



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 11 December 2025

Session 6



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SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE
33rd Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

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

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

*Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind)

*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:

Andrew Bartlett (Advice Direct 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 11 December 2025

[The Deputy Convener opened the meeting at 09:01]

Interests

The Deputy Convener (Bob Doris): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 33rd meeting in 2025 of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. We have received apologies from Collette Stevenson.

Agenda item 1 is a declaration of interests. I welcome Claire Baker as a new member of the committee. It is good to have you here, Claire. I invite you to declare any interests that are relevant to the committee's work.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Thank you, convener. I am pleased to join the committee. I do not have anything relevant to declare.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you.

We are also joined by David Torrance, who is substituting for Collette Stevenson. David, you have previously declared any relevant interests. You are more than welcome this morning as well.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

09:01

The Deputy Convener: Our next item of business is a decision on whether to take items 4, 6 and 7 in private. I am just checking that I have not missed out item 5 by mistake.

I am advised that we previously agreed to take item 5 in private. Does the committee agree to take items 4, 6 and 7 in private as well?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Deputy Convener: Thank you.

Social Security Independent Advocacy Service

09:02

The Deputy Convener: Agenda item 3 is an evidence session on the social security independent advocacy service, which is due to be delivered by Advice Direct Scotland from January 2026. I welcome Andrew Bartlett, the chief executive officer of Advice Direct Scotland, who is joining us online.

Thank you for joining us, Andrew. Before we move to questions, I put on the record that various members of the committee have welcomed your proactive approach to engaging with members ahead of today's meeting. Some of us had an opportunity to meet you, but it is, of course, also important to have a public session to put on the record some of the matters that we think are relevant in relation to our scrutiny work.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Welcome to the committee, Andrew. Advice Direct Scotland currently operates across a range of subject areas. I am interested to know what experience Advice Direct Scotland has in providing advocacy services. If you have to adapt your ways of working to deliver this service, how might you do that?

Andrew Bartlett (Advice Direct Scotland): We already provide a nationwide service. We are efficient, we are customer centred, and we will absolutely put the advocacy partners at the centre of our advocacy work. We have agile systems and we have relationships with more than 1,500 organisations the length and breadth of Scotland.

We will welcome the current advocates who work for VoiceAbility, under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations. We will work with the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance, and we will take up a membership with it.

We will build a referral pathway for advice to make sure that we do not cross the line between advocacy and advice, but we are not going to make people tell their stories several times. We will absolutely seek out lived experience input. We have already started that with some sessions in our office in Glasgow and online.

We will engage with Social Security Scotland. I am just waiting for an appointment date with David Wallace so that we can discuss how we can improve the referrals from Social Security Scotland before we start.

We will engage with the third sector and local authorities, with a particular focus on departments

that have disability experience. We will also work with health boards, looking at their advocacy plans to make sure that there is no duplication and that people know where we fit into those. We will immediately take feedback from advocacy partners when we start delivering the service, because feedback is key.

Carol Mochan: That is helpful. At £3.2 million, the contract value is lower than the previous one. Have you got a plan in place to ensure that the lower value will not mean that the service will go down? Will you be able to continue to support the same number of people with the same high-quality service?

Andrew Bartlett: Yes. We are committed to delivering a minimum of 60,000 hours' worth of advocacy. That includes travel and administration. There is a mechanism that we can explore if we were to need a lot more hours than that, but 60,000 hours would be more than the current delivery.

We do not carry large central costs—we are a lean organisation. Our systems will cut down some of the administration time for our advocates. That is not using technology to replace people; it is using technology to deliver value so that people can spend more of their time speaking with the people they seek to support.

We have been through a robust procurement process, and I am confident that we have demonstrated that we can deliver the service within the contract value.

Carol Mochan: Thank you.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Having engaged with you before, Andrew, I know that your service has considerable experience in providing advice. What do you consider to be the defining difference between advocacy and advice?

Andrew Bartlett: They are different. Our head of internal learning and development is a trained advocate, so we have experience of advocacy within the organisation. We want to make sure that our advocates deliver advocacy. However, we need to be clear that, if advice is required and requested, those services will be available either in our organisation or in the organisations that we already have a relationship with. We will welcome the VoiceAbility advocates, and their experience and the casework that they are already doing will come with them. I am confident that we will be able to demonstrate to you that we are offering a quality service across the country.

