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DRAFT

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

**Comataidh nan
Co-ionannachdan, Còraichean
Daonna agus Ceartas Catharra**

Thursday 8 October 2026

Session 7



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EQUALITIES, HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL JUSTICE COMMITTEE

7th Meeting 2026, Session 7

CONVENER

*Katie Hagmann (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green)

*Amanda Lindsay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform)

*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)

*Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab)

*Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Neil Gray (Cabinet Secretary for Justice)

Simita Kumar (Minister for Equalities and International Development)

Ivan McKee (Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform)

Kate Nevens (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Thursday 8 October 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:31]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Katie Hagmann): Good morning, and welcome to the seventh meeting in 2026 of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. We have received no apologies this morning; Kate Nevens may join us later.

The first item of business is a decision on whether to take items 5 and 6 in private. Are members content to do so?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Subordinate Legislation

Maximum Number of Judges (Scotland) Order 2026 [Draft]

09:32

The Convener: Item 2 is evidence on a draft affirmative instrument. I welcome Neil Gray, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice; Emma Thomson, a lawyer from the Scottish Government's legal directorate; and Heather McLean, a senior policy officer from the justice directorate. I thank them all for attending.

I refer members to paper 1 and invite the cabinet secretary to speak to the draft instrument.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): Good morning, colleagues, and thank you for having me—this is the first time that I have appeared at the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to and move the motion on the draft Maximum Number of Judges (Scotland) Order 2026.

The maximum number of judges is set out in section 1(1) of the Court of Session Act 1988. This order in council will increase the maximum number of judges of the Court of Session—also known as senators of the College of Justice—from 36 to 40. Judges of the Court of Session also sit as judges of the High Court of Justiciary.

An increase in the number of judges is required partly due to Lord Colbeck's appointment as chair of the Sheku Bayoh inquiry. Three further senators are serving on public inquiries and two hold the offices of president of the employment appeal tribunal and president of the Upper Tribunal administrative appeals chamber. Although those individuals remain judges of the Court of Session—and therefore count towards the statutory maximum set out in section 1(1) of the 1988 act—in practical terms, they are undertaking other roles and have limited capacity to carry out Court of Session and High Court business. As a result, there is a reduction in the judicial resources available to support the work of those courts.

Given the significant pressures in the High Court and the Court of Session, the Lord President requested the appointment of an additional senator, to ensure that sufficient resource would be available to manage the impact of another senator being appointed chair of a public inquiry. Although the immediate requirement is for only one additional senator, I agree with the Lord President that there is merit in increasing the statutory maximum to 40. Doing so would provide greater flexibility to respond to future pressures on judicial resources, avoid the need for repeated

legislative change and support longer-term workforce planning.

Considering the ongoing pressures across the higher courts and the increasing demands placed on senior judicial office holders, a higher maximum would provide useful headroom. The Lord President has advised that existing temporary judge resources are already being utilised to their full extent. At a time of increasing demand across the High Court, the Court of Session and the sheriff courts, further reliance on temporary judges, who are usually appointed from the pool of sheriffs and sheriffs principal, risks displacing pressures to elsewhere in the system, rather than addressing underlying capacity challenges.

Increasing the maximum number of senators will help to improve the resilience and efficiency of Scotland's courts, support the timely administration of justice, and strengthen public confidence in the court system.

I am happy to answer colleagues' questions.

The Convener: Thank you for outlining that. It is helpful to understand and appreciate the need to create a bit of flexibility, although it is clear from our papers that the draft order concerns one initial additional appointment.

I invite questions from members.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Good morning. You noted the strain on the Court of Session and the added pressure that that is putting on the sheriff courts. What measurable improvement in court capacity and waiting times do you expect from the additional appointment? Is there any evidence to suggest that that first appointment would trigger the other three potential appointments—or creation of posts, I should say?

Neil Gray: I appreciate Ms Stevenson's question, and I understand its basis. As has been well reported, I spent two and a half hours at the Criminal Justice Committee yesterday, part of which involved discussing the pressures on High Court business. The draft order will allow us to sustain the number of judges available to be called for High Court business, and it has the flexibility to allow the Lord President to come forward with a business case, should he wish, for an increase in the number of senators beyond the additional one that we are providing for in the draft legislation that is before you. It would require a business case in order to do that and confirm that.

From January 2027, we will have an increased number of High Court venues and weekly High Court sittings to attempt to address the backlog. Although that gives us the opportunity to address the backlog, the order that is before you gives us the flexibility, should it be needed, to ensure that

there are sufficient custodians of that increased business.

Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green): Thank you for coming, cabinet secretary. I have two questions. My first relates to the equality impact assessment that was provided in our committee papers, which states that the draft instrument would

"give rise to ... positive equality outcomes through increased judicial capacity, improved access to justice and opportunities to support diversity and representation"

in the workforce. Can you outline how the improvement will provide that flexibility, so that we get a more diverse court and more diverse people going into the judicial professions?

Neil Gray: That is an important matter. We want to ensure diversity of representation at higher levels across all aspects of the public sector. Appointments as senators are for the Lord President to make—that is a function that he has to dispose of. However, this measure clearly gives us an opportunity to bring greater diversity in representation.

The point that is made in the equality impact assessment about ensuring greater equality across the justice system is partly to do with the point that Ms Stevenson raised and our ability to get through High Court business better and thereby better serve victims through the faster processing and administration of the justice system. However, I absolutely take Ms Bruce's point: this is an opportunity for greater diversity although, as she will recognise, it is a matter for the Lord President to preside over.

Holly Bruce: My second question relates to the financial implications. Our papers state that the cost of appointing one additional senator will amount to more than £400,000 per year, although that

"will be offset by the Sheku Bayoh Inquiry".

Under the draft Scottish statutory instrument that is before us there might be an opportunity to increase the number of senators in the future, which would cost more than £400,000 per judge. If we were at maximum capacity, there could be an increased cost of just under £2 million to that budget. Did you consider that while drafting the legislation?

Neil Gray: We did, to an extent, although, as I said in response to Ms Stevenson, there would be a requirement for the Lord President to put forward a business case to begin the financial process to allocate the resources that would be required, and to give proper consideration to the merits of having more than 37 senators. It is for the Lord President to do that, should he feel the need, and the financial considerations that Ms Bruce raises

would be considered as part of the business case process.

Amanda Lindsay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): I understand that three senators are currently working on inquiries or other non-court duties. Is the rise in the number of senators because the courts are busier, because judges are being pulled off the bench, or because of a combination of both? Are there other changes that could be made, beyond simply increasing the number of appointments?

Neil Gray: Knowing some of those inquiries, and knowing how important it is that they should be judge led to confirm their independence, I think that it is important that we are open to public inquiries continuing to be led by judges. That is not universally required, and we have some public inquiries that are led by senior independent experts who can come forward and provide leadership support. However, continuing to have our public inquiries led by senior judges gives confidence about the robustness of the process. I am comfortable that the individuals who currently lead those inquiries will ensure that they get answers and provide truth for victims, individuals and society, so that we understand the nature of what is being investigated.

