want to explore the use of the words “formal” and “informal”, because we need to think about what a child needs, rather than what the status of the adult who cares for them is and the legal arrangement around them. That will help us to step into the question of what the child needs if we strip away some of those definitions.

Jeremy Balfour: That is helpful. If no other witness wants to add anything, I will move on. My next questions are, first, for COSLA.

The independent care review, which refers to the Promise, was commissioned back in 2017 and reported in 2020. What progress has been made on the reforms that were outlined? What are the major things that we need to pick up on and take forward more quickly?

Laura Caven (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): To clarify, when you talk about the Promise, are you referring to reform to kinship care specifically or to the Promise overall?

Jeremy Balfour: I am referring to kinship care.

Laura Caven: There is quite a lot in that; it relates to your earlier question about the definitions of kinship carers. As Kirsty Doull said, we need to think about what the child needs rather than the legal status of their carer and the placement—in fact, we have been doing that for a while under the getting it right for every child approach. In the kinship care collaborative, some of the sub-groups are looking at the gaps in resourcing needs and at the support that is provided to families, regardless of the definitions. We need to focus on what the child needs rather than on the definitions. Good work is being done in that regard, but it needs to be accelerated.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Good morning. My first question is for Laura Caven from COSLA and for anyone else who would like to comment. We have seen considerable variation in rates of support for kinship carers across councils. What are the main reasons for that, and is there concern that the needs of some kinship carers are not being met because of the variation in policies?

Laura Caven: That is certainly a live issue. There is variation for a range of reasons, one of which is the fact that, as well as the core allowances that are paid, local authorities have a

range of payments and benefits in place for kinship carers and foster carers. For example, local authorities have different payments for birthday celebrations, clothing, transport and so on. Looking at the core allowances in isolation does not give a clear picture of the overall financial support that is available.

There are also different costs depending on where people live. For example, the committee will know that there is significant variation in the cost of transport and fuel and in the distances that people travel, depending on where they live.

That said, on-going work is being done. You will know from our submission and from other submissions that the care allowances group reported in 2018. Work has been going on since then—although it was paused during the initial part of the pandemic—on how we ensure that there is more clarity on allowances so that families understand the system and have the resources that they need to support their children. That work has picked up again. We are looking not only at the core allowances but at other related support to ensure that everything is clear. The Scottish Government is looking at the funding that can be provided to support that.

As I said, looking at the allowances in isolation not does give a clear picture of the financial support. Vivien Thomson might want to add to that, because she has also been involved in the work that I mentioned.

Vivien Thomson (Social Work Scotland): I echo what Laura Caven has said. Financial support varies for several reasons. Scotland is the only one of the four United Kingdom nations that does not have a national allowance for foster care, and has pegged kinship allowances to fostering allowances.

Historically, COSLA and the Fostering Network provided national recommended rates on the allowance that should be paid for young people, but that has dissipated over time. Local authorities now set their own fostering rates. The national allowance work was about bringing us into line with the other three nations of the United Kingdom and providing greater equity for foster carers and eligible kinship carers, so that the same rate would be paid, regardless of whether they lived in the north of Scotland, in one of the cities or in the central belt. Social Work Scotland is very supportive of that.

As Laura Caven said, a lot of work has been done on what a reasonable allowance would be. Different models have been looked at, and work is being done to bring that discussion to a conclusion that would mean equity in the allowance across the country. That work, which includes the details

of what an allowance should cover, is equally applicable to kinship carers and to foster carers.

Marie McNair: Thank you for that. I have a second question. There are different approaches across the 32 councils. What is being done to promote best practice? Is there a good approach that you are aware of that you would like to highlight to the committee?

Vivien Thomson: Are you asking about good practice in relation to finance?

Marie McNair: Yes.

Vivien Thomson: That is a difficult question to respond to. There are different approaches across the country. There is a real commitment across local authorities, voluntary groups and others that work with kinship carers and foster carers to making sure that carers receive the support that they need, that the GIRFEC framework that Kirsty Doull referred to is universally embedded, and that the approach that is taken involves assessing what young people need, rather than it being a case of, "This is what we'll give them."

No single model would fit every circumstance, but there is a real desire to ensure that the right support is given at the right time. There are some legal complexities involved in ensuring that that happens. As you will see from the submissions, there are many variations in and differences between what people are entitled to, depending on legal status, which makes kinship care a complicated situation, but there is certainly a commitment to ensuring that people get the right support. There are some quite imaginative ways of using other means to help kinship carers to access family support and to join foster carer training. There are charities that manage other approaches in that way. I am not sure whether that answers your question, but I think that that plays into the support that can be provided to kinship carers in addition to the allowance.

Marie McNair: That was helpful. I have a final question, if that is okay with the deputy convener.

The Deputy Convener: Yes—on you go, Marie.

Marie McNair: The question is open to anyone who wants to answer it. The committee frequently hears horror stories about the detrimental impact of universal credit. How is UC impacting on kinship carers? Is there anything that needs to be urgently addressed? I appreciate that the second panel of witnesses might be able to answer that in more detail.

The Deputy Convener: Would anyone like to respond to that? Is there anyone in particular whom you would like to answer that, Marie?

Marie McNair: No—the question is for anyone who would like to answer it. However, if no one

wants to do so, I can take up the issue with the next panel.

The Deputy Convener: It seems that no one wants to come in on that, so we will leave that for the second panel. Have you finished your questions, Marie?

Marie McNair: That is me finished, for now.

The Deputy Convener: We move to Miles Briggs.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Good morning. Thank you for joining us.

I want to follow up on Marie McNair's questions. Why has progress not been made on the issue? There is frustration about that in Parliament. The Education and Skills Committee made numerous recommendations on the subject, but those do not seem to have been implemented. Is it the case that a recommended allowance has not been implemented in Scotland purely because of the financial situation in which councils have found themselves?

For example, I was looking at COSLA's submission to the committee, which states that, from the start of the work on a national allowance, delivery

"would not be possible within the current level of ... funding",

and that the Scottish Government, having cut council funding, would have to fully fund the allowance in order for it to be possible.

I will bring Laura Caven in to comment on why we have not seen that standard being delivered, because it is now years since it was expected.

09:15

Laura Caven: There are a range of reasons for that. When the recommendations were first published, a great deal of work was done to cost the financial impact of the recommended allowance. I understand that, at that point, the Scottish Government went away to discuss how it would provide the funding to allow that. Obviously, because of Covid-19, there was a bit of a delay as people rightly turned their attention to the immediate crisis. However, over the past few months, discussions have picked up again.

I understand the frustrations fully. Having been involved in the matter for a while, Vivien Thomson and I might also echo some of those frustrations. However, we are now moving forward with the work, so I hope that that offers some reassurance.

As well as that, it is, as I described in my last response to Marie McNair, a complex area, because local authorities pay not only the core allowances but a range of other payments to foster

and kinship carers to support the children whom they look after, so we cannot look at the allowances in isolation.

We also need to ensure that there is equity. If a council is paying above the recommended allowance, we do not want the foster or kinship carer to lose out by their allowance being reduced. We want to make sure that the allowance is fully funded, so that anyone that is paying below the recommended allowance will be able to pay the additional amount, and anyone that is paying above it will not be negatively impacted. Basically, we need a distribution system that does not penalise those that pay over the recommended allowance, so that has added a bit of complexity to the situation. I apologise for not being very succinct or clear, but I am happy to have another bash at that or send you some additional information.

Miles Briggs: Thank you. If there is information about what additional payments councils provide, that would be very helpful for the committee. Clearly, there is a postcode lottery of support across the country, so it would be helpful to see where that applies.

Since nobody else wants to answer that question, I move to my second question, which is also on kinship carers who are in informal kinship care arrangements and so are not eligible for support. Maybe this is a good question for Linda Richards. How are such individuals supported and what arrangements do you have in place in Perth and Kinross Council?

Linda Richards (Perth and Kinross Council): Good morning. and thank you for the question. First, I want to make it clear that informal kinship care arrangements are for children who are not looked after by the local authority. As such, there is a very difficult balance to strike, because we do not want to impinge on their right to their family and, under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, we must also take a minimal intervention approach. The informal kinship care arrangements that we have in Perth and Kinross are obviously through the kinship care assistance legislation. We did a lot of publicity around local arrangements for kinship care arrangements of which we were not aware; many kinship carers look after family members in private family arrangements and do not want the state to intervene.

We have tried to offer support on a voluntary basis—it is an offer rather than a “must do”. We use our local third sector partners in Perth and Kinross to offer support. Sometimes, people do not want support from a social work department; we have to be clear that many families that make informal arrangements do not want formal social work support. Therefore, we direct them to third sector partners for support. For example, we have

dedicated access to a welfare rights team to ensure that people's benefits are maximised.

In relation to housing requirements, we have a strategic need policy in Perth and Kinross, and kinship carers get strategic need points, which allows them to access larger housing. We also provide a lot of training and support through our therapeutic project. We sometimes offer individual consultation regarding emotional wellbeing and mental health issues for children and young people who live in kinship care and for kinship carers.