Marie McNair: You are already providing advice services. What systems do you have in place to avoid conflicts of interest between the advocacy

service and the services that you currently provide?

Andrew Bartlett: The advocacy service will be on its own platform, if that makes sense—we are not just bundling it into something that we already have. We are building a bespoke advocacy platform that will allow data to be shared transparently. We will be able to share real-time information with the Scottish Government so that it can see how many hours we have done, how many visits we have done, and so on. We are also introducing a separate freephone number for advocacy, so those calls will not come to our advice givers. If advice is needed—for example, if somebody asks for support with debt—that request will be passed through, but it will be dealt with by our debt team rather than by the advocate.

Marie McNair: As a digital organisation, how will you deliver face-to-face advocacy in local communities? Earlier, you mentioned the TUPE transfer of the VoiceAbility staff, some of whom are in my constituency. Will the work of VoiceAbility staff continue?

Andrew Bartlett: Yes. We are not looking to make anybody redundant. We expect everyone who comes over to carry on with the work that they are doing and to support the advocacy partners that they are currently supporting.

We also want to make sure that we are in the community. We have a memorandum of understanding with Scottish libraries, which gives us 431 locations across Scotland in which to meet people if they are comfortable with that. Obviously, we will continue to meet people in their homes if that is their preference, or we will meet people at third-party premises.

It is important to stress that we will be working with other advocacy organisations. I have no appetite for duplicating services or creating conflict with advocates who may have been working with people for many months—in some instances, for many years. We want to work with them, not against them. Our role is clear: it is to deliver advocacy for Social Security Scotland services.

Marie McNair: I certainly welcome that assurance. None of us can work in silos. I look forward to working with you.

Claire Baker: I am pleased that you have confirmed that TUPE is being used for the advocates who worked for the previous organisation. That organisation employed 48 advocates, I think, among its 58 staff members. Is that right? Is the intention that the 48 advocates will come over to you?

Andrew Bartlett: Yes. We have been sent the employee liability information. I am not a human resources specialist, but I have HR specialists as

part of the team. We have all the paperwork that we require from VoiceAbility. We are doing a consultation. It is a non-unionised organisation, so we have a meeting next week and another the following week with representatives.

TUPE is always a bit of a scary time. There are differences between our organisations. For example, we are a four-day-week organisation, as we have been for many years. However, we have to make sure that people's rights are respected, so they will come over on their current terms and conditions on 31 January, and those rights are protected as we go forward. Some people will want to change to our terms and conditions if an opportunity comes up, which they are always welcome to do. We have done TUPE in the past, both in and out, so we have experience with it.

Claire Baker: It is good that you have the intention to keep the staffing complement that was there before.

Carol Mochan asked about the value of the contract being lower. Usually, the cost of a contract is in people. Employment is the heaviest cost. You suggested that the use of technology at other ends of the business would explain how you can do it on a reduced budget, so it is not to do with staff reduction.

Andrew Bartlett: Yes. Actually, we are recruiting. At the minute, there is only one person for the whole of the Highlands and Islands, for example. That is simply not practical. I used to live in Newtonmore, so I am very familiar with the travel times in that part of the world. We are looking to make sure that we have people where there is demand. We have nobody in Orkney, and nobody is servicing the Western Isles at the moment, so we will be doing a lot of work to make sure that we have people where we need to provide a service.

We want to make sure we have proper coverage in each health board area and each local authority area. At the minute, coverage is 48 per cent face to face and 52 per cent remote. We need to look at whether that is the service that people want or whether, in some instances, it is the service that people have to have because there is nobody in their geography. We will be looking at that very closely, and we have funds available to fill the gaps.

Claire Baker: That is welcome.

The contract starts on 31 January, so there is quite a lot to do before that date, given that you are implementing TUPE, mapping and all the rest of it.

Andrew Bartlett: There is an awful lot to do. However, we have started the technology build and we are having regular conversations with the

Scottish Government team. We have a joint mobilisation board and workstreams for data, TUPE, operations and training. That is all on target.

