



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 18 September 2025

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Thursday 18 September 2025

CONTENTS

	Col.
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	1
SUBORDINATE LEGISLATION.....	2
Winter Heating Assistance (Pension Age) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2025 [Draft]	2
Social Security (Cross-border Provision, Case Transfer and Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2025 [Draft].....	8
PRE-BUDGET SCRUTINY 2025-26	13

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE
23rd Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

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

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind)
Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)
*Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
*Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab)
*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Fiona Collie (Carers Scotland)
Leah Duncan-Karrim (One Parent Families Scotland)
Allan Faulds (Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland)
Shirley-Anne Somerville (Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice)
Adam Stachura (Age Scotland)
David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Diane Barr

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 18 September 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Deputy Convener (Bob Doris): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 23rd meeting in 2025 of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. We have received apologies from our convener Collette Stevenson and from Michael Marra, and I welcome to the meeting David Torrance, who is substituting for Collette Stevenson. Thank you for coming along, David. I also note that Jeremy Balfour and Carol Mochan are online to contribute to today's meeting.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on taking business in private. Does the committee agree to take items 7 and 8 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Subordinate Legislation

Winter Heating Assistance (Pension Age) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2025 [Draft]

09:00

The Deputy Convener: Agenda item 2 is consideration of a Scottish statutory instrument. As the instrument is subject to the affirmative procedure, the Parliament must approve it before it comes into force.

I welcome to the meeting the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice—good morning, cabinet secretary—and the following Scottish Government officials: Daniel Blaikie, who is a solicitor; Owen Allen, who is the winter benefits and Scottish welfare fund team leader; and Pamela Forsyth, who is the service manager of the carers support payment and common components branch. Thank you all for joining us today.

Following the evidence session, the committee will be invited under an upcoming agenda item to consider a motion to approve the instrument. I remind everyone that the Scottish Government officials can speak under this item, but not in the debate that will follow under the next agenda item.

I invite the cabinet secretary to make a short opening statement.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Thank you, convener, and good morning.

The provisions that are laid out in the regulations will ensure that vital support is available to eligible pensioners with their fuel bills this winter. From this winter onwards, all pensioner households will typically receive £203.40 or £305.10, depending on their age, with the vast majority of people receiving the payment automatically.

We are in discussion with the United Kingdom Government to extend the proposed arrangements in England and Wales to recover payments from those pensioners with an individual income of more than £35,000 through the tax system. The tax charge will be brought forward through separate UK Government legislation, and it is our intention that the payment will be recovered automatically and that pensioners will not need to register with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs for that or to take any further action.

The UK Government has set the income threshold at £35,000, which is broadly in line with average earnings. For this winter, HMRC was not able to deliver a different income threshold in Scotland, but it might be possible to introduce a

different threshold in future years and we will consider the options that are available.

This will now be the largest single benefit to be delivered by Social Security Scotland since its inception, and it will require significant planning and resourcing. We are reliant on the Department for Work and Pensions to provide the data that is required for delivery; indeed, we are highly dependent on receiving high-quality data from the DWP and the Ministry of Defence in a timely manner to enable Social Security Scotland to carry out the required period of data assurance and to complete the household matching process to allow us to meet our target of beginning payments by the end of November. Although that will be a significant challenge for the agency, it has been working at pace to prepare for delivery and to ensure as smooth a transition as possible, and we are absolutely on track to start making those payments in November as planned.

As the committee will be aware, since the UK Government's restriction of winter fuel payments eligibility in 2024, the Scottish Government has consistently acknowledged that other people of pensionable age might also face financial difficulties and would benefit from that support. For that reason, following the UK Government's autumn budget in October 2024 and the confirmation of the associated budget in Scotland, we worked at pace to consider the options for delivering pension age winter heating payment in winter 2025-26, as well as the mitigations that might be available for winter 2024-25. Within the funding available, we decided that £100 payments for pensioners not in receipt of relevant benefits were affordable and would go some way towards supporting those households in meeting their heating bills through the winter.

On 6 June 2025, the Scottish Government laid regulations to introduce a universal pension-age winter heating payment from 2025-26 onwards.

Forgive me, convener, but I am choked with the cold. I am just going to have to stop and blow my nose a little bit.

The Deputy Convener: Of course. Take your time, cabinet secretary.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The joys of the start of the winter season.

On 9 June 2025, just three days after the regulations were laid, the UK Government announced its intention to expand the winter fuel payment in England and Wales to those with an income of £35,000 or less. Although that belated U-turn from the Prime Minister was welcome, it was disappointing that, yet again, Scottish ministers received no prior consultation on the UK Government's decision.

As a result of the UK Government's change in policy, the Scottish Fiscal Commission predicted that the associated block grant adjustment funding for the Scottish Government is expected to increase by £120 million. We considered carefully the importance of prioritising that additional funding for those who needed it most, and we decided to mirror the revised UK Government approach for our pension-age winter heating payment. Our approach will ensure that a higher level of support will be provided to those who are in most need, with more than 880,000 Scottish pensioners estimated to benefit from it.

The Scottish Fiscal Commission estimates that that will be a total investment of £187 million in 2025-26, providing a payment to around 1 million pensioners. It also estimates that around 16 per cent of the eligible pension-age population in Scotland will then have their payments recovered in 2025-26. That equates to around £30 million being recovered from 169,000 pensioners.

We recognise that households across the country feel acutely the twin pressures of rising energy costs and the cuts to social security budgets that have been made over many years by successive UK Governments. The regulations will provide important support to households, but it is not the only support that is available. There is also our winter heating payment and the child winter heating payment. Those benefits are available only in Scotland and provide reliable support to people who have an identified need for additional heat over the winter months, including low-income households and families with disabled children and young people. We continue to prioritise support with energy costs for the most vulnerable households through access to long-term and sustainable measures in our energy efficiency programmes.

I am immensely grateful to the members of the Scottish Commission on Social Security who have given their time to engage constructively with officials on the initial draft regulations that we shared with them in April and for agreeing to scrutinise the regulations before they were laid and after they were laid in draft. Wherever possible, we aim to give SCOSS sufficient time for scrutiny ahead of laying regulations but, in these circumstances, that has not been possible. SCOSS has now responded to our referral of the new pension-age winter heating payment amendment regulations, stating that it has no further comments.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you for battling through that, cabinet secretary; it is appreciated. We move to questions from members.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife (Con): Good morning, cabinet secretary. In your opening statement, you talked about the

negotiations that are taking place between you and the UK Government. Will you update the committee on the progress of the negotiations with the UK Government to recoup funds through the tax system? How will that work in practice for Social Security Scotland, and how will it be accounted for in the Scottish budget?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The discussions with the UK Government are on-going, and I will update the committee once a final agreement has been reached with the Treasury. In essence, when it comes to recouping the funds, it is more about what happens with the block grant and the Scottish Government than with the agency. The agency will continue to deliver the benefit as planned.