The financial support is different, but our experience is that what informal kinship carers are really looking for is practical and emotional support. We have supported a number of them to gain kinship care orders, which allow people to gain parental rights and responsibilities in relation to the child whom they are looking after. Several informal kinship carers have sought that financial support, and we have given it to them.

In summary, the different thing about informal kinship care is that it is dictated a lot by the kinship carer seeking what they want and what they feel they need in order to look after the child.

Miles Briggs: Thank you—that is helpful and informative. Finally, I want to ask—

The Deputy Convener: I believe that Vivien Thomson wants to come in before you move on.

Miles Briggs: I am sorry.

Vivien Thomson: I just want to add a little to what Linda Richards said.

The issue links to the questions that we were asked earlier about definitions. Not all informal carers do not receive an allowance; some eligible kinship carers receive an allowance. That is probably the part of the legislative framework within which we operate in relation to kinship carers that causes the most confusion. Of two carers with section 11 kinship care orders, one might get an allowance but one will not. It depends on whether the child was at risk of being accommodated by the local authority or were placed originally with the kinship carers through the involvement of the local authority. There is a difference in the support that is provided financially to kinship carers. Some will get an allowance and the support that Linda Richards has described; others will get the support that Linda described, but might receive their maintenance income from benefits or other sources.

Miles Briggs: That leads on to the point that I wanted to make. I am sure that every MSP has dealt with cases involving informal kinship care. Often, it is grandparents who informally take on the kinship care role, and in many cases they have retired. To go back to Linda Richards's point, such

people are often worried about engaging with social work and what that might mean. To be honest, they can be worried about how they might be judged.

For a future model, should informal kinship carers benefit from a recommended allowance? Given your experience, what would that look like, and how could it work for such families, who are often nervous about engaging with local authorities on the issues?

Linda Richards: Obviously, the ambition of the Promise is about universal family support. That is the key in supporting informal kinship carers. Vivien Thomson spoke about the group of informal kinship carers that we in Perth and Kinross call wellbeing enhanced carers, in order to differentiate them. They are people who have been caring for a looked-after child and have then gained a kinship care order. That group might still require support and will still be entitled to an allowance. That is as opposed to informal kinship carers with whom we have had no previous involvement.

If I am being honest, I would say that universal support in the community is what informal kinship carers need more than the intervention of local authorities via the social work department. We are looking at building that kind of universal support through our education colleagues, support networks and third sector partners to raise the profile of kinship carers who might require more support than their peers. If there were an allowance in the future, I would like to see it as a universal support rather than one that the council social work department was involved in monitoring and allocating.

Miles Briggs: Thank you.

Laura Caven: I want to pick up on the point about families perhaps being reluctant to access support or feeling worried about it. That is part of the reason why COSLA is stating quite strongly that children's services should not be included in the national care service as they were in the consultation. The Promise is about supporting families and reducing barriers, and we have spent years trying to destigmatise seeking and receiving support from a range of agencies. We provide that support through a range of services, such as schools and early learning and care, and we try to make it a holistic, GIRFEC, whole-family type of support. We do not want to risk undoing that by moving that kind of support into a national care service. I just wanted to reiterate that point.

Jeremy Balfour: I want to come back to the point about a national agreed allowance. We are a country of approximately 5 million and we know each other quite well. Is it more sensible to pay such an allowance centrally rather than leaving local authorities with the discretion of how much

they pay and what extra should be paid? Should the Scottish Government say that, if someone gives kinship care, this is what they will get, whether they live in Inverness or Dumfries or wherever?

Perhaps Kirsty Doull could go first, then Vivien Thomson, and if anyone else wants to jump in, that would be helpful.

Kirsty Doull: As we have talked about a little today, we know that children who are living with kinship carers are often disproportionately living in some of the poorest households in Scotland. The provision of financial support to kinship carers is therefore crucial.

Equally crucial is the implementation of a national minimum allowance for kinship carers. That is required quite urgently. One of the risks of becoming a kinship carer is that it can cause financial difficulties, as was described earlier, because of the additional costs of raising a child, especially if extra support is needed. For example, as a result of children's complex life experiences, there might be a need for therapeutic and trauma-informed support. We also know that grandparents are the most frequent kinship carers, and they might already be living within limited means.

From a recent survey, we also know that 44 per cent of kinship carers feel that they have to give up their employment when they become a kinship carer. There is therefore a real need to address the financial aspect of becoming a kinship carer.

09:30

Vivien Thomson: It is a very interesting question. There is universal support across local authorities and support groups for the introduction of a national allowance in Scotland. It is not just desirable but something that we very much want to happen. In the other three nations, there is an allowance that relates to fostering and is available only if somebody is approved or assessed as a foster carer. Scotland's situation is slightly different in that the Scottish Government introduced a parity of allowances a number of years ago—I forget the date. At the time of the decision to make eligible kinship carers and kinship carers of looked-after children entitled to the same allowance as their foster carer counterparts, the Scottish Government made a commitment to examine the place that welfare benefits would take in providing a much more equitable approach to support for kinship carers. We hope that that could be explored further, particularly now that the Scottish Government has established Social Security Scotland.

Regardless of the introduction of a national allowance for foster carers that would equally be applied to eligible kinship carers, there will remain

inequity because of the legal context that some carers are eligible for an allowance the same as foster carers and some are not. That feels particularly important if we really want to do what the Promise says about providing equity of support, family support and people being able to have their needs met regardless of what part of the country they live in.

Jeremy Balfour: What further support would make the biggest impact for kinship carers throughout Scotland? If there was one thing that you could do tomorrow, what would it be?

Linda Richards: For me, the one thing that would make the biggest difference is suitable housing, certainly in my local authority. We have all spoken about the fact that the majority of kinship arrangements involve grandparents. There are a number of families where four or five children are placed with grandparents or aunts and uncles who also have children of their own. Accessing suitable housing then becomes a huge issue. There are not many five or six-bedroom local authority homes available for kinship carers. We have done imaginative things such as knocking together two flats to make one house for a family group of eight children moving in to live with their grandparents, but that is not always possible and comes with a financial risk as well. Housing is a huge issue.

Kirsty Doull: I agree with what Linda Richard said about housing. It is crucial.

One of the big things that I would like to see is clearer assessment and decision-making processes in local authorities and their partners for children who have a plan to live, or are already living, with kinship carers. Linda Richards has the experience of Perth and Kinross Council, which is exemplary, but we also know that there is huge variation across Scotland in the approach to assessment and decision-making processes for children who are in kinship care.

That is particularly stark even when those children in kinship care are “looked after” under the legislation. By that definition, they should have regular looked-after child reviews, in the same way as other looked-after children, such as those who are living in foster care or with prospective adopters.

The reason why those processes and scrutiny are so important is that they are part of ensuring that children are living with the most suitable carers, who will meet their needs for the rest of their childhood and, we hope, beyond, which is obviously what we want. We want carers and children to continue to receive the appropriate and tailored support that those children need to thrive.

Sometimes, in assessment and decision-making processes, the same legal advice is not always

offered to kinship carers, and there is not always discussion of the various options. Sometimes there is an assumption that a kinship care order is the best option, without exploring other legal routes that might be more beneficial for some children and their kinship carers.

I would advocate for clearer assessment and decision-making processes, to make sure that children and their kinship carers get the support that they need, both at the point of decision making and beyond.

Laura Caven: I would not disagree with anything that other panel members have said. If there was one thing that I would like to see happen tomorrow, it would be enhancing and accelerating the culture change around how people feel about receiving or accessing support, which relates to the reluctance to seek support that Linda Richards spoke about. That would be in line with the Promise and making sure that we provide that support early, to avoid any kind of struggle or crisis situations and to help children to thrive, regardless of their family situation.

We would also like to see full funding of the Scottish recommended allowance, while allowing for local variation, which is important, as I mentioned, as there are different costs associated with living in different parts of Scotland and different situations.

Those are the two options that I would take, if that is okay.

Vivien Thomson: Similarly, I would not disagree with anything that my colleagues have already said. To answer the question, the one thing that I would like to see is good-quality family support that is available to everybody and every kinship carer. That is a core component of what we are trying to achieve through the Promise. We hear from kinship carers across the country that money is important, but equally important is the other support, such as support to access suitable housing, support to adjust housing that carers are in just now, and support to understand how to care for a child who has perhaps been traumatised or has had difficult experiences. Kinship carers want to be able to go to somebody and ask, “How do I get extra support at school? My young person is struggling and they are having difficulties, and I do not understand what that is about.”

There are all those different aspects of family support, and if that was universally available, it would make such a difference to every kinship carer, regardless of whether they are someone who is looking after a looked-after child, an informal carer who is just using an allowance, or an informal carer who has not had any contact with social work at all. That would be my wish for tomorrow, if I had a magic wand.

