The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

Tuesday 4 March 2014

Session 4

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WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE
4th Meeting 2014, 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)
*Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)
*Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)
*Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Carol-Anne Alcorn (FareShare and Edinburgh Cyrenians)
Denis Curran (Loaves & Fishes)
Ewan Gurr (Trussell Trust)
Marie Hayes (British Red Cross)
Dr Nicola Livingstone (Heriot-Watt University)
Jo Roberts (Community Food Moray)
Dave Simmers (Community Food Initiatives North East Ltd)
Dr Filip Sosenko (Heriot-Watt University)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Simon Watkins

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

Welfare Reform Committee

Tuesday 4 March 2014

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 10:00*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Michael McMahon): Good morning and welcome to the fourth meeting in 2014 of the Welfare Reform Committee. I ask everyone to switch off their mobile phones and other electronic devices.

Agenda item 1 is to decide whether to take in private item 4, which is consideration of today's evidence on food banks. Are members agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Food Banks

10:00

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is an evidence-taking session on food banks and possible links with the United Kingdom Government's welfare reforms. I should say that committee members have been visiting food banks in their local areas to inform this morning's session.

Later, we will hear from our second panel of witnesses, who are the authors of the report, "Overview of Food Aid Provision in Scotland". First, I welcome the witnesses for our round-table evidence session: Marie Hayes, operations director (west Scotland), British Red Cross; Carol-Anne Alcorn, interim chief executive officer, Edinburgh Cyrenians, and FareShare Edinburgh; Dave Simmers, chief executive, Community Food Initiatives North East; Denis Curran, chairman, Loaves & Fishes; Jo Roberts, development lead, Community Food Moray; and Ewan Gurr, Scotland development officer with the Trussell Trust. For the sake of transparency, I point out that I have been working in support of Ewan Gurr's efforts to establish food banks on behalf the Trussell Trust in North and South Lanarkshire.

Although the round-table format allows committee members to ask questions directly of witnesses, I hope that there will be more interaction between members and witnesses. The discussion is structured, but we will keep things as informal as possible. If you want to make a comment or ask a question, please indicate as much to me. We will keep the discussion flowing as long as we can, and I hope that everyone will get an opportunity to inform our work not only by telling us about their experiences or what they are doing but by making suggestions about what the committee might be able to take forward from the discussion. Please do not think that you are here simply to give us information—signpost us in the direction in which you think we need to go.

I believe that the deputy convener wants to ask a question or make an observation to kick things off. It will then be open to anyone to come in. There is no particular order; if you want to make a contribution, let me know.

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I have a question rather than an observation, convener, although I should say that it is informed by an observation.

I have observed that the United Kingdom Government has made a number of statements about the increased use of food banks. For example, it refutes any direct correlation between its welfare reform process and the increased use of food banks across not only Scotland but the rest

of the UK. Indeed, I understand that one of its ministers wrote to Glasgow City Council, suggesting that supermarkets' more efficient approach to food and its disposal might be a driver in the growth of food banks. How do the witnesses respond, first, to the UK Government's statement that there is no correlation between its welfare reform process and the use of food banks and, secondly, to its particular point about supermarkets' food efficiency and the growth in food banks? That is an open question to everyone. Who would like to respond first?

The Convener: I see that Jo Roberts is keen to come in.

Jo Roberts (Community Food Moray): I can speak only from my own experience but, from that and from having read some of the other evidence, I think that it is very clear that use of our food bank has increased as a result of welfare reform. I also point out that we in Moray do not use any surplus supermarket food in our food bank.

Carol-Anne Alcorn (FareShare and Edinburgh Cyrenians): I represent FareShare in Scotland and the Cyrenians, which works to address homelessness and social exclusion. The number of people accessing our homelessness prevention service and the need for emergency food packs have increased because people have less money in their pockets. The cost of rent, food and fuel is rising, but income is not rising alongside that.

The issue goes deeper than that. There is a problem when people need food. The big thing is that we need to know why they need food and to solve that at a different level, whereas we are putting on an Elastoplast and not getting to the root of the problem. The number of people whom we are seeing has increased and we are doubling the number of emergency food packs. That is well managed; we provide not only a food pack but support with it. Why is there a problem and what do we need to do to resolve it?

The Convener: You made the interesting comment that people's incomes have not kept up or have decreased. I have picked up the perception that unemployed people—people who have no income—go to food banks, whereas you are saying that the situation is having an impact on working people who have an income but who cannot meet cost increases. Is that right?

Carol-Anne Alcorn: Yes—absolutely. I make it clear that FareShare is not a food bank; that is not our business. Our business is to see that surplus food that is good quality, within date and checked for condition—that it is the same food as you and I would eat at home—goes to the right place.

We deal with hostels, soup kitchens and projects whose budgets have reduced, which are finding that more people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless are accessing their services. That is a big growth area, but knowledge of that is diminishing because of the big drive on food banks. That is quite right, but it means that we are forgetting the hidden people below that. The people who access food banks today often become the people in hostels tomorrow. The picture is wider.

Denis Curran (Loaves & Fishes): Loaves & Fishes is a voluntary group that gets no Government funding whatsoever. We depend totally on people's good will. A couple of stores have approached me to offer bashed tins and food that is going out of date. When I tell them that we do not use that, they look at me and say, "You don't use it?" I tell them that, when my wife goes into their stores, she does not ask for the aisle with the bashed tins and out-of-date stuff.

We are in the middle of no-man's-land. People with wee children come to us after walking 3 or 4 miles. There is a fallacy that there is misuse and greed and that the people are layabouts and rogues. They are people who are in total disarray. They are frightened and insecure, and they have no money. We got a phone call the other day from a social work department that asked us to give it food for a family that they will not need to cook, because they have no money for their electricity. The picture that the Government paints is totally wrong.

Last night, we did a meal at Renfield St Stephen's church centre. One of the lads who came in said that he was sent for a job where he did two hours' work—he even brushed the floor when he was finished, which he was not asked to do—but the manageress said that he was not suitable. He did not get a penny for his two hours' work. It is immoral for that to happen in 2014. Whether or not their labour is worthy and they are suitable, if somebody does the best that they can, they are entitled to payment for what they put into the job. Nobody in here would toil next week if they were not paid for their day's labour today, but what I described happens all the time.

The amount of people who come to us who have been sanctioned is unbelievable. A man comes to us who has been sanctioned for 11 weeks—that is 11 weeks without any money. People might say, "Oh, it's misuse—he's coming back already." Of course he comes back to us. If he has no money this week and he is not getting any money next week, how is he going to feed himself? We had a lady who had not eaten for three days because she was feeding her children. Those things get buried and do not come to light. It is easier to say that those people are thieves, liars, cheats and layabouts and that they misuse the benefit system. The benefit system is based

on the national poverty line. Which companies pay wages below the national poverty line? Name them and shame them. Which companies are not paying Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs?

When the Government brought out welfare reform, it had a meeting on a Thursday and made a decision on the same day to change the benefit system. The following Tuesday, it was made law—that is a fact. At the same time, the Government was talking about looking at the companies that were not paying their proper share of tax, and it is still looking at the companies that are not paying their proper share. It is the simplest thing in the world to solve. Go to the managing director of each of those companies and say, "We reckon that you owe that tax. You have not paid it and it's unlawful not to pay your tax. If it's not paid by the end of next month, you're going to jail." When people go for benefit and do not get it, the system is saying, "We don't think you're worthy of payment." What are we going to do about that? In 2014, people cannot eat.

Dave Simmers (Community Food Initiatives North East Ltd): That is depressing.

We have the FareShare franchise up in the north-east and, over the past year, we have also been running our own food bank. To go back to the question, we have strong anecdotal evidence of the impact of welfare reform on the use of food banks, but there is undoubtedly a need to back that up with independent research. I am delighted that two institutions—Robert Gordon University and the Rowett institute of nutrition and health at the University of Aberdeen—have approached us about being involved in some independent research into the use of our food bank. I think that we need that research to back up the anecdotal evidence.

As Mr Curran said, it is important to recognise that folk who have been awarded benefit that is taking four, five or six weeks to come through are clearly in a bad place. Mr Johnstone kindly came and visited us the other week. One of the issues for me at the moment is separating the policy from its bureaucratic implementation, and I am not clear whether some of the situations that we deal with are a result of the policy or its implementation. Management might expect X, Y or Z to happen, but the policy could be interpreted differently on the ground.

Independent research is needed to back up the anecdotal evidence, of which there is a considerable amount.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): Dave Simmers pointed out something that is very important. We talk about the welfare reform process, and that process is going on, but there is also an issue about how Department for Work and Pensions officers work. That issue is not associated with the welfare reform process; it is more associated with practice. Those are quite distinct issues and we need to be very careful to keep a separate understanding of them.

Jamie Hepburn: I agree entirely with Mr Simmers on the need to quantify the impact of welfare reform. I am sure that we have all read the Trussell Trust submission, which quantified the impact to a degree, so perhaps Mr Gurr can tell us about that.

I was really interested to read in the Community Food Moray submission that, from April 2013, when a lot of the reforms came online,

"The impact of the welfare reform was evident almost overnight."

If Jo Roberts could perhaps quantify that impact, that would be helpful as well.

The Convener: I will take questions from committee members first and then give panel members an opportunity to respond.

Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): On the point about process and policy, those who set the policy are responsible for the process. The DWP is a Government department so it is an absolute cop-out for anybody to sit there and say that there is a difference between process and policy. The Government needs to get it right, because there are people who are hungry.

The best evidence of all is that of the rise in the use of food banks—that is the clearest indication to me. When I first represented East Kilbride and heard about Loaves & Fishes, I thought that it was a group of great volunteers who went round feeding people who were hungry. I associated the group with Renfield St Stephen's church and helping people who were homeless and on the streets for whatever reason. Since the benefit changes, we are talking about normal, everyday families who could be the families or friends of any one of us sitting around this table—people who are working and doing their best. The situation has changed completely.

We need independent evidence, but let us not try to deny the evidence that is already there in every community in Scotland. I would like to know, from folk around the table, how the rise in the use of food banks has manifested itself and the difference in the numbers that they are now dealing with compared with just a couple of years ago.

10:15

The Convener: I will bring in Kevin Stewart and will then come back to our witnesses.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I am interested in what Mr Curran said about the distances that folk are walking to access food. I was at Instant Neighbour in Aberdeen a couple of weeks ago. It asks folk where they have come from, and folk have travelled 4 or 5 miles. There was no evidence of folk coming by car and they probably could not afford the bus fares, which are rather expensive in Aberdeen to say the least. That is a huge distance for someone to walk—particularly with their bairns—to access food, although it might be a bit easier for someone to do that in an urban area. How are we tackling the situation in rural areas? Jo Roberts and Dave Simmers will have experience of that. Walking 4 or 5 miles may not be as hard in the city of Aberdeen as it is in rural Moray.

One of the reasons why we invited Dave Simmers here today is to hear about the experience of the food banks partnership Aberdeen. I think that we should hear more about what that partnership is achieving and why certain groups have chosen not to join it.

The Convener: It will be interesting to hear that. We will come back to that.

Jamie Hepburn, the deputy convener, referred to the Trussell Trust, which has submitted a helpful submission. Having heard the questions that have been asked and the points that have been made, does Ewan Gurr want to make some observations?

Ewan Gurr (Trussell Trust): What Linda Fabiani said is absolutely right. Only 5,726 men, women and children utilised Trussell Trust food banks in Scotland in 2011-12, but 14,318 utilised them in 2012-13. It is terrifying that the number has now risen to more than 56,000, and we are not even at the end of the current financial year—we will know what the number for the year looks like by the end of this month. That is an exponential rise in the demand for emergency food relief, and a number of things in our statistics link that rise to welfare reform.

The Scottish Government report that was released in December indicated that the providers who participated in the study agreed that welfare reform, benefit delays, benefit sanctions and falling incomes have been the main factors driving the recently observed trend of increased demand for food aid. To me, that is pretty clear.

The issue is not only welfare reform but the rising cost of living. In the past three months, there has been a 0.7 per cent increase in the Scottish economy, but there has also been a 4.3 per cent rise in food costs and a rise of between 8 and 11 per cent in fuel costs. It is indisputable that people are under more pressure than they ever have been, and benefits are not keeping pace with the rise in living costs.

Our statistics show that, of the 14,318 men, women and children who utilised the Scottish food banks that are run by the Trussell Trust last year, 15 per cent—just over 2,000—did so because of a benefit change. Sanctions come under benefit changes, and the figure has since risen to 20 per cent—jumping from third place to second place—and now accounts for more than 11,200 men, women and children. To me, that is a huge concern. We are seeing evidence every day, right across our food bank network, that the welfare reforms are inextricably linked to the rise in demand for emergency food relief. In addition, we state in our written submission that 1,565 people were referred because they had been refused a short-term benefit advance.

I managed the Dundee Food Bank for seven years. It has now been open for nine years, and it saw more than 1,000 direct referrals from the Scottish welfare fund in the first six months of the current financial year. We understand that, when a new system is devolved to local authorities, it takes time to work through the teething issues that come up, but a number of the people whom we spoke to at the Dundee Food Bank said that they had not even been asked about their financial situation—they had just been directly signposted to the local food bank. To me, that is a concern, because we have no intention of becoming part of the welfare state. Unfortunately, it indicates a sort of underhand way of trying to weld us into the infrastructure of the welfare state. For us, that is a no-no. We are not interested in going there.

Picking up Kevin Stewart's point about rurality, I note that we operate in a number of extremely rural local authorities. We operate in 26 of Scotland's 32 local authorities, including the Highlands, which is bigger than Wales. We have five projects that operate in the Highlands and we expect that another three will be launched in some of the more rural parts.

We rely on communities to approach us to set up food banks. For example, our South Ayrshire Food Bank has been open for two years now. It is a single food bank but it has six distribution centres right across the local authority area—there are centres in Troon, Girvan, Maybole and Prestwick, and two in Ayr. The food bank ensures that, if it can, it has a presence in each and every local community. It also has a rural delivery service that provides for the outlying areas where it is more difficult for people to get to their local jobcentre or to a food bank.

There are a number of ways in which we can break down rurality and remoteness, but those are more of an issue up here than they are south of the border.

The Convener: The practical problems of rurality have come up in discussions that we have had previously. We have discussed the food bank in South Lanarkshire, where there are major centres of population surrounded by disparate rural communities. Accessing food banks is much more difficult, practically, for people in those areas. There is an appreciation that that is the case.

Jo, do you want to comment?

Jo Roberts: Yes. If it is okay, I will jump back to our written evidence, in which we state that we experienced a difference almost overnight. We set up what we call an emergency food programme based on people who had been made homeless, were at risk of being made homeless or were experiencing financial problems, but we are now in a very different position. We were providing emergency food aid, but we saw an increase in demand as a result of the financial issues that others have mentioned—the fact that rises in the cost of living are not being reflected in wage rises, people are having their hours cut and all the other things that come along with that.

We had a slight increase in demand compared with what we anticipated at the beginning, and the number of referrals had reached about 13 per month before April last year but, as I said, there was a jump almost overnight. We saw it within a month. Our records show that, after April last year, the number of referrals increased to 59 per month. That happened for various reasons, but the main reasons why people are presenting to the food bank are welfare and benefit problems. I now have the figures for February, and we had 301 referrals to the food bank.

Sanctions have the biggest impact, because people who have experienced sanctions must decide whether to heat or eat, as a number of witnesses have said, because unfortunately they cannot have help for both.

We have also had referrals from people for whom food is the priority and electricity and heating are not, so the number of cold food boxes that we have to put out is increasing. On our referral forms, we ask what cooking facilities people have and an increasing number of forms show that people have all the cooking facilities but cannot use them because they cannot afford to put credit in the electricity meter. Those are the implications for people that we are experiencing.

On top of that, 30 per cent of our referrals now come from the Scottish welfare fund; that is just how we record it. We do not know the exact figures for those with benefit issues, but we can estimate that the majority—around 90 per cent—of referrals arise from benefit problems.

There are other reasons. In rural locations, people find it difficult to travel. If people have been sanctioned, it is often because they are living in an area where travel is an issue, not just because of money—although public transport is expensive—but because services have been dropped and there are not as many buses available, so people cannot get in on time for their appointments and are therefore sanctioned and get their money taken off them. Whether that happens once or 10 times to an individual, that person is having taken away from them the ability to fulfil their basic need to eat and to keep warm. If we have to fulfil that need for them, we will do so.

There are a number of implications for us around rural locations. We are lucky that we already go out to a number of rural areas, but the time and day when we go to an area might not be when a person needs the emergency food, so we are working with the citizens advice bureaux on a joint project, a big part of which is about outreach. Local services in local areas are being taken away and if somebody has benefit problems, they have to ring a call centre that is a million miles from their problem and their community. We hope that through our partnership project with the citizens advice bureaux, we can help to fill some of those gaps.

Kevin Stewart: Before we move on, could Jo Roberts clarify the figures that she gave. I think that she said there were 13 referrals in April 2013, and 301 in February 2014. Is that right?

Jo Roberts: The 13 figure was pre-April.

Kevin Stewart: Pre-April 2013?

Jo Roberts: Yes.

Kevin Stewart: So there were 13 and now there are 301.

Jo Roberts: Yes.

Kevin Stewart: Thank you. That shows the starkness of the situation.

The Convener: Yes, when you said that, I thought that I had misheard, but I checked with the clerks and they confirmed that it was the right figure.

Dave Simmers: One of the difficulties with evidence sessions is how to get everything that you want to say in. I have just a few quick points. First, I emphasise that one of the things about any "ism" is that it is based on ignorance and stereotyping. Although we have huge public and corporate support behind what we are doing on the food front, one of our challenges is the tremendous amount of ignorance and stereotyping of people who use food banks. The use of case studies is important, because they can be powerful in getting across to people the reality of folk's

circumstances. However, case studies need to be backed up by independent and more objective evidence.

In Aberdeen, we have an impressive food banks partnership supported by 19 organisations, including the local authority, a credit union, a housing association and a range of churches and other voluntary organisations. We established the partnership because we recognised in 2012 that there was an exponential growth in food banks.

Please listen carefully to what I am saying just now—I do not want this to be misunderstood. In our view, food banks in themselves are not a very productive or positive activity. In themselves, they create dependency, they erode dignity and—if you will excuse my saying this—they will prop up welfare reform, in isolation. They need to be linked with other support and services to people. In the food banks partnership Aberdeen, there is a clear statement about how critical it is to work in partnership with colleagues in the health service, in employability, in money advice, in welfare benefits and so on. We have a referral system, which provides other support to people—hopefully to get them oot the bit, and not dependent on the food bank.

10:30

Servicing is a huge area. Grampian is big—Aberdeenshire is the second-biggest authority in Scotland. Lindsay Boswell, the chief executive of FareShare, is here on the public benches today—I think they are called benches; in any case, he is at the back of the room—to observe the meeting. FareShare has adopted a hub-and-spoke arrangement, in recognition of the need to get food out to more places. We are going to become FareShare Grampian, and Aberdeen will be the hub, and there will be spokes. We work in Aberdeenshire at the moment, and we get the food out through partner organisations there.

I emphasise the importance of partnership if we are to be effective in supporting people. We get to health visitors and others who are in contact with folk in need. We will send out half a dozen food parcels, they phone us when they are done, and we send out more parcels. In rural areas, the only way to be effective is with a range of partners working together. We want to develop the hub-and-spoke arrangement.

Kevin Stewart asked a question. A couple of food banks have not joined the partnership in Aberdeen. I will not say much about that in this public forum, other than to reinforce the message that, in partnership, we are stronger together.

For all the agencies that we are involved with, one issue is that they are under huge pressure—and we are under huge pressure. The people who are coming in who are in desperate need are not necessarily responsive to other support at their first meeting. That comes from building a relationship with people. Frankly, it is good, old community work.

One point that I want to raise today is the fact that we take a person-centred approach. We do not work on the basis that we will see someone once, twice, three times or 10 times; we are interested in the person and their individual circumstances. Where they need food, we need to get it to them, but we align that with other support and services. In my view, we need that person-centred approach, which is based on a person's needs and on where they are in their life.

Carol-Anne Alcorn: I agree that the lack of food is never a stand-alone problem. It is a result of deeper issues, which we need to address. We need to examine those deeper issues, whether they involve benefits, employment, the bedroom tax or whatever. FareShare exists to cascade help to organisations that we work with; it is not a food bank. It addresses the causes of hunger, not just the symptoms.

With that in mind, we are now providing meals for 4,500 people a day in Scotland alone. That is a real step increase. We are redistributing in excess of £1 million of surplus food every year to around 90 projects working in Scotland. You can appreciate how that cascades.

I feel—and this is the opinion of the four FareShares that operate in Scotland—that we need to start to link welfare issues with environmental issues. Without spending ages on that subject, I will mention that I go to an anaerobic digestion facility, and I see in-date food going into that AD plant. We might be getting energy out at the end of it, but there are people going hungry in this country. That food could be feeding the most vulnerable members of our community. For me, that is so wrong.

It is right that we think of FareShare not just in the context of Aberdeen, Glasgow, Dundee and Edinburgh, but consider the rural perspective, as Jo Roberts was saying. We are doing a pilot involving a wee project down in Duns that is just as deserving as some of the big projects that we might support in the bigger cities. People come in once a week to pick up stuff. We want to develop that to support other people around the area and do one delivery to one place.

We have an opportunity. I feel energised by the idea that we can reduce the surplus food that is going to landfill. FareShare has done some research and it looks as if we are using only 1 per cent of the food that is fit for human consumption, so there is a lot more food out there. We are strengthening the voluntary sector in Scotland

while people face huge cuts in their budgets and do not have the money for food—it is the thing that goes.

Last week, Christopher Somerville, the manager of FareShare in Edinburgh, went to visit a wee project that supports people with mental health difficulties. He went to do an advisory visit, to protect the surplus food that companies such as Asda and Marks and Spencer donate, to see that it goes to the right place and is stored at the right temperature and so that we know the route that it will end up taking.

He came away from that visit and wrote me an email that said something like, "This wee project that started almost 15 years ago has developed so much, but I want to tell you why I get up in the morning." The project involved a group of people who were receiving support because of mental health difficulties. They had started to serve lunch with the FareShare food and the significant change was that people stuck around longer and talked to and said goodbye to one another. It was about building community and care at the root, where things are happening.

We have an opportunity to work together with food whether in food banks or FareShare. We need to consider what resources we have. We lack storage in a big way. We spend lots of money on storage facilities. In Edinburgh we spend £22,000 a year on storage alone. We also have refrigeration to think about. We need some joined-up thinking and funding to examine larger storage and how we work together.

We have an opportunity to lead the way. We need the statistics that Dave Simmers talked about. We need energy around the table. We need collaborative work. As Jo Roberts and Denis Curran say, what matters is the end result. It is about the family that receives the parcel. I see it. We work with asylum seekers and refugees, who have very limited access to such support.

The situation calls for us to invest in the growth of such support and to scale it up. However, we also need to be very aware of where the need really is and to monitor it carefully.

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): As we could anticipate from all the submissions that we have received, many issues are being brought to the table, which is useful for the committee.

I will raise the issue of children. However, before that, I will mention transport, which my colleague Kevin Stewart and others discussed and which is important. The convener made a good point: the issue applies not only in what we typically identify as rural Scotland but in most of Scotland, which has rurality linked to it.

When I visited Dunfermline Foodbank yesterday evening, someone mentioned to me that someone had walked in from Ballingry, which is some 12 miles away. It is not only the walking in that is quite difficult to imagine, given the weather that we have had, but the walking back with, perhaps, 12kg of food.

Transport is hugely important because many such facilities will, by definition, not be on the high street because of the space that they need. Last night, we discussed talks that Dunfermline Foodbank is having with Fife Council on whether the voucher—it is a Trussell Trust food bank, which has a clear, distinctive red voucher—could be used on the bus or another form of public transport to get to the food bank and back. I am not sure where the discussions have got to. We must consider practical solutions to help people in an already difficult situation.

We have been trying to find out how many people are affected. The figures from the Trussell Trust show that it is dealing with some 56,000 people, but those only go up to 24 February and do not even take us to the end of the current financial year, and there are all the other organisations too.

If we were to add up all the figures, from the information that we have, it seems that we could be looking at around 90,000 to 100,000 people in Scotland who are affected. That figure is not unrealistic. One of my key concerns is how many children are in that group. Do we have any idea of the numbers affected? Perhaps that could be a point of discussion.

I have a couple of observations from my visit to the food bank last night. I spoke to a volunteer who mentioned people's huge generosity in donating, which I am sure is the case throughout Scotland. He gave an example of two youngsters who had given up their comic allowance to contribute to their family's donation to the food bank.

I also met two young teenage schoolgirls; they were Duke of Edinburgh award contenders and the food bank was part of their volunteering. They pointed out that, although they found it incredibly useful to have the experience of handing over food to people who received it with such welcome, they felt—importantly, as youngsters—that they were learning hugely about society because the work was making such a big impact on their lives.

In general, the issue is impacting on children who are affected because their families need to go to food banks, but it also affects other children. That is a key aspect of the debate. What information do all of you experts have on the ground?

Denis Curran: Everything is fragmented—really. I can only speak for East Kilbride. We will go anywhere and take food parcels anywhere. I have sent stuff to Oban; the haulage contractor takes it up for free. I have travelled to Peebles, and to Alexandria. I did not always go willingly, but I have always come back glad that I went. When we get there, people are breaking their heart because we brought in a bag of messages to them, and maybe a couple of toys for their kids.

In East Kilbride, we know that we are never going to get the true figures. The true figures cannot come out, because Government departments misuse the whole thing. Whether or not you want to accept that, it is a fact.

I walk with two sticks, and sometimes I do not always get out. So I get a phone call, and it is always out of hours—"Oh Denis, can you help us with a bag of a messages?" I say, "I'm very sorry—I cannae manage them now." I say, "How about Friday? I could maybe manage to get something to you for half past 4." They say, "We stop early on a Friday, we do not work Saturday and Sunday and we are busy on Monday and Tuesday. What about Wednesday? What is this emergency?" That family is now sitting until Wednesday waiting for something to eat.

The answer to that one is, "Oh well, we'll just need to use our own budget." If the departments use their own budget properly, we will, when their budget runs out, manage to get a true figure for the amount of people who are really struggling. I have heard from other organisations, and it is the same thing—"Oh well, we'll need to use our own budget."

I went to the social work department and said, "How many food parcels do you need for Christmas?" because—as the other witnesses will know—all this does not happen in a couple of days. I said, "Can you give me an idea of how many?" and they said, "Oh, we're not using them this year." I said, "Well, that's smashing—you don't get anybody going hungry."

They said, "The staff have been making a mess of the room, so we do not want to store the food." That was said to me in East Kilbride—that is a fact. They said, "What's all this?" I said, "Oh, those are the food parcels." They said, "Well, if you've not got rid of them in two weeks, they're getting flung out." Who are these people who do not want to take responsibility for their own property?

We have Lindsay house, which is a 10-minute walk from the civic centre. Anyone who is homeless in South Lanarkshire must appear at Lindsay house. Why can something not be set up in a room in Lindsay house? I know that Lindsay house has a big room lying empty. We are in a position to provide the food. It is a lot easier for someone with two kids to walk for 10 minutes than it is for them to walk 4 miles.

Certain people say, "We don't want that in here," or "We're not allowed to store food in here." Someone in Rutherglen said, "This food could be cross-contaminated or recalled." If food is recalled, it is on every television and radio and in every newspaper. Sainsbury's would be very interested to see how there can be cross-contamination between a packet of rice and a tin of beans. It is all excuses.

10:45

I have been doing this since 1992; this is not new. It has just exploded. We started off with homeless people. My wife, who is sitting at the back of the public area, has been going to meetings since 1993, and I hope that this meeting brings about some change. The only thing that changes in the meetings that we go to is the date.

After the last one I went to, I came home and said, "What do you think they said to me, Cathy?" She told me word for word what was said; the only difference was that we were talking about 2014. We all sit and bandy figures about. Are people not important any more? Are your constituents not important?

We have been asked "Can you give us a parcel for a baby that's going to be born on Tuesday? What about a layette?" The mother is not entitled to any benefits, but what are the rights of that child? It does not matter a damn what the mother has done. Surely our social work departments and people in power should be looking at what benefits that child. That child had to get someone to come to a food bank to see if it could get clothes. This is 2014.

That is the reality. Figures, figures, figures. What is the figure for the number of people who have committed suicide because of the benefit cuts and not being able to make ends meet? People come to us and they are terrified. I do not want to know their circumstances. They have already sat in a social work department and pled their heart out before walking 4 miles to me, then they feel that they have got to sit down and tell me their problems again. We have got a wee sign on the door that says "No Smile No Entry". That is all they need. They come in with a wee smile on their face and they get their parcel. I am not there to judge them.

I have a breakfast, a lunch, an evening meal, and a cup of tea before I go to my bed. That is some power when I can start deciding when and if somebody is going to eat. That is what we are doing here today. We are sitting here making decisions about whether somebody is going to eat or not.

What are we going to do to make sure that people have not got debt? My parents brought be up to believe that those that can should do for those that can't, and we seem to have lost that in this society. It is time that the powers that be woke up to reality. We do not need to have meetings to discuss whether benefit cuts have meant a rise in food banks. My seven-year-old grandson has Asperger's, and he could tell you that it has. Let us be truthful about the whole situation. People are getting penalised for being poor, for not having, for not having the ability to do, for not having a job, and for going to the food bank.

How would you feel if we decided here today that every MSP was going to have their electricity and gas cut off and their fridges and their freezers emptied, and be sent to work for four months to get their grub off a food bank? How would you feel about that? If that was part of what you had to do to be an MSP, you would maybe realise what the policies really mean to people, not financially, but inside. People come to us and they are broken. Do you know what it is to stand with somebody whose heart is breaking because they cannot feed their weans? That is what this is about. It is about building a society that is worth while, not demeaning people. Because they cannot work, it does not make them a lesser person, but this Government has got everybody thinking that people who are on benefits are thieves, liars, cheats and layabouts, and that is the furthest thing from the truth. I live on benefits—I am on pension support—and I am no thief and no liar, and I am certainly no layabout. Stop pigeonholing people and putting them in doocots.

We have a chance to do something real—something positive. You should not spend time bandying figures about. Get to the heart of the matter—and the heart of the matter is that people are starving. They are coming in, and they do not have the money to feed themselves with. We get asked, "Can you give them something they don't need to cook?"

It was like that during the war. My wife said the other day that the only difference now is that we live in 21st century society, yet we are dealing in 1930s values. People need a wee voucher to go to a food bank. That is the same as it was with ration books.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Thank you, Denis—you have captured it really well. Most of us have a bizarre mixture of feelings: shame and pride at the same time. It is odd to be ashamed of what is happening in our society but also to be proud of the fact that compassion is driving so many people around this table and so many others in supplying food banks.

I will pick up on a point that Ewan Gurr and Dave Simmers made earlier about the rise in the use of food banks: there might always be a need for some kind of food aid, but the provision of emergency food banks can be unhelpful in the long term. Your organisations both have systems in place to try and stop it becoming long term.

A clear message could go from all of us—most of us—to the UK Government about the welfare reform agenda itself, but is there more that we could do here in Scotland, particularly through the Scottish Parliament? In particular, I am conscious that the Scottish welfare fund, which exists to provide crisis loans, is undersubscribed. That does not quite make sense when there are people relying on food banks for food whereas they could instead get money, which I am sure would be far more dignified for them, as they could make their own choices. Is there more that we can do that would help you to get to the underlying causes and that would help to address dependency?

The Convener: I will let others come back in, but Marie Hayes wishes to make a contribution.

Ken Macintosh: Sorry—

The Convener: That is fine, Ken—I am starting to watch the clock now. I want to ensure that everyone gets an opportunity to contribute.

I was having a chat with Marie before the meeting started, and I would be interested to hear what she has to say. The Red Cross has now become part of the headlines in relation to all of this. You may respond to anything that you have heard, Marie, but I invite you to comment on how the Red Cross has become involved and on how things are different from where you have been before.

Marie Hayes (British Red Cross): We had no intention of attracting the headlines. People around this table are the experts on the distribution of food in the UK, although we obviously have experience at an international level. We have become increasingly concerned about the humanitarian impact of food poverty in the UK and the increasing reliance on food banks. We are considering our role and whether we should be making a strategic contribution.

Internationally, as part of the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, we have been involved in work to look across Europe at the response of our societies. We have looked at the responses to the economic situation of 52 Red Cross and Red Crescent societies in Europe. There are some themes that echo in Scotland, particularly the increasing number of new poor and the impact of food insecurity on people, which goes beyond the issue of meeting immediate needs and affects their mental wellbeing and their capacity to address their situation and make some changes.

It is helpful to be here today, and we welcome the opportunity to hear about what is happening and to consider where we could best place ourselves to help strategically. We got involved with FareShare last year in mobilising our volunteers to support some of its food drives.

A number of people have echoed quite powerfully the humanitarian response from people in Scotland to people in need. However, I echo the concerns of Carol-Anne Alcorn and Dave Simmers in relation to food banks just presenting an immediate response. If we do not meet people's basic needs, we will not be able to help them do other things, but we also need to consider resilience and how to offer longer-term solutions at a societal and an individual level. I am very interested in developing that resilience-based approach and in how we can help people to build on that.

A concern that people have echoed around this room is that we end up building in food banks as part of the welfare response rather than recognising them as a crisis response to a crisis, to which we need to find different solutions, as Ken Macintosh said. We see ourselves as being part of that solution. I think that we could develop a longer-term response to build resilience across the country.

Linda Fabiani: To follow on from some of the things that have been said in the last wee while, I, too, have a concern—as Marie Hayes has just emphasised again—that we end up taking food banks as the norm and that they become part of the system. If you will excuse me saying this, guys, I hope that you are campaigning to do yourselves out of a job, because that is what is really important—that has to be the bigger picture that we hang on to.