Scottish Government officials continue to engage with their Treasury counterparts to develop the plan with a view to minimising the additional complexity and to looking at the operation of the fiscal framework. This is a new type of discussion that has not been entered into previously, but it is continuing at this point. As I say, once we have a conclusion, we will update the committee on the decisions that have been taken.

The Deputy Convener: The Scottish Government has ultimately mirrored the UK policy—albeit perhaps reluctantly—in moving from universal provision to means testing. I acknowledge that there are no up-front barriers to people receiving the income, which is important. What are the advantages of devolving winter fuel payments—noting that we are mirroring what is happening elsewhere in the UK?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Let us consider winter payments in the round. In my introductory remarks, I mentioned in passing some of the differences that we have made. For example, the child winter heating payment does not exist in the rest of the UK. Also, our winter heating payment for low-income people is a guaranteed income, which is very different from what happens in the DWP system.

We have used the devolution of winter heating payments in the round to make different choices in those aspects. It is challenging if, while we attempt to move ahead with our policies, there is a handbrake turn from the UK Government on its policies, particularly if there are repercussions—as has been the case with some of the winter heating payments—for the Scottish Government's in-year budget and not just for the future. That makes things challenging, and we have to bear that in mind as we make our decisions.

I hope that that gives a demonstration of the difference that we can make with devolved social security when it comes to the winter payments. It

is still important to use those powers responsibly within our fixed budget and to make choices that we think will deliver support to pensioners, who are most likely to be struggling.

The Deputy Convener: Jeremy Balfour joins us online.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind): Good morning, cabinet secretary, and thank you for coming along. Regarding the regulations that would allow someone to opt out of receiving the payment and then opt back in again for the same year's payment, how did you balance the administration costs of those provisions against the money that could potentially be saved through opt-outs?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Mr Balfour raises an important point. Regarding the design of the benefit, it is important to consider the cost of the benefit not just in terms of what goes to individuals but in administering it—and, indeed, the complexity of doing so. As we looked to design the benefit, we were mindful of the costs of administration.

We anticipate that the number of opt-outs will be relatively small. That means that the administrative cost of enabling people to opt out, if they choose to do so, and to opt back in again within the same year will be minimal in comparison with the overall value of the benefit. In essence, the system has been designed so that the opt-out and opt-in process is streamlined and is capable of being delivered within the existing structures. On that basis, the administration costs of the provisions are deemed to be proportionate, and the flexibility ensures that no eligible person is excluded from support should they later decide that they need it.

Mr Balfour raises an important test, and I am satisfied that we considered the cost of administration and the overall complexity of the benefit as the process was designed.

Jeremy Balfour: Thank you, cabinet secretary. That is helpful.

On a practical level, I think that you said in your opening statement that, if all the information is provided to Social Security Scotland on time, you hope to start making payments towards the end of November. In previous years, it was quite late into the next year before all the payments were made. What, in Social Security Scotland's thinking, would be the timescale for the payments to be made? Would they start in November, and when would they finish, subject to all the information being provided to you?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That is subject to what we get from the DWP—being given that information is what will allow us to function. With the caveat that we are reliant on that data and its

quality, we expect to begin the payments by the end of November, as we have planned to do.

09:15

The ambition is to have paid the majority of clients by the end of December this year. That reflects the DWP's payments process, which is similar. We are ready to begin the process for those payments at the end of November, and the agency stands ready to receive the data from the DWP to allow data matching to continue. However, it is dependent on the quality of that data.

It is important to recognise that, although this is the first time that we have had the transfer of this data from the DWP to Social Security Scotland, there have been other data transfers in the past. Lessons learned exercises have been undertaken following those processes, because, sometimes, there has been a challenge in relation to the quality of data from the DWP, leading to further work and further manual intervention being required by Social Security Scotland. I hope that the committee is reassured that, following the experience of previous years, those lessons learned exercises have put in place an even better and more robust process for the DWP to be able to hand over high-quality data to the agency this year, to allow it to get on with its work.

The Deputy Convener: There are no further questions, so we move to agenda item 3, which is the formal consideration of motion S6M-17854.

Motion moved,

That the Social Justice and Social Security Committee recommends that the Winter Heating Assistance (Pension Age) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.—[*Shirley-Anne Somerville*]

The Deputy Convener: Since no member wishes to contribute, cabinet secretary, do you wish to sum up in relation to this non-existent debate?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I have nothing to add, convener.

The Deputy Convener: I am just making sure that we tick all the boxes.

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Convener: The committee will report on the outcome of the instrument in due course. Are members content to delegate responsibility to me or to our convener, should she return, to publish a short factual report to the Parliament on this affirmative instrument?

Members indicated agreement.

The Deputy Convener: I thank the cabinet secretary and her officials for coming this morning.

We will have a brief suspension to allow for a change of officials.

09:18

Meeting suspended.

09:19

On resuming—

Social Security (Cross-border Provision, Case Transfer and Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2025 [Draft]

The Deputy Convener: Item 4 is consideration of another SSI. The instrument is subject to the affirmative procedure, which means that the Parliament must approve it before it comes into force.

I welcome back to the meeting the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and welcome the following Scottish Government officials: Thomas Nicol, who is a lawyer; and Simon Coote, who is head of the cross-cutting policy unit. Thank you for joining us.

Following this evidence session, the committee will be invited under an upcoming agenda item to consider a motion to approve the instrument. I remind everyone that the Scottish Government officials can speak under this item, but not in the debate that will follow.

I invite the cabinet secretary to make a short opening statement.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Thank you, convener. I welcome the opportunity to assist the committee in its consideration of the regulations. A key principle in the cross-border regulations is to ensure that, when case transfer is complete, individuals who move from the rest of the UK to Scotland, while in receipt of an equivalent reserved benefit, are able to do so without a gap in their entitlement.

Our intention had been for the cross-border process to mirror case transfer, so that awards could be transferred automatically from the DWP to Social Security Scotland, without the need for the client to submit a new application. Despite our best efforts, that has not proved to be possible, because the DWP was unable to commit to the required data-sharing arrangements. That means that individuals who move to Scotland will be required to submit a new application for Scottish benefits. That will ensure that we have the most up-to-date information when deciding on an award and minimise the need for the client to undergo an unscheduled review soon after the decision. It also future proofs our approach if there is further

divergence between our benefits and the UK equivalents.