The Deputy Convener: Before we move on to Foyso Choudhury, I believe that Evelyn Tweed has a question on one of the points raised in this theme.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Good morning, panel. I want to go back to a point that Linda Richards made about housing. Linda, you made a powerful point when you said that there are just not enough large houses for kinship carers in your area. I see that myself in Stirling. I wonder whether the committee needs to look at the fact that, although there is a huge Scottish Government house-building programme, at local level, local authorities need to consider kinship carers and their needs, including that particular need for quite large housing.

Linda Richards: Having spoken to my colleagues, I know that this is certainly an issue in Stirling as well as in Perth and Kinross and indeed across the country. We in Perth and Kinross have a strong partnership with our housing colleagues, who go over and above to find us houses that are suitable for kinship carers. Sometimes, however, there are just not enough houses, but our housing colleagues are totally aware of the need and will look at all kinds of different options, such as help with extensions. For example, a housing association partner allowed us to reconvert the top floor of a house in order to make four bedrooms out of three, and we have lots of such examples of people working hard to ensure that that sort of thing happens. We must make sure that this is a priority and that we build more larger homes in the right areas.

Evelyn Tweed: Absolutely.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Good morning, panel. I want to go back to a topic that my colleagues have already asked about. I guess that my question is for any of our witnesses. What are the barriers to informal kinship carers gaining the benefits to which they are entitled, and what do you see as the problems with the current system of entitlements?

The Deputy Convener: Would you like to direct that to a particular member of the panel?

Foyso Choudhury: It is perhaps for Linda Richards or Vivien Thomson. I can see Linda shaking her head.

Linda Richards: Are you talking about financial entitlements, entitlements to support or both?

Foyso Choudhury: Both, I would say, but mostly financial entitlements.

Linda Richards: Our experience has been that informal kinship carers sometimes do not know that they are entitled to welfare benefits or support towards the granting of a kinship care order. The barrier is partly to do with raising awareness of

their entitlements and supporting them in approaching the relevant organisations.

As I have said, we have a partnership with our local welfare rights team, who have been excellent in getting alongside our kinship carers and helping them with income maximisation benefit assessments to ensure that they receive all the benefits to which they are entitled. On several occasions, that has increased their financial position quite considerably, and it is something that we try to do and promote in the informal kinship carer group.

I think that part of the barrier for those seeking kinship care orders is the emotional impact on people who have never been involved in a formal process of removing a child from their parents, as you would do with a looked-after child. If we are talking about, for example, a grandparent seeking to remove parental rights and responsibilities from their own child to look after their grandchild, that is a huge emotional journey, and they will need support in considering whether it is the right thing to do. Our kinship care team will work through that with them and support them in thinking about, say, what they need and what they hope to gain.

Our kinship care team will also look at specific things—we will make one-off payments for essential equipment such as beds, bedding and clothing. That frees up the kinship carer from that kind of financial burden and allows them to then look after the child themselves.

09:45

Partially, it is about raising awareness. We have tried to do that through some of our universal partners. For example, very often, the people who know about informal kinship care arrangements are our education colleagues and we have done a lot of raising awareness there. Sometimes we have referrals to our kinship care team from guidance teachers or third sector partners, which allows for that support to be considered by the team.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you, Linda. Foyso, do you have any further questions?

Foyso Choudhury: No, thank you.

The Deputy Convener: Apologies for sticking with the same theme—I will bring in Pam Duncan-Glancy now.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning, panel. Thank you for your submissions and for your answers so far. I find the variation of allowances across the country quite staggering—for one age group, from ages 0 to 4, it can be anything from £77 to £200—so the conversation that we have had around the need for a national allowance has been really helpful.

Laura Caven, your submission said that local authorities can choose how they cover the cost of the 16 items as part of the allowance. Does that mean that, in some cases, it is not a cash payment, or is it always a cash payment?

Laura Caven: I do not know that I have an answer to that one, actually. It might be a question that Vivien Thomson can answer, as she is a bit closer to the delivery side of things than I am.

What we meant by that in our submission—*[Inaudible.]*—that you are referring to, is that there might be an additional payment. For example, there might be a separate payment for transport that is not covered in the core allowance, or some things might be paid for separately. There might be a separate payment for clothing, for example. I assume that those are cash payments, but I defer to Vivien on that.

However, in referring to the issue in the submission, I meant that not all 16 items might be within the allowance. You are referring to the different figures; a separate payment might be made for one of the specific elements.

Vivien Thomson: I can answer the question. The allowance is a cash allowance that is given to foster carers or any eligible kinship carers. We do not hand over notes, but it goes through a BACS payment into the bank accounts of kinship carers or foster carers.

The review group identified what the national allowance ought to cover, and 16 items were listed within that. Across the country, there are variations in what people would call additional payments to foster carers and kinship carers of looked-after children.

For example, if somebody has to travel for a meeting that is related to the work of looking after that child, they might get an allowance to cover that. Most local authorities will provide what we would call set-up costs. At the point when somebody first becomes a kinship carer, they would be provided with a bed and bedding for the child or young person. They might need clothing and they might need other immediate costs to be covered to ensure that, at that point, they can look after that young person. Lots of other little bits and pieces are provided in terms of support. Those things might be provided in cash or in kind. The carer might be provided with an actual bed or with money to purchase the bed of their choice. That would normally be done in discussion with the carer.

We have the opportunity to consider how legislation on self-directed support might be able to assist. We need to explore that a little further. There are particular opportunities for kinship carers in that regard. When there is an assessed need, people have much more choice in how that

young person's need is met. However, that would be a subject for a completely new discussion.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: That is really helpful and clear. In the discussions on the national allowance, has there been consideration of the required rate for the 16 items? How is that being established? Are the increases in the cost of living being considered as part of that? How do you see the rate and the payments working? Someone mentioned Social Security Scotland earlier. Does it have a role?

Vivien Thomson: I will have a first stab at answering that, but others might want to come in after me. The Fraser of Allander Institute was involved in the initial costing of the 16 items and in coming up with what that might look like. A report that went through all that was provided to the Scottish Government and to the allowances working group.

As and when we introduce the national allowance for foster carers and eligible kinship carers, it will be important that we include some uplift to take into account the cost of living. We are serious about ensuring that the allowance covers everything that is needed for youngsters who are in care or in eligible kinship care. There is no point in introducing a national allowance that, in two years' time, will not be sufficient to deliver the intentions of all this work.

As I said, from the beginning of the work on allowances, it has been stated that there is a role for benefits. If there is a way of providing a benefit to all kinship carers, that will reduce the inequity that currently exists—there will still be inequity even with the introduction of a national allowance, because many informal kinship carers will not be able to access the allowance.

I am not sure whether that answers the question, but I hope that it helps.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: It absolutely does. Will you tell us a bit more about the legal mechanism that is used to determine who is eligible? What needs to change?

Vivien Thomson: There are two different legal mechanisms. The first relates to children who, for want of a better term, are in care. They have been removed from their parents, perhaps following a children's hearing, and placed with a kinship carer. Local authorities, when looking at carers, have a duty to always consider family members before considering strangers, for obvious reasons. A family member might have said that they are struggling and asked for the young person to be looked after for a while. Such children are then looked after. They are no different from young people in foster care, residential care or other types of care; all the regulations and legislation

that govern children in care apply to those children.

The informal group is covered by kinship care orders, as outlined in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. Those who are eligible for an allowance are termed as—this is horrible terminology—eligible carers of eligible children. If certain eligibility criteria are met, the carers get the allowance, and if they are not, they do not.

The eligibility criteria relate to young people who are formally looked after. For example, Linda Richards spoke about children who have already been looked after by a kinship carer. A decision might have been made that that is where the child should live permanently, and steps might have been taken to support the kinship carer to achieve a section 11 order, which allows the child to be taken out of the care system and permanently cared for by that carer, who gets parental rights and is allowed to get on with it, although the local authority is still allowed to provide support if it is needed. Such children were previously looked after and were at risk of coming into care at the time of their placement.

I should know it, but the other eligibility criterion has gone right out of my head. The criteria relate to whether a child has previously been looked after and to something else.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you.

Vivien Thomson: I have remembered the other criterion: it is that the child was placed with the involvement of the local authority. In other words, although the child might not have been in care, the local authority was involved in making the placement.

If those criteria are met, the carers and the young people concerned are considered to be eligible, and they can therefore access the allowance and the other support that goes with that.

The Deputy Convener: We move on to our final theme, on which Miles Briggs has questions.

Miles Briggs: I want to raise the issue of further support for kinship families, which overlaps with much of the conversation that we have had. I am thinking specifically of how we can improve referral pathways and signposting. We have already touched on what happens when young people are in education. Should we be looking for a better model so that all the professionals who are involved—especially teachers—are aware of the needs of children in kinship care and of young carers in the classroom setting?

