OFFICIAL REPORT
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Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 5 March 2026

Session 6

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CONTENTS

	Col.
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	**1**
JOB START PAYMENT	**2**
SUBORDINATE LEGISLATION	**30**
Council Tax Reduction (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2026 (SSI 2026/56)	30

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE
8th Meeting 2026, 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:

Jo Derrick (Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum)
Karyn Dunning (Social Security Scotland)
Graeme Hendry (Skills Development Scotland)
Zara Kitson (King's Trust)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Diane Barr

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 5 March 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Collette Stevenson): Good morning, and welcome to the eighth meeting of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee in 2026. We have apologies from Alexander Stewart.

Our first item of business is a decision on whether to take items 4, 5 and 6 in private. Do members agree to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Job Start Payment

09:00

The Convener: Our next item of business is a round-table discussion on the job start payment. I welcome our witnesses for today's meeting: Graeme Henry, head of Government, parliamentary and stakeholder engagement, Skills Development Scotland; Zara Kitson, senior head of Government partnerships, King's Trust; Karyn Dunning, chief operating officer, Social Security Scotland; and Jo Derrick, chief executive officer, Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum.

The meeting is in a round-table format, which we hope will enable a free-flowing conversation. The committee is very much in listening mode today, so I ask members to indicate to me or to the clerks if they would like to speak. We intend to focus on three main themes today. We have about an hour and 15 minutes for the session, so I encourage members and witnesses to be succinct in their questions and answers.

The first theme concerns the adequacy and coherence of current support for young people seeking employment and suggestions for improvements. Would anyone like to come in on that?

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I want to start the discussion by looking at the figures. Since 2019, 34 per cent—about a third—of young people who engaged with the no one left behind scheme entered employment. I am interested in the other 66 per cent of young people. Should we expect the figure to be higher? Is it a reasonable success rate for the support that is offered, or are there issues that cause only a third of young people to reach employment?

Jo Derrick (Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum): My specific area of knowledge is care-experienced young people and the transition to adulthood from a care leaver's perspective. From our experience in engaging with young people and the workforce, we know that the number of care-experienced young people entering employment is still significantly lower than one would hope in order for them to flourish. It is also recognised that care-experienced young people are less likely to be in employment and, even if they are in employment, they are less likely to have the same opportunities to earn as much as their friends and peers in the general population.

Significant work is under way to support young people into employment. One of our key messages is about the need for wraparound support. It is important that we acknowledge the relationship-based approach that needs to be taken in order to provide support in the short, medium and long

term. However, the short answer to your question is that much more can be done, and we want to increase the number of employment opportunities.

Zara Kitson (King's Trust): The focus should specifically be on identifying which young people go into a job destination. This year, the King's Trust has supported nearly 7,000 young people to achieve in education and employment or start up in business. We target our support towards more disadvantaged young people and those with multiple complex needs, who will often have experienced trauma in their background.

Having a job is one outcome for young people, but it is not the only outcome. From our experience of delivering employability services, we are aware that the best next step for a log of young people is further education—going into college—which might give them a better pathway to a more meaningful, sustainable career and employment.

I anticipate that some of the reason for the 34 per cent figure is the focus on the job outcome in no one left behind services. Regarding our services, we are part of a consortium with Action for Children and Barnardo's. The young persons consortium collectively supports more than 10,000 young people across all local authorities to take their next steps into employment. Three in four of the young people we support go on to a positive destination, but that is not always a job.

We know from our experiences that the needs that young people are presenting with are multiple and complex. Mental health barriers have increased for young people, specifically on the back of Covid. Young people who have developed and came of age during that time now need more intensive support to gain basic skills and confidence, and to take part in teamwork. They need to be able to leave the house, navigate and get on a bus. We are finding that, for a lot of young people, the journey times and support needs are a lot longer than they used to be. We would typically take young people on a journey from where they were to getting a job, but that is now a lot longer.

Among the foundational elements of what we do are earlier-stage interventions, and we are seeing a lot more demand for that type of support. It takes a long time to get young people to that later stage of job readiness. That is a shared experience across the young persons consortium.

Claire Baker: The pot of money that we are talking about is quite small—it is not a big pot of money. However, that money is focused on the end point, where a young person enters employment. Is that the best focus for where the money should be? You are suggesting that young people need as much support as they can get in order to reach that stage. Is there enough support for them to get to that stage, so that they can access the fund?

Zara Kitson: Both things are required. For a lot of young people, the financial barrier is very stark. It is quite a change: if they have been reliant on benefits and come from a culture of families who are reliant on benefits, they may be worried about what it will mean if they start a job and whether they will be better off or not. The financial incentive can help. That is the feedback that we got from youth workers, who said that the main support that young people are looking for is often support for clothing, childcare and travel.

We distribute a development award to young people, which has the same aims as those for the job start payment—to support young people. That addresses the last financial barrier to achieving the outcome. Over the past year, more than 600 development awards have been distributed to young people by the King's Trust. The time from when a young person applies to when they access the award is about two weeks. It is important that they get the award in a fast turnaround, as there could be a gap between them getting their last benefit payment and then receiving their salary. That is when they can face harsh circumstances. That is not what someone needs when they are starting a new job and they are not sure how they are going to pay their bus fare to get to work or how they will have money to pay for their lunch.

That money is absolutely necessary, but for us the need is for wraparound support. As Jo Derrick was saying, people need one-to-one wraparound support—which should be trauma informed, needs led and targeted—alongside group work. People need both those things.

For the young people who are accessing our development awards, it is usually a trusted adult—a youth worker or a key worker—who applies for the award on the young person's behalf. That can be part of what removes the barrier, whereas, for the job start payment, it is more likely to be the young person who does the application process, as I understand it—although there are challenges there for them. Young people do not tend to work on laptops—they have mobile devices—and I do not think that the application is fully mobile enabled.

Those are the kind of barriers that can get in the way of young people getting the payment. However, if we can support youth workers and key workers who are working with those groups of young people to know more about the payment and to support them through the application process, there might be some benefit there.

Claire Baker: We will come on to other questions on that.

Graeme, do you want to say anything about the adequacy of support for young people who are seeking employment?

Graeme Hendry (Skills Development Scotland): To pick up on what Zara Kitson said, there is a lot of support out there for individuals, but it varies from area to area. One way in which SDS tries to provide support is by enabling the system to have elements of universality or consistency across it and to support the variety of partners that are operating in every area.