The Convener: No one else wants to ask a question, so we will move to the formal debate on the instrument. I invite the cabinet secretary to move motion S7M-01122.

Motion moved,

That the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee recommends that the Maximum Number of Judges (Scotland) Order 2026 [draft] be approved.—[*Neil Gray*]

Motion agreed to.

The Convener: Do members agree to delegate to me responsibility for the publication of a short factual report on our deliberations on the affirmative instrument?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That concludes this agenda item. I again thank the cabinet secretary and his officials for their attendance.

09:43

Meeting suspended.

09:47

On resuming—

Women's Poverty

The Convener: Our fourth agenda item this morning is our second evidence session to inform the committee's pre-budget scrutiny for 2027-28.

We will hear today from the Scottish Government. I welcome Ivan McKee, Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform and—once again—Simita Kumar, Minister for Equalities and International Development. The cabinet secretary and minister are accompanied by Rachael McGruer, deputy director for tackling child poverty. Thank you for coming along.

I refer members to paper 2, and I invite the cabinet secretary to make a brief opening statement.

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): Good morning, and thanks for inviting me to the session this morning. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the committee about public service reform and how it supports the Government's priorities, including the tackling of poverty.

Our vision is of a Scotland where citizens enjoy excellent public services that are delivered to meet their individual needs, and where the staff who provide those services feel valued and empowered to make a difference to people's lives.

As I discussed with the Public Service Reform Committee last week, a broader perspective on PSR is required that looks across several individual portfolio budgets. I know that this committee will take that approach, given the similarly cross-cutting implications of your work.

I consider our approach to budgeting to be critical to how we progress the ambitions of public service reform, given the challenges that we face due to siloed budgeting and the need to think about how we change our approach to better focus on outcomes and collaboration. That is an area of common concern, I think.

It is fair to say that public services are not working consistently enough for people across Scotland, and change is required. The programme for government set an ambitious acceleration for the work that is set out in our strategy. It sets out our commitment to ensuring that decisions are made at the right level for the greatest impact in overcoming siloed organisational boundaries.

From the citizen's perspective, it is about ensuring that public services are there when they need them. It is about better joining up across the delivery landscape, addressing preventable demand and driving efficiency. Every pound that is

spend on unnecessary duplication is a pound that cannot be spent on front-line services.

I have carefully considered many of the concerns that have been raised. It is worth setting out the link between public service reform and fiscal sustainability. The PSR strategy, which was published in June last year, sets it out. Each pillar is designed to reduce cost on different timeframes.

First, the work on efficiency looks to reduce costs over the course of the parliamentary session while maintaining service quality and availability, and a number of the workstreams address that directly.

Secondly, by our better joining up services and taking out duplication and administrative costs, people get access to the help that they need more easily, while costs are reduced.

Thirdly, indicative analysis in the strategy shows that, overall, reducing poverty by a quarter by 2030 could avoid £2.9 billion of public spend. Through tracking, prioritising and investing in prevention, we can support people to live happier, healthier lives and save money at the same time.

I have considered the evidence relating to PSR with regard to the Public Service Reform Committee's pre-budget scrutiny, including perspectives on equalities and the concerns raised. I have heard about the impact of service reductions on women, particularly those who experience poverty. It is important to underscore that reform and efficiency are not about doing less with less. They are about identifying genuine savings by addressing areas of duplication, improving procurement, exploring digital automation and better integrating services.

We have set out in detail in the strategy that better joining up of services can save money. There is a substantial human and financial cost to passing people from one siloed service to another. That can include having repeated and costly assessments and asking people to tell their stories time and again. It means that resources are not directed towards helping those people but towards assessment and administration. It is stressful and difficult for the people who access services, and it makes public sector workers' jobs harder.

It is my view that improving those services—driving that better joining up and integration—is not in tension with efficiency but is part of the solution. I am therefore ambitious about whole family support and taking a wider approach to holistic service provision.

I am committed to achieving a meaningful move to prevention and to tackling long-standing barriers to doing so through the work that is set out in the PSR strategy and in the design of the new Scottish Government prevention unit, which contains a

broad range of activities, including work on understanding drivers of demand, a new framework for investment, work on collaboration across sectors and budget tagging. As I said at the beginning, tackling siloed budgeting is a key component of that work.

For 2027-28, the preventative budget work will, for the first time, allow us to track the scale and shape of preventative intervention in Scotland and to do so in a way that is matched to outcomes. That will give us a baseline from which to monitor future activity and, along with the refreshed national performance framework, will provide a clear structure for monitoring the Government's focus on improving outcomes for citizens.

In conclusion, public services are fundamental to the Government's ambitions, and reform is about strengthening those services now and in the future. I look forward to discussing that in detail, and I can hand over to the Minister for Equalities and International Development for her introductory remarks.

The Convener: Thank you very much, cabinet secretary. I invite the minister to make a brief opening statement.

The Minister for Equalities and International Development (Simita Kumar): Good morning. Further to the Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform's opening remarks, I welcome the opportunity to set out the Government's priorities regarding women's poverty, particularly in relation to our guiding mission of eradicating child poverty.

The First Minister's programme for government sets out the key priorities for this Government and makes it clear that our number 1 priority is eradicating child poverty. We recognise that women's poverty is child poverty, and we have intentionally taken a gendered approach to our tackling child poverty delivery plan, "Bringing Hope, Building Futures", which was published in March.

The report builds on strong foundations: rates of relative child poverty in Scotland are 6 percentage points below the United Kingdom average as a result of the actions that we have taken. However, it is clear that too many children in Scotland continue to live in poverty, which is why it is so important that we all work together across the Parliament and across Scotland to deliver the change that is needed.

That is why we are taking action across Government to tackle women's poverty. As set out in our programme for government, we are investing a further £2 million in 2026-27 in our national fund to leave initiative and making the fund permanent, which will support women to leave abusive partners. We are also investing in a

new child maintenance project, led by One Parent Families Scotland and Fife Gingerbread, to help more separated families to access regular and reliable child maintenance payments. It is an investment that will primarily support lone parents, the vast majority of whom are women.

We are also investing to deliver a national breakfast club offer and are continuing to invest around £1 billion a year in early learning and childcare. That is in recognition of the fact that women are far more likely to take on childcare responsibilities and reduce their working hours to accommodate family demands. We are also progressing the work that is needed to increase the Scottish child payment to £40 for families with a child under the age of one.

Through the programme for government, we have brought forward the strongest set of proposals on tackling and preventing violence against women and girls. That is underpinned by the First Minister's commitment to providing leadership to drive change on violence against women and girls, which includes tackling the underlying inequalities experienced by women. We cannot eradicate violence against women and girls without addressing women's inequality. Our work to tackle poverty and the cost of living crisis, to increase economic opportunities and to advance public service reform are all critical to tackling violence against women and girls.