Our focus has been on making that application journey as easy as possible for the estimated 300 people per month that we expect to apply across all benefits. The DWP will continue to pay clients for 13 weeks after they move to Scotland, and those clients can apply for the equivalent Scottish benefit while they are still in receipt of their DWP benefit.

The regulations make specific amendments to support carer support payment by allowing entitlement to start on a future date if the client is not eligible on the date that they apply on—something that is not currently possible. For adults receiving disability living allowance, we have developed a process to enable them to request an award of Scottish adult DLA, which, otherwise, is a closed benefit with no new applications possible. Crucially, the regulations provide for backdating of an award of Scottish benefits to the date on which the DWP award ends, as long as the client applies in the defined timeframe. We can also apply that backdating to any awards that were missed in the case transfer process or to awards made retrospectively. That design greatly reduces the possibility of gaps in entitlement and minimises the likelihood of individuals losing out on support that they are entitled to.

For carer support payment, the regulations also extend provision for temporary stop in entitlement where the payment has ended because the qualifying benefit of the person who is being cared for stopped as a result of that person moving to Scotland from the rest of the UK. That ensures that carer support payment can be reinstated more quickly and without the need for an application.

Alongside these regulations, we have designed processes to ensure that cross-border applications are identified quickly and can be prioritised. The regulations also include amendments to child disability payment, adult disability payment, pension age disability payment, Scottish adult DLA and Scottish child payment, to ensure that, when a person has continually disengaged with requests for information relating to an on-going award and is found to be no longer entitled to assistance following a period of suspension, the award can be ended from the date on which the award was suspended.

We have also taken this opportunity to make some minor, technical changes to residence and presence conditions, including for the best start grant and best start foods regulations; to update and add references to international agreements; and to remove now-redundant provisions relating to the initial period of applications for disability benefits within the regulations.

Subject to parliamentary approval, the changes will commence from 6 November 2025; for PADP and Scottish adult DLA, they will commence from 23 February 2026.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Good morning. In its reply to SCOSS, the Scottish Government said that it would prefer the DWP and Social Security Scotland to share data about clients moving between Scotland and the rest of the UK. Why has that not been possible and what will the impact of that be on disabled people and carers?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: This is a disappointing part of the regulations that I am presenting today. The priority for the Scottish Government was to make the journey for a client as smooth as possible. From our discussions with constituents, we all know that it is a complex system and that people might be unaware that, for example, they might have to move to a different benefit when they move from England to Scotland or vice versa. We had hoped to make the process easy for clients, as we did during case transfer. Unfortunately, the DWP has chosen not to take that route. If we cannot get the data from the DWP, we cannot have that kind of process. That is disappointing, because it makes the journey more difficult for the client. As I said in my opening remarks, we have endeavoured to put processes in place, which we would like to introduce if the regulations are passed, to support clients through the process as best we can and ensure that cases are prioritised within the agency. The situation is far from ideal, but, given that that is our starting point, we have done what we can to make the process smoother.

Elena Whitham: Will you continue to press for change in a continued quest for the data transfer to happen automatically, or will this be a fait accompli, if we approve the regulations?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: This is certainly the process that will be in place. With every benefit, we have a system of support to ensure that we analyse what happens in real time with real people as they go through the process, and that will be an important part of how we can evaluate how big any challenges for individuals are. If there is evidence of issues, we will not be talking theoretically but will be talking about the actual impact as people have gone through the process, so we would certainly go back to the DWP with that evidence, because this is not the position that I want to be in. However, at this point, the DWP's position is the DWP's position, so we have to get on with making the best that we can of the situation. I can reassure the committee that we have the process in place to see what is happening on the ground with clients as they go through the process.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Good morning. You touched on this in your opening statement, cabinet secretary. Given that the DWP is not sharing data, what will adults who are in receipt of DLA who move to Scotland need to do to ensure that they get Scottish adult DLA?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Again, this is a more complicated situation than we would have hoped for, but, nonetheless, it is about looking at how can we support people during that process. Although new applications are not available for Scottish adult DLA, it is important that there is an avenue for people in the rest of the UK, should they move up to Scotland. With regard to when we need further information, the Scottish adult DLA cross-border form has been developed. That will be available to people with an on-going DLA award who have moved to Scotland. In essence, that will be similar to the part 2 form that is used for other disability benefits, so that clients can provide the further information that is required about their conditions and how they affect them.

Under the arrangements, individuals who have moved to Scotland while receiving a DWP benefit will be signposted by the DWP to contact Social Security Scotland, and to ensure that people understand the process of accessing Scottish adult DLA, clear information will be provided through the usual channels. Again, the process is not ideal, but we have endeavoured to make it as simple as we can for the individuals concerned.

09:30

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Good morning, cabinet secretary. Sticking with the data issue, I note that the SCOSS report referred to on-going efforts to agree data sharing with the DWP in cases of terminal illness. Can you update the committee on how those discussions are going?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Despite best efforts, we have not been able to agree a cross-border process on terminal illness cases, which is, I think, particularly disappointing. We note that the commission welcomed the Scottish Government's on-going attempts to agree a data-sharing option with the DWP for terminally ill clients. We would all hope that it is recognised that those clients are in some of the most vulnerable situations, and it would be far from ideal if we put an additional barrier, stress or process in place for those individuals and families. We will absolutely continue our efforts to reduce the burden that we are placing on those families wherever we possibly can.

The DWP has agreed to confirm with Social Security Scotland when a client is registered with it as eligible for special rules for terminal illness, and

that will allow Social Security Scotland to confirm that status without needing to seek confirmation from the client. However, the process can be triggered only when a client applies for the special rules for terminal illness, and we have confirmed that it is a cross-border application.

Again, it is not an ideal position that we have been placed in, but we are continuing to work through the data-sharing options with the DWP, particularly for those vulnerable clients.

Marie McNair: It is just very unfortunate for those people, given that time is not on their side.

The Deputy Convener: As there are no other questions, we move to item 5, which is formal consideration of motion S6M-18126, on approval of the regulations. I invite the cabinet secretary to speak to the motion, if she wishes, and to move it.

Motion moved,

That the Social Justice and Social Security Committee recommends that the Social Security (Cross-border Provision, Case Transfer and Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.—[*Shirley-Anne Somerville*]

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary, and I hope that your autumn cold—[*Interruption.*] Oh right—thank you. The clerk has just told me that if I do not say this bitty, we cannot report on the instrument in the normal way. Are members content to delegate responsibility to me to publish a short factual report to the Parliament on the affirmative instrument?

Members indicated agreement.

The Deputy Convener: That being the case, I can now thank the cabinet secretary for battling through the evidence sessions, and I thank her officials in both sessions, too.