There are a couple of key areas where we try to pull together the support. One is the local employability partnerships, which are key. Every local authority has a local employability partnership, which pulls partners from the third sector and from national agencies such as us to try to shape the services. The partnerships are led by local authorities, and we are a supporting partner in that space, along with others.

Another area is about being data driven and using insights so that services can access the most up-to-date and best information to identify, support and target the young people whom they most want to get into employment or who are most at risk. We manage the participation portal, which is a robust data set that gives insight and supports all key partners. It captures information from when a young person goes to school all the way through, so that individuals can be tracked and monitored. For example, if a young person leaves school, moves to college and then leaves at some point, the college will input data into our system, which will allow the local employability partnership to identify that that young person has moved into unemployment or employment.

Access to that is key to the local partners, so that they can shape their services around it. The system can also identify flags for people who have a disability or are care leavers, so that partners can focus on those who are most at risk. As Zara Kitson said, individual needs are different, but being able to focus, identify and profile what is happening in an area is key to each local employability partnership in trying to target people.

We should recognise what Claire Baker said about the number of people who move into employment and other destinations at different times, and some of that is about what they are ready for. We know that some destinations have high retention and attainment rates. SDS highlights the benefits of apprenticeships, which have a very high attainment rate. Scottish apprenticeships have the highest rate in the UK, and the retention rate is high. Apprenticeships are disproportionately skewed towards people from the areas of most deprivation in the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. There is benefit from focusing on those areas. However, some individuals might need to work with a multitude of agencies, such as throughcare and aftercare services or the King's Trust to build their skills to be ready to access apprenticeships.

The Convener: Zara Kitson wants to come back in, and then I will let Jo Derrick in.

Zara Kitson: I will follow on from what Graeme Hendry said. The LEPs are key, because the way that the system works is that the no one left behind funding and policy is activated through local authorities and at local level. As a Scotland-wide organisation—along with Barnardo's and Action for Children, we are a national organisation that reaches into all communities across Scotland—we have noticed that the system has become very fragmented for young people on the ground.

All our organisations used to receive funding through European social funds, which meant that we had more of a national approach. As the young persons consortium, alongside those other organisations, we could target support where it was needed. However, at the moment, there are 32 local authorities, each of which does its own commissioning for services. That means that, as providers, we need to have 32 individual arrangements with local authorities, and it is a bit of a patchwork quilt. In practice, that means that, for some of our services, we have to ring fence cohorts based on the funding that we have available.

We have a big youth hub in Glasgow that services the Glasgow city region, and we want to ensure that, through our offer, young people have choice when they come to us. If they come because they are interested in getting a career in the national health service—we work with the NHS as an employer partner—or if they want to get into construction, we want them to have a tailored journey.

09:15

Given the fragmentation of the funding in the system, if we have funding only for a construction programme in Renfrewshire, for example, we can offer that programme only to young people with a Renfrewshire postcode. If young people from other areas want to travel into Glasgow to access some of our courses, that will depend on the funding arrangements. If the courses are funded by Glasgow City Council, only young people from that council area will be eligible to access them. The system does not really translate to cover areas from which people travel to work or the way in which local economies work for people, including young people. That has been quite a challenge for us on the ground.

When our access to the European social fund ended, we moved to the United Kingdom shared prosperity fund, which was driven by the UK Government, although the money is disbursed locally in local authority areas. That meant that young people living in Fife, for example, who wanted to access our programmes in Edinburgh could not do so, because our only funding was from the UK SPF. If it was an Edinburgh-based programme, it was only for Edinburgh-based young people, even though it would be reasonable to travel to work from outside those areas.

Such issues have meant that the system has become very fragmented for young people. Although the no one left behind approach is good in principle and covers all ages, in our experience as a targeted and specialist provider of youth services, young people have been a bit lost in the system—there is not the same momentum or focus on youth unemployment and youth-targeted policies.

At the moment, a lot of momentum and focus on addressing youth unemployment as a priority is coming from Westminster, which is great. There are UK-wide and national programmes that are targeted at young people, but we are not really seeing the same from the Scottish system, so there is a risk that young people in Scotland could be left behind.

Jo Derrick: As people have been speaking, I have been reflecting on the fact that the invitation to be involved in the committee's meeting today was extended to young people, but I appreciate that, unfortunately, young people have not been able to participate. We want that invitation to be extended beyond this meeting so that we can have a conversation with young people and those who are involved in employability more broadly, not just in relation to the job start payment.

I will briefly mention two pieces of work that very much align with the work on the Promise, which everyone is looking to keep by 2030 at the latest—but let us be ambitious about what can happen ahead of that time. The work has involved young people, because the work that we do is co-designed with young people in the workforce.

First, one of the key messages that came from a piece of work that we did on the transition to adulthood was about the importance of financial literacy. Young people in the workforce felt that there was a gap in that regard and that such support was missing from the system. There are different interventions that provide support, but it could be argued that such support is dependent on the young person's geographical location and the capacity and availability of their worker to support and signpost them. We know that there is a real capacity stretch in throughcare and aftercare, and I could speak to that specifically. Therefore, there is a broader issue about young people's understanding and awareness of the financial support that is available, their rights and what they are entitled to.

The second co-designed piece of work links to modern apprenticeships. A blueprinting exercise was undertaken for a pilot on a minimum income guarantee linked to modern apprenticeships. That was carried out in recognition of the drop-out rate among care leavers involved in modern apprenticeships. The crucial point is that, although we would not have identified modern apprenticeships as the route, young people, following the work that they explored, said that a pilot might make sense in that area.

What underpins all this is that young people have to consider the intersectionality of the benefits that they receive. In every conversation that we have with young people, this is one of the first things that we hear. Before we even start the conversation, we ask, "Is this something that you would like us to look into with you and on your behalf?" The challenge is that they say, "Yes, that sounds interesting to explore, but it cannot impact my housing benefit, and it cannot impact on this." What might surface through this work is the impact of short-term interventions on the longer term. Young people have to try to manage that balancing act, despite the best of intentions behind the support.

Claire Baker: You represent young people in care, so this may not apply, but I suppose that it is about generational poverty. We are talking about the impact of benefits on a household. If a young person is still living at home with their family and the household is receiving benefits, is that a barrier to their taking up employment, given that that would have an impact on household income if they still stay at home?