CELCIS's survey highlighted the root of the situation when it identified that many children in kinship care have experienced trauma and that

children in kinship care are less likely to receive mental health support than children in foster care. What is your view on that? How do we improve that model? I am thinking of the classroom setting in particular. Although we are not the education committee, there is an opportunity to take on board some of the work in that area.

I realise that that was a long question. Maybe we can hear from Vivien Thomson first, as she has touched on the issue.

Vivien Thomson: Mental health support is a massive topic that has been given a lot of attention. The Parliament's education committees and other committees have looked at it. The issue is highlighted in the Promise. Anything that can be done to raise awareness of it and to ensure that the right children can access support will be welcomed. A lot of attention is being paid to it at the moment. A number of groups are looking at mental health support for all young people, not just looked-after young people or those who are in kinship care. If we can sort that for the general population, that will sort it for young people in kinship care.

If the committee were to talk to people who work only in fostering and who do not work in kinship care, you would hear about the challenges that exist in getting access to the right mental health support for young people in foster care. There is a national shortage of access to child and adolescent mental health services, and a lot of attention is being paid to what could be called crisis services and early intervention services. Money has been put into that across the country, and there are plans to expand such provision. We need to focus attention on that generally, so that young people—and carers, parents and the general population—know that they can access the right help at the right time, regardless of whether they are in foster care or kinship care, or are living with their parents or struggling with the stress of exams.

In my view, the school aspect is incredibly important, because every child, regardless of their living circumstances or the legal context in which they might be living, attends school, apart from a few home-schooled people. Awareness of the issue is beginning to develop, through counsellors in schools, the early intervention support that is provided there and the text chat services. If we pay attention to that aspect, it could make a substantial difference to young people, including young people who are living in kinship care arrangements and looked-after children, regardless of whether they are eligible.

Miles Briggs: I am not sure who else wants to come in. Should teachers be informed of children's status? Should "YC" or "KC" appear next to someone's name in the register, to indicate that

they are a young carer or are in kinship care? That would flag it up to teachers—especially in secondary school settings, where young people move around and see a different teacher in each class—so that they would understand and could sometimes cut them some slack. That point is always put to me when I speak to young carers, so I wanted to include that potential model in my question.

10:00

Linda Richards: We are all acutely aware of the impact of the pandemic on the emotional health and mental wellbeing of our children and young people, and their needs have certainly come more to the fore. In the majority of our schools, young carers are—*[Inaudible.]*—recent legislation and policy guidance has certainly put their needs at the centre. More than ever, teachers are acutely aware of their needs and they work with their counterparts in the third sector and local authorities to cut young carers some slack.

As Vivien Thomson has said, demand on CAMHS has increased. The additional funding that local authorities have been given to promote the emotional wellbeing of children and young people through counselling in schools projects has been very supportive. In schools, we are looking at having third sector partners that promote emotional wellbeing for all children and young people. Teachers and guidance staff in secondary schools, in particular, are acutely aware of the children they are educating who have exceptional needs that are above and beyond. Our experience is that they wrap support around such children and young people and try their best to ensure that their emotional wellbeing needs are met.

On universal provision in schools, the focus has been very much on third sector partners' delivery and talking with children and young people in a general way about good emotional health. That is to be commended and welcomed, because children and young people talking about how they are thinking and feeling and how they are coping with situations is the way forward.

Laura Caven: On Miles Briggs's point about schools knowing who is a young carer or who is looked after by kinship carers, I agree with Linda Richards—*[Inaudible.]*. However, we have to be careful about asking children and young people whether they want that to be known. Some children and young people would not necessarily like the idea of teachers knowing their home circumstances and, in terms of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, we have to be very careful about ensuring that we take into account the views of young people and what they decide should be known about their circumstances.

The Deputy Convener: Before we conclude, I want to pick up on a point that we have not fully covered. The whole family wellbeing fund, which was included in the 2021-22 programme for government, is not solely focused on kinship care, but it is aimed at tackling issues that families face before they need crisis intervention. How might the fund be used to offer improved support to kinship families?

Vivien Thomson: I said earlier that family support is an incredibly important part of the support that is available to kinship carers—that is the link that I make to the whole family funding that will be coming. If we get family support right, if we make early interventions right the way through a child's life and if we get the right support to the people who look after that child, far fewer young people will need to be looked after, whether through kinship care or foster care or in any other type of care setting. Therefore, the fund is incredibly important.

My one comment is that, if the fund is too targeted, that might affect its ability to meet everybody's needs. Some very specific supports are needed for kinship carers. They need help to look after children who have gone through trauma. They need to be able to access the right person to direct them to the right place for issues that might not exist for families who are not looking after a child in kinship care.

If we get the family support aspect right, that could transform the opportunities and supports that are available to kinship carers. From that point of view, the fund is incredibly important. It will target one of the key parts of the Promise.

Laura Caven: COSLA has been working really closely with the Scottish Government on the purpose of the investment to provide that—*[Inaudible.]*—crisis support for children and young people and families. That is welcomed in relation to our work to keep the Promise.

A family support delivery group—a collective of the Scottish Government, local government, health professionals, the third sector, professional associations and academics—has developed a route map for family support, which will feed into and advise future years of the whole family wellbeing fund. The committee might be interested in looking into and linking with the work of the group and considering how it might influence it.

The Deputy Convener: That brings us to the end of the evidence session, as I do not think that anybody else wants to come in on that question. I thank all the witnesses for their evidence. Your answers and comments have been extremely helpful. I remind you that, if there are any points that you feel you might have missed, you are more than welcome to follow up in writing.

I suspend the meeting briefly for a change of witnesses and a comfort break.

10:07

Meeting suspended.

10:13

On resuming—

The Deputy Convener: Welcome back. We will now continue taking evidence on kinship care. The format for this session will be the same as the format for the previous session. I welcome our second panel of witnesses, who are also joining us remotely. First, we have Micheleine Kane. Have I pronounced your name correctly?

Micheleine Kane (Scottish Kinship Care Alliance): Yes.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you. Micheleine is chair of the Scottish Kinship Care Alliance. We also have Gill Westwood, who is manager of Peebles and District Citizens Advice Bureau, and Alison Gillies from the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland.

I hope that you all had an opportunity to tune in to the previous evidence session. If so, you will have an idea of the issues that have been highlighted.

I will again go over a few housekeeping points. Please allow our broadcasting colleagues a few seconds to turn on your microphone before you start to speak. When you want to respond to a question, you can indicate that by putting the letter R in the dialogue box in BlueJeans or simply by putting your hand up. Everyone should check that they can see the dialogue box on the right-hand side of their screen.

I urge you all to be mindful of time. We are not too bad for time, and I will keep an eye on the time as we go through the session, but we have a lot to get through. Please do not feel that you all have to answer every question. If you have nothing to add to what others have said, it really is okay. You are also welcome to write to us after the meeting with any points that you feel have not been covered, or if you want to supply further information on any point.

I invite members to direct their questions to particular witnesses. I will again invite members to ask questions in turn. We will begin with Jeremy Balfour.

10:15

Jeremy Balfour: Good morning. I thank the witnesses for giving their time to come and answer our questions. As the deputy convener said, if you

watched our first evidence session this morning, you will know roughly where we will be going in the next few minutes. I will start with the general question that I asked earlier, and I ask Gill Westwood and Alison Gillies to respond first. Is it a problem in financial terms to have different definitions? Would it be easier to start with one definition? What do you see as a solution?

Gill Westwood (Peebles and District Citizens Advice Bureau): Having the two definitions makes it complicated for kinship carers to navigate not only their financial entitlements through the kinship care lens but the knock-on effects and their access to other UK state benefits. If the system could be streamlined or even just use simpler terminology, that would be a huge benefit to kinship carers. Terms such as “formally looked after” and “not looked after” are great for social workers and professionals, but they do not translate for people who are dealing with children who have experienced trauma, who experience a bit of trauma themselves in trying to help those children.

Kinship carers have said to me that the terms “looked after” and “not looked after” do not mean anything to them. They say that the children are all looked after because they are being looked after by them, if that makes sense. It would make sense to kinship carers for the terminology to be more straightforward.

Alison Gillies (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland): I agree that there is an issue with the use of definitions and terms such as “formal” and “informal”. Other phrases that are used include “looked after” and “not looked after”—Gill Westwood mentioned that distinction—and “approved kinship carer”. I come at the subject from a welfare rights point of view, and a lot of the terminology in relation to entitlements to social security benefits is not helpful when a kinship carer is trying to ascertain which benefits they are entitled to, or indeed when an adviser is trying to advise somebody. From a benefits point of view, what we need to know is whether the child is looked after or not. That is often the crucial bit of information. The terms “formal” and “informal” do not necessarily equate to “looked after” and “not looked after”, as you have already gathered.

There are wider issues to do with the terminology, as others have said. From my point of view, using the terms “formal” and “informal” in relation to the social security aspect is not particularly helpful. It causes confusion and causes people to get the wrong information and advice. It sometimes causes people to get the wrong benefits entitlement or to not get the entitlement that they ought to have. Pieces of terminology will inevitably be used in relation to, for example, the benefits system. I would like

people to have greater clarity about the terms that are used, so streamlining or greater clarity would be very welcome.