I suspend the meeting to allow for a change of witnesses as we move to item 6.

09:33

Meeting suspended.

09:47

On resuming—

Pre-budget Scrutiny 2025-26

The Deputy Convener: Welcome back. We now move to agenda item 6, which is a pre-budget scrutiny evidence session.

I welcome to the meeting Leah Duncan-Karrim, who is the policy and influencing lead at One Parent Families Scotland, and Adam Stachura, who is the associate director of policy, communications and external affairs at Age Scotland.

We hope to be joined online by Fiona Collie, who is the head of public affairs and communications at Carers Scotland, and Allan Faulds, who is the senior policy officer at the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland—known as the ALLIANCE. There are some technical difficulties, but we hope that they will join us during the course of this morning's meeting.

Jeremy Balfour will ask the first questions.

Jeremy Balfour: The Scottish Government is spending £1.4 billion more on social security than it received in the block grant adjustment. If that additional spending affects the group that you represent, how does it do so?

Leah Duncan-Karrim (One Parent Families Scotland): I will speak about the effect that it has had on children and young people growing up in families that are in receipt of additional spending in Scotland. In recent years, a number of payments, such as the Scottish child payment, have had substantial impacts on families, as will the forthcoming mitigation of the two-child limit.

Families tell us that they can now afford things that are essential to their households, such as the shopping that they need, as they have more choice about what they buy. They are also able to afford the heating bills and can ensure that their children have opportunities to do things such as extracurricular activities, because their budget allows that little bit of extra space.

The impact on the quality of life of families who were living in poverty in Scotland and who are now not living in poverty as a result of those payments is immeasurable.

Adam Stachura (Age Scotland): That spending relates to a lot of things that older people—including people who are over the age of 50 and receive the state pension—will need. With regard to Mr Balfour's question, spending more on the social security system has demonstrated what Scotland can do differently from the rest of the UK—that is how the system is set up. It is likely that, at some point, we will be spending more than

the UK Government had set out to spend. The ability to do that was critical to devolution—first with regard to the Scotland Act 1998 and subsequently to the powers that the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government wanted to gain.

With regard to either extra spend or critical spend, it is important to recall what happened last winter with the removal of the winter fuel payment, the inability to deliver a pension-age winter heating payment, and the negative impact that that had on the lives of low and modest-income pensioners in Scotland. Before then, almost four in 10 pensioners were living in fuel poverty—the biggest group in Scotland that is affected by fuel poverty is older people, but there is hardly mention of that fact in fuel poverty strategies or actions by the Scottish Government. That proportion skyrocketed last winter. Resuming that payment, or returning money to people to help support them through the winter, will make a big difference, but the best that it might do is bring us back to the level of fuel poverty that we had before. There are, therefore, things that we might want to do more of to help address those issues.

Jeremy Balfour: I do not know whether Allan Faulds has heard the question. I will go on, and maybe he can come in in a moment.

The Deputy Convener: Our witnesses who are online have had some technical difficulties, but I have just been told that Allan Faulds has joined us.

Jeremy Balfour: Okay. I would like to develop this issue with all three witnesses. Last week, I asked witnesses whether our social security spend should be more targeted towards those in need instead of being universal. We have seen today that there has been overspend in some benefits. Would it be better to focus the benefits on those who are in most need and give less to those who perhaps do not need it as much, or is the universalist methodology that the Government has followed the right one?

The Deputy Convener: Who is that question for, Jeremy?

Jeremy Balfour: Maybe we should start with Adam, since he was looking bemused.

Adam Stachura: I will avoid looking at you now, in case you ask me further questions.

The universality element is important. The Scottish Government has adopted that as its position. We also know that we can miss a huge number of people who need something by drawing sometimes quite draconian lines where we think lines are necessary. I go back to the example of the pension-age winter heating payment or the former winter fuel payment. At one time, the only

criterion for receiving those was going to be the receipt of pension credit, but half a million pensioners in Scotland have incomes that are too low to pay income tax. That means that 350,000 pensioners are not entitled to pension credit although they demonstrably have very low incomes.

We do not have the right mechanisms to work out who is the most needy. Over the past year or so, I have found it very hard to get any kind of assessment from politicians, the Government or others about where the line of need is.

Everyone's circumstances are different. Income and wealth can look very different to different people, and needs can be more severe than they appear to be. I do not think that we necessarily have sophisticated means for determining who is and is not needy.

I think that lots of people, irrespective of their income or wealth—which might not be liquid—will be in need of social security support, and it is important that we do not just find lines to draw that are so low that very few people get it. I do not think that we have cracked that issue yet; I do not think that anybody has worked out where the line of need is.

Jeremy Balfour: Does anyone else want to come in on that point?

Leah Duncan-Karrim: I think that there is a place for both approaches. For example, we know that the Scottish child payment is making a huge difference to lots of different family types. However, we are five years away from the 2030 statutory child poverty targets, and at the moment it does not look like we are on track to meet them.

When we look at targeted interventions in social security, we do not find many. Next year, we will be looking at the mitigation of the two-child limit, which is for larger families. However, we also know that child poverty rates are significantly higher among single-parent families, families with a child under the age of one and families with a disabled child.

There is more that can be done in relation to targeted spend for groups that specifically need it. For example, the child poverty rate for single-parent families is 36 per cent, compared to 23 per cent for all families with children. There is a distinction to be made between where universal provision has an impact and where targeted support might be needed.

Jeremy Balfour: I have a final question. In the next few months, the winter heating payment and the carers additional person payment will be introduced, and there is the possibility of the two-child limit on payments being mitigated. Given the financial context that we are in, do any of you have

a view on the priorities for those particular payments? Are there other priorities that could or should be met as well?

The Deputy Convener: I will bring in Allan Faulds, as he has not had the opportunity to put anything on the record.

Allan Faulds (Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland): Good morning, folks. In the short term, we would agree with that prioritisation of the things that are coming up. In particular, we welcome the new carers additional person payment. Although that will be a very small additional sum, it is still an additional bit of money for people who are caring for multiple people, which we strongly welcome. Given that the value of that will be quite small in relation to the Scottish Government's budget but it will be an improvement to people's lives, it is a good thing to take forward without having too much of an impact on other stuff.

We also welcome the two-child limit mitigation payment coming in, although it remains the case that the UK Government should ideally abolish that at the source. That is a restriction that should never have been introduced in the first place. Perhaps there will be something about that in the UK budget, which we would certainly welcome.