Zara Kitson: Yes. If they are in a family where the experience is that the family is better off on benefits, there would be a nervousness about that among family members. It can be a challenge to support young people with the right mentorship to enable them to see beyond their immediate family circumstances and work toward something for themselves, because they do not always get encouragement and support at home. That is why we need the trusted adults, youth workers and others who can support young people to think differently, outside their immediate circumstances, to a future where they can build a bit of a different life for themselves.

The Convener: I am going to invite Karyn Dunning in, but, before I do so, I want to pick up on Jo Derrick's comments in relation to young people. As a committee, we have reached out to invite

young people along, and as convener, I have met members of the Scottish Youth Parliament to hear about their experience. We have brought them into committee and heard from them directly. That is hugely important, and it will form part of the committee's legacy report to our successor committee in the next session of Parliament. That will, I hope, come across as a strong key theme.

I will bring in Karyn Dunning.

Karyn Dunning (Social Security Scotland): I am conscious that as we go on, we will have questions about the uptake of the job start payment, so I will outline the part that it plays and what it has done. As colleagues will know, it is a Scotland-only benefit. Looking at the statistics since the launch of the payment in 2020, we see that they show that 6,360 individuals have received such a payment, totalling more than £2 million.

We are acutely conscious that—as we said in our submission—it is one of our lower-uptake benefits. Some of that has been evident from listening to stakeholders in the room today, and we understand the blockers and barriers to uptake. In 2022, an evaluation was done of some of the blockers and barriers that were impacting on young people feeling able to apply. Across the board, we have seen that the denial rates and take-up rates have remained fairly consistent after a spike following launch.

It is interesting to hear stakeholders' feedback. We are keen to hear about different ways that we can promote the benefit. I am here from Social Security Scotland, so I am sadly not in charge of the policy and strategy around benefit take-up, but we continue to look at these things from both a Scottish Government and a Social Security Scotland perspective to see how we can better promote the benefit and get that support to young people who are entitled to it.

It would be interesting to hear where it has an impact and bridges the gap, which Zara Kitson talked about earlier, between a young person leaving unemployment and going into employment. The support can provide some funding for clothing and for a bus pass, and if the person has childcare. The eligibility criteria are deliberately more nuanced and less hard to navigate for care leavers, recognising that they have different criteria in applying for the job start payment.

Claire Baker: Can I just add—

The Convener: No—I am going to invite Bob Doris in.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Thank you, Karyn—that was really interesting. Other members will explore lots of the things that you mentioned, so, although it is frustrating, I will not follow up on any of that just now.

My question is for all the stakeholders and whoever wants to respond. The convener's original question was about the adequacy and coherence of support. I am hearing that it is hard to make a judgment on the adequacy of the support because of how fragmented everything is and the need to pull it all together when reporting. I suspect that it would be for another committee to consider that issue, but it will inform our discussions on the job start payment.

The point about coherence is also of interest to us. We always talk about social security being a shared space between the Scottish and UK Governments. The area concerning job-search duties, Jobcentre Plus and so on is very much with the Department for Work and Pensions, while much of the area of employability and skills has been devolved to this Parliament.

That is where the question of coherence comes in. Do any of the witnesses have any comments to make about local employability partnerships? Do they involve the DWP? What is the role of work coaches and jobcentres in all this, and how does that knit together? Regardless of whether the services are adequate, the dots still need to be joined in a coherent fashion. Is that happening?

Karyn Dunning: The short answer is yes. We work closely with the DWP to support information sharing in jobcentres and we work with work coaches. It is one of the key ways that we can get information to young people and, equally, get feedback from young people into the system.

We hold regular engagement sessions with the DWP. We have strategic relationships with the DWP as well as operational relationships all the way through the different levels. We have done various bespoke events with jobcentres, hosted online events with DWP work coaches and promoted our work through things such as work fairs. Our relationship is at the right levels and there are on-going strategic and operational forums in which to have discussions about ensuring that young people get information and support about the benefits and entitlements that they can receive through the Scottish system.

Bob Doris: Do any other witnesses want to come in? I see from my notes that there is a universal credit youth offer.

Graeme Hendry: I agree with Karyn Dunning that there is cohesion at a local level, but that does not mean that every area is the same. Some areas will be stronger than others, depending on their specific nature. Generally speaking, SDS will be in a LEP, as will local authorities and third sector

partners, and the DWP will also be part of it. There can also be strong collective decision making in the LEPs whereby some of the planning and commissioning aspects are shared and discussed, which is a strength. That will all sit in one area with regard to who holds the contracts, but the collective awarding and planning aspects are key.

On an operational level, there has been a lot of movement into community delivery rather than having stand-alone offices, and that is particularly the case for our work. We now have more than 230 community locations in which we deliver services, many of which are delivered in partnership with the DWP, third sector partners and colleges. That was in response to the findings of the careers review on the need to be in parts of the community that young people will recognise rather than in what might be considered to be more traditional locations. It is about shaping and enhancing services.

I will highlight one other area, which relates to regional skills planning—that is, planning that is beyond just local authority areas but in regions. We are keen on ensuring that the evidence base and the insights of labour market intelligence will allow people to make the best local decisions and have coherence in planning. We have good connections in that regard and strong regional partnerships, which include taking actions on youth unemployment.

Zara Kitson: To pick up on the point about the relationship between the DWP and Social Security Scotland, the King's Trust's Glasgow centre, like many of our centres across the UK, is a youth hub. It provides a multi-agency approach, and there is a DWP job coach in our centre throughout the week. That is part of a specialist team in the DWP that focuses on young people. Their case load is all young people and they have specialist skills to work with young people. As a young person's consortium, we advocate for supporting young people with a specialist approach in the employability system, because there cannot just be a mainstream employability offer. That approach works well.

I do not know about the intersection between Social Security Scotland and the DWP youth hub model. It seems that that would be a good operational opportunity to make things a bit stronger. We would even welcome having Social Security Scotland based in our centre as part of that multi-agency approach, alongside the DWP. We know that young people would much rather come to a youth hub than go to a jobcentre, because they feel that the hub is their space—they trust it and they know us. A range of different council and third sector services are offered in that space, and young people see us all as one joined-up service, and they trust all the elements that are there. That is quite a good way to overcome some of the barriers and it gives Social Security Scotland staff quite a strong connectivity to the people who are taking that multi-agency approach so they can get the information out more quickly to those people, who in turn have a connectivity to those young people that they are supporting into work.