We have made sure that our internal resources are fully aligned to that, so we will be on time. Will things be dramatically different in quarter 1? No. I am really hopeful that we will have the gaps plugged by quarter 2 and that people will know about the service. One of the current issues is whether people know that the service is available, so we will certainly be doing an awful lot of work on that, including with elected officials such as yourselves. We will reach out to every local authority and health board, and we have already reached out to the 1,500 partners that we work with from the top of Shetland down to the bottom of the Borders.

09:15

The key thing is letting people know that the service is available, and we will be driving that message. We will be doing more breakfasts and other sessions in our office, and we will be doing more online sessions for people for whom Glasgow is not convenient.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Social Security Scotland is operating on a larger scale than when VoiceAbility started in January 2022, so contending with demand will be one of the major issues. How will you anticipate the large demand? How will you manage it, and what support will you provide?

Andrew Bartlett: At the moment, we do not entirely know what the demand will be, because the service is not known everywhere. We have committed to provide 60,000 hours of advocacy in year 1 and year 2. For argument's sake, if 120,000 hours are required, I will need to go back. There is a mechanism in the contract that can be used if extra funds are required. Let us see what the demand is, first of all, and let us make sure that the people who need the service know that it is there. To put it bluntly, I will have to deal with what arises.

Alexander Stewart: You might well be anticipating that there will be high initial demand because people will want to ask for or require some support from you. That might have an impact on what you can and cannot do and how you manage that. As you have also indicated, there might be geographical differences in what rural and urban communities and the individuals within them require from you. You already have a plan and you have the capacity to adapt it depending on the demand that comes through.

Andrew Bartlett: Absolutely. It is about being practical. Looking at where the advocates live, I

can see big gaps, particularly on the west coast of Scotland, although not in Ayrshire. I can see gaps in the Borders and on some of the islands. We will work to resolve those gaps and make sure that there is a level of equity in access to the service.

Scotland's geography is challenging in many ways, and this programme is not the only one that is affected by that. We will commit to using technology to an extent and to finding the advocate who is nearest to the person who needs support. Let us not make assumptions. Let us make it clear that, if we have someone in Thurso, we will make sure that we reach out to any other advocacy groups that operate in the Thurso area and say that we will be there on Thursday, for example, should they have someone who might require our service.

A lot of it will be about ensuring that our partners are on board and that they understand that we are advocates for a specific part of people's needs. If an advocacy organisation is already involved, it is not our job to replace it. It is our job to deliver the Social Security Scotland element, and the organisation can continue with its good work. We need to fit round the work of other organisations. For example, in Argyll and Bute, where there is a gap, we have already spoken with the local advocacy organisation. We will work closely together rather than duplicating work.

Alexander Stewart: How will you work with Social Security Scotland and other partners to get referrals for the service and provide the support that individuals require?

Andrew Bartlett: Social Security Scotland has its own teams, and they will go into homes and help people to fill in paperwork and so on. That is not exclusive to people with disabilities. The purpose of my meeting David Wallace is to ensure that the front-line people at Social Security Scotland understand that an independent service is available, which sits outside Social Security Scotland. That is important.

We need to understand when it would be better for Social Security Scotland staff to deal with an inquiry rather than our doing so. It is a matter of letting people know that we are here and of making referrals easy. We have a lot of experience with the fuel insecurity fund, for example. We work with partners the length and breadth of Scotland. Those arrangements made engagement with us easy. Everybody in the third sector and in the public sector is busy, and if we make it too hard to engage, people will not engage. They will either look for an alternative route or they will just ignore the issue. We will be making it easy to engage, including for people who want to self-refer.

We are getting in-house help from the team at the Forth Valley Sensory Centre, and they will give us observations about how the service could be improved for people with sight issues and hearing issues. We want to make it easy for people to engage with us, because that is key.

Some people will want remote engagement anyway. There has been a big change since Covid, as we have seen on our dashboards. People who once would have opted for a face-to-face service now opt for an online one. We are not here to judge whether someone should receive the service online or face to face: if they want face to face, we will aim to deliver a face-to-face service.