Jeremy Balfour: I want to pursue with Alison Gillies her role in getting people the benefits that they are entitled to. Are there passported benefits that people get if they fall under one definition of kinship care but not another? Is the situation the same across the United Kingdom? That might go beyond your experience; if it does, stop me. However, is the situation in Scotland the same as that in England and Wales?

Obviously, Social Security Scotland has just got up and running and is still fairly new. From your early experience of the new agency, is it following the same approach to definitions, or does it see kinship carers as one group?

Alison Gillies: That is a wide-ranging question, which is why I was making whatever face I was making.

I know about the UK system and some of the differences that exist in relation to kinship carers in the Scottish context. I will try not to be too long winded. The main means-tested UK benefit that people think about is universal credit, although we still also think about child tax credit, as it is still around. In relation to those benefits, the issue of whether a child or young person is looked after is crucial to entitlement for a kinship carer. A lot flows from that, particularly in relation to universal credit. By and large, if someone is caring for a looked-after child away from home, in a kinship care situation, they do not get the child element of universal credit. The same rules apply to those kinship carers and children as apply in a foster care situation. The assumption is that the local authority is supporting the kinship carer and the child.

Those rules are the same across the UK. There are differences as a result of the legal differences in relation to kinship care situations or placements. However, by and large, what I have said applies across the board. That creates issues, difficulties and confusion, and the Department for Work and Pensions does not always get it right, as I said in my written submission.

Social Security Scotland does not administer the big means-tested benefits such as universal credit. However, with the Scottish child payment, for example, which, as you will know, is a Scottish benefit only and has no equivalent in the rest of the UK, the Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland have tried quite hard to ensure that kinship carers of looked-after and non-looked-after children who are on a low income can access that payment. That shows a different approach, but I have to say that, although the Scottish child payment is significant, it is quite small and is very

different from the support that somebody gets from universal credit.

I could say more about the issue, but that is probably enough.

Jeremy Balfour: That has been helpful. If you want to tell the committee anything else about that, please do so in writing, as the deputy convener said. In particular, if you have any comments on passported benefits that people might or might not get depending on the definition, perhaps you could reflect that in a written statement. However, that has been very helpful, so thanks very much.

The Deputy Convener: Gill Westwood and Micheleine Kane want to come in on those points.

Gill Westwood: Going back to the question of definitions and what Alison Gillies said in that respect, I point out, from the perspective of someone who gives advice on welfare benefits, that if a kinship carer is not confident about the information that they are giving about a child's looked-after or not-looked-after status, we cannot proceed to advise them, because we could be giving them completely the wrong information. That leads to time delays, and it therefore takes longer for the kinship carer to start to receive benefits and, in some cases, the kinship care allowance. As a result, timing is crucial and needs to be considered when we are thinking about definitions and clarity in that respect.

The Deputy Convener: If Micheleine Kane has anything to add, that would be great.

Micheleine Kane: I agree with Gill Westwood and Alison Gillies that this is a minefield—it always has been. The biggest minefield has come with the roll-out of universal credit in Scotland, because it is different from the old income support that a lot of the grandmothers, especially the single ones, were on for many, many years. They have been taken off that, and in becoming a new kinship carer, they have had to wait a month for their benefits because of the law with regard to benefit changes as a result of changes in circumstance. We have had a lot of that.

Another issue that has never been addressed—and which seems simple to us but obviously not to the DWP—is that kinship carers are not foster carers. As, I think, Gill Westwood pointed out, when the kinship carers get these kids, the child benefit people ask, "Are you not the parent?", and a lot of them say, "No." The assumption is that they are foster carers and that, along with that, the local authorities should be providing the benefits. I do not know whether the committee is aware of this, but when you get the kinship care allowance—or if you get it; that is a big bone of contention—any benefits that you are on are taken off the child's allowance. They do not get the full

benefit. If you are working, you get the full benefit, but if you are on benefits, the allowance and the child benefit are deducted from the weekly maintenance allowance. The child's benefits—the child tax credit and the child benefit—are removed if you are in the benefits system here in Scotland.

The system is quite discriminatory. As we heard from the previous witnesses, 44 per cent of kinship carers give up their jobs to look after a kinship kid. If you have to do that and then have to go into the benefits system, you face a minefield. That is why, as we keep saying over and over again, there has to be legislation, not guidance.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you. I will bring Alison Gillies back in with a follow-up point.

Alison Gillies: I just want to emphasise Micheleine Kane's point, because it is really significant. As the committee will, I think, be aware, local authorities deduct so-called child-related benefits from the starting-point figure for the kinship care allowance, the idea behind which is to have parity with the fostering allowance with regard to any benefits that a foster carer would not get for a child. That might impact mainly on kinship carers of non-looked-after children, but the point is that it impacts on kinship carers.

Micheleine Kane said something important in that respect. The benefits that are deducted are, for example, child tax credit and universal credit, if the kinship carer gets them. However, they will get those benefits only if they are on a low income. A more affluent kinship carer will not get those benefits, so they will not be deducted from the kinship care allowance. The upshot, therefore, is that a more affluent kinship carer benefits more from the kinship care allowance.

I probably did not need to reiterate Micheleine Kane's point, but I felt that I should.

Marie McNair: Good morning. My question is for Alison Gillies. Your briefing is really helpful, but will you expand on the issues that kinship carers have in trying to access UC and other reserved benefits?

10:30

Alison Gillies: There are some pretty significant issues, which I listed in my briefing. I also sent a fuller report, which gives more detail of financial impact.

One of the significant points is an issue that I mentioned already. Generally speaking, a kinship carer of a looked-after child is not eligible for the child element in their UC. That is the starting point and it is an absolute rule but, unfortunately, it is not always applied properly. I have explored that to quite an extent with the DWP, although not to an extent that has resulted in it being sorted out.

The questions that DWP staff ask do not elicit the correct information in all situations. Quite often, a kinship carer of a looked-after child is paid the child element in error and, at some point further down the line, the DWP realises that it is an error and the money is recouped from the kinship carer.

All overpayments of universal credit are legally recoverable, regardless of whose fault the overpayment is. That causes a significant problem and, associated with that, is what the local authority is doing in the meantime. If it is deducting the child element from the kinship care allowance—it might well be, because that is the authority's normal policy—the kinship carer has not benefited at all by having it and they have been overpaid universal credit, which will be recovered from them.

There are two main problems there. We thought that it might be just a bedding-in problem that would disappear in time, but we see the issue in our advice line service, so it is definitely still coming up for kinship carers. There is confusion on the part of the agency that administers the benefit.

The other issue that I raised in my written briefing is the interaction between the two-child limit and the benefit cap. That is an issue for kinship carers of non-looked-after children, who get the child element in their universal credit. There are special rules that certain people are exempt from the two-child limit, and one of those groups are certain kinship carers. That is great but, if someone has a bigger family of maybe four children, they are likely to be caught by the benefit cap. There is no specific exemption in the benefit cap rules for kinship carers.

I hope that that makes some kind of sense. A person might have the advantage of special rules in relation to the two-child limit, but they might find that, in any event, their universal credit is significantly restricted because of the benefit cap. That is an issue in itself, but it is also an issue if the kinship carer is an eligible kinship carer who is being supported by the local authority. Is the local authority aware enough of what is going on with the person's universal credit in order to try and work out what it should be deducting from the person's kinship care allowance? It causes a real complexity and difficulty for kinship carers and for local authorities who are trying to work out what to do.

There is more to say than that, of course. As I highlight in my written submission, if somebody is on universal credit and in a straightforward situation with no other income but they are a kinship carer and get a kinship care allowance, the local authority knows what to deduct, because the person is on the maximum amount of universal credit and the amounts are standard. However, as

soon as somebody has an income from earnings, for example, that is no longer the case, so it creates a difficult problem for local authorities to do what they ought to do and have agreed to do.

One issue that I feel quite strongly about is that local authorities really need updated guidance, because the existing guidance from 2016, which covers lots of things including the kinship care allowance, has not been updated to include anything meaningful about universal credit. The issues that I am raising are difficult—there is no doubt about it—and local authorities are having to try to work out what to do. Some are doing it really well and others are struggling and perhaps not even aware of some of the issues that exist. Kinship carers might inadvertently end up being supported far more poorly as a result of those interactions than the local authority thinks they are.

It is difficult, but I hope that that makes some kind of sense.

Marie McNair: You touched on the benefit cap. Will you address the financial detriment that it can have when all that kinship carers are doing is stepping in to care for their family?

Alison Gillies: There is an example in the report that I recently produced, which is on our website—I think that we sent round the link to it. I do not have it in front of me but, if somebody had two children already and took on the care of two children in a kinship care arrangement—not looked-after children but perhaps children with a kinship care order—they would be exempt from the two-child limit because of the circumstances. That would mean that they would get the child element of universal credit for those two children. I am looking at the figures quickly. That would be about £470 a month.