09:30

The Convener: Claire Baker wants to come in quickly, and then we will go to Elena Whitham.

Claire Baker: Karyn Dunning would probably be the best person to answer my question. Zara Kitson mentioned the jobs guarantee for 18 to 21-year-olds that the UK Government is introducing, which is expected to start in the spring in areas of Scotland. Will that group be eligible to apply for the job start payment, and do we expect there to be an increase in applications as a result of that programme?

Karyn Dunning: There have been recent discussions between Scottish Government officials and DWP partnership and engagement teams regarding that job guarantee. The first jobs under that programme are expected to start in May, but it is unclear to us at the moment whether any of those first jobs will be based in Scotland.

The expectation is that young people entering those roles may well be eligible for the job start payment. There is on-going conversation and exploration of joined-up working between Social Security Scotland and the DWP. We are docked in and are having the right conversations around the UK jobs guarantee at the moment.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Following on from something that Graeme Hendry said, in the East Ayrshire part of the area that I represent, we have a hub called SL66, in Cumnock, and one called SL33, in Kilmarnock. The hubs are based around the youth hub model that Skills Development Scotland, the local authority, the DWP and, indeed, Social Security Scotland will be part of, as well as the education system.

How do we ensure that those places are up to date with the information that they need to support young people to understand when they are eligible for the job start payment and how to apply for it? That is just one little strand of all the amazing things that happen in those centres. For a lot of young people, that is the one place that they feel connected to. They are not going to go into the jobcentre or somewhere like that, but the fact that that setting is very much like a youth club will bring them in. How do we ensure that those places can give them the support to access job start?

Graeme Hendry: That is a really good example of where young people access services and how we as agencies need to adapt to meet their needs. There is a combination of ways to ensure that young people can be aware of those services. One is through national organisations such as ours. Having a national reach allows us to get consistent information out to our staff, so that they are aware of what is happening.

In careers week back in November, we worked with Social Security Scotland, which held webinars and sessions for our front-line careers advisers to make them aware of the job start payment. We can use that approach and we can use our communication channels. Building on that, there is also the ability of national agencies such as Social Security Scotland and others to link into the LEPs and community planning partnerships to get that information to the front-line workers. A combination of those two approaches—national and local—can be used to get the information out there, rather than just taking one approach.

Elena Whitham: Finally, how do we ensure the intersectionality of the benefits system? That is a really important point. I have worked with care-experienced young people and other people experiencing homelessness over the years. A whole comorbidity of issues means that that can be a massive thing for an individual in terms of the impact that it might have on the rest of their family or on them and on what support they receive. How do we make sure that there are people with relevant skills within such hubs who can support individuals to work through all the implications? I do not think that the job start payment will have a major impact on a family's situation, but other opportunities that someone could take advantage of could have implications for them.

Graeme Hendry: I will pick up on something Zara Kitson said about having staff with the specialisms and skills to engage with individuals. There are a number of partners in local areas that have those skills, including the King's Trust, throughcare and aftercare providers, and many third sector providers. SDS will also have some of that expertise. Our services try to target and focus on those who are most at risk, which would be the client group that you referred to. The Scottish Government's careers strategy pushes us to do that, which is a good thing.

Once we have targeted those people, we can build a relationship with them and we will have more chance of being able to provide them with the right guidance and support. They will be able to access the services that are most appropriate to them and are tailored for them, rather than a universal offer which, on its own, might not meet the needs of the individual.

The Convener: I am conscious of time, but would anyone else like to come in on theme 1 before we move on to the next theme? If anything occurs to anyone in that regard, we might have time to return to theme 1 at the end of the meeting.

Reflecting on what has been said on the theme so far, although I am an MSP for East Kilbride, I am aware of Project SEARCH in Edinburgh, which focuses on young people with additional support needs. It works with carers, parents and guardians to offer young people work placements and collaborates closely with the national health service and local government. The young people might be given placements portering or working in a stores area in a hospital, for instance. They get an opportunity to try something out, almost like a taster session, and there is an opportunity to get a full-time job out of it. Even if the placement does not work out for them, they can develop key skills through it.

How does the job start payment work to provide wraparound support for people in that project? Graeme Hendry, I see you are nodding your head. Do you want to comment?

Graeme Hendry: I cannot give you the detail of how the job start payment works in relation to that project—I would need to check in with some of our colleagues on the specifics—but I am familiar with Project SEARCH. It operates in a number of localities across Scotland and has strong links with the NHS, as you said. We have done some partnership work with the NHS in the Aberdeen area, and I can write to the committee with details of that and share some of the work that we have done with Project SEARCH, if that would be helpful.

The Convener: It would be helpful to learn more about how the benefit ties in with that sort of project.

We will move to theme 2, which will be led by Marie McNair.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I represent the Clydebank and Milngavie constituency in the west of Scotland. For theme 2, we are looking to hear your thoughts about how we can improve application rates. Karyn Dunning, you spoke about valuation. What difference is the job start payment making to young people? Can you expand on how they use it?

Karyn Dunning: As I said, more than £2 million has been paid out since the launch of the job start payment to 6,360 people and we received 17,000 applications. Picking up on Zara Kitson's point, the majority of those applications—93 per cent—are made online by young people. We offer different accessible options: people can also contact us by telephone to make an application, and we offer

support in communities through our local delivery teams.

On how we promote the job start payment, we have an on-going and rolling communications campaign for all our benefits that is tied into key events in the calendar. This week is national apprenticeship week and—not in a cynical way, I am pleased to say—Social Security Scotland was able to issue some comms today to promote the job start payment. We have aligned and worked closely with Skills Development Scotland, the DWP and other organisations to promote it.

However, we must recognise that it is difficult to promote the benefit. It is a one-off payment that is made at a point of need. Therefore, it is something that people will probably look at only when they become eligible for it, rather than something that is in the psyche. The statistics show that, very early after the launch, we received quite a large number of applications. That is because we were able to use various social media platforms that reached the key demographic of young people, such as TikTok, which we now cannot utilise, in accordance with Scottish Government guidance that is based on security concerns. The numbers of young people applying for the benefit have definitely fallen.

The 2022 evaluation found a couple of key issues that are probably quite perennial. One was that young people were not always cognisant of the benefit that was available to them. Another was that they found the benefit process quite difficult to navigate. At that stage, the requirement was to submit five pieces of evidence to prove the job offer, although that was later reduced to three. Broadly, those are something from the employer, something from the individual and confirmation of the start date. The evaluation also looked at extending eligibility. On launch, individuals could apply for job start payment for three months from the date of the job offer, and that was extended to six months.