Our equally safe strategy recognises that women are more likely than men to live in poverty and that violence against women and girls sustains that situation. We know, for example, that women experiencing abuse in the home will find it more difficult to leave their abuser if they are living in poverty.

Prevention is the best route to tackling and challenging attitudes that underpin violence against women and girls. That is why we will introduce a misogyny bill, which will recognise misogyny as a distinct form of prejudice. We are increasing investment in our delivering equally safe fund to support front-line services for women and young girls. We are also working, within our devolved powers, to improve online safety and combat technology-facilitated violence against women and girls.

Later this year, we will also publish the Scottish Government's first equality strategy for women and girls, as recommended by the First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls. That strategy will help to demonstrate and drive forward the range of activities that are being progressed across Government to achieve greater equality for women and girls.

I recognise the importance of taking a gendered approach to budgeting to ensure that our

investment addresses women's poverty. Therefore, I welcomed the opportunity to meet the Scottish Women's Budget Group over the summer, and I will be reflecting the views of its members on the investment priorities for women in our budget process.

Through action across Government, including on child poverty, social security, employment, and violence against women and girls, we are improving outcomes across Scotland for women.

I very much look forward to hearing the committee's questions this morning.

The Convener: I thank both witnesses for those opening remarks. Before I open out our questioning to members, I will ask a few questions. I also make a plea for everyone to keep their questions and answers as succinct as possible, so that we can get through a range of topics.

I welcome that both of you are able to come here today. We are the Equality, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, so the first question might be: why are we discussing public sector reform? I appreciate that the cabinet secretary's opening remarks pointed out that one of the strategies aims to deliver a system that improves lives and reduces inequality, as well as delivering fiscal sustainability.

We have a range of topics to touch on. In our evidence sessions last week, we heard about public debt and childcare debt, and there was a request that different economic levers potentially be used. Members have lots of questions, but let us start with an overall look through the lens of the Equality, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee.

Cabinet secretary, in your remarks you said that reducing poverty by a quarter could avoid £2.9 billion-worth of public spending; however, my understanding is that a gendered analysis of that has not been provided. How do you see that poverty reduction work being progressed, and how can we ensure that the gendered aspects can be taken into account?

10:00

Ivan McKee: That is one data point, which was used as an example. Other work will look at it from a variety of perspectives, including gender. We can seek to pull together information on that.

It is important to recognise the key point of being able to analyse budget spend lines in terms of the impact that they are having rather than the portfolio to which they are allocated. Fundamentally, when money is spent in one portfolio or on one intervention, that has implications right across the whole landscape. It is hugely important to be able

to join up how that money impacts, understand that better and have a process of tagging all that against the Government's four priority areas, including child poverty. It will help us to understand not where we are allocating the money initially but where it is finding its way to and what impact it is having. We can then assess the relative impact of the funds that are being spent by the Government across all portfolios.

The Convener: Thank you. I will ask another question, although Collette Stevenson and Amanda Lindsay are looking to come in.

Accountability and incentive sit as part of the foundations of your work. How does the Scottish Government intend to use the revised national performance framework to inform future spending priorities? I am thinking in particular of those that are aimed at reducing women's poverty and the inequalities that drive it.

Ivan McKee: We need to look at the whole system. As I said, we have traditionally had a process in which we allocate money to portfolios, which then make decisions on how to spend it. Although I do not pretend that it is easy, we need to evolve to a process in which, in addition to that, we have a clear perspective on both how much money is being spent on prevention and how much is being spent on delivering impact across the Government's priorities.

The national performance framework sits behind that. When the new NPF is published, you will see that it is much more of a framework than what we had in the past, which was simply a list of outcomes and indicators. Underneath that, it ties to the operational metrics that are used across the system and to the strategies that are in place to help join everything up.

Effectively, we have a link between the outcomes that we want to achieve, what we are measuring daily to help to deliver those, what strategies join up and what interventions drive the improvement in the metrics to drive the outcomes. All that sits underneath the work on how to allocate resources through the budget process.

There is a whole-system approach, and the various building blocks are being put into place that should make it easier, from where you are sitting, to look at the metrics that support reductions in inequality and poverty, where the resource has been allocated to support that, and what impact is being had.

The Convener: Thank you. Outcomes and indicators are helpful, but ensuring that those are met is key. In our evidence sessions we have heard from a range of partners that the implementation does not always follow through. There is definitely further work to be done, both by

the committee and in hearing from the Government, on how that is measured.

Collette Stevenson wants to come in, and she will be followed by Amanda Lindsay.

Collette Stevenson: Good morning. I will touch on the impact of public service reform on women's poverty, but, before I do that, I will ask about child maintenance, which we discussed at our round-table evidence sessions. I put it on record that this figure was unverified, but we heard last week that reforming the weaknesses within that system, which is reserved, could potentially lift 20,000 children in Scotland out of poverty. What work, if any, have you done or talks have you had with the UK Government on that matter?

Simita Kumar: Thank you for the question. I do not know where the 20,000 figure comes from, but I can assure you that the tackling child poverty delivery plan combined package will lift an estimated 100,000 children and young people out of relative poverty. That is the first point.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that our combined support means that children from the lowest-income households will be better off by £2,760 a year. Those are the figures that I am aware of. The Scottish child payment alone will lift about 50,000 children and young people out of relative poverty.

I am not familiar with the figure of 20,000 that you quote. If it is okay with you, I will write to the committee on other aspects. I should caveat all that by saying that there are things that we can do within our devolved competence and there are things that are reserved, and I am mindful about mitigating some of the UK Government policies. However, I am happy to write to the committee on those issues and that figure.

Collette Stevenson: As I said, the figure was unverified, but I thought that it was significant. The committee will write to the UK ministers on that.

How will the Government be able to demonstrate that the public sector reform that is being undertaken will improve the lives of women, rather than transferring the costs to them in the way that we have heard about? There is a concern that the costs will transfer over to unpaid carers, families and other services.

Ivan McKee: It is important to understand and reinforce the point that I made earlier. It goes back to the Christie principles, and involves having a focus on prevention, integration and empowerment that can feed into the efficiency agenda. As can be seen from the examples that I have given, if people are spending more time having to engage with different bits of the system,

fill in various forms and communicate their information multiple times because services are not joined up, the system is not good for the service user or the staff who work within it, and it is more expensive.

Making the system more efficient by addressing those challenges allows us to allocate more resource to front-line services and support service delivery more effectively. The impact of that will be measured through the national performance framework when it is launched.

That will be much more comprehensive than what we have had in the past. It will link the outcomes to the United Nations goals, from the top-level indicators right down to the operational metrics that are driven across the system, and it will influence where resources are allocated. Over time, that will enable us to see more clearly where resources have been allocated, the impact that they are having and how we measure that through the new reformed national performance framework.

Collette Stevenson: That is really helpful. With regard to the 2027-28 budget, I am interested in the support for a no wrong door approach to delivering help with debt. The issue of stigma has been highlighted in relation to debt advice, and it is important that someone who is seeking debt advice is also helped to access benefits, council tax reductions and other support.