It is great that they would get that child element, but they would then be capped and completely lose that and more. In the example in the report, which is a realistic example of such a situation, the carer would lose all of that and a bit extra, so they would not get any support in their universal credit for the two children whose care they had taken on. If the local authority supports them financially but is not on the ball in that regard and not aware of the issue, and if the kinship carer is on universal credit, the authority might assume that the kinship carer gets the child element and make the deduction.

That might make the financial side a bit more real.

Marie McNair: That was helpful. I have a final question, if you do not mind indulging me.

Alison Gillies: I could talk about the matter all day.

Marie McNair: If the UC approach means that kinship carers of looked-after children who want to work can be denied financial support for childcare through UC, there is surely a detriment to taking on employment. Can you quantify the financial loss in relation to childcare?

Alison Gillies: I would struggle to give you figures on that. There is an example in the report that we circulated that shows the loss of universal credit for someone who has childcare costs.

To be clear, if someone does not get the child element of universal credit because the child is looked after, there are three other things to think about. First, if the child has a disability, that person will not get the additional bit of child element. Secondly, a person who is working would not get the work allowance—that is the disregard on earnings—unless there is some other reason to get that, which includes having a dependent child. The person might not get a work allowance at all, so the universal credit starts to be tapered immediately. Thirdly, someone who has childcare costs will not get any help with those, because the child is not their dependant as far as universal credit is concerned.

On quantifying that, the maximum amount of childcare allowance that eligible people get in universal credit is 85 per cent of their childcare costs—the amount is capped at that level. In addition, another calculation must be done relating to a person's income. You can imagine that, given the expense of childcare, that can be a significant loss, particularly when that is combined with the work allowance element.

There are figures in the report on that. Would it be helpful for me to submit those, or have I said enough? I can easily submit the figures in writing.

Marie McNair: That would be helpful—thank you.

The Deputy Convener: I reiterate that any further information that you have would be very helpful, Alison.

Miles Briggs: We touched on the Promise when speaking to the previous panel of witnesses. Many MSPs are feeling frustrated that the Promise is not being delivered. In your professional experience, where are the problems in delivering that? From most of the submissions that we have had, it seems that local authorities are being tasked with delivering the Promise but are not being given the resources to do that.

I start with Micheleine Kane and then I will see who else wants to come in.

Micheleine Kane: On the Promise, when I gave evidence to the care review, all the people there left crying. Kinship care is real life. It needs to be legislated for. We have 32 local authorities

working on guidance. Guidance is no good for kinship care.

I wish that I could have butted in a few times during the first panel of witnesses, to be honest. I am here as the voice of kinship carers. I work with grass-roots kinship organisations day in and day out, 24/7. What we need and want is for the people who made the Promise to keep it.

In 2014, we fought to get parity. It took us a lot of years to get that. Sadly, a lot of the stalwarts in kinship care, such as Jessie Harvey, and a lot of the most impoverished groups, including in Glasgow North, Possilpark and Maryhill, stood up 20-plus years ago and tried to be counted. We are talking 20 years; we are not talking six years, four years or two years. We are talking 20-plus years for recognition.

We are like the dirty secret of care—that is how kinship carers feel. We are discriminated against continually. A kinship carer comes tae see you. Their kid has died, and they have been told that they were a voluntary kinship carer. Voluntary! That is in Scotland in 2022, which is supposed tae be the best place in the world where aw these kids are gonnae grow up. That doesnae cut it; there is no voluntary in kinship care. We love these kids, but we cannae keep them on love. We cannae send them intae a nice safe, warm and clean bed and feed and clothe them on love. That doesnae work in the real world. That does not work.

10:45

There has to be a universal approach. We have dealt wi this status and that status and the postcode lottery and so on for 20 years. We are just regurgitating what we have said for 20 years. Wi aw due respect tae everyone who did all those briefings, there is nothing different in any of them fae 20 years ago. We are still here, 20 years doon the line.

We have lost absolutely amazing kinship carers who will not see the legacy of what they started. We are continuing the fight. That is what the Scottish Kinship Care Alliance does. We are fighting for justice for kinship carers, but the 32 local authorities are not doing the same thing. As youse heard, there is a disparity in the money, which can range fae £77 tae £200. How can that be?

I am in West Dunbartonshire and it ends and Argyll and Bute begins at Cardross. If you live at the end of Cardross Road, you are still in West Dunbartonshire; a carer two doors along the road is getting nearly double what you get, and yet West Dunbartonshire is one of the best-paying local authorities—I will give it that.

I will also give West Dunbartonshire credit for how it handles the bereaved. I do not have any bereaved in the group that I deal wi, and I deal wi a lot of kinship carers daily between my ain group in West Dunbartonshire and the Scottish Kinship Care Alliance. However, in West Dunbartonshire, they get the payment. They do not go through hearing, “You took those weans voluntarily.”

They got a chap at the door. We do not get counselling; we do not get training; we do not get anything. We get kids and there is human emotion involved in taking every single one of these kids. They need to take that into account. It isnae just about money; it is about getting it right for every single kinship child in every single family. They aw deserve tae be treated the same, but that aspect of the Promise is not being kept just now. We are still fighting.

Miles Briggs: Thank you for that very powerful testimony, Micheleine.

Does anyone else want to come in on that point?

The Deputy Convener: I believe that Gill Westwood wanted to come in.

Gill Westwood: Micheleine Kane has said almost everything that I was going to say.

I am here as the manager of Peebles and District CAB. However, prior to that, I managed the kinship care service for Citizens Advice Scotland and I was a caseworker. From my experience, I will just add that foster carers know that they are going to be foster carers; kinship carers get, as Micheleine says, the knock on the door. Very often, they do not get very long to decide whether they are able, physically or financially, to take on the care of a kinship care child. However, I do not know a single kinship carer who has refused.

That is the start of their problems, because that is when they start trying to understand the ins and outs of all the financial stuff. Try explaining what Alison Gillies was explaining earlier to a kinship carer who has three traumatised children and who has not slept for a week.

The information that needs to be given to kinship carers about the Promise and about all their entitlements, their rights and responsibilities should be written down; it should be clear; and it should be delivered in the same way to everybody so that everybody gets the same information.

It would also be really useful if local authorities and, in particular, the DWP had a bit more awareness of kinship care. One of the major problems that we have come up against is suggesting to the DWP that someone is entitled to money and having the DWP saying, “No, actually, they’re not,” and then having to have an on-going discussion about it.

If some of the struggles could be taken out of kinship carers' lives, that would help them a huge amount. I echo Micheleine's comments.

Miles Briggs: Thank you for that—

The Deputy Convener: Sorry, Miles. Before we go on, I will just bring in Alison Gillies on that final point.

Alison Gillies: I will be brief. I do not know a huge amount about the Promise; it is not really my area, although I am obviously aware of it. However, earlier, somebody mentioned the kinship care collaborative as part of the Promise. Although I am really interested in the kinship care collaborative, I have not been able to get to grips with exactly what it is doing or looking at and whether, for example, our area of expertise—the money side of things—might be useful as an input to that process. That is my point or, rather, my question.

Miles Briggs: That is a very useful question/point, which we can perhaps take away and pursue.

Specifically, the committee wants to focus attention on the potential model to change the situation and get it right. As Micheleine Kane has outlined, local authorities all have different things going on, and it will often come down to the key people in a council who are driving services to change and respond. What would you like to see that model look like—especially for informal kinship carers—and how do you think that it would best be developed? Micheleine Kane touched upon legislation. A national rate has also been highlighted, with the suggestion that that change should really have been put in place already.

Micheleine Kane: I am sorry; is that question for me?

Miles Briggs: I am sorry—I wittered on a bit there. The question was around what you think we should suggest to help change this. That is the key point that we want to get into.

Micheleine Kane: Ideally, we need legislation. As I have said, guidance is exactly that—it is guidance. It is then about what a local authority can afford to do, what it wants to do and what resources it has. We are not blaming local authorities or any one thing. However, it has to be about what kinship carers want to see—and have wanted to see for 20-plus years.

Picking up on Alison Gillies' point, we are in the kinship care collaborative. We have come in because we were asked to come in, but we are about to withdraw—or we might withdraw. They have had two years. We have been in the kinship care service since Mentor came in. We have seen out Mentor and we have seen out other agencies. It is a documented fact that we are not happy with

who is running the kinship service, because they are concerned with adoption and fostering. We are mainly unhappy with them because, when we were looking for support in 2014, they refused to support us, citing total differences. That is fine—that was up to them. However, if they are going to cite total differences, they cannot then put in a tender for our services, because—as they said—we are totally different. We are not the same entity.

There is a lot of anger in kinship care about the kinship care advice service. To be honest, we were happy when it was run by Citizens Advice Scotland, because it dealt with the benefits. It was brought in to deal with the benefits, which—as you have heard in the evidence the day—is very much a minefield for kinship carers.