The Deputy Convener: I have a supplementary question on the referral process. If an advocacy worker is in someone's house carrying out the contracted work on adult disability payments, say, and they discover that there is a universal credit issue or another issue, what happens?

Andrew Bartlett: Two things. If the person has another advocate who is working with them, that advocate may run with it. If there is an issue that my welfare team can resolve, that can be referred to my very experienced welfare team, should the individual be happy with that approach. We have been giving welfare advice since 2004.

We are not leaving anyone behind. I know that signposting does not work, because people do not follow the signpost. We need to ensure a safe handover to another organisation. It may be that the individual already has a relationship with a citizens advice bureau or another community-based organisation. We are not looking to supplement or replace any of those services. We will work on a case-by-case basis.

The Deputy Convener: A wraparound welfare advice and support package would certainly be welcome.

Andrew Bartlett: Absolutely.

The Deputy Convener: There could be a loss of identity here. There is one stream for universal credit, another stream for another suite of income-based benefits and another stream for adult disability payment. It would be nice if those different streams lost their identities and the support was simply provided. That is something that the committee may return to at a later date, to see how that could work in practice. What you have said is quite reassuring, however.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Good morning. The committee has been quite concerned about the low awareness of the advocacy service over the past few years. When people were supported, the advocates did a sterling job, so it is brilliant to hear that they are going to be TUPE transferred over into your

organisation so that you will retain those people and skills.

On 27 November, the committee heard from Edel Harris, who authored the independent review of adult disability payment. She, too, found that there was low awareness of the advocacy service. Everything that you have said so far gives me a lot of comfort about the way in which you are going to carve out the new service's identity. Can you add anything to that? We want to ensure that everybody who needs to be aware of the service is aware of it.

Andrew Bartlett: There is a bit of confusion about our name. Advice Direct Scotland has the word "advice" in it, but the URL that we will use for the programme is advocacy.scot. We have agreed a communications strategy with the Scottish Government, which is reviewed weekly.

We have written to all 1,500 partners, and we will write again in January because, with Christmas coming up, this is a busy time. I realise that an email from us may not get to the top of somebody's in-tray straight away, especially as the contract will not begin until 31 January, so we will reach out again in the new year.

We will carry on with the CEO focus groups. We are building a lived experience steering group, because we want to hear from people who have used this service or another about what good looks like.

As I have said, we are going to reach out to Social Security Scotland at all levels—not just David Wallace. We are working with elected officials, including councillors, everybody in Holyrood and all the Scottish MPs, and with all the caseworkers. We will run a caseworker forum in January specifically on the subject, so that people who reach out to people such as you will be directed to us.

It is really important that we link ourselves to health boards' advocacy plans. Let us ensure that every health board and local authority in Scotland knows that we are there and that we are precise about the service that will be offered. That will greatly improve our visibility.

This is important, so we will reach out to the press. We have a good relationship with the press across Scotland, and we will be in local and national publications. Most people read such things online now, so we will be pushing the message out consistently.

Elena Whitham: That is helpful to know.

As Social Security Scotland has bedded in and we have had the safe transfer of everybody from personal independence payment to adult disability payment, we are entering a new phase in which a lot of reviews and redeterminations will start to

happen at pace. That will be an entirely new focus for the advocates, who have perhaps not yet had that level of such work across their desks. Is there anything that you will do to ensure that they are upskilled, so that everybody who is referring has confidence that this group of people will be best placed to support individuals?

Andrew Bartlett: We will provide evidence and inform the committee about what we are seeing on the ground, which will be invaluable. Training does not stop at the end of the first training session—training and coaching are continuous. We need to learn from things that have worked well, so we will inform our advocacy team about good practice. We also need to understand why things have gone less well for people.

09:30

We should not be afraid to admit that we will sometimes make mistakes or take a route that was not the quickest way to get a good outcome for someone. We have to absorb that and ensure that the individual is not disadvantaged in the future, as well as ensuring that the whole team understands what to do, when to do it and what tools are needed.

Our plan is to upskill the advocates, but we might also need a different role, although I do not know that yet. Will we need someone who appears only at tribunals? I do not know, so we will not put that in place on day 1.

Elena Whitham: It is helpful to understand that you are going to monitor and evaluate how the service might have to evolve.