Ivan McKee: That relates to exactly the point that I was making. We need to join up those services, so that the process becomes seamless for the individual, who can engage with the system as a whole without worrying about those silos. Clearly, that is a large undertaking. It requires us to restructure; to inclusionally digitise; to remove silos; and to have a focus on services, not structures.

We are absolutely on a journey in that regard. The delivery of the PSR strategy has been accelerated for those very reasons. We recognise that those challenges are there, but we are determined to reform public services so that we can deliver on them.

Collette Stevenson: I have one other question. In the previous session, the Social Justice and Social Security Committee did a lot of work on economic abuse. One of the things that stood out was the issue of council tax debt, particularly for women who are fleeing abusive relationships. What action will you be able to take with councils to ensure that women experiencing poverty or economic abuse receive an affordability and entitlement check before council tax recovery escalates?

Simita Kumar: I will take that question.

One thing that we are absolutely firm about is that nobody in Scotland should have to meet a council tax liability that they cannot be expected to afford. In 2025-26 and 2026-27, we provided an additional £2.2 million of funding for Citizens Advice Scotland to support people with debt. That project promoted a dignified and empathetic approach to debt collection. We are also working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to encourage the adoption of best practice.

I am encouraged that there will be a review of council tax arrears, especially through the lens of domestic abuse. The results of that review will be communicated to Parliament by the end of this year.

Collette Stevenson: When we took evidence at the round-table meeting, we heard that things were very piecemeal in relation to local authorities. Discretion in writing off debt was down to each local authority, as was the reinforcement aspect. Will there be a more consistent approach?

Simita Kumar: That is exactly what Mr McKee has highlighted in relation to public service reform. We see an inconsistent approach, exactly as Collette Stevenson has set out. It is up to local authorities to prioritise different services but, as a result of that, we see inconsistency. We hope that, through public service reform, we can ensure consistency in the service provided, regardless of a person's postcode.

The Convener: It came across very clearly that some local authorities are very aggressive when it comes to council tax debt recovery, in a way that they are perhaps not in relation to other debt recovery. If that can form part of the approach to the local governance review and be captured as part of the wider public sector reform, that would be very welcome.

The committee also heard about four points of reserved matters, which we intend to write to the UK Government about. That letter will of course be publicly available on our website, so you will be able to see that.

I am aware that Amanda Lindsay is looking to come in. However, Fulton MacGregor has a supplementary question on this point, so we will go to him first.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I have a supplementary question on the point that Collette Stevenson made, and which the convener backed up, about council tax debt. Last week, we heard strong evidence about the impact of that, including how it

is a burden that mainly falls on women. The convener has already said that it would be good if that could be included in discussions about reform.

However, I also want to know—from the cabinet secretary or the minister—whether there have been any early talks about that and whether the Government has thoughts on that. A lot of the time, we talk about the issues around public service reform, but everybody knows that there are also opportunities. Is the Government talking about it as an opportunity to change the way that things are done in order to benefit people—mainly women—who have council tax debt?

Ivan McKee: It is a good question. PSR is all about opportunity. We look at it through that lens.

On the specific question of where we are on the matter, obviously there is the ongoing work that Ms Kumar identified in relation to the existing structure. However, Fulton MacGregor is right that, as we move towards a new structure of a smaller number of regional authorities, we have an opportunity to look at council tax recovery through that lens. Conversations are ongoing at the moment as to what powers and what funding would lie where in that structure. Once they are complete, we will be able to understand where council tax recovery should best sit in that system and what opportunities there are for a standardised approach.

That is an important aspect. Officials will feed that into the work that we are doing at the moment to understand how that structure should best reflect improvements in service delivery.

Simita Kumar: I will come in on one point that the convener and Fulton MacGregor made. Whatever we do, it has to be done in the most dignified and empathetic manner. As Mr MacGregor highlighted, the burden of responsibility, especially for women who are in domestic abuse situations, is profound. Along with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and other agencies such as Citizens Advice Scotland, we are trying to make sure that dignity and empathy are part of the picture, so we will not lose our focus on that.

10:15

Fulton MacGregor: Assuming that council tax remains as it is—which is a whole other debate that we will not get into just now—has the Government decided where responsibility for council tax will sit? Will it be with the regional authorities, or will it be a bit more local, or would it even go to the Scottish Government? Am I too early in asking that question?

Ivan McKee: That is an excellent and very perceptive question. I will stick my neck out here

and say that it would not be at the national level. We are very interested in hearing views on the issue, to understand people's perspectives on where it should sit in the local structure—at either the regional or the community level. We are very interested in hearing perspectives at this stage.

The Convener: Carol Mochan is online and has a supplementary question on council tax.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I appreciate being able to come in on this point. In the chamber earlier in the week, I asked the First Minister whether legislative changes might be required to get consistency. I hope that what I am hearing is that if we did need to make legislative changes, we might be able to do that. Does the cabinet secretary think that we might need to make legislative changes, and would there be a willingness in the Cabinet to do that?

Ivan McKee: Regarding changes through the public service reform agenda more broadly, some parts will not need legislation and others will. A PSR bill is identified as a year 1 bill, and we are currently working through what will go in that, but that will deal with things that we cannot do without legislation. As I say, we do not need legislation for a lot of the stuff that we are doing in public bodies.

The local governance piece would, of course, require primary legislation and support from across the chamber. The details of what would be in any such bill need to be worked through and would depend on the solution that we end up with on local governance. However, if any aspects of the issue that we are talking about need to be included, they would be open for inclusion in that bill.

The Convener: Holly has a supplementary question.

Holly Bruce: A couple of weeks ago, our committee considered SSIs regarding public debt and increasing fees for chasing council tax arrears. We are going to see the 55 per cent increase in council tax debt fees being passed on to households. That is embedded in the legislation. I absolutely hear members' points about councils being better at not chasing those arrears as quickly, but those fees are still being passed on to households.

The motions to annul the SSIs were unfortunately voted down, but, within the SSIs, there was a commitment by the courts to a three-year review of fee structures. Is the cabinet secretary aware of that review, and can we work together on that?

Ivan McKee: I will pass that question over to Simita Kumar because it is much more in the policy space than in the broader public service reform space.

Simita Kumar: Ms Bruce, I absolutely hear you on council tax arrears and debt collection. At the end of the day, it is about income that goes to local authorities. I reiterate that a dignified and empathetic approach is needed, and we have often seen that the ways in which we collect debt must be improved. We are working with COSLA to encourage the adoption of best practice, from the point of view of families, which you have talked about, and also in terms of debt recovery.

Along with colleagues from other portfolios, we will be considering and reviewing council tax arrears within the domestic abuse space. The review communication will be coming out to the Parliament by the end of the year. If there is anything that we can do to work together in that space, I would really welcome that. However, the review will be coming to the Parliament by the end of the year.

The Convener: The next question is from Amanda Lindsay.