The modelling needs to be right, and it needs to be based not on data, not on statistics and not on analysis, but on evidence from the grassroots, foot soldiers of kinship care—the carers. Everyday life in kinship care should be front and centre for any modelling. Without us, it is certainly not about us, but about data and analysis.

We have had all that data and analysis. We want action. We do not want words. We are not all words now. We are done with words. We are taking to the streets, and we have not had to do that since 2014. We have engaged for all these years. We have engaged with the Scottish Government and let it into our groups and it has written reports on the situation, and we feel let down because, at the end of the day, we look after and love those kids and we want to keep them in the best place, and the proven best place for their care is in their families. We want to keep all their broken trees thriving.

We should remember another thing. If we are supporting young mothers to get their kids back to their families, which is where kids should be—the Promise says that we should be supporting families to keep their children—we are a second chance. We can hand those kids back and say, "There you go. They're back. You've done what you need to do to prove that you're stable."

We know that that does not always happen, but where it can happen, it should. As Gill Westwood says, adoption and fostering is a choice. People choose to be a foster carer or an adopter; they get counselling and a wage and so on. We do not get that choice. Nobody chaps on your door and says, "I'll be back in a week; you can have a think about this". Naw—you have to think there and then.

We should think about all the bereaved carers who are termed as voluntary kinship carers. As you can hear in my voice, that is my biggest pain—I hate going to meet up with a kinship carer. In the evidence that I submitted, I talked about

helping a kinship carer whose daughter died. Why should she have to go to MPs and beg for help? She is a kinship carer. She took those kids on out of love and lost her own kid in the process. She doesn't get to grieve—the normal human emotion. No mother or parent wants to bury their child and then be penalised for taking their children and told that going and getting them was voluntary. That is ridiculous.

We need that to change, and we need it to change now. We do not need any more data, analysis or statistics. Those changes need to come about soon, because there is a volcano of kinship carers now, and it will erupt. We are tired of being the undervalued underdogs in care. We do a lot of caring, and we do it to the best of our ability. We provide love and stability, and we do everything that we can to break this cycle. We want to break the cycle. We do not want these kids being the next generation of kinship carers. We want it to stop, but, to do that, we need to be supported, and we are still not seeing that. That is a fact, and I have made that quite clear to the Scottish Government, the kinship care collaborative and everybody else.

People will look at me and say, "She's all angry." I am not angry; I am fed up. I have watched dedicated kinship carers lose their lives. As I said, they will not see justice—they will not see this part, with us still fighting 20 years on. It is enough now. It is enough. We want to see action, and we thought that, with the Promise, that is exactly what would happen. People have said that it is taking years. That is true, but it is years that we do not have. We do not have all these years. We want change, and we want it now.

Miles Briggs: Thank you for that. I hope that the committee hears what you have said, because I think that everyone in the Parliament is disappointed by the lack of progress that has been made. That has to change.

I do not know whether any other witness wants to come in.

Gill Westwood: I will throw in my tuppenceworth and pick up on something that Micheleine Kane said. It would be an understatement to say that I was slightly dismayed that the kinship care service went to an agency that does not provide information on benefits or the legal status of kinship carers. The service also went to an agency that has the power over what, in my experience, kinship carers fear most: the children being adopted or fostered away from them.

Notwithstanding that, any citizens advice bureau will be very happy to advise any kinship carer who turns up. With or without the funding—much like

kinship carers—we will continue to provide a service.

Foysoil Choudhury: Good morning. I share the pain that Micheleine Kane has spoken about. I have one question for her. What could we do with the social security powers that we have in Scotland to help kinship carers?

My second question is for all the panel members. What barriers exist to kinship carers gaining the benefits to which they are entitled, and what problems exist with the current system of entitlements?

11:00

Micheleine Kane: Regarding social security benefits, we knew that the benefits system was going to be devolved to Scotland, and we were involved in the talks about that way back in 2017 and 2018. It is a minefield for us, and we get the same issues. As Gill Westwood says, we absolutely relied on other people's benefits expertise. We are not benefits experts; we are experts in daily life in kinship care. We do enough voluntarily; we are not waged. I voluntarily do this, day in, day out. I am a kinship carer to a disabled grandson of 14 and a granddaughter of seven. When my granddaughter came into the process, she was only young, and we had just changed to universal credit, so everything changed. The lucky thing for me—well, it is not lucky, but, because my grandson is disabled and the system hadn't been rolled out fully, I didn't come into that issue where people are got shifted and basically penalised more.

It needs to be a devolved benefit, or there have to be talks around the benefits system and how it affects people. As I pointed out, if you work, you get the full allowance or entitlement because, as has been said, it is based on foster carers. However, foster carers are paid to do exactly that: look after these children—that is their job. They will get a pension. We are not paid to look after these children. Some of us—the lucky ones—are given an allowance to cover looking after these children, only because they are looked-after children. Before 2014, there was no allowance; there was a link carers allowance, which you got if you were extremely lucky. It was £50—that was it. That was to cover keeping those kids. They didn't have parity; we had to fight for parity, which we did.

There needs to be a social security act or something. There needs to be a serious chat around social security and benefits. People like Alison Gillies and Gill Westwood will always be inundated with kinship carers who do not understand the benefits system. They do not understand what they are entitled to or where to

go, because it is a benefit, and benefits are complicated, and some of that complication is to do with whether an arrangement involves informal or formal kinship care. If the council looks after you, they will send you back to the council and say, "That child's your responsibility." With informal agreements, there used to be residency orders, and then when money came into play, those were changed to kinship care orders. A residency order basically meant that you were responsible for the child, and social work and the local authority didnae have tae take any responsibility. Now there is a kinship care order, because there is a financial element in some cases: where the child was previously a looked-after child or is at risk of becoming a looked-after child.

It is a big minefield and it is complicated. Oor job every day is tae keep kinship carers happy and gie them the best advice that we can. However, as I just said, we absolutely admit a million per cent that we are no benefits advisers, and we are no the DWP. I will be honest: when we go on a phone call to the DWP, they are rude tae us and arrogant. They go by what happens in England or the rest of the UK. As I have said, Northern Ireland and Wales have a national allowance that is legislated for, but we have guidance and that is a lottery in itself, because you are either in a good council—

The Deputy Convener: Thanks, Micheleine. I am sorry to have to interrupt you but we are running short of time, so I have to ask for succinct answers. I believe that Foysol Choudhury asked another question but, before I move on to that, Alison Gillies wants to come in.

Micheleine Kane: That is fine.

Alison Gillies: The point was about whether there could a role for Social Security Scotland in the provision of a national allowance. It is difficult to be succinct about that, but I have a couple of main points.

The main means-tested support that kinship carers might have to access in the past would have been child tax credit—some carers still get child tax credit—or for an older kinship carer, it might be pension credits. None of those benefits are being devolved to Scotland and there is no plan to do so.

Of course, Scotland can create new benefits, and it has done so with the Scottish child payment. However, I have no idea whether there is any appetite to do that in relation to kinship care allowance. If there was, it would raise a number of questions, such as where that would leave local authorities and whether they would have a role in financial support. Some people might think that that would be a good thing and welcome it.

It would also have implications for the UK benefits system because some kinship carers, particularly kinship carers of non-looked-after children, can access benefits to support the child through universal credit and so on. We would have to think through whether that person would still be able to access that support and how it would interact with a new Scottish benefit that serves the same purpose.

There is a lot of complexity to be thought through there. It is perfectly possible to think it through, but it is important that people are well informed about all those issues before embarking on that kind of discussion or plan.

I could maybe say something about the other question. I have already talked about the barriers and quite a bit about universal credit, so I will not say all that again. The main barriers are the complexity and the confusion. Of course, people can access advice, such as the KCASS helpline, CAS, and local authority welfare rights services. Some local authorities have really well developed systems for welfare rights services that link with their kinship care teams, but, of course, that is not true across the board. People need to be able to access that advice in what we would call a no-wrong-door way where they do not get cut off if they have phoned the wrong number, contacted the wrong agency or are speaking to the wrong person in a particular advice agency. People should not have to tell their story again and again.

Where that kind of service exists, if it can exist, it is really helpful at the point at which kinship care is needed, because it is a complex area. We might be able to do something to simplify it but, currently, there is no denying that it is an area of complexity, and that creates barriers.

Foysol Choudhury: Thank you, convener.

The Deputy Convener: Before I move on, I just want to say that I am sorry. I do not like to cut people off, but we want everyone to get through their questions and we want to hear all the answers.

Jeremy Balfour is next and will be followed by Pam Duncan-Glancy.

Jeremy Balfour: This is a complex question, so a yes/no answer with a follow-up in writing might be helpful. We have talked a lot about having a nationally agreed allowance and how things are different across local authorities in Scotland compared with other parts of the United Kingdom. From your perspective—perhaps Alison Gillies and Gill Westwood could respond—would it be easier if the allowance was administrated across the whole of Scotland, such that everybody got the same amount of money, regardless of where in Scotland they lived?