It is good to see the winter heating payment being brought forward. With regard to the previous point, the universality approach is quite positive, because there was a lot of confusion last winter. The confusion was a huge problem—people had the payment suddenly taken away and were told a few weeks later that they would get it again but only in the following year. That kind of uncertainty in relation to the payments that people are able to get has not been particularly helpful.

On things that could be prioritised in the near future, we would refer to some of the recommendations that were in the "Independent Review of Adult Disability Payment", particularly the recommendation to effectively abolish the 50 per cent and 20m rules. We have long called for those rules to be abolished; they are arbitrary and unfair, and they do not represent the realities of the conditions that people live with. We particularly emphasise that the 20m rule fails to take account of things such as pain and exhaustion, which obviously have a significant impact on how people are able to get about. We are glad that the independent review picked that up. There would be resource implications to removing those rules—that is kind of the point, because we would like more people to be able to access those payments.

Another priority would be to increase the earnings limit for the carer support payment. The Scottish Government had intended to do that once it got to the point of having done all the case

transfers. The UK Government beat it to the punch by increasing the limit itself, which had financial flow-through that enabled the Scottish Government to replicate that decision. However, the Scottish Government should not consider that job to be done. If the policy intention was to put in place a more generous earnings threshold for the carer support payment than existed at the UK level, that should be followed through, and the earnings threshold in Scotland should be increased again.

Considering that the value of the carer support payment in Scotland, plus the supplement is about £5,000 and the earnings threshold is about £10,000, there is a gap for incomes between £10,000 and £15,000 in which people taking on additional hours, even if they want to do that, will end up losing money. We suggest that bringing the earnings limit closer to the £15,000 point would make more sense in making sure that the payment is effective and goes to the people who need it.

Jeremy Balfour: I am done with my questions, deputy convener. I should have declared that I am on ADP at the higher rate.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you, Mr Balfour. We are about to move on, but if either Leah Duncan-Karrim or Adam Stachura would like to make a short, pithy comment on the question, please come in—I apologise that we are a bit short of time.

Leah Duncan-Karrim: The two-child limit mitigation is fundamentally an issue of rights. Although we recognise that the issue originates from UK Government policy, this Parliament unanimously passed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 and, within that, children have a specific right to social security. Fundamentally, the mitigation is about ensuring that all children will be able to access that right, regardless of their family size.

The Deputy Convener: Your point is that that is the correct priority to pursue.

Leah Duncan-Karrim: Yes.

10:00

Adam Stachura: The priorities are set and I would not change anything. If anything, we would like there to be more social security for people in areas where we think there is an injustice or an imbalance in the benefits that they receive. For instance, we think that a mobility component should be considered for PADP. It may not need to be exactly the same as someone would get under ADP or what they would have received from the personal independence payment, but the idea

of a benefit award being based on when someone has become disabled is essentially ageist, and the idea that receiving a state pension mitigates someone's disability is unfair.

We could be doing a lot more with the winter heating payment for people who live in cold parts of Scotland. The universality of the payment is welcome, but we are missing people on extremely low incomes living in the coldest parts of the country who previously would have received a lot more social security and benefit payments on average. I think that there are quite a lot of things that are missing for that group of people, as well as older carers. I do not necessarily come to the committee with helpful suggestions about what we might prioritise or cut, but I would say that perhaps we are not doing enough.

The Deputy Convener: The clarity is helpful, although it may not be helpful with balancing the budget. Your point is that there should be additional priorities, rather than different priorities, which feeds in nicely to our next theme.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I have been asked to talk a wee bit about balancing the budget. The panel might know that, in previous evidence sessions, we heard that the budget will be under severe pressure, so it is important that we look at that.

The Scottish Government has set out plans to meet the expected shortfall between funding and spending across all public services. How can we ensure that any budget cuts, made in part to afford social security spending, do not affect the very people that social security spending is intended to help across the portfolio?

Adam Stachura: That is a difficult question. There are different responsibilities for a lot of the spending areas across Scotland. For instance, integration joint boards across the country are reducing spending significantly, which is detrimental to the lives of people who are disabled, older people or those living with dementia, because they do not have the same access to services that they had previously. They are likely to be in receipt of social security, but their health outcomes could become poorer, so they might become a bigger strain or burden on the NHS. Social care spend is not keeping up with anything near the amount that we need it to, so the burden will shift.

Decisions are made by local authorities, IJBs, health and social care partnerships and others that will have a big impact on people's lives. I go back to the point that, whether it is closing community centres, day care centres or restricting access to the eligibility criteria for receiving social care packages, the decision-making process is hidden and there is limited accountability or responsibility.

It is hard to work out how things have happened or who is responsible, so it is difficult for the public to scrutinise those decisions. Although the Scottish Government might have measures and levers at its disposal, other organisations in Scottish public life and public services make decisions that could run counter to its aspirations and there are no mechanisms to challenge or understand those decisions. Those decisions create other issues that bodies, such as those in the health system, then have to deal with.

The Deputy Convener: I will bring in Fiona Collie, who has just managed to get online. I am not sure whether you heard the question. In essence, as we try to meet the shortfall in the block grant in Scotland's social security investment, that could impact other services elsewhere and it could lead to cuts. It could also have a detrimental impact on the groups of people that we are trying to help with additional cash payments. Do you have any reflections on that, Fiona?

Fiona Collie (Carers Scotland): I will add to what Adam Stachura said. It is a challenge that different parts of the system are doing different things that can cause harm to individuals and create harm elsewhere.

We have increasingly found that caring is a social determinant of health, but so much of that is linked to poverty. We also know from the Scottish Fiscal Commission that the level of poor health among carers at the peak age of caring is increasing at a rate that will cause a problem with providing individuals with social care and unpaid care in the future. The Scottish Government and its partners are keen to look at investment, including social security, to develop care in a cohesive way that looks at those interdependencies and outcomes across all policy areas.

Carers Scotland and the other organisations that are here today are part of a Scotland that cares and talks about developing a national outcome on care and caring. That would look at where and how we invest those funds across the system so that we have fewer of the unintended consequences that Adam Stachura mentioned—it would be optimistic to say that we would not have any of those. A national outcome might not be a panacea, but it could look at a co-ordinated way of making public policy and at how we invest in individual areas and those interdependencies.

Allan Faulds: There is a point here that our politics have come back to again and again since 2010—when cuts are made to one area, they have knock-on effects in other areas. The previous UK Government's welfare reforms just made people's health worse, did not lead to savings and meant that people became more reliant on the NHS and

other services. In this scenario, we are flipping it about and investing in social security, but do we then reduce spending on other public services and will that impact upon people's rights and their lives?