Amanda Lindsay: Good morning, and thank you for coming. My first question is for the cabinet secretary. Stakeholders have told the committee that cuts are already closing some specialist women's services. Will the efficiency target fall on advocacy, policy work and campaign grants before it falls on front-line services such as domestic refuge beds and local advice services?

Ivan McKee: To be clear, the focus of the public service reform activity is precisely to ensure that resources can flow to front-line services and to make other services that support them more efficient. I would look at it from the other side of the lens. Given the Scottish Government's fiscal envelope and the amount of money that we have to spend, the focus of the public service reform work is to ensure that that money goes to the front-line services that you mention rather than to elsewhere in the system. If we did not do public service reform, less money would go to the front line as a consequence. It is about mitigating and reversing any declines in those critical front-line services by taking out duplication and systemising, digitising and so on other bits of the system that are not on the front line. That is the key focus and it is what we are about.

Amanda Lindsay: Okay. Thank you for that answer. My next question is for both of you. Which single measure in the next budget will put the greatest additional disposable income into low-income mothers' households per pound spent? What are you basing that on?

Simita Kumar: The single biggest measure is something that is already known about, which is the Scottish child payment. It is unique in these isles. I will quote again the figures I mentioned earlier. Even if we look only at the Scottish child

payment, that single element is going to lift 50,000 children out of relative poverty, but we also have a combined tackling child poverty delivery plan. With the wider package, that number jumps to 100,000 children and young people being lifted out of relative poverty.

We know that child poverty is also women's poverty, so that single measure is truly the basis of this Government's defining mission to eradicate child poverty.

Ivan McKee: It is an interesting question, because it goes to the heart of the points that were made earlier about looking at the entire Government spend across portfolios through that lens. Employability services and childcare support also have significant impacts, and the work that we are doing to join up those budget lines and understand how interventions across a range of portfolios can impact on that agenda is an important piece of the public service reform work.

The Convener: Holly Bruce is next.

Holly Bruce: I have three questions, and the first is for the Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform.

Cabinet secretary, in your opening remarks you referenced budget tagging. I am keen to hear more about that. Who in the Scottish Government undertakes gender analysis? Last week, we heard that social care was assessed as neutral in the previous budget, but many stakeholders strongly disagreed with that, because we know that the sector has a gendered workforce and that a lot of unpaid care is carried out by women. How is budget tagging being used this time around? Who undertakes that gender analysis and with what expertise?

Ivan McKee: The work that we are taking forward on budget tagging is at an early stage. The preventative work is further advanced than the tagging work across the four Government priorities, but work is happening on that. How much of that we will have in place for 2027-28 is still an open question, because there is quite a bit to be done. The work on the child poverty priority is further advanced than some of the other areas. I had a very helpful conversation on that with Ms Somerville earlier this week. We are still to work through the detail of how much of that we will be able to embed in the 2027-28 budget.

Regarding your question about how the tagging is done, officials will work through that and will present the detail to ministers. That is happening at quite a granular level, with lots of lines adding up to an overall picture. There will be a discussion about that and the portfolio that sits closest to it will have the biggest impact. There will be transparency, in the sense that the documents that

support the budget will identify which budget lines are tagged to which priorities, which are tagged to prevention and at what level. There is definitely scope for organisations, committees, members and other interested parties to say, "Hold on; I think you've got this bit right or that bit wrong and you need to look at that again."

You make an interesting point. We can assume that officials will work through a process and come up with an answer, but you are right that others may have a different perspective, so it is really important that there is a process to input that.

Holly Bruce: That is great; thank you. I have two more questions, one of which is about childcare. Last week, we heard a lot from stakeholders about how the affordability, availability and flexibility of childcare are super important for women living in poverty. We know that there is a mixed picture of childcare across Scotland, because it is delivered by local authorities, third sector partners and private providers, and we know that there is a patchwork in free at three provision across Scotland, due to council budgets being stretched. There was a debate on that in May, with one of the amendments asking for an extension of free at three so that children would get that after their third birthday. Can you give us an update on progress?

Simita Kumar: Our current offer already delivers many benefits, as you know, but it has taken time to put in place the steps to broaden our childcare support for children aged from nine months to the end of primary school. A lot of that work sits in Ms McAllan's portfolio, but I assure you that we will be consulting on and publishing a blueprint for a new childcare offer that will focus on what matters most to families.

If we focus on 1,140 hours for the moment, I can tell you that it is saving families £6,400 per eligible child, per year. That shows that things are working, but I appreciate your comments about broadening the scope. A blueprint will come out, following a consultation on what matters most to families.

Holly Bruce: I appreciate that response, but I stress that savings are made based on the time of year when children are born. The payment for childcare provision is based on term time. In Glasgow, children get that from the Monday after they turn three, but the picture is not equal across the board, which means that children who are born in March get different provision from those who are born in August. That is not fair and equitable resourcing of childcare.

My third question is about the mitigation of UK universal credit policies. Yesterday, I asked the First Minister about the young parent penalty, and about the fact that 55 per cent of children with mothers under the age of 25 live in poverty, which

is double the national average, and that under-25s are living on £86 less per month. What mitigation will the Scottish Government provide?

Simita Kumar: I again reassure you that we are looking at that holistically to ensure that the whole family support system is working. If we were to combine whole family support with breakfast clubs, transforming childcare and dealing with the two-child cap, all those policies would come together to support families. You have highlighted how the burden falls on women, and we are conscious of that. We know that child poverty is women's poverty and we are taking a whole family approach to mitigate the effects of some UK legislation.

10:30

We are very mindful of the bedroom tax, the benefits cap and the local government restrictions. We know that poverty impacts on young mums, on families with single mums and families who are from an ethnic minority background. Families with young mothers are one of our priorities. In considering any policy, we highlight priority areas, and young mums are one of those priority areas, as are women in single-parent households and women from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that. Several other members want to ask about childcare, but I will come to Meghan Gallacher first, as she has a number of questions on the subject.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): We need to talk about childcare because, as well as setting out its public service reform programme, the Scottish Government has announced a programme of childcare expansion. We have just heard about some of the challenges that families are facing with the current offering of funded hours. My first question relates to the fact that both those policies have been committed to at the same time, which means that we are having to look at things through both lenses. How does the Government intend to do that?

Ivan McKee: I am sorry—are you asking about the local governance review?

Meghan Gallacher: Yes, but also the childcare review. Those two massive policies are being introduced at the same time. At the same time as you want to reduce the number of local authorities and change the whole dynamic of local government, you want to increase the childcare offering. How do you intend to do both at the same time?

Ivan McKee: The purpose of the work on local governance is twofold. First, we want to make service delivery more joined up and more efficient

by sharing services, reducing non-front-line costs and getting more resources into interventions such as the childcare intervention that you are talking about. Secondly, we want to ensure that communities are better represented and more able to influence decisions and policies at a level that is closer to them.