Alison Gillies: That might be easier. I am sorry; that is not a yes or a no. If there was one level, the first question would be to ask what level that should be set at. Would it be a case of having a race to the bottom or picking the best practice and going for that? Other people have made the same point.

The other question that that would beg is who would administer that. Would it still be done by local authorities, only with the same rate of allowance across the board, or would it be administered centrally? I do not know whether you had that in mind when you asked your question. I probably do not have a strong opinion on that that I could helpfully share. Rather unhelpfully, my answer is, "It depends."

Obviously, the first question would be what level a national allowance would be set at because, at the moment, the rates are so disparate and there are such big gaps between them.

Jeremy Balfour: Does anyone else wish to comment?

The Deputy Convener: I do not believe that anyone else does, so we will move on to Pam Duncan-Glancy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I thank the members of the panel for their testimony. I especially thank Micheleine Kane. From your description of what you have had to go through and the time that it has taken to get action, I am not surprised that you are fed up. Thank you very much for sharing your experience with us. As Miles Briggs said, I hope that the committee and the Government listen carefully to what you have said.

I have a couple of questions, which I will run together in the interests of time. My first one relates to the issue of a national allowance, and it follows on from Jeremy Balfour's. Micheleine Kane talked about the fact that someone two doors down can be offered a different amount. I do not think that that is tolerable, and I cannot see any other way to address it.

I agree with Alison Gillies that the first principle must be that there should be a race to the top. That is absolutely true. If the allowance was paid nationally, what would we need to do to make sure that everybody who needed to get money got it? Specifically in relation to the issue of whether children have been looked after, what mechanism could be used to ensure that the discretionary approach that might be applied to make sure that some people get money in a way that others do not could be applied nationally?

In a similar vein, I would like to ask Micheleine Kane how involved kinship carers have been in the national conversation about a national allowance. I fear that you have not been involved

in that conversation, and I hope that you will be. I am keen to hear about that.

Also, who made the decision about which agency to make responsible for the kinship care service? Do you know why they did that?

Finally, I was really concerned about Alison Gillies's point about affluent kinship carers ending up getting up more money than people who are worse off. Is guidance needed to fix that? How can we sort that?

Alison Gillies: In response to your first question, as I said already, there might be a plan for a national minimum allowance, but I have no idea whether there is a plan for a national allowance that would be paid nationally. If there were such a plan, the first thing that would need to be done to make that work is that a decision would have to be taken about who would be eligible. I know that this is stating the obvious, but parameters would have to be drawn up. I would hope that they would be drawn widely, but that would have to happen. Such an allowance would have to be either for the same kinship carers who are eligible for support at the moment or for a wider group.

11:15

A decision would have to be made about eligibility and, ideally, that would then be enshrined in law. To be able to point to and pursue your rights and to be able to challenge something is always better than having something that is at the discretion of somebody else to pay or not pay. That is my short point on the first question—I hope that that is helpful.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: It is—thank you.

Gill Westwood: I want to pick up on a couple of points about national allowances, which tie into the barriers, too. It would be helpful not to have three payment mechanisms that all impact differently on UK benefits and access to other financial support. If that were included in national allowances policy, it would probably be helpful for kinship carers.

Generally speaking, the money follows the child and not the kinship carer. The local authority that places the child is the one that pays the kinship care allowance. I will give you an example from a good number of years ago when the allowance was first brought in. Most local authorities were paying the allowance but one local authority decided not to until it absolutely had to. A child was moved from their home in the islands to the home of their granny, who lived in the council area that did not pay the kinship care allowance. The result was that children from the child's home area who were placed in that area were getting the allowance but the granny in the other local

authority area did not—she got absolutely nothing at that time.

The money comes from where the child comes from, and a child might come from a local authority that pays more than the local authority in which, for example, the granny lives. I am using the term “granny”, which is disrespectful, but it is generally grandparents who are kinship carers. As Micheleine Kane pointed out, the amount of money can vary from one end of a street to the other.

Those points perhaps need to be looked at.

Miles Briggs: I have a question that you might want to follow up in writing. I want to ask about a new model around information and access to services for kinship carers, which goes beyond what we have been talking about in terms of payments. I think that we were all impressed with what we heard this morning about Perth and Kinross Council, given the urban and rural nature of that council area. Is there a best practice model for providing a whole package including, for example, peer support for kinship carers and access to and information about local third sector organisations? You might want to write to us about that, as I said.

In West Lothian, in my region, there are a lot of good third sector organisations that link with and help people without waiting for a referral pathway to be put in place. Are there any examples of that additional support for when people become kinship carers, or of models being developed around that?

Gill Westwood: When I was a case worker in the kinship care service at CAS, I covered 10 local authority areas. Some were very proactive and quick to offer as much help as possible. The help was not only in financial terms, but with housing and—I was about to say “social isolation” but that is not really what I mean—integrating kinship carers into foster care groups and other such things. However, some local authorities were less proactive.

I am not terribly keen on the phrase “postcode lottery”, but it is fairly accurate that provision depends on where someone lives. It would be really good if that could be aligned. I do not know how you would do that. Certainly, some of the communities and local authorities were quicker on the uptake than others. I will not name and shame anyone, but the support really varied across Scotland.

Micheleine Kane: I will follow on from what Gill Westwood pointed out but from a kinship point of view. We are the umbrella for every kinship group in every local authority. Kinship groups put in a lot of work. They are not funded by every local authority and that is where there is more disparity,

which Gill Westwood and others know well. Glasgow groups get funding from the local authority. There is guidance on that, but it is up to the local authority, depending on what resources it has. Kinship groups take a lot of strain off the social work departments to free them up for other things. Carers can come to the groups and be signposted to help. They also come to the group for peer support, which is crucial, because they need somebody to talk to.

Wi aw due respect in the world, as Gill Westwood pointed out and as I have pointed out many times, we do not want tae talk tae foster carers or adopters, because we fear that oor kids are gonnae end up in foster care or adoption or we have had tae fight tae get our kids from foster care. Why, on anybody’s day, would they want tae be in touch wi organisations that they fear? Nobody is gonnae do that.

What I have said has been documented. It is no naivety that we do not need foster carers or adopters; it is just that they shouldnae be near our service. The service is about kinship carers and it should be for them. The groups are run by kinship carers for kinship carers. They get tae come in and tell how bad their day has been and how rubbish their life is.

Funding needs tae go tae appropriate places; no tae people that are gonnae draw graphs. You cannae draw a graph and take that tae the hoose ae a granny that has just lost her child and say, “Aw but here, haud on, Ah’ve got a graph in ma bag. Ah’ll show ye it. This is whit they’re gonnae do. This is whit they’re lookin tae do.” That is no help. What we need is what I have said, and I am no gonnae stop saying it: we need the discrimination against us tae stop. We need tae start being valued for what we are.

The authorities need tae stop undervaluing us, but they need to put the right people in place tae do the right jobs and they need to have the right services that are designated to be the service. I mean CABs, services on welfare rights and aw the places that we need tae signpost people tae. We should be able tae signpost carers tae organisations without fear that that organisation will be biased against them. We need tae be able tae be happy. Even if it is community services such as working4u that gie oot local financial advice tae kinship carers, we have tae be able tae say, “Yeah, you can go there, because they have got kinship carers’ interests at heart.” That is what we want.

We want a model that is based on us. We are unique. We are no waged. We are a totally different entity tae everybody else.

The Deputy Convener: Sorry, Micheleine, could you wrap up? Carry on—I know that you are

in the middle of that point—but I ask you to wrap up quickly.

Micheleine Kane: I am just making the point that the funding and the models that they are talking about should be based on what kinship carers, not the people with the data and analysis, say that they want.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you.

Alison Gillies, you wanted to comment on that point. I ask you to be brief. If you have any further points, you can make them in writing.

Alison Gillies: I was going to say that we did not address Pam Duncan-Glancy's point about more affluent kinship carers.

The Deputy Convener: I was going to comment on that at the very end. We were just finishing off on Miles Briggs's question.

Is that everything, Miles?

Miles Briggs: Yes, thank you.

The Deputy Convener: I apologise that we did not follow up on a couple of points from my colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy's questions regarding involvement in the national allowance discussions and which agency got the contract. If the witnesses could follow up in writing on those points, that would be great.

I apologise that we have run short on time. It has been a really interesting and informative session. I thank all our witnesses very much. I know that the issue is extremely emotive and important, so they should be assured that their responses and testimonies will help to inform our work on the matter.

That concludes the public part of the meeting. At next week's meeting, we will take evidence from a range of organisations that support women and girls who have experienced violence and we will consider where the focus for the prevention of violence should be.

We now move into private to consider our remaining agenda items. Members who online should leave this meeting and join via the link in their calendars.

11:25

Meeting continued in private until 11:38.

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