I will be slightly cheeky and partly reject the premise of the question. We acknowledge that there is a budget and that it needs to be balanced. We recognise that there are financial difficulties at the moment, but if the Government fully recognised that, perhaps it should not do things like straitjacketing itself with a commitment to a tax strategy not to touch income tax for the rest of the parliamentary session. Perhaps it should finally make some serious progress with the reform of local taxation, which is long overdue. I always make the point that I was not even a one year old when council tax valuations were made. If the Government were to address the long-standing problems with the tax system and increase the amount of revenue and resources that are available, it would not necessarily need to make as many decisions on whether to cut X in order to invest in Y.

If it is essentially a choice between making cuts and modest tax changes, we suggest that the Government's priority should be making tax changes to meet the obligation to deploy maximum available resource and to deliver on human rights, rather than it saying that the current budget needs to be kept where it is and that cuts should be made accordingly.

The Deputy Convener: Carol, do you want to come back in on any of that?

Carol Mochan: I will, because my next question links to what Allan Faulds was saying. Is there a way in which we could consider human rights in how we balance the budget? Part of what we are scrutinising today is how to balance the budget, and Allan has made some interesting points in that regard. Does anyone else want to comment on the point about how we can use human rights to help us to achieve that?

The Deputy Convener: Leah Duncan-Karrim mentioned that in an earlier answer. Do you want to expand on that, Leah?

Leah Duncan-Karrim: Absolutely. Even before the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024, the Scottish Government was under international legal obligations not to allow rights to regress in Scotland, and it has to prove every year how it will further that objective. Children's rights have to be a key consideration in the budget and that is what children's rights and wellbeing impact assessments are for, particularly at a time when we are looking at potential financial changes. Those assessments are there as an indicator and

they have to be done meaningfully, which means that ensuring that the participation of children and young people is at the centre of any decisions that are taken. The assessments should be done in advance, meaningfully understood and no decision should be taken until then.

As an aside—this is an important point—as an organisation that represents single-parent families, we know that 92 per cent of single parents are women and women's rights budgeting goes alongside what we have been talking about. If we get budgeting right for women, we also get it right for their children.

The Deputy Convener: As no other witnesses want to come in, Carol do you want to add anything before we move on?

Carol Mochan: No. That was very helpful. Thank you.

Marie McNair: Fiona Collie, there is more support for carers in Scotland than there is in any other part of the UK. How impactful are the changes to the carers allowance supplement, the changes for students, the young carers grant and the plans on caring for more than one person, and what more can be done?

Fiona Collie: The changes to support for carers are really welcome—particularly those that extend eligibility and add value. We have seen improvements, but some of those are softer improvements. The level of carers allowance supplement, for example, has enabled carers to deal with additional costs at certain points. However, the gap between the allowance and the additional costs is becoming smaller as a result of the increased cost of living, and I note that the carers support payment remains one of the lowest benefits—it is very, very low.

We can beat around the bush and say that Scotland and Social Security Scotland are doing well. Yes, we are doing better, but even with the improvements, including increased eligibility and the improvements that are coming down the line for those who care for more than one person, the reality is that more than a quarter of carers are living in poverty. Furthermore, they are 56 per cent more likely to be living in poverty than non-carers. For those who are also on means-tested benefits such as universal credit, the poverty rate is more than 60 per cent. Therefore, these are welcome developments, as are the changes that are coming in this parliamentary term, but the value remains too low, and I do not think that any of us could say that the value of carers support payment in any way enables carers to offset the costs of or their contribution to social care in Scotland.

Marie McNair: Thanks, Fiona. Do not get me started on the lack of reform to carers allowance since it was first introduced to the UK in 1975.

Your submission mentioned the overlapping benefits rule, which is a real issue. Do you have any concerns that trying to fix that might have an impact on pension credit entitlement, which is means tested?

Fiona Collie: Any attempt to fix the overlapping benefits rule would need to involve both Governments and co-operation. We have seen what has happened over the years when the two Governments do not work together in relation to social security, which creates additional complexity and anxiety for individuals. Fixing that issue will involve both Governments, because, ultimately, we want to make social security—whether it is in the reserved or the devolved system—as easy as possible for individuals to claim.

There are opportunities in the system in Scotland to look at how we support older carers, for example, who lose their carers support payment. We get huge amounts of correspondence from individuals who express a great deal of anger about that, given that their caring role continues. Are there opportunities to look at something such as a recognition payment for older carers? Previously, both Governments worked together to offset carers allowance supplement so that it cannot be taken off reserved or devolved benefits. There are opportunities, but they would require both Governments to work together.

Marie McNair: That is really helpful. In the interest's of time, I hand back to the convener.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you. I call Elena Whitham.

Elena Whitham: Leah Duncan-Karrim, how can we reduce the need for child payments? It seems that the only way that we could do that is by increasing parents' employability options. How tricky is that?

The committee has previously done an inquiry into employability for parents across Scotland, and the picture is very patchy. How do we ensure that support is in place to reduce demand? How do we ensure that parents do not face a cliff edge when they move into work, particularly when they lose Scottish child payment eligibility?

10:15

Leah Duncan-Karrim: In an ideal Scotland, it would be possible for all parents to access employment if they want it. Unfortunately, a number of systemic barriers make that quite challenging.

Sixty-six per cent of single parents are in some form of employment, whether that is full time or part time. It can be very challenging. For example,

if you are a single parent and want to work full time, you might have to cover full-time childcare costs, which can be the equivalent of the best part of your wage. That can make it very tricky to access full-time employment. Carers can also find it difficult to work in long-term, sustainable and flexible employment. For example, they might have a six or seven-year-old who has additional needs and they might need to go into school a couple of times a week to support them. Flexible employment is really key. It is about ensuring that employment is tailored to parents' needs, and understanding and recognising that caring is a legitimate need in our society.

For some parents, work is just not appropriate. There will always be parents in situations in which it is just not possible to work, part time or full time, because they have a child with complex needs. Social security is in place and needs to function effectively as a mechanism for families who need it, whether it is a bit of additional support on top of employment or their primary income. Unfortunately, it is not as straightforward as saying that parents who want to work are able to.

Elena Whitham: It helps to have on record the structural barriers that are in place across the country. That is why what is available in local areas is such a patchy picture. That gets to the heart of what Adam Stachura and others have said about the decisions on where to prioritise the spend. Do you look at the Scottish child payment as scaffolding infrastructure that is in place to help families at any point? Should we not look at that? How do we reduce spend in that area?

Leah Duncan-Karrim: Originally, the Scottish child payment was introduced in recognition that the child element of universal credit was insufficient for families and their needs. There needs to be a broader conversation on cross-Government collaboration on the issue, but the Scottish child payment is a scaffolding for families and is essential. When it came in, families told us that it allowed them a bit of extra wiggle room in a budget; now, in some cases, they tell us that they could not afford their weekly shop without it.