The Deputy Convener: Given that monitoring and evaluation have been mentioned, that provides an almost appropriate segue for me to hand over to Jeremy Balfour.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind): Good morning and thank you for coming. VoiceAbility shared several of its quarterly monitoring reports with the committee, but I, and probably some other members, thought that those did not really go far enough. It was difficult to work out who was being seen and what effect that was having.

We all agree on the need for transparency and accountability, so how will your quarterly reports to the Scottish Government and to the committee show us the client's journey, how far you went with the client, how many people you worked with and so on, so that we can monitor from the start of the process and see whether we are getting value for money?

Andrew Bartlett: We will provide something visual so that you can see the information and do not have to get a pen and paper out to do the maths yourselves. We will report on things such as

advocacy hours, so that you can see how much time we have spent working with individuals across Scotland. We will be open about where referrals have come from and will let you know about timescales.

I can use our debt programme as an example. We put things in what we call pots. Pot 1 is where I get your name and address and an overview of your situation, and the programme goes all the way through to pot 5. We will build something similar into this programme so that we can let you know at any point in time where people are in that journey. You will know whether we have had only a single session, whether paperwork has been completed, whether a redetermination is needed or whether a tribunal will have to be done. We will let you know where people are on their journeys, which is important for us, because it means that we can see where people are in real time. If nothing has happened for three weeks after an initial meeting, that means that the person has disengaged or that we have not provided the service that was expected.

I think that the committee will enjoy our reports. It is not our aim to make it difficult for you to find out what we are doing; we aim to be clear about what we are doing and what our advocates are doing.

Jeremy Balfour: That is helpful. I hope that I will be here to monitor your first report, but that is another issue.

As I have previously shared at committee, I was in hospital as a long-term patient two years ago. VoiceAbility came in and set up in a room, but most of the people on the ward were in bed and could not get out. VoiceAbility could tick a box and say that team members had spent an hour at a hospital but that no one had come to see them, but, actually, no one was able to see them because most patients were bed-bound.

I am looking for more than, "We visited a hospital," or, "We visited a library and sat there for an hour." I want to know how many people you see in that hour and to know about that journey. I think that your answer means that you will come up with that.

Andrew Bartlett: Those of you who have worked with me before will know that I am not interested in box ticking, because we are not treating people with dignity and respect if we just tick a box to say that we have done something. We have to understand where the people who need our support are, and if that means sitting next to someone who is in a hospital bed, we should do that, because it is the practical thing to do.

We might run some drop-ins for people with brain injuries, because it lets them know that the

service is there, but not everybody with a brain injury will need support to claim their rights in relation to a Social Security Scotland payment. I am not one for sitting in a room if nobody comes.

Jeremy Balfour: Thank you. We wish you well for the end of January.

The Deputy Convener: On reflection, I think that parliamentarians very much take a similar pathway to you, Mr Bartlett. There is no point in having an advice surgery in the same library at 2 pm once a month on a Friday if no one comes along. It is much better to be bespoke and accessible as and when you are needed. If that is the model that you seek to develop, that is welcome.

Before I let you go, I should point out that you said that we would enjoy your reports, so you have already set quite a high bar. I hope that that bit goes well.

I am mindful that you only get to put on the record answers to the questions that you are asked. We have a couple of minutes left and, given that there are no additional questions and that we did not permit you an opening statement, would you like to make any final comments?

Andrew Bartlett: I am a big believer in communication. If you hear things, good or bad, please share them with us.

We are absolutely committed to making a success of this. We have a very good team and we have brought in a couple of new people with advocacy experience. Our aim is to hit the ground running on 31 January and get those gaps plugged across the country. The next time I speak to the committee, I could bring a map of the coverage that we have, so we can show you what it was and what it is. We are happy to share information on that front.

As I said, if you have any questions or concerns, please reach out and we will come straight back. We will not always have the answer and we will sometimes say, "We will sort that out," or, "That is a really interesting observation," but it is about communication for us.

The Deputy Convener: I put on record again that the committee welcomes your proactive approach to engagement thus far. Thank you for your evidence. That concludes our business in public.

09:38

Meeting continued in private until 11:28.

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