Those changes have been made. However, the statistics do not lie. They do not show a massive shift in the number of people who are applying or the number who are successful in their applications. Even when we did the heavy promotion after the start-up of job start payment, which was through TikTok and other platforms, although we saw a real spike in applications, we did not see much of a change in the percentage of people who qualified. We have therefore done other things to try to simplify the guidance that is available on the Gov.uk website, such as giving samples of the type of evidence that can be submitted. Internally, in Social Security Scotland, we have done lots to train our client advisers and others on what is acceptable proof. However, we are not necessarily seeing a huge shift.

Marie McNair: Take-up among folk claiming universal credit can be encouraged through posters, leaflets and so on. Can you confirm that you have met at senior level to make sure that work coaches offer information on the job start payment?

Karyn Dunning: Yes. As I said, we have on-going relationships with the DWP, and we are conscious that the relationship with work coaches is key.

A lot of other work is happening. We have referenced the work with Skills Development Scotland and the on-going promotional campaigns, but we are also trying to get the information out in a way that is accessible. We see stakeholders as having a key role in helping to promote the benefit to young people.

Marie McNair: Zara, in your written submission, you mentioned the difficulties that are associated with the application process. Do you have any suggestions for the committee on how to improve that process?

Zara Kitson: That point about difficulties was based on feedback from youth workers who connected with young people and gathered some of their experiences. Awareness was the biggest barrier to take-up—there just was not enough awareness of the benefit among young people and youth workers. Our youth workers specialise in employability, but the information has not cut through and is not reaching those specialist leads.

On the application process, the issue was more about making the process mobile enabled. I do not know whether it is now, but there was a perception that it was not and that there were digital barriers around some of the application process. There was also a lack of clarity about eligibility. It was not clear to youth workers and young people who would be eligible.

09:45

Looking at the context and background, there is also an issue around some of the evidence requirements. We have to gather a lot of evidence to be able to draw down funds to support our work, so we know, based on our experience, that it is challenging to get evidence from young people, such as their payslip or their identification. Some of those are quite hard barriers that we have to support young people to work through.

Some of the young people who we support have mental health challenges or complex and chaotic lives. They do not have a nice, tidy folder with all of their paperwork in order—that is not how their lives work—so I imagine that some of the main barriers for young people relate to getting the evidence in a way that makes sense for their skill

set and organisational skills. We need to streamline that process to make it easier for young people, and use more youth-friendly language in the guidance and the application process.

Marie McNair: Did the feedback from the young people who have applied show that the job start payment is making a difference?

Zara Kitson: Yes. Again, there was not a lot of time for meaningful engagement with young people ahead of this committee meeting, but we work with thousands of young people every year and loads of them are happy to share their lived experiences, so we are able to hear from them directly.

We also know from our development awards, the process for which is very similar, that the support makes a difference to young people's lives. The harsh reality is that a lot of young people would be locked into poverty if they did not have the job start payment or financial support. Without that payment, the financial reward of their first salary is undercut by the expenses that people often have when they start a new job—travel, work clothes, and lunches, for example.

The payment gives young people a good start in a job, which leads to a higher chance of sustaining it. Even when we are able to support young people to get into work, it is another challenge to support them to stay in the workplace. That is a journey, and employability support providers help them with the next step of the journey.

The support does not end when young people have a job or are in a positive destination. They need continued support beyond starting a job, because that is when they are at risk of dropping back out of the labour market. It is a process of change, and some of the challenges that they have faced—whether related to their family, their household or their mental health—can rise up again when they are faced with a change in their circumstances. The job start payment gives them more of a chance of sustaining a job.

Marie McNair: Can I open up that question to Graeme Hendry and Jo Derrick? Are there any improvements that could be made to increase the number of applications?

Graeme Hendry: The biggest issue is awareness. We need to get the message out that the payment is there and that support can be provided. That is the big thing that we can do after we recognise all of the other aspects of the application process that could be made smoother. Awareness is where our focus is.

Jo Derrick: It goes without saying that we would all prefer it if the scaffolding was in place so that we were not in a position in which we had to think about raising awareness.

I welcome the adaptations that have been made for care leavers to provide support with engagement. I note that 8 per cent of job start payment applicants are care leavers, although I do not know the details around that. What I have experienced is that our workforce members in our care leavers into employment, education and training focus group have not really mentioned the job start payment. I asked whether the group had feedback about the job start payment that I could pass on to the committee, but it is not a theme that has come through. Also, it is not necessarily a theme that the group has been raising on behalf of young people.

I wonder whether that is partly because the payment is a one-off payment, and whether it is about the time involved. I also wonder whether the barriers that have been faced at earlier stages in the process have put people off. About 15 per cent of people found out about it through word of mouth and, within the care-experienced community, word of mouth would be a strong influence on whether people think that it is worth taking the time to apply. The length of time it takes is clearly a factor, too.

In short, there is relatively low awareness within the care-experienced community and among the throughcare and aftercare workforce in relation to support. I did not see what percentage was authorised for care leavers. That would be an interesting parallel to consider.

There will be changes under the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill around the extension of applications for aftercare, with an increasing number of new Scots who, through legislation, will have an entitlement as care leavers. There are other considerations about eligibility for future consideration, which is probably needed sooner rather than later when it comes to awareness raising as a whole.

I am happy to support ways of raising awareness. On entitlements and rights, Who Cares? Scotland has a helpline, as that is increasingly an area of ask for both young people and the workforce, so there are routes there.

I also have a general interest around where employers stand in that. Under the family firm model and approach, we would expect there to be routes into being able to engage as a corporate-parent employer. That could be modelled in other ways, too.

Karyn Dunning: We do our own research on the impact that the job start payment has had. I can reference some of the feedback that we have been getting from young people who are eligible. This is going back to the 2022 evaluation and goes a little bit into our charter measurement framework and our annual "Measuring Our Charter" reports.

Young people reported improved confidence and reduced stress after receiving the payment, and they definitely felt that it helped them to manage the costs that we were referring to earlier—clothing, travel and childcare.