As we look towards the next election, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has done modelling that looks at the Scottish child payment and whether a targeted additional element would be possible for families—particularly single-parent families, families with a baby under the age of one and families with a disabled child—who potentially face additional barriers to things such as employment. It is not always as simple as parents saying that they want to increase their hours at work, because that is not always possible.

Elena Whitham: I wonder whether Fiona Collie has anything to add from a carer's perspective.

Leah, you touched on carers already, but I want to hear Carers Scotland's perspective.

Fiona Collie: I echo absolutely everything that has been said. Parent carers with a disabled child and carers who are responsible for a child under 18 face greater poverty. Many of them even miss out on the support of the Scottish child payment.

A bigger conversation is to be had about what support employers should and could provide. The Government's investment in the carer positive scheme means that around half a million employees are being supported by participating employers more effectively, but that is only part of the picture. If you cannot get accessible childcare in your area, no matter what your employer does, it is very hard to balance work and care.

We need to do more with employers in that area, and more with public commissioning. When money is being invested from the Scottish budget, there should be an expectation that employers look carefully at how they support, from our perspective, carers in employment, but also at how they provide family-friendly, flexible working more widely that enables people to balance work and their caring responsibilities, whether that is for children with disabilities, for children without disabilities or for adults.

Alexander Stewart: We have heard from you in your submissions, and from previous witnesses, that organisations would like to see eligibility criteria extended to cover more people, and potentially an increase in some benefits, which would help individuals in your sectors or the areas that you deal with.

Those matters are relevant, and there is no question but that they need to be looked at. However, if you think that the eligibility criteria should be broadened and there should be further spend across the sector, how would you suggest that we could afford that additional spending on Scottish social security payments beyond what we already have in place?

This week, we have seen documentation on how the whole thing is blossoming and we are continuing to potentially move into overspend, if we have not already. If much more is required in the specific areas that your organisations are considering, how would it be possible to afford additional spend on current policies?

The Deputy Convener: Perhaps I can bring in Adam Stachura first, because he has rightly set out what the additional priorities should be. We may come to Allan Faulds after that, given that he made some suggestions earlier, if that is okay.

Alexander Stewart: I am content with that.

Adam Stachura: It is a very good question. Audit Scotland's "Adult Disability Payment" report,

which was published today, talks about the extension of the ADP by the end of the decade. I suppose, slightly counterintuitively, that I would not necessarily describe it as overspending—it is just spending based on what the criteria are.

Thinking about the social security spend in Scotland over time, there has been more of that as more benefits come to Scotland as part of the anticipated package, so the numbers go up. We can look at that as a bad thing, but it is what was expected.

A lot of the money for that is coming from the UK Government, and there are margins within each benefit, or in most of them, where Scotland has decided that it will do a little bit more by increasing the payment or the eligibility. That spend is there to meet the need, and the organisations that we represent, and the many more that will come to see the committee, and which have appeared before the committee over the years, see the need that exists in communities. People see where the gaps are and the injustices and challenges that people face, and advocate—rightly, I think—that we may not be doing enough.

On your point about where spend might be cut, I would never come to the committee with suggestions for that, but we might want to look at how we can spend money better in some places. It is not about just saying straight up, “We’ll stop doing this thing.” With regard to some Scottish Government priorities, whether it is public service reform or other areas, we might look at where we are not necessarily wasting money, but spending more than we need to. Where is spending unaccountable? Are there initiatives in which tens, if not hundreds, of millions of pounds have been invested that do not float, or do anything else, yet? How are we ensuring that the money that we are spending is having the right outcome?

I suggest that the social security budgets, along with the budgets for health and care, education and other areas, are absolutely necessary for citizens in Scotland, but we could maybe look at how the rest of the £60 billion is spent.

Rather than the hyperbole that we get sometimes—not necessarily from you, Mr Stewart—that says, “Look how much more we’re spending,” we should be saying that the spend is expected. Most of it is coming from elsewhere, but a good chunk is coming from Scotland to do more of what it wants for its intended outcomes.

Allan Faulds: As a starting point, I refer back to something that I said to the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee last week, during its pre-budget scrutiny: it sometimes feels as though the approach that we take to public spending across the UK is back to front. We often consider what levels of taxation we think are

acceptable, what levels of taxation we think we should have, and then, based on the money that that would raise, what services we can deliver.

Instead, we should consider the kind of society that we want to live in, the human rights obligations that we have and what we need to deliver to meet those obligations. Only then, once we know what kind of society we want to live in, should we talk about how we build a taxation and revenue-raising system that delivers on those obligations and principles.

As I mentioned earlier, perhaps we need to be open to making more changes to income tax if that is what is needed to raise additional revenues. I also do not think that we should underestimate the potential for additional revenues that could come from fixing local taxation and finding a long-overdue solution to that. If we had a stronger local tax system—there are various views on how to do that—and councils were less stretched and their services were being cut less, that might free up money at a national level that could then be invested in different areas.

I did not come in earlier on this point, but I suppose that it is relevant here—a human rights budgeting approach should absolutely be central. We should be thinking about what kind of society we want to live in. I emphasise that human rights budgeting is not a tool for deciding on cuts to essential public services, but there are ways in which it might identify things that do not have a particular human rights basis. If the Government is spending on something and it cannot see what human rights it is meaningfully contributing to realising, whether those are rights to education, health, social security, employment, participation in society, or any number of other rights, perhaps that thing is not a priority.

To refer to an example that I gave to the Finance and Public Administration Committee last year—I admit that this is more on the capital rather than the resource side of things—does road building have as much of a human rights bang for our buck as house building? We need to think about those issues and to ask how we can increase the revenues that we have to deliver on the society that we want to live in. As Adam Stachura said, there might be ways to spend the money that we already have more smartly to deliver on those rights.

Alexander Stewart: Following on from that, which areas of policy would the witnesses like to be prioritised for additional spending? Should those areas be higher priorities for public spending than areas such as health and social care, which Adam Stachura mentioned?

Fiona Collie: I echo everything that has been said. We need to think about things in a different

way, including how we measure outcomes. We are great—well, perhaps not great, but we are good—at data, but we are not very good at measuring outcomes across the piece. We certainly believe that we need to think about social security in its widest sense in relation to being bold and developing a minimum income guarantee. Sometimes when we talk about a minimum income guarantee, people think that that means more spending and so on, but what we are actually talking about is minimum expectations for individuals in relation to their income. The issue is also about how we reduce costs.