The work on the governance review aims to address the barriers that are preventing us from delivering policies more effectively, so that we can create a landscape in which we are able to execute and deliver on policies for citizens more effectively, more efficiently and in a more joined-up way. That is the lens through which we are looking at the process.

The consultation and discussions that we are having at the moment are about gathering inputs from a variety of organisations, individuals and interested parties, in addition to local authorities and COSLA, so that we can understand what specific opportunities exist that will allow us to better design the outcome. As I said earlier, the PSR work gives us an opportunity to deliver better in other policy areas, rather than running counter to those.

Meghan Gallacher: I appreciate your response. One of the challenges that the childcare provision sector—especially providers in the private, voluntary and independent space—faces is the disparity between the pay of nursery staff who work for PVI providers and that of those who work in council-run facilities. Will the funding formula and, in particular, that disparity of pay, be addressed through public service reform? Will the relevant funding—this is similar to the question that Fulton MacGregor asked—be allocated nationally, rather than on a local authority basis, as it is at the moment?

Ivan McKee: That question covers several issues. I will let Ms Kumar address the disparity of pay more generally, as that relates to her portfolio responsibilities.

The funding mechanism will be worked out as part of the process of identifying what the landscape will look like as a consequence of the review work that we are undertaking. We will have to work out how, once we have reached a point at which we have regional and community authorities, the funding will flow through those bodies, what taxes will be raised, how those funds will be allocated and who should make those decisions.

The Government's allocation of the general grant to local authorities is based on a series of assessments. Such a process is ongoing at the moment, and those factors will clearly be considered when we progress the governance review work. There is clearly work to be done.

When it comes to ring fencing, the funding has to go somewhere. The presumption has been against ring fencing, as articulated in the Verity house agreement. For the most part, unless there is a very good reason not to do so, you allow local authorities to decide how to allocate their budgets. Over time, more and more of the budget has been baselined as a consequence of that.

Simita Kumar: It is important to highlight that the Scottish Government is absolutely committed to the principles of fair work across all sectors.

Ms Gallacher, you highlighted the disparity of pay between council workers and those in the private sector. I will give this answer from the perspective of my previous role as a councillor in the City of Edinburgh Council. The pay decision was a council decision based on local democracy, and the Scottish Government can allocate funding to local authorities. I know that other councillors or former councillors are present, so they might wish to come in on that.

To look at that through a PSR lens, I will go back to the earlier comment about consistency between postcodes. We need to see PSR as an opportunity to balance the consistency of services and pay. That is all up for discussion. We need to have good consultation and an understanding between the Government and local authorities.

Meghan Gallacher: I appreciate that, minister. I am also a former councillor—I was on North Lanarkshire Council.

Simita Kumar: Apologies, Ms Gallacher.

Meghan Gallacher: I know the issue well, which is why I continuously raise it. We need to do better with childcare, and I want the Government to succeed on it. We need to do so not only because it helps families with their personal income but because it allows more economic activity, which I am sure that we all want to see.

On your point about putting pay decisions to the councils, there needs to be recognition from the Scottish Government that the policy guidance needs to be changed to make it fairer for the private, voluntary and independent sector. It is not only the public sector that we need to consider in relation to public service reform; in areas such as childcare provision, the Scottish Government, through policy decisions, has engaged and brought in other partners. Please keep that in mind when you look at those particular policies, because it is really important.

I am testing your patience, convener, so I am sorry, but I have one last question. I will move from childcare to breakfast provision because concerns have been raised, by Magic Breakfast in particular, about the Scottish Government's plan to have the

policy implemented by August 2027. I want to look at provision for additional support needs schools, because that provision does not necessarily stay only within the primary sector age bracket. It can expand, depending on the needs and requirements of children and young people who are in those particular schools.

What work is the Scottish Government undertaking in that area, bearing in mind that helping children with breakfast provision in such schools will help the Government to meet its poverty pledges?

Simita Kumar: Your question is focused on the ASN element of breakfast clubs. I am quite determined that, as a Government, we look to expand breakfast clubs, but I know that it sits under Ms McAllan's portfolio, so, if it is okay, I will come back to the committee or ask officials to write to it on those specific issues. I do not have the figures in front of me because the matter is not under my portfolio, but you have made an important point in relation to children and young people with additional support needs, which I am happy to take away.

Meghan Gallacher: I am just making a brief plea, because there is an equality element to that issue as well, so cross-portfolio working on it would be hugely appreciated.

The Convener: I will jump in with a couple of questions on childcare. It is really clear why public sector reform will be so important in our deliberations. In our meeting last week, participants argued that childcare and social care should be recognised in economic policy making as productive infrastructure and potential priority sectors instead of as a cost. Has that area been explored in the public sector reform debate?

Ivan McKee: It is important to recognise that the work that we are doing is about making that visible. The policy decision about how you want to make investments is exactly that—a policy decision—but the PSR and budget work is about making that visible, so that people have the information to understand what the impacts will be and make decisions accordingly. In principle, I agree with the gist of your question, but it will come down to allocation of resources based on information that, through the change to the mechanisms, PSR can make a bit clearer.

The Convener: Having a gendered lens is so vital in this area, and childcare is often considered as just a cost. The *Official Report* of last week's meeting is available online, so I am sure that your officials have been or will be able to glean further information from that.

Before I check whether members have any questions, I have one for the minister. You have

responsibility for welfare and debt advice, and, on the subject of childcare, we heard that childcare debt is a serious burden for some women. Have you explored that area or had any input on it? Is the Scottish Government having that conversation?

Simita Kumar: That is another critical point. The Government is already doing quite a lot in the early learning and childcare space. As well as the 1,140 hours provision, we are making significant further investments to improve the affordability and flexibility of childcare, which you have mentioned. We are supporting more parents to access work, education and training. We all know that, between parents, the burden of care and responsibility falls predominantly on women, so we are absolutely resolved to ensure that we promote access to work, education and training to women, in particular. We have grown that across 2026-27 through our delivery projects, and more than 7,000 children who are most at risk of living in poverty, and their families, are now benefiting from funded or subsidised childcare activities or other activities.

Going back to the tackling child poverty delivery plan, I note that it focuses on a complete package of support and understanding how best to support women with childcare. All those things are ways to support women to go back into work, education or training, because, once we reduce women's poverty, that will have a direct impact on reducing and eradicating child poverty.

The Convener: I am conscious that a couple of members have not had a chance to come in. Perhaps Fulton MacGregor or Carol Mochan have specific questions. We will go to Carol, who is online, and then to Fulton. We will just get your sound up, Carol.

Carol Mochan: Thank you. I really appreciate all of today's discussion. I have a question for the cabinet secretary, which is about public sector reform and women in the workplace. Many lower-paid jobs are done by women, as is some of our more precarious work, where people have two or three different contracts, perhaps working in areas such as school meals provision, cleaning services or similar essential roles. There is concern that those are the kinds of posts that are most likely to be made redundant or to have contract changes. Given that most of those jobs are done by women, and women working in such areas have the highest levels of poverty, can the cabinet secretary assure us that that will not be the case?