On the point about whether the application is simple and straightforward, and whether it is what is needed, our most recent client satisfaction survey in November 2025 showed a really low return for the job start payment, which is not unsurprising, based on the evidence that we have heard. Just 41 clients responded to that client survey in relation to JSP, but 68 per cent of them said that they rated their benefit experience as very good or good, and 71 per cent said that they were treated with dignity, fairness and respect. Interestingly, 54 per cent of young people said that they had first heard about the job start payment from the Department for Work and Pensions.

Marie McNair: Turnaround is key. I know that there have been improvements, but it is a matter of doing things at the right time and at the right place for people.

Karyn Dunning: Yes. At the moment, based on the latest statistics, the median processing time is 20 working days, but from the point of application, not necessarily from the point of supporting information. We often need to contact the young person to talk to them about the evidence that they have submitted so that we can give them the best chance of providing the information to get their application approved. That is not without its challenges. Young people do not necessarily always want to pick up the phone, especially when it is an anonymous number.

We have done some things about that route. Back in January, I was talking to the committee about telephony improvements and the use of SMS messaging. We will now do that: we will contact a young person by text message to say that we are attempting to get hold of them and inviting them to give us a day or time when we could have a conversation.

Getting back in touch with the young person and getting the supporting information that we need is a blocker and a barrier, and it extends the processing times for applications.

The Convener: Before I bring in Carol Mochan—and I note that Bob Doris also wants to come in—I have a question. The local employability partnership is key to young people and employment. Does anyone have any views about how well those partnerships are promoting the job start payment?

Graeme Hendry: We are connected to them all and I know that there are strong partnerships there. On the specific point about promoting the job start payment, I know that they are good at putting out information but there is a lot of information coming out, which is challenging. I cannot give you a precise answer but I know that the information will flow out through those channels to front-line staff.

Zara Kitson: There is often a third sector representative on the LEP, so it depends on the representatives on the LEP and the communication that flows out from those representatives to other parties, which is obviously not the same in all places. There is definitely a missing link in relation to some of the stakeholders and partners that have been listed for promotion directly to the third sector and to organisations that deliver employability services.

There is a third sector employability forum that brings together third sector providers. It is a strategic forum that is hosted by a third sector interface but it also has connections to the Scottish Government employability directorate. I do not know whether a connection has already been made with that forum but it feels as though it could be a good step towards supporting some of the communications and putting on some events with key workers who work directly with young people so that they can hear about the benefit and how to get it.

Key workers will often know ahead of the game when young people are about to be offered a job because they support them through the interview process, so those key workers are in a good position to get ahead of that application process. They will be on the phone to the young person, asking, “How did it go? Did you get the job?” and they can hit the button and get moving with this stuff.

That direct connectivity to those key workers in the system who have the relationships with young people seems to be missing at the moment. They are the ones to support the removal of barriers to awareness of the process.

The Convener: That is helpful.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): In this style of meeting, some of our questions get answered early. The points that Zara Kitson made a few minutes ago were helpful and I was thinking about the support to get the benefit. It seems to me that we should be able to immediately help people to get it rather than them having to think about applying for it. Zara said that there are barriers, so how do we break them down? Do we need different or clearer criteria so that it is easier for young people to understand what they are being asked to provide? Are you saying that young people are unable to provide the information or just that it is complicated, so they find it a wee bit tricky to follow the whole process?

We said at the beginning of the meeting that some people apply online and some do it with support. Do we know how many people who are applying online do so with support? I know that a person can attend a joint meeting with an employability person, who can help them to go through the process. Do we know any of that information?

Karyn Dunning: Sadly, we definitely do not know how many people are receiving support in the background while they are making their application. We know that 93 per cent of the applications come through. We have also amended the guidance as part of an update to encourage young people to call us if they are unsure about their eligibility so that they can have a conversation with a client adviser up front. We do not want anybody to waste their time making an application if they are not eligible. We want them to have the conversation about the evidence that they need to submit, and how to do that, either with a client adviser on the telephone, in the web chat or through our local delivery teams in the community. We do not have statistics on people sitting in the background helping but, across all our benefits, we see stakeholders and third parties supporting individuals to ensure that they have the best chance of success.

With the job start payment, we quite often need to go back and ask for additional supporting information.

10:00

Carol Mochan: Is that about a need for hard copies or is it because applicants have not worded the application correctly? Do you understand what I am getting at?

Karyn Dunning: I do. The Gov.uk guidance was amended to try to make the language simpler, but we all recognise that benefits delivery can be complex. I take Zara Kitson's point about language that resonates with young people. That can be quite difficult. There are examples on the website and we have tried to make the requirements as straightforward as possible. We ask for three pieces of evidence: one from the employer, one from the person and one that confirms the start date. They do not have to be payslips or a formal job offer, but they need to be something that gives us those three pieces of information.

With the applicant's consent, we can ask for the employer's details and whether the applicant is willing for us to contact the employer so that we can follow up if they need us to do so, if they are particularly vulnerable or need additional support. However, that is obviously a matter of consent.

To go back to your other points, we are always exploring data sharing opportunities, especially under public sector reform principles. We have talked before in the committee about whether Social Security Scotland could do more with data sharing across Government organisations or local authorities to streamline the process and make it easier. I cannot necessarily talk to that, because it would be a Scottish Government policy and the Government would do that work. We would want to feed into it and think about how, operationally, we can make the process much easier for the applicant. There are continuing discussions and opportunities in that space.

Zara Kitson: On the streamlining of the process, a lot of the evidence that you are after is evidence that our key workers would have to gather with the young people anyway, because we also have to evidence the job outcomes for funders and we have to evidence the young person's identity. We probably already have that paperwork, so we could save the young person another step of getting it together again and giving it to someone else. Those key workers could be key to streamlining the process.

I will reflect on the development awards that we distribute to young people, 617 of which were given out in the past year. The needs are similar. The young people face financial barriers. They need travel, childcare and clothing. It is a two-week process from when they apply to when they get the funding, but it is very joined up in that, often, a referral partner that we are already working with and that has a connection with the young people does the application, so the evidence is streamlined. There is definitely potential to learn from that process.

We could get a focus group with young people who have experienced the development awards process and discuss how that worked for them alongside a group who have had the job start payment to explore where there is an opportunity to streamline some of the process.

We know that young people are more likely to connect with a trusted organisation or brand. Social Security Scotland and the DWP are not necessarily in that category for young people. We need to consider what the trusted organisations or youth brands are that can support the activation of the payment if there are barriers to getting the word out through social media because of Scottish Government policy. TikTok, Snapchat and other social media channels are how we engage with young people, because we need to go where they are and that is absolutely where they are.