There are opportunities there, and we should think about how we can pilot some of those opportunities. The minimum income guarantee expert group made recommendations on the building blocks that are necessary for us to start moving in that direction. As Allan Faulds said, that is partly to do with how we fund our public services. Taxation is also part of that, as is how we support people into employment and provide them with the right support for their children.

On short-term support, we certainly think that there is a gap for parents with a disabled child who are not currently on a means-tested benefit. Their costs are significantly higher, particularly for accessible childcare, but at the moment they do not qualify for the Scottish child payment. That is a very specific issue for that group.

Alexander Stewart: Do the witnesses have any low-cost, high-impact suggestions for how we can improve Scottish social security?

The Deputy Convener: Leah, do you want to take up the cudgels on that?

Leah Duncan-Karrim: Yes. I have two points to make. On prioritisation for additional spending, I do not think that the question is how we can reduce the cost of the Scottish child payment. As part of the End Child Poverty coalition, we are looking for the Scottish child payment to be raised to £40 at the earliest opportunity, because that would lift 15,000 children in Scotland out of poverty. Although budgetary constraints are a factor, if we have the opportunity to lift children out of poverty to give them better long-term outcomes, the question is: how, on a human level, can we afford not to?

10:30

On low-cost, high-impact suggestions, a number of families who are entitled to current social security provisions do not always receive them. For example, the uptake of benefits is significantly lower in ethnic minority communities. One solution to that would be to look at income maximisation services and to think about how we can get alongside communities in a way that is appropriate

for them, that meets their needs, that makes things accessible in a way that works for them and that ensures that they receive everything that they are entitled to. That would have a significant impact on child poverty levels in particular communities but would not necessarily cost very much.

The Deputy Convener: As this might be our final question, I will ensure that every witness gets the opportunity to put on the record the low-cost, high-impact suggestions that they want to see.

Adam Stachura: It depends on your definition of “low-cost”. I am not entirely sure that we have easy fixes for such issues. In Scotland, we have a long-term challenge in relation to our national health—not our national health service, but the health of the nation—which will drive the challenges that we face at various stages in our lives or in later life. That will draw resources from the NHS, social care and other places. Therefore, it is difficult to suggest that there will be one or two quick fixes.

In relation to Leah Duncan-Karrim’s point, the Scottish Government should look more at how it could work with the UK Government—we heard about this from Fiona Collie—to increase the uptake of things such as pension credit. I do not think that this committee has ever heard anything from the UK Government to suggest that, if Scotland did more in that area, money would be taken away. It is not accurate to suggest that that is the case. Such joint working could open the door for people to receive more income, and the cost of doing that would be very low, because some of the spend comes from elsewhere. That would provide an opportunity to lift people out of poverty.

There are 70,000 or 80,000 pensioners in Scotland who are entitled to claim pension credit who are not doing so. Scotland has done almost nothing on that. We could have awareness campaigns or anti-stigma campaigns. More support could be provided for income maximisation to help people to apply to get the support that they need. The provision of a bit of money for that might help the level of spend in other areas, such as health and care, across the country.

Scotland should commit to doing something significant with the UK Government on pension credit uptake, because it is a gateway to some of the social security that Scotland is responsible for, such as the higher rate of the pension-age winter heating payment and the winter heating payment, which are things that we do not do anything on. It would not take much money to transform people’s lives, but we seem to be absolutely unwilling to touch those areas, which is wrong.

Allan Faulds: From the ALLIANCE's perspective, we probably do not have low-cost, high-impact suggestions; ours are probably high cost and high impact, because a lot of our focus is on disability payments and carers payments. The changes that I suggested—addressing the 20m and 50 per cent rules and increasing the earnings threshold for carers allowance—would probably have significant resource implications. However, some of the suggestions that other witnesses have made, such as improving uptake of benefits among ethnic minority communities, would be a good approach to take and would probably have very high impacts for quite low costs.

I will finish with a more general point that I did not get the chance to make earlier. We need to be aware of the fact that social security does not work in isolation; it is part of a wider system. Part of what is driving the increased demand for disability payments—this is not true in every case, because lots of people have conditions and disabilities that are genetic, congenital or unpreventable—is relatively poor health. Scotland has significant levels of health inequality, and there is a lot that could be done in different portfolio areas to address those issues.

I do not have any quick fixes, but we ought to be aware of the need to look beyond social security and to think about how we can increase and improve the health of the wider population. The Scottish Government has its population health framework. If we can deliver in that area, rather than attempting to cut costs, that might help to constrain some of the growth in social security in a positive way.

The Deputy Convener: Fiona, I am conscious that you missed out at the very start of the session. A question was asked about whether we had our priorities right for new social security spending. The carer additional person payment was discussed as part of that, along with other issues. I mention that just in case you would like to reflect on that in your answer.

Fiona Collie: It is right that the carer additional person payment is a priority. We know from the evidence that we have that those who care for more than one person face greater poverty than those who care for one person, so it is right to look at that. Extending the run-on for those who have been caring for someone with a terminal illness is absolutely the right priority, as Marie Curie research has been very clear on the poverty that they face.

In response to the question about low-cost, high-impact suggestions, we are a little bit like the ALLIANCE in that we have lots of high-cost, high-impact suggestions. The point about the need to understand the impact of health was well made. There has been investment in short breaks, and it

would be good if targeted support could be provided for micro breaks to enable carers to address their health needs, because we know that 41 per cent of carers miss out on appointments and are unable to attend tests and screenings, including in primary and secondary care, which has significant consequences.

On the point about pension credit, the system for those who have an underlying entitlement to the carer support payment is very complex. People get a letter that says, "You're entitled to carer support payment—we're not going to pay it, but you might be eligible for pension credit." Simplifying that system to enable more individuals to claim their entitlement to pension credit is a great example of something that would have low cost and high impact.

To go back to the point that I made about public commissioning, we should expect more companies that benefit from the public pound to support current and future employees to remain in or return to employment. With my organisation, we are talking about carers, but that could equally apply to parents and people with disabilities. We are missing a trick by not bedding that in.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you, Fiona.

I thank all our witnesses for their helpful, focused and tight contributions, because we have landed within our timescale for completing the evidence session.

Next week, we will hear from the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice as part of our final pre-budget scrutiny evidence session.

10:38

Meeting continued in private until 11:10.

This is a draft *Official Report* and is subject to correction between publication and archiving, which will take place no later than 35 working days after the date of the meeting. The most up-to-date version is available here:
<https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/official-report>

Members and other meeting participants who wish to suggest corrections to their contributions should contact the Official Report.

Official Report
Room T2.20
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Email: official.report@parliament.scot
Telephone: 0131 348 5447

The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Tuesday 21 October 2025

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot

