



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## Official Report

# WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

Tuesday 11 June 2013



---

**Tuesday 11 June 2013**

**CONTENTS**

	<b>Col.</b>
<b>DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE .....</b>	<b>807</b>
<b>FACT-FINDING VISITS .....</b>	<b>808</b>
<b>WORK CAPABILITY ASSESSMENTS .....</b>	<b>826</b>

---

**WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE**

**11<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2013, Session 4**

**CONVENER**

\*Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

\*Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP)

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab)

\*Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Simon Watkins

**LOCATION**

Committee Room 3



## Scottish Parliament

### Welfare Reform Committee

*Tuesday 11 June 2013*

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 10:04*]

### Decision on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (Michael McMahon):** Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 11th meeting of the Welfare Reform Committee in 2013. Please ensure that mobile phones and other electronic devices are switched off, please.

We have received apologies from Iain Gray and Kevin Stewart, and Kenny Gibson is attending in place of Kevin Stewart; I welcome him again to the committee.

Agenda item 1 is to consider whether to take in private item 4, under which the committee will consider its approach to the scrutiny of the Scottish Government's 2014-15 draft budget. Do members agree to take item 4 in private?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Fact-finding Visits

10:05

**The Convener:** Under agenda item 2, members have an opportunity to report back to the committee on their recent fact-finding visits to local authorities. The committee has conducted a series of fact-finding visits to Department for Work and Pensions and Scottish Government welfare reform pilots that are based in local authorities. The pilot areas are experimenting principally with support services before welfare reform changes are introduced from October 2013.

At its meeting on 26 March, the committee agreed to visit all six pilots, along with West Lothian Council and New Horizons—Borders. Visits to Dumfries and Galloway Council and New Horizons—Borders are planned for the near future. To date, there have been fact-finding visits to Aberdeenshire Council, Dundee City Council, North Lanarkshire Council, South Lanarkshire Council, West Dunbartonshire Council and West Lothian Council.

I will invite representatives from each of the fact-finding visits to report back to the committee on their findings. Will Alex Johnstone, who was in Aberdeenshire with Kevin Stewart, take us through his impressions of the situation there?

**Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):** Thank you very much, convener.

I had contented myself with the idea that I would let Kevin Stewart do the talking, as I usually find that to be the most comfortable approach, but I will have to say a few words, as he is not here.

Aberdeenshire Council is taking forward its pilot in a very engaged and constructive way. It has put in place opportunities for people to claim housing benefit and council tax reduction. It is also possible for people to use their assessed entitlement to claim free school meals, school clothing grants and single person discounts.

The project went live on Tuesday 21 May, and the council has already gained considerable experience of people who have begun to interact in that way. It is interesting that it has found that there are individuals who are choosing not to complete the process to assess their entitlement. There are also cases of people who engage in the process and come back to it over a period of time before completing it. A considerable amount of experience is therefore building up.

The council has chosen to use an off-the-shelf software package rather than build a system for itself. It has found that that works effectively and is an extremely cost-effective way to go forward, given that there is a fairly limited cost associated

with running the software. The system is integrated into the council's website.

The council still requires signatures to go on applications, which is slightly complicated, but it hopes to get to the point at which online applications can be dealt with without a signature. I think that a legal issue has to be sorted out before it can do that.

The council is simply allowing people who can access the necessary equipment and broadband connection to apply online, but it has plans to roll out support in libraries. It is even considering the possibility of changing or improving staff skills in order to support that work. It will have available individuals with the necessary equipment who can visit people in their homes to go through the online applications with them, if that level of support is required.

The experience so far is that the council believes that the interactions that have taken place are positive, and it has plans in place to have much broader interaction with people to support them in the online application process.

**The Convener:** Thanks very much.

If members agree, we will listen to all the reports and then have a general discussion about the information.

Annabelle Ewing will report back on the visits to Dundee City Council.

**Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP):** Thank you, convener. Good morning.

I attended Dundee City Council yesterday on behalf of the committee. Heather Lyall from the Scottish Parliament information centre came along as well. We met the chief executive, the director of housing, key council officials, Ken Guild, who is the leader of the council, and the convener of housing. We obtained a general overview of what they are doing and then focused on certain specific issues.

We were told that welfare reform has a very high priority in the council. A while back, the council formed a corporate working group on welfare reform that is made up of senior council members and staff to co-ordinate across the services seven workstreams, on universal credit, council tax reduction, the social welfare fund, the personal independence payment, housing services, supporting initiatives, and employability and learning. There are monthly meetings and there is good involvement with local DWP staff, although there was a comment that there was perhaps less helpful involvement with the DWP centrally. People are working across departments and all services to provide the structure and the service.

All members of staff across the council have had or will receive basic training on the impact of welfare reform in the form of a mandatory e-learning module, which will be shared with local housing associations. As a result, any front-line member of staff should be able to signpost and make appropriate referrals to other council services as appropriate. The key point is that the module is for all members of front-line staff and not just those specifically involved with welfare issues.

The council has been working in partnership with other organisations, including local voluntary organisations and health services. It has also been working with local credit unions and has taken a very strong stance against payday loan companies. For example, there is no access to such companies through the network of computers to which there is access in local libraries.

The council offers bespoke welfare reform action plans. An individual will have an initial, face-to-face meeting at which they will provide basic information, such as their name, address and date of birth, the number of people in the household, the benefits that they receive—as far as they are aware—and so forth. As a result of that information, they will be cross-referenced to welfare rights, money advice, housing options or employability services. The key point is that that meeting is short, direct and not intimidating for the individual claimant, who does not have to bring lots of pieces of paper with them. The computer programme is set up in such a way that there are early triggers that point people to other services in terms of information that would then need to be obtained and so forth. It seems to be a very user-friendly approach and the staff certainly enjoy doing the work.

I did a test welfare reform action plan, which I have a copy of here. Its personalisation is a help because the person is not simply presented with a generic document full of gobbledygook; they are presented with something that will help them to take the necessary steps to ensure that they get any help that they are entitled to receive.

In terms of communication, cards such as the one that I have here can be found throughout the city, and there is a dedicated website and a single phone line for the first point of contact for welfare reform advice. There are book cards in libraries, because the library service will be used quite extensively. The council has beefed up the computer presence in libraries and will seek help from voluntary bodies to assist in libraries. Computer presence has also been increased in council buildings across Dundee.

Obviously, the bedroom tax is a specific issue. The time that it would likely take to fill the gap between one-bedroom properties that are

currently available and the demand for those further to the welfare reform changes is about eight years. The council anticipates underoccupancy penalties of about £2.1 million per annum. The council's discretionary housing payment fund sits at £461,000 and consists of £311,000 of grant, which the council has topped up with £150,000. As a result of the gap between available funds and demand, the council is having to ration DHP.

The council is concerned about the move from disability living allowance to the personal independence payment, which it sees as a particular challenge. About 8,000 people of working age in the area are currently on DLA, and many of those are on the lower rate. In that regard, there may be a problem with the PIP, because many will lose out.

The concern is that the stress of the situation may worsen those people's conditions and place additional pressure on health and social work services. The DWP has erroneously been advising new clients to wait until June to claim for their benefit, but the council has picked up the fact that that was incorrect information.

10:15

The council also anticipates specific challenges with universal credit, because the payment is to be made to one member of the household. It has liaised with the local police to discuss potential impacts and problems in week 1, when the money comes in, and the fact that there could equally be a problem in week 4, when in many cases the money will have been spent.

The chief executive said that the Scottish welfare fund was implemented for the start date and is being applied according to the legislation, but the council has found that there has been a need to divert staff to deal with the changed system and that the process is quite intense. As a result, other issues are perhaps not receiving the attention that they would otherwise have had.

With the Scottish welfare fund, the council's focus has been on trying to avoid providing hard cash. For example, it is looking to provide furniture, bedding and electrical goods in connection with Transform Community Development. That will happen in the next wee while. In cases of fuel poverty, it sends in the energy efficiency team to look at the household's energy efficiency. The council will also help with debt advice and rescheduling of debts. Some people have managed to write off their debt—that is an example of good, concrete, practical help delivered through the Scottish welfare fund system.

The council is concerned that the increased pressures of the bedroom tax in particular and the welfare reform changes in general, and the increase in rent arrears that is likely to happen—indeed, it has already happened—could erode all the good work that has been done by the housing department, especially with regard to homelessness. It is also concerned about meeting the Scottish housing quality standard in 2016, because the target is to do with energy efficiency and money is not coming in that would have been expected to come in.

There is concern about the definition of secure accommodation and the exemptions for temporary accommodation, as the committee has already noted. The council said that David Mundell had met its committee and had promised to come back with answers to various queries that had been raised, although thus far he has not replied with that outstanding information.

Finally, on welfare rights, the council is seeking to ensure the earliest possible intervention, as the roll-out of welfare reform takes place, with the anticipated further challenges that that will entail. The earlier the intervention it can institute, the better, as far as the council is concerned, because it can already flag up problems that are coming down the line and it wants to anticipate and mitigate further problems with changes, thereby mitigating the further challenging impact that welfare reform will have on its tenants.

**The Convener:** That is a comprehensive report. Thank you.

Linda Fabiani and I went to the joint meeting with North Lanarkshire Council and South Lanarkshire Council. Linda, would you like to give some feedback on that?

**Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP):** Yes, of course. I will start off; you might have something to add.

We had a joint meeting with North Lanarkshire Council and South Lanarkshire Council, involving officers and elected members of the councils and partners such as Citizens Advice Scotland. There was also an organisation whose name I cannot remember that ties in with the work to make sure that people maximise their income as far as possible. The meeting also included those who were in charge of the digitalisation pilot in South Lanarkshire.

The context must be recognised. Lanarkshire has high levels of deprivation and social housing, so most of the discussion was about the bedroom tax. One of the key challenges is the complete inadequacy of the discretionary housing payment; that is a big issue. Both councils felt that they were using up very quickly discretionary housing payments in perfectly justifiable cases, and they

were concerned that other justifiable applications would come in.

Another challenge is the lack of suitably sized housing stock. Over the years, councils and housing associations have been supplying houses that allow people to stay in them for a long time—meeting the housing needs of growing families, for example. If we are talking about moving people into one-bedroom houses, there is a lack of suitably sized housing stock. Welfare reform has additional costs.

It was recognised that partnership working is absolutely essential. We had all the partners around the table, apart from—I noted—housing association representatives, although we were assured that local housing associations and the councils are working together.

The overall aim is to get to people early to forestall some of what is coming down the line that might mean that they end up going for crisis services. There was also a recognition that some of the necessary work could not be carried out overnight and that this is a long-term process. Those working in the field need detailed knowledge of what is going on as well as a lot of patience, empathy and understanding.

The direct costs of welfare reform to both councils and the money that has been lost to the local economy, which is part of the wider issue, is in the millions of pounds, but there are an awful lot of indirect costs, too. One of the issues that came up was the good housing and allocation policies on which the councils and housing associations have worked over the years to match the profiles of their communities. I completely refute what Mr Iain Duncan Smith said at our meeting with him when, to paraphrase, he said that Scotland had badly managed its social housing for decades. The policies were more about building communities and meeting people's needs in the short, medium and long term.

Let me give an example that will make that clear. South Lanarkshire Council has long had a policy of not putting children who are under the age of 14, I think, in high-rise flats because those who live there are generally quite elderly and that can cause some problems. If a potential exchange for a two-bedroom high-rise flat comes up, the council's allocation policy will not allow a family with a baby who are in a one-bedroom flat elsewhere to move in. However, that might leave the people who are seeking the exchange from the high-rise flat in a position where they could get into debt and perhaps lose their house in the longer term. There are a lot of issues around allocation policies. The councils will be looking for other sources of money to help.

There is a real concern about how those councils will shoulder the burden of the costs. There have been pilots but the councils recognise that there is more to come down the line and that the situation is going to go on for a long time. Indeed, I got the feeling that the councils were working hard to mainstream some elements of the bedroom tax in recognition of the fact that it will be in place for a long time. However, both councils have already noted a rise in rent arrears—including first-time rent arrears—as a result of the tax.

The concern was raised that, because of the profile of the residents, councils would be able to meet some of the costs only by considering rent rises. That would mean that those who are already paying full or partial rent would have to shoulder the burden of some of those costs, which could lead to a degree of resentment among tenants, because rents may have to increase without a corresponding improvement in services or housing quality. As Annabelle Ewing said, that has led to concerns about the commitment to meeting the Scottish housing quality standard, so the financial implications of welfare reform could have a knock-on effect in that respect.

With regard to digital exclusion, there was a marked view that there were expectations about how many people would be digitalised and how many would be comfortable with that. However, the forms that must be filled in online and the work that must be done are complicated—even those who can find their way around a computer and do some work online have found the forms to be very difficult. More work will be required in communities than had originally been suggested.

Heather Lyall has included in the summary of our visit a lovely phrase that was used on the day. The local authorities said that they have a shared interest with the DWP—which they obviously do—and that they have to work together, but they wanted to make it plain that they and the DWP did not have a “shared ambition”.

We had some additional questions. We have heard an awful lot about how people can just take in a lodger, and then all will be well and there will be no problems. We discussed that a great deal, and there is an understandable reluctance among residents and tenants to take in lodgers. There are real issues with regard to a single woman with a spare bedroom or a family with children taking a stranger into their home. We asked whether we could have a case study on the knock-on impact of someone taking in a lodger, because it is all very well to say to them, “That will help you to pay the bedroom tax”, but there are other issues.

A couple of case studies have been sent to us, but I am still trying to get my head round them because I am finding them quite difficult to



understand. I do not know if you are too, convener. I am not sure that they look at the issue in the round.

**The Convener:** The issue concerns the financial aspects, once the contribution is taken into account—

**Linda Fabiani:** Yes, and the tapers and everything else.

**The Convener:** The issue is the impact on benefits, so it is not straightforward.

**Linda Fabiani:** It is not as straightforward as it looks.

**The Convener:** That highlights the complexity of what we are dealing with.

**Linda Fabiani:** Absolutely.

**The Convener:** We have heard the simplistic response that taking in a lodger is a solution to the problem, but when we look at the complexities that are involved in doing so, it is clear that it is far from a solution.

**Linda Fabiani:** Exactly, and I think that the committee needs to do a wee bit more work on looking at that.

It struck me that we can have all the case studies we like along the lines of how much a person will lose or gain, but that takes no account of other household costs. The tenant might not be feeding the lodger, but that person will be using their gas, electricity and hot water—all those things—so bills will rise.

We were also reminded that housing benefit claimants are not necessarily in receipt of the full benefit. Real concern was expressed for those who are on the margin and get a wee bit of housing benefit, especially if rents have to go up so that councils can meet other costs.

People fall into and out of housing benefit, and some get partial housing benefit. We all wanted a clear recognition that an awful lot of people who get housing benefit are in low-paid employment. They pay most—or at least a bit—of their rent, and get a bit of help when things are not great. We have asked for a breakdown of the number of claimants who are on full rather than partial housing benefit, but we do not have that information yet.

10:30

Another interesting point that came up was that staff who deal with housing benefit now have to deal with council tax issues as well, and universal credit is coming in. Council staff are used to dealing with housing benefit but they are not used to dealing with all the rest, so there is an on-going staff training programme. If those staff have to be

used in other areas, there can be a knock-on effect on councils' working practices.

All in all, the meeting was really interesting, but it raised more questions than it answered. A bit more work needs to be done, and there needs to be on-going monitoring.

**The Convener:** Again, that was a very comprehensive report. Thank you very much, Linda.

Yesterday, Jamie Hepburn and I were at West Dunbartonshire Council. Does he want to give us feedback from that?

**Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP):** Certainly, convener. I place on record thanks to West Dunbartonshire Council, which gave us quite a bit of time and provided a number of senior staff and folk who work on the front line in West Dunbartonshire.

The council is involved in one of the DWP pilots, which is to assess the impact of the introduction of universal credit. Concern was expressed about whether the pilot will have a meaningful impact on the implementation of universal credit and what lessons might be learned. That ties in with stuff that we have heard elsewhere. To be fair, the concern was not so much about the evidence that is being gathered, because the council was fairly clear that the DWP is in regular dialogue with it and seems to be listening to what it says; the concern was more to do with the pilot's timing. The council hopes to extend the pilot, which is meant to finish in September. It has asked the DWP for an extension, which is being considered.

A number of general concerns were raised about the introduction of the welfare reforms, including concerns about the digital by default agenda. We heard that the latest available figures indicate that less than 30 per cent of West Dunbartonshire households have access to broadband. It was suggested that many people who present for support with upskilling and getting into the job market do not have any level of information technology skills.

Another interesting point was that the council has a focus group that works with its client base. Concerns were raised about the digital by default agenda in relation to the privacy and security of using the internet generally and where information might go. Concern was also expressed about how information can be kept secure when people use the internet in public locations and on computers that might be shared.

There was concern about the enormous culture shift of the move to the single monthly payment. People are used to regular smaller payments when budgeting. There was also concern about the impact on the council of the direct payment of

housing benefit, which we have heard about many times.

Concerns were raised about the appeal process for employment and support allowance. It was suggested to us that some 72 per cent of appeals that West Dunbartonshire Council takes forward for those who ask for its help are won. That figure is fairly steady, and that high level of success suggests that there is something wrong with the DWP decision-making process. The concern is that that will continue when the welfare reforms are fully put in place.

There was much comment about the research that the committee commissioned from Sheffield Hallam University, which identified West Dunbartonshire as one of the hardest-hit areas from the loss of payments. There was concern about the impact on the various local economies in West Dunbartonshire.

Concerns were expressed about the pressures on council services. Like most councils, West Dunbartonshire Council has topped up its pot of money for discretionary housing payments. In my handwritten notes, I put down “£500,000”—I think that that figure is correct. The council had had about 600 applications by the first day of the scheme and it expects its funds to be fully committed by September. Concern was expressed about future years. We know that the money that the UK Government provides for discretionary housing payments will be further squeezed, and the council is concerned about the pressure that might come to bear in future years.

It was suggested that it is taking a while for people to realise that the Scottish welfare fund is there and for demand to pick up, but the council was pretty clear that there should be enough funds to cover need in West Dunbartonshire, unlike the position with discretionary housing payments.

The council has had to build—I think—£500,000 into the housing revenue budget for bad debt. That follows on from the concern about the impact on the housing budget. The council expects increased pressure on social work and education services and reduced pressure on leisure and recreation services such as libraries and leisure centres.

The council mentioned that it is involved in trying to establish a food bank in West Dunbartonshire. Anecdotally, it is aware that people present to it who have been taking food out of skips at local retailers when they close. Such folk tend to have been sanctioned. The council wanted to put that on the record as a concern.

Given all those concerns, I should point out—I am sure that you would back this up, convener—that a lot of good work seems to be going on to mitigate the worst effects of welfare reform,

especially in advice services and the services that try to upskill folk and get them into employment. The council reported a high level of success through its employability programme. I think that it has got about 500 people into work over two years, which suggests quite a high level of success. However, the concern is that, as the welfare reforms come through, sustaining that will be more difficult.

One last suggestion is worth mentioning, because it seems to be quite innovative. Members will recall that I mentioned the council's concern about the huge culture shift of the switch to single monthly payments of universal credit as opposed to regular payments of different benefits. The council mentioned that it has changed how it pays its staff—it used to pay them more regularly than monthly. Although the council will pay its employees monthly, it has worked with local banks to come up with a way for the banks to provide another type of account, from which people can draw down money more regularly, so that the change does not have a discernible impact on staff.

The council suggested that something similar could be done with the banks for universal credit so that, although a person will get a single monthly payment, they can draw down money at the bank more regularly, which would be more akin to the pattern of payment that people get now. That is an innovative suggestion. I do not know how practical it is, but it might be worth while for the committee to consider it.

**The Convener:** That is certainly an interesting suggestion. The council has worked hard on its approach and we have asked it to update us on progress. We have also asked it for additional information on other aspects of the work that it is undertaking.

That brings us to our final report back. Annabelle Ewing was with Iain Gray at West Lothian Council.

**Annabelle Ewing:** At the meeting with West Lothian Council that we attended some weeks ago, we met the head of finance and other senior officials, as well as some relevant councillors. We heard some very interesting presentations. The council estimates that the overall impact of the changes will be about £57 million in 2014-15.

The council has taken a proactive approach by establishing a welfare reform working group, which has several work streams: universal credit; the bedroom tax, which—Alex Johnstone will be impressed with this—was diplomatically referred to as “size restrictions”; the Scottish welfare fund; personal independence payment; and council tax reduction. The council is feeding all that work into its anti-poverty strategy so that a single, common

approach is taken, with each work stream working across services. Elected members receive a report on progress each quarter.

Through a variety of work, the council is building up an enhanced picture of its clients, to ensure that information about the changes is communicated to them. For that, the council uses social media, in particular Twitter and Facebook, and it has set up stands in shopping centres to reach as many tenants as possible. I believe that attempts to communicate by letter have tended to have quite a low response rate—Dundee City Council also mentioned that—so West Lothian Council is trying other ways to ensure that, when possible, tenants are given the opportunity to have face-to-face meetings.

On digital exclusion, West Lothian Council said that just over 50 per cent of its tenants have access to the internet. That is an astonishingly low figure—much lower than one might expect in the 21st century—so that is a major issue. To improve internet access, the council has come up with a digital inclusion action plan, for which it has applied to the Big Lottery Fund for funding.

One aspect of the welfare changes that the council is particularly concerned about is the need to maintain and resource the framework for localised claimant support. The DWP is supposed to do that, but the concern is that the resources are not being made available. Given the low level of digital access, such support will be an important element in ensuring that people receive the right entitlement.

The council expressed concern about the fact that the pilots will run beyond the implementation date. Although the findings of the Dunedin Canmore Housing project are not in the public domain as such, it is believed that the project was extremely resource intensive. There is general uncertainty about roll-out, about what might happen as an upshot of the pilots and about the timing of universal credit, which seems to have been put on a different path. There is a lack of information from the DWP about when universal credit will be rolled out.

The council reported that the Scottish welfare fund is working fine. Demand is considerably lower than it was expected to be at this point, but the council expects demand to increase over time. The council has provided ways of helping people beyond simply handing out cash. For example, if white goods and furniture are needed, they are provided through a local supplier at what I believe is a very reasonable cost. A feature of all councils seems to be that they are using the Scottish welfare fund innovatively to help people in a way that is sustainable over the longer term—it is not just a revolving door.

For the discretionary housing payment, West Lothian Council receives a grant of, I think, £180,000. Applications for the DHP have increased significantly. Obviously, there are huge concerns about what will happen next.

10:45

The council estimates that the bedroom tax—which it refers to as size restrictions—will cost it about £2 million a year. It wrote to tenants, but there seems to be poor engagement on that basis, so it has been engaging in other ways.

The council has plans to build about 1,000 homes over the next four years, and the plan is to provide for smaller accommodation, but I guess that discussions are still on-going about how that is to be worked out in practice. The council is aiming to get a more general assessment of all welfare changes, with a consideration of housing profiles and, therefore, direct and indirect impacts.

Obviously, there is a concern that the welfare changes will threaten the delivery of existing council priorities, including the early intervention strategy, which faces particular challenges.

The council feels that it is doing all that it can to mitigate the direct impact of welfare changes but that it is difficult for it to mitigate the indirect impact. It wants to look at data about issues such as criminal justice matters, employment and education, so that it can consider the services that it provides in the round. It is working out ways in which it can gather data that will be meaningful as it makes decisions. The welfare reforms are seen as affecting every aspect of the council's work.

The council faces all the unknowns that we have discussed, such as the migration arrangements from DLA to PIP, the roll-out of universal credit and what will happen to the Scottish welfare fund a couple of years down the line.

Concerns were expressed about the DWP being a bit prescriptive about the ways in which the council can deliver support services, information about services and so on. There was also concern about staffing issues, such as the potential impacts on other staff of some staff being used for other purposes.

A few other issues were probably raised, but I think that that covers most of the meeting. Both the meetings that I attended were good.

**The Convener:** Colleagues have shown that a lot of work is being done in the pilot studies. The information will be invaluable. Of course, whether the DWP takes any of that on board remains to be seen. Certainly, we will want to do something with the information. Common themes have arisen, but each pilot has also brought out individual issues. For example, on digital inclusion, South

Lanarkshire Council and West Dunbartonshire Council identified that the lack of access to computers and systems is a problem and that it is resource intensive to try to identify at the earliest opportunity people whom they need to involve in the process.

South Lanarkshire Council commented that, once it had established links with people, it found that people engaged with it and tried to work the system effectively. However, West Dunbartonshire Council, which identified a problem with literacy, said that, even when it engaged with people, it was difficult to get them involved in the process. If we can draw out the common themes and individual issues and pull them together in a report, that will be useful.

One thing that struck me yesterday and which the deputy convener mentioned in his feedback was that, when the council officials talked about their experiences and things that have emerged as they have worked to address the welfare reform changes, they established a picture of people in their area waiting at the back of supermarkets to raid skips and pick up food to feed themselves. I had to pinch myself when I heard that, because it beggars belief that that is happening under any system.

Regardless of the direction in which we believe welfare reform should go, it should surely not take us to a situation where people have to raid skips at the back of supermarkets to feed themselves and their families. That is abhorrent. Whatever is broken in the system, that has to be fixed. That is the most appalling thing that I have heard in many a long day in the Parliament. If we cannot address that problem, we are failing. We need to start looking at that type of issue to see exactly what lies behind it. That cannot be acceptable in any modern society in this day and age.

I ask Kenny Gibson to make a few comments.

**Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** As a substitute member, I was not on any of the visits, so it has been fascinating for me to listen to what has been happening. For me, the most interesting thing is the incredible variation in the methods by which local authorities are dealing with the welfare reform agenda and the difficulties that it presents. I was struck by the number of ideas, the innovation, the dedication of local authorities and their staff and the flexible way in which the issue has been addressed.

Your idea of a report is excellent, convener, because it is important that we feed back what has been picked up from the six visits, not just to the six authorities but to all 32 and, indeed, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. There is an opportunity for local authorities to consider what other local authorities are doing. The

committee almost has a co-ordinating role. Its work shows that some councils are addressing the matter in ways that other councils might not have thought of but could pick up on. Other councils could adopt those methods and, where necessary, adapt them.

I share the convener's concern about people having to raid skips in West Dunbartonshire. That shows the flaws of the whole welfare agenda, full stop.

**Jamie Hepburn:** Kenny Gibson's suggestion is helpful. I wonder whether it would be in order for us to pull together a report. I do not suppose that it could be a formal report, because we have not gone through the process of a formal inquiry, but it would be helpful to pull together some sort of report that draws together all the evidence. My only suggestion is that we still have two visits to make, and we should probably wait until we have gathered all the evidence. Once that is done, the clerks could perhaps pull something together that could be presented to us early upon our return from the summer recess. We can take it forward then.

**The Convener:** That is what I was suggesting. A lot of work has been done and the clerks who were on the visits with us have compiled some documentation. We will also get additional information from all the places that we visited. We might not necessarily come up with recommendations, but we could certainly compile the information and identify themes and issues that have arisen.

**Jamie Hepburn:** Even without recommendations, the stuff that we are getting more or less speaks for itself.

**The Convener:** Yes—almost.

**Alex Johnstone:** From listening to the reports, it is obvious that the experience differs in different areas. I agree with Kenny Gibson that there is an opportunity for best practice to be shared. However, there is more than one potential reason why the experience is different in different areas. It could well be that the reliance on welfare differs in certain areas and that, consequently, there is a different impact when the reform process takes place.

The feedback from the visits included the suggestion that some councils do not share the ambition of the Department for Work and Pensions. It was also suggested that the welfare reform process may cut across council priorities. That indicates to me that there is, at least, a suggestion that some councils may have an ideological objection to the changes. Consequently, some councils may be more active than others in trying to making the system work.

I want to ensure that, while we look at the feedback, we see whether there is any evidence that success is occurring in the areas where council engagement is greatest and that some of the difficulties are concentrated in areas where the political objection to the process is most notable.

**Linda Fabiani:** I have an ideological objection to the aims of welfare reform, which is leading to people scrabbling around in skips to find food to eat. Although I get what Kenny Gibson and Alex Johnstone said about the need to look at best practice because we must do our best to mitigate the impact of the reforms to make them as painless as possible for those who are directly affected, we should not lose the feeling of the committee—whatever it may be when we discuss these things—about what is happening to people in our communities and our country. If the committee wants to send a strong message to the DWP, which is having to work to the coalition Government's ambition—this is not about the officers and others who work in the DWP—it should do so. I do not share that ambition and I recognise why North Lanarkshire Council and South Lanarkshire Council do not share it.

There are two strands to our work. We can disseminate best practice as far as we possibly can, but we must also clearly lay out the impacts of welfare reform on our communities. If one impact is that people are going to food banks or looking for food because they have been sanctioned—as we have heard in evidence, that does not always happen fairly—the committee should be making a big noise about that.

**Annabelle Ewing:** It is not helpful for Alex Johnstone to suggest that, if individuals at their workplace have particular views privately, somehow they are not doing their job.

**Alex Johnstone:** You misunderstand my point.

**The Convener:** Alex, let Annabelle make her point. I will let you respond to it.

**Annabelle Ewing:** What I took away from the visits to West Lothian a couple of weeks ago and to Dundee yesterday is that both councils have been mobilised to do their best for all the people to whom they provide services across their areas. Staff in all departments have bought into that. They are working to ensure that people are helped and they are looking into whether there is something out there to which people are entitled but that they are not getting, so that they do not lose what is a big part of their weekly income through no fault of their own.

On cutting across council priorities, the point was made that there is a danger that good priorities that are in place—Dundee City Council is dealing successfully with homelessness, for

example—will be undone by the impact of the UK Government's welfare reform.

On housing policy, it was explained at yesterday's visit that one-bedroom properties are sought by many individual males. Over many years, the point of housing allocation policy has been to have mixed communities. The suggestion is that, in order to meet the ridiculous tax that the UK Government is imposing to tackle a problem that does not exist in Scotland to any meaningful extent, we must change our housing policy allocations to meet that one policy.