There are other ways of doing it, including by specifically targeting young people—I noticed that Young Scot is referenced in the evidence. There is a specific role for organisations that do youth employability work. Some of the organisations that

we have spoken about are great, but it is about doing even more targeting with the organisations that are delivering youth employment. All those organisations work to get young people into jobs, which is the key element of the job start payment. It would be of benefit to be a wee bit more intentional with some of the partnerships.

The Convener: I invite Bob Doris to come in.

Bob Doris: This will surprise you, convener, but I will forgo my question, because I am more interested to hear what the witnesses have to say.

The Convener: Oh, my! Are we putting that on the record? [*Laughter*.]

Bob Doris: Wipe that from the record, please.

The Convener: Thanks very much, Bob.

Jo, would you like to come in?

Jo Derrick: I will conclude the previous discussion with one point, which is again anecdotal. I cannot speak about the authorisation rate, but we know from what we hear from young people that we need to simplify the communication as much as possible about where the support is. As corporate parents, we know who our children are and, therefore, we know who our care leavers are. The message that comes from young people at all times is about the need to simplify the process. Too often, when thresholds have to be met, it is incumbent on people to evidence and prove their experience. We hear that message a lot, not directed towards this issue in particular but more broadly.

Things such as data sharing are important, because they are about how we change the system. It is about being the ambassador for our care-experienced young people and being able to signpost and support them by saying, "You are entitled to this and we are going to get it for you—this is how easy I am going to make it for you."

Continually having thresholds that people need to evidence is a barrier in itself. The whole point of being corporate parents is that we know our children, and we therefore know that some will engage with us and some will not. The question is about what our role is in ensuring that things are as simple as possible.

The Convener: That is a good point.

As nobody else wants to come in on the theme, I will move on to the next theme, although I am conscious of the time.

Elena Whitham: My question is about the low authorisation rates, which we have touched on, and how that issue could be addressed. I want to find out how effective the measures that were implemented following the review have been. However, as we were talking, I was also thinking about whether there is a disconnect that might be causing the low authorisation rates.

The DWP's four-week housing benefit run-on is automatic for people who are eligible for it. When I was a young person—many years ago—who was going into employment, housing payments and the question of how I would afford my rent, which I was responsible for on my own, were major considerations for me. That type of stopgap, which also existed at that time, was very helpful. It was not automatic then, but it now appears to be something that happens automatically so people do not need to chase it.

The fact that we are working with two different systems is part of the issue. The DWP holds all the information on universal credit while Social Security Scotland has a stand-alone benefit in Scotland. There is also a lack of awareness of the benefit, and the system does not automatically apply it. When benefits are automatically applied, authorisation rates obviously increase and people know more about the benefits. Could that be looked at or addressed? I do not know whether anyone else has thought about that. I just know that, if something is automatic, it will be provided to people without them having to chase it.

I will ask Karyn Dunning.

Karyn Dunning: That is fine—feel free to ask—but I do not know the answer.

As I said, the Scottish Government is exploring ways to make the process simpler. I am not at the table in those conversations, so I cannot say whether automatic payments for the job start payment are being explored. We are definitely considering ways to automate payments where we can in order to provide support with regard to eligibility requirements and to lessen the burden on applicants.

Fundamentally, if people are entitled to the money, we want them to get it. The Scottish Government absolutely recognises the need for bridging money to get people out of unemployment and into work. I will not repeat my comments on the blockers and barriers that we see with regard to the provision of supporting information, but I highlight all the work that has been done to try to make the benefit more accessible, such as changing the guidance, reducing the evidence requirements and ensuring the removal of trial shifts. Previously, trial shifts were counted as a period of employment, which had an impact on the six-month period of unemployment required under the eligibility criteria, so those shifts were removed.

However, it is quite difficult, in that young people are encouraged and supported to go for jobs and roles to get themselves into employment, but a short-term role or placement might break their six-

month period of unemployment and impact on the eligibility requirements. We are fully cognisant that that is a difficulty for young people.

Elena Whitham: Thinking about 16 and 17-year-olds, I understand that the situation is different for those who are care experienced, who do not have to meet the criteria of being out of work and on universal credit for six months. However, it is difficult for someone who is 16 or 17 and has an opportunity to take up employment but who comes from a very low-income household, as the cost of travel, clothes and so on might be a barrier.

I know that that requires a bigger discussion than what we, as a committee, are asking of the Scottish Government. However, in looking at the authorisation rates, do you feel that that is a barrier? Are some individuals not eligible because they do not meet the criteria of being out of work for six months because they are 16 or 17 and living at home? They might be applying for the payment and not meeting the criteria, so their application is not being authorised.

Karyn Dunning: There seem to be two key reasons why applications are denied—those relate broadly to the evidence requirements and to the six-month period. Someone must have been unemployed for six months—sorry; I am just making sure that I get this right.

They must have been on a qualifying benefit for a minimum of six months, and they should not have been receiving any income within those six months.

Our feedback, and what came out of the evaluation in 2022, show that that still felt confusing to people. Although steps were taken to streamline the process and make it simpler for young people to navigate, that remains an issue, and we continue to receive feedback that meeting the eligibility criteria and providing the supporting information feel difficult. Those are the two things that we hear from young people and that have the greatest impact on the approval rate for applications.

Elena Whitham: Yes, because it is very difficult for a 16 or 17-year-old to meet the eligibility conditions for universal credit as well.

Karyn Dunning: Yes.

Elena Whitham: It feels to me that there is a cohort of young people who are going to be ineligible for the job start payment regardless of whether they are actually getting support or have a job offer in front of them.

That is all from me, convener.

The Convener: Zara Kitson would like to come in.

Zara Kitson: The more we can automate the process and make it part of a seamless journey for young people, the better. It strikes me that there are two ways to do that. We could do it by automating the existing system. Alternatively, we could look to what happens with other benefits such as the training allowance, which young people receive as part of their no one left behind journey, and which is built into funding for providers. If the target cohort is young people who we are looking to support into work, I wonder whether we could get the job start payment out to young people in a more streamlined way that is part of the no one left behind journey.

The training allowance is only for 16 to 17-year-olds—it is £55 a week, but that amount is included in the funding for no one left behind journeys, and organisations distribute that money to young people as part of the conditions attached to the fund. In fact, our youth workers think that the training allowance should also be for older age groups, not just for 16 and 17-year-olds, but that is a different discussion.