10:45

Ivan McKee: Yes, I reassure you that that will absolutely not be the case. To go back to comments that I made earlier, the public service reform strategy and the work that we are doing is

intended to ensure that we free up resources from other parts of the system so that there are resources to continue to fund the kind of front-line activity that you are talking about and that you are right to say can be predominantly low paid and women's employment. The focus is on taking out directors and layers of management as we amalgamate organisations, because that is where the reductions are most effectively delivered. It is also about not having duplication as we join up services and—I am explicit about this—delaying structures so that there are fewer layers of management, which is more empowering for the staff and frees up more resources to go to the front line.

Carol Mochan: Do we have a defined example or wording for what the Government means by “front-line staff” and “backroom staff”? Do we have that written down anywhere?

Ivan McKee: There will be grey areas around that, so it is a guiding principle rather than a hard and fast definition, but it is those individuals who work face to face with members of the public and provide services that are essential to them. That includes all the cohorts that you identified. By our reckoning, that is the vast majority of workers in the public sector.

The focus is on shifting the balance and shifting the workforce. We have been clear about that as well. It is about shifting the resource allocation so that more resources are allocated to the roles that you identified. Clearly, as we bring 14 health boards into two, we will not need all the different director roles and there will be opportunities to look for savings in senior management.

Carol Mochan: I press you, cabinet secretary, to give us a timeline for when we might be able to see in writing which roles will go. All those staff are workers, so they will be concerned about whether they could be targeted. In the context that we are talking about, women will be fearful that their jobs could go.

Ivan McKee: The principles that I laid out are important. I have stated them repeatedly. It is important to understand them, and I expect that they would give reassurance about what will happen.

As the work advances, individual parts of the system, such as health—clearly, it will also be the situation in local government and elsewhere—will work through the details of the opportunities to redirect resources. However, the principle is important that, if you bring different organisations together, the people who deliver the day-to-day services should not be impacted but should continue to deliver those services. They might just have a different management structure over them that is more streamlined, is more efficient and

allows more resources to flow to the work that they do.

The timeline will be a function of different bits of the system moving forward on that work, but I hope that that gives you, Carol, and those workers the reassurance that you seek.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that. It is important to acknowledge the points that have been made. In the evidence that the committee received, the Scottish Women's Budget Group highlighted to us that women are far more likely to work in the public sector, use public services and provide unpaid care, which is why it is so important to ensure that that gendered lens is used throughout the public sector reform work.

Fulton MacGregor: I was going to come back in on childcare, but Holly Bruce and Meghan Gallagher have given that a good go. I have a couple of other questions that are not necessarily linked.

Minister, during the round-table meetings that we held before this evidence session, the committee heard about paternity leave and the impact that it has in other countries by lessening the burden on women. In the UK as a whole, we have a really bad paternity leave offer. It is a reserved matter, but, first, are you or any of your colleagues discussing that with UK Government colleagues in relation to tackling women's and children's poverty? Aside from conversations with the UK Government, is the Scottish Government doing anything on that now? In the 2016-21 session, I and others did a bit of work on the issue, and, although we did not have powers in that area, the Scottish Government was making a lot of the right noises. However, recently, we do not seem to be saying a lot about it, and I am not sure why. Does the Government talk about it, and, if so, what are those discussions and are there any plans afoot?

Simita Kumar: You rightly pointed out that paternity leave is a reserved matter, and paternity leave will sit with other portfolios in addition to this one. I want to provide reassurance that, within its devolved competencies, the Government is looking at the whole aspect of wider support. I am incredibly mindful of the society in which we live and the fact that women are expected to be the primary caregivers. We also need to consider how we upskill parents, and we have invested £20 million in that.

On addressing poverty, I go back to Ms Bruce's question about priority areas, such as single parents, young parents, disabled women and parents from ethnic minority backgrounds. Work is being done on all those aspects, but perhaps that is not coming across. I am really sorry if you feel that the Government is not talking about that. We

are thinking about a wider package of support to ensure that we respond directly to families' needs.

For example, the Scottish child payment is the defining and single most considered policy that we have delivered. Since its introduction in 2021, we have increased the Scottish child payment by, I believe, 180 per cent, which is remarkable. Therefore, we are doing things in response to child poverty and women's poverty.

On leave and paternity leave, I and my portfolio colleagues will be happy to write to you about our discussions with the UK Government. Anything that you and I, and colleagues in the room, can do to advocate for that and to come together as a collective voice in speaking to the UK Government will be helpful.

Fulton MacGregor: I want to clarify that I think that the Scottish Government is talking a lot about child poverty; my point was more about the paternity leave aspect, and I apologise if I did not explain that properly. I think that we could do more. I remember visiting Aviva, which is based in, I think, Bishopbriggs. I visited with Rona Mackay, who was the MSP for the area at the time. Aviva has a great paternity leave policy of up to a year, so some businesses can obviously provide better paternity leave, despite the Government's policy. I wonder whether we can do more on that, but I also take the minister's point that it is not just on the Government but is for all of us to take that forward.

On public service reform, you have addressed most of the issues, cabinet secretary, but I want to go over this point again. Public service reform gives us a really good opportunity, but I share other members' concerns, which Carol Mochan put well, that cuts or job losses—or whatever words we want to use—could disproportionately impact women and therefore children, and the Government has a target to eradicate child poverty. I know that you have touched on that and, to an extent, I am asking you to repeat yourself, but what safeguards is the Government putting in place ahead of the reform agenda to ensure that that will not be the case and to alleviate members' fears and concerns?

Ivan McKee: First, I welcome your questions on paternity leave, which is an important part of addressing the issues that the committee is considering.

On your question, I go back to what I said earlier, namely that, if we do nothing, the fiscal challenges are such that there would be pressure, and, unfortunately, the default is often to look for savings in the easiest places. Those are usually the things that are preventative—such as third sector provision—and front-line services, because they are easy to measure and, as a knee-jerk reaction, it is easier to just stop doing things. It is

to avoid precisely that that we want to rewire and restructure the system, so that it is more streamlined and more efficient. In that way, we will have lower costs and avoid resources being allocated to multiple organisations that overlap and duplicate work and provide non-digitised solutions. Engineering that out of the system as early as possible will allow more resources to be focused on the front line precisely as you talked about.

To be honest, that also requires a culture change, because it requires those leading public services to look first not at what services they need to cut but at how to streamline the services and functions that support them, so that we maintain, at all costs, the front-line services that we are talking about. That is absolutely the driving force behind what I am doing, because nothing causes me more pain, sorrow and grief than to see services in my constituency being reduced or to see excellently performing third sector organisations and others in the community not getting the resources that they need, when I know that there is inefficiency across the wider system where resources could be freed up to support those services.

Fulton MacGregor: Thanks.