It was suggested that there is no definition of a bedroom in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010. However, that does not really take the councils any further. It seems that we are back to the old light tax in the 19th century, because of which people bricked up their windows. If councils were to seek to make designations where bedrooms were walled up, we would not be making changes to just the odd property; we would be making changes to all properties falling within that category throughout the council area. In turn, we would have ridiculous posturings whereby we could not house people in accommodation that would fit them because it had been reclassified and we would not be allowed to do that.

That is the point about welfare reform cutting across council priorities. It particularly relates to housing, but it also relates to the very important early years intervention, and early intervention in general, which is identified as a key way forward in delivering public services in Scotland. The policy is cutting across priorities that have already been identified and policies that are already in place. For both the councils that I visited, that is a major concern.

11:00

**The Convener:** I will let Alex Johnstone respond to Annabelle Ewing's point and I will then ask Jamie Hepburn to make the final comment.

**Alex Johnstone:** At one point, Annabelle Ewing appeared to suggest that I had suggested that the opinions of individuals within councils at any level are influencing the way in which the policy is being implemented. That is not what I suggested. Furthermore, I did not intend in any way to suggest that individual councils are either failing in their duty to implement the changes or implementing them in a way that is inappropriate.

What I was suggesting is that there appear to be different experiences in local authorities and different levels of engagement in the process. I am concerned to ensure that we can assess whether the way in which councils choose to engage can be ruled in or ruled out as one of the factors in the

success or otherwise of the implementation of the changes.

**The Convener:** I think that that has clarified your position.

**Jamie Hepburn:** I probably should not say this, but I cannot help myself. On the suggestion that councils might be ideological entities, I note that councils are political entities, so it is perfectly legitimate for them to be ideological entities. We should not pretend that the entire process of welfare reform is not somewhat ideologically driven.

That said, on Alex Johnstone's wider suggestion, we have other information. We wrote to all 32 local authorities as part of the process. I know that we did not get responses from all of them, and we cannot demand responses from them. However, we have the benefit of some feedback. I wonder whether we could work some of that into our consideration of the issue, which might satisfy the concerns that have been expressed about the need for a wider sample.

**The Convener:** I completely agree. My suggestion at the outset was that we are compiling information and bringing things together, and there should be something at the end of it. We still have a couple of visits to make and information is still coming in from local authorities. At the end, we want to have something concrete so that people can see what we have pulled together. It will not necessarily be a report with recommendations, but it will certainly be a document that contains all the information that we have been able to draw out. That can then be used to share best practice in order that people can learn from others' experiences. I think that everyone agrees about that. We will keep working on that basis.

## Work Capability Assessments

11:03

**The Convener:** Agenda item 3 is to consider whether to take further action on the response that the committee received to its freedom of information request to the Department for Work and Pensions on the geographical breakdown of work capability assessment figures for Scotland. I think that everyone has seen the response. We have a paper that suggests a couple of things that we could do on the back of that. Colleagues have had a chance to look at it, so I open it up for suggestions. Are members happy with the recommendations?

**Alex Johnstone:** Both the recommendations are worthy of pursuit.

**Annabelle Ewing:** I agree. I just seek clarification of one point. Are general practitioners' contracts under the jurisdiction of the Scottish Government's health department or the United Kingdom Government?

**The Convener:** The distinct contract is with the Scottish Government.

**Linda Fabiani:** I do not think that it is as clear cut as that.

**The Convener:** The British Medical Association negotiated them throughout the UK, but I think that the national health service in Scotland is responsible for implementation here. I think that that is how it works.

Everyone seems happy with the recommendations.

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** That being the case, we will move into private session for agenda item 4.

11:05

*Meeting continued in private until 11:20.*

Members who would like a printed copy of the *Official Report* to be forwarded to them should give notice to SPICe.

---

Available in e-format only. Printed Scottish Parliament documentation is published in Edinburgh by APS Group Scotland.

All documents are available on  
the Scottish Parliament website at:

[www.scottish.parliament.uk](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk)

For details of documents available to  
order in hard copy format, please contact:  
APS Scottish Parliament Publications on 0131 629 9941.

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact  
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000  
Textphone: 0800 092 7100  
Email: [sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk](mailto:sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk)

e-format first available  
ISBN 978-1-78351-319-2

Revised e-format available  
ISBN 978-1-78351-338-3