10:15

Nevertheless, I wonder whether there is a way that that could be done. The end goal is that those young people have financial support to enable them to get into the workplace and get the job outcome. Social Security Scotland is one way of achieving that, but it is not the only way. I wonder whether there is another way to look at the problem that involves thinking about how we build the support into the no one left behind mechanisms, as that is where providers are in direct contact with the young people who they are supporting into the workplace. It does not need to be either/or—it could be both, trialling a mix of options to see what produces the best result for young people.

The Convener: That is really interesting.

I now invite Bob Doris in.

Bob Doris: I apologise, convener, but I am going to ask a question—I could not help myself.

The Convener: It was too good to be true.

Bob Doris: I like the idea of innovation, whether it is automation or whatever. I know that this would not work for 16 and 17-year-olds, but I am looking at the current universal credit rate for under-25s. For about a month, it is £316 for a single person. The job start payment is £331.95, so we are really talking about a one-month run-on of benefit. If someone is in the UK benefits system, the system will know whether they are under 25 and when they lose their entitlement to universal credit. One innovation could be a one-month run-on of universal credit, with someone knowing that before

they accept a job. There could then be a financial transaction between Social Security Scotland and the DWP.

I am not saying that that would work; I am just trying to make the point that we need to innovate and be cleverer about how we do this. If anyone has any other ideas, it would be really good to hear those before we come to the end of our evidence session.

The Convener: Does anyone want to come in?

Bob Doris: If not, that is okay.

The Convener: I suppose that, for the committee, it is about what we take away from the session and take forward, and focusing on solutions for getting our young people into the job market.

I will finish on this point. What one thing should we take away from this session when considering our report?

Graeme Hendry: I will offer my reflections on the conversation, recognising that some of this is outwith the SDS space. A desire to ensure that young people are at the heart of the process, and building on the advocacy that is already available to help them to access support, feels like a way forward. We know that that works in other areas—when we place the young person in the centre and the other people work around them. We need to look at how we do that in this area, too. That theme seems to have come out of the conversation this morning.

The Convener: Zara, do you want to come in? I am putting you on the spot here.

Zara Kitson: I would say something similar to what Graeme Hendry said. We know that we get things right when we focus on the journey from the perspective of the experience of young people and the outcomes that we are looking to achieve for them. When we look through a young person's lens to see what the system is like for them, we can design a better solution.

The key components are there, but the way in which those are currently stitched together is not quite right for young people. We need to take a different approach that is more solutions focused. We should definitely think about how we can automate the process a bit more, because quite a lot of it currently relies on young people being aware that they are eligible and applying for support. As Jo Derrick said, we know who and where the young people are, so we should be able to make the process a bit more automatic for them.

We have not spoken much about the role of employers today. We need to ensure that employers are aware of the job start payment so that, when they recruit a young person, they can say, "Have you applied for this? Do you know you're eligible?" There has not been much discussion about the role of employers, but that is a key element.

The Convener: The aspect of what employers can do is interesting.

Karyn Dunning: This is perhaps not something for the committee to take away, but I just make the point that Social Security Scotland prides itself on being a learning organisation. Sessions such as today's are important, as they enable us to hear from people in a way that supplements and supports the work that we do in communities and with stakeholder groups.

We are always looking for ways to improve accessibility, because we want to ensure that people who are entitled to the money get it quickly in their time of need and that it helps to support them. We look forward to seeing your findings in due course. That does not mean that we will not continue to look for ways to refine the process. I am sure that we will take away some of the stakeholder conversations and pick them up offline.

Jo Derrick: As I am the last witness to answer your question, I feel that I should finish with something profound, but that will probably not be the case.

I welcome the sort of engagement that we have had today. It is important. I have come away from this meeting knowing more about the job start payment than I did, which means that our organisation can raise awareness of it.

I appreciate that work has already been done to make claiming the payment as simple as possible, particularly from a carer's perspective. That work should continue to be done with young people, because we will then get solutions in real time about what is working for them in their lives. The process should be kept as simple as possible, and we should continue to keep in mind the responsibilities that we all have, given the commitments that we—including employers—have made about being a trauma-informed nation, keeping the Promise and being corporate parents.

I do not think that there has been a time when there has been more focus on how we can make the system work more effectively and more efficiently for those whom it is there to serve, and I think that the job start payment intersects with other things that are happening in that regard.

The final thing that I will say is that we will revisit the issue with our workforce membership and that we accept your invitation to engage further on the issue in the next session of Parliament.

The Convener: Before I wrap up, I will ask a question about the issue of employers, which Zara Kitson and Jo Derrick touched on. From the point of view of a young person who is trying to make a good impression as they start their new job, is there stigma about reaching out to an employer for advice on where to go to get help with bus fares, train fares and so on? They do not get paid in advance, so they might need help with those costs initially, but is there stigma attached to asking an employer about what benefits might be available?

Karyn Dunning: We see stigma in relation to applications for all benefits. That is why we have tried to be proactive in that regard. We are in the middle of our tackling stigma campaign, so we have quite a lot going out on social media. We recognise that social security is a fundamental human right in Scotland and that any of us could need it at any point.

Our communications and approach are very much framed in that way, but we continue to recognise that there will be issues. All that we can do is continue to tackle stigma, raise awareness and ensure that, when a young person or anybody claiming any kind of benefit contacts us, they are treated with dignity, fairness and respect and are supported to make that application without stigma. Young people sometimes feel reticent about giving us the employer information that we need to process the application, exactly because of the point that you make.

The Convener: That brings us to the end of this session. Thank you for all your evidence. If there are any points that you have not had a chance to raise, please feel free to get in touch in writing—Graeme Hendry, you said that you would provide information in writing about Project SEARCH, so thank you for that.

We will have a brief suspension to allow our witnesses to leave. I give a huge thank you to all of you again. Your evidence is much appreciated.

10:24

Meeting suspended.

10:32

On resuming—

Subordinate Legislation

Council Tax Reduction (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2026 (SSI 2026/56)

The Convener: Our next item of business is consideration of a Scottish statutory instrument, and I refer members to paper 3. The instrument is subject to the negative procedure. Do members have any comments on the instrument?

As members have no comments, does the committee agree to note the instrument?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: That concludes our public business for today, and we will now move into private session.

10:33

Meeting continued in private until 11:23.

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