The Convener: We have talked a lot about young parents, mothers and childcare. I want to go to the other end of the spectrum and think about older women, who are also particularly at risk of greater poverty. The UK Government has made announcements in relation to ending the pensions triple lock, and I would be doing them a disservice if I did not mention women against state pension inequality—the WASPI women. Work is needed in that sphere. In addition to the points that we have made generally about women and public service reform, what is the Government doing in the budget process to consider older women specifically?

Simita Kumar: As you rightly pointed out, older people come under my portfolio, and I am working with our stakeholders. I chair the older people's strategic action forum, which brings together portfolios in relation to older people—not just women. Having a wider scope is crucial, because, for example, we need to think about the impact of rising fuel costs on people's ability to heat their homes and travel. Again, Scottish Government policies, such as free travel for the over-60s, are helping. If we had more powers, including, for example, to give us control of our energy prices, that would help women, including older women, in relation to poverty.

I have always stood with our WASPI women. A lot of the matter is reserved and will be discussed at UK Government level, but I am disappointed

about some of the things that have come out of the UK Government when it comes to support for the WASPI women. I am resolute in my support for the WASPI women, and I hope that other colleagues will be doing the same as I am in continuing to advocate for them.

I am not sure whether the cabinet secretary wishes to add any other points.

11:00

Ivan McKee: I wish to reinforce those points. The betrayal of the WASPI women by the UK Government, and the U-turn on that by the UK Labour Party, has been disappointing, to say the very least, as has been recognised by those in that cohort. Likewise, the steps that have been taken on the triple lock on pensions are having real cut-through. I do not think that I am betraying any confidences in mentioning that my mum immediately called me to ask me about the implications of that. She asked, rightly, why Scottish pensioners are having to pay for something that is already free in Scotland so that the money can go to the UK Government to help it to implement a policy in England. That has absolute cut-through, and people recognise the unfairness of it. It has been a huge mistake by the UK Government to go down that route.

The Convener: For the committee's awareness and for openness, I should mention that I wrote to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister just yesterday to raise the issue of the WASPI women in pre-budget discussions.

Regarding the wider public sector reform, we are talking about both older and young women, thinking about the range and intersectionality of women, and I make a plea to keep using that gendered lens.

Kate Nevens wants to ask a question, and I said that I would come to her, but do you want to ask a supplementary, Amanda?

Amanda Lindsay: This is to follow up on something that Fulton MacGregor said about cost-cutting concerns, and it is a general question. What three women's poverty or child poverty outcomes will the reform programmes be judged on?

Ivan McKee: As I said earlier, the reformed national performance framework, which we will produce very shortly, will lay out the new set of outcomes and indicators—and, importantly, the operational measures that sit below that. Public service reform is intended to give us a structure, a system and a method of measuring, and then a process for making decisions on allocating resources, with transparency on where they will make the most impact. It is about freeing up

resources so that they can be targeted more effectively to service delivery while ensuring that citizens get the services that they expect and deserve and so that the decisions on where we allocate resources can reflect the Government's programme.

There are certain specific areas where you would want to be able to measure the PSR system per se, which involves providing information and allowing those in charge of portfolios to decide what is important for them and to allocate resources accordingly to deliver on the outcomes.

Amanda Lindsay: I understand the points about transparency and freeing up resources, but can we be any more specific about particular women's or child poverty outcomes? Are there things that you have baselines on, and are there dates by which you want to achieve a specific outcome, targeting women's and children's poverty?

Ivan McKee: There will be a whole range of indicators right across the system, and perhaps many hundreds of metrics in every part of the system, and it is important to seek to improve how they influence each other. The decisions on what the priorities are and on how to allocate resources accordingly to deliver on them come under the Government's overall priorities.

Regarding poverty, there will be a whole series of measures that the Government is focused on delivering. PSR is about ensuring that, when we make decisions on how we design the system and how we allocate money, we understand their impact on the outcomes. Those specific outcomes will be a question for the relevant portfolio.

Simita Kumar: The Scottish child payment is a fantastic example of the precise things that we are doing. We are hoping to increase the payment for children under the age of one to £40 per week in 2027-28—subject, of course, to the parliamentary process. We estimate that that payment alone will be received by and benefit about 12,000 children per year. That is a tangible example of a payment that will benefit not just our children and young people but our women.

Amanda Lindsay: I appreciate the child payment, and I certainly support it, but that is a strategy. How do we know that that actually alleviates women's and children's poverty? How do we measure that?

Simita Kumar: We have targets and measurements on child poverty. Understanding the targets on child poverty is one of the things that the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing, Ms Somerville, is responsible for within her portfolio; we are committed to delivering against those targets.

Our child poverty targets are very bold and very ambitious, but we are up for that challenge. We are also resolute about ensuring that we understand the child benefit cap. I was very pleased that the UK Government made a U-turn on child benefit being capped at two children; as we all know, the rape clause was also within that space. The Scottish Government is doing a great amount of work in relation to that issue; it is a fantastic example of tangible support and outcomes arising from policy decisions that the Scottish Government has taken.

Kate Nevens (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): My question is related to Fulton MacGregor's questions about safeguards, which is a concern for me as well. What equality impact assessments have been undertaken so far in the development of the PSR strategy? What are we doing to make sure that those assessments do not happen as an afterthought, or too late in the process to make a meaningful difference?

Also, following up on Holly Bruce's question about budget tagging, could we hear a bit more about what steps are being taken to ensure that budget information at the different stages is more transparent and accessible? That would enable us as MSPs, but also our wider civil society, to do the human rights and gender-budgeting scrutiny that we would like to be doing.

Ivan McKee: The Deputy First Minister leads on the budget process, which we are entering into just now. Clearly, some parts of the budget will not be announced in advance—for obvious reasons, that is how it operates.

With regard to tagging and the assessment of the impact of various budget lines on different aspects of the Government's programme and priorities, the committee and others will have the ability to assess and comment on how that has been done. Obviously, that process will evolve year on year, because the first time there will be things for us to learn, and then we will come back to it having taken input from others on how that process should look. However, I think that, through the budget process and when the budget is announced, you will be able to see not just the portfolio allocations, but the initial work on prevention and on how the money has been allocated to the specific portfolios. There is stuff in Ms Kumar's portfolio, the education portfolio, the economy portfolio through employability, and probably every portfolio that has an impact on this agenda and it is really important to be able to look at the budget through that lens.

The numbers are published when the budget is published, and the process will then enable people to assess how the tagging has been done. There

will be then be transparency and the ability for people to input to that process going forward.

A monitoring and evaluation framework has been pulled together to support the overall PSR work. There are many different parts to that; at least two dozen public body rationalisation projects are under way. There is work on health, social care, local governance, education and funding streams—a whole range of things is or will be going on. In each case, work will be done to pull together how it will be taken forward and the business case—the equality impact assessments will be part of that.

The Convener: Thank you very much. If there are no further questions, we will draw our session to a close. I thank the cabinet secretary and the minister for coming today. We indicated that we would follow up on a couple of points following the meeting.

11:10

Meeting continued in private until 12:15.

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

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