Carol-Anne Alcorn: Absolutely.

Linda Fabiani: I believe that there will always be people who need a hand up for whatever reason, just as I do not believe that we can ever completely eradicate homelessness. We can make it temporary, perhaps, but we can never eradicate it; we will never eradicate people who, every now and then, hit hard times. That is where people such as Denis and Cathy Curran come in, who have been doing this work for years for the exceptions—exceptions that are now becoming the norm.

Yes, we should be joining stuff up and saying that we have to help people with other things, but that should not be predicated on people being hungry. That is immoral. Denis Curran made some claims about a lack of working together in South Lanarkshire, and I am sure that South Lanarkshire Council would have its own response to that but, for whatever reason, there certainly seems to be an issue about—to paraphrase Denis—others not quite doing their jobs, whether it is about spending their budgets or working together. Maybe it is not deliberate. This welfare reform has really hit people, so it may be that the process—as Dave Simmers mentioned earlier—has not quite caught up with the policy.

Ken Macintosh mentioned the welfare fund—maybe more can be done under that. There was low take-up of the fund, although I understand that take-up is getting better and that the money can be carried over. I hope that it is better managed. However, there may well be a case for following up this meeting with taking some evidence from those who are officially involved in that process, to see how they make decisions and what they do.

It is not just about the people here and the folk like them and all the voluntary groups and how they relate to the local authorities, to social work, the DWP and others. It is about how the local authorities and others relate to what is happening directly as policy, which they then have to develop the processes for. Another part of the equation would be to take evidence from those groups to find out how they see the agencies around this table and how they work with them.

We need to have a balance. I do not want members of this committee to be in the business of saying, "We're going to make these awful welfare reforms work better," and trying to salve our consciences like some of those who are sitting in Westminster. I do not want to be doing that at all. I want a very strong message to go from here. I think that understanding the bigger picture by seeing the other side of the coin is important as well.

The Convener: I totally agree with you, Linda. Our work programme includes looking at the Scottish welfare fund. I do not think that we have set up anything specific with the DWP, but we meet the DWP periodically and we can set up another meeting if we need to speak to it again. We can also get the local authorities to speak to us about their work on this matter. We are certainly going to keep on top of it.

Linda Fabiani: Denis Curran has just passed me a wee note and I have to say that what he says in it is absolutely right. We should never forget that the vast majority of people want just to be able to work for a decent wage that takes away their absolute need to turn up at food banks. That should be part of the bigger picture.

11:00

The Convener: Absolutely. I made that very point in response to Carol-Anne Alcorn's initial comments. Some of the people she referred to are in work; we are talking not only about unemployed

people or people who cannot access an income, but people on low incomes. We need to take that into consideration.

Carol-Anne Alcorn: The Cyrenians' focus has been on giving people not a handout but a hand up and, with our FareShare project and other social enterprises, to take people on a journey. Our enterprise to employment project, for example, takes people who are not even in the employability pipeline on a journey towards securing a job. For some people, that takes quite a long time and, in any case, the job has to be worth their while and must allow them to support themselves.

I totally agree with Marie Hayes that we need to look at the big picture, and to consider what we do in a wider context. If FareShare achieves the aim that it is working towards, it will be taken out of existence; however, given all the food that is still going to landfill, we need to link welfare reform with environmental concerns and the capacity to feed people who are going without.

We work with a food bank in north Edinburgh that distributes, under stringent conditions, fresh fruit and vegetables along with the packs of tins. I think—this goes back to Denis Curran's point—that that helps people's dignity, because it means that they do not have constantly to eat from tins; they can have a bit of broccoli or some potatoes on their plate and their children can eat some fruit.

We also run cooking classes. I am admitting my age here, but I was brought up in a generation that was taught cooking at school and in which cooking was part of a child's education. There are people coming out of prison and care who do not know how to make a pot of soup, so the aim of the classes is not only to give people the skills to cook that soup for themselves but to build their confidence through sharing that meal with them.

On Annabelle Ewing's comment about children, I should tell the committee that last summer we had a strawberry glut through FareShare. It was fabulous; when you walked into the depot, all you could smell was the beautiful smell of strawberries. A wee lass aged four who came with her dad to pick up her mum from the cooking class had never tasted a strawberry before. To begin with, we chat with people about what they buy, what they eat and what they cook, and the big change that happened in that particular family at the end of the class was that they started buying fresh fruit. They could afford to buy only the minimum, but what we taught them about budgeting and shopping added value. We want there to be no food banks, no FareShare or whatever, but people are hungry and food is going to waste, so we need to direct our energies at working together in partnership.

The Convener: I call Dave Simmers, to be followed by Jamie Hepburn and Kevin Stewart—and I have to tell everyone that we are really up against the clock, now.

Dave Simmers: Going back to Ken Macintosh's question about what else can be done, one of my bugbears for many years has been that the rhetoric of partnership has not become reality. It needs to do that. Despite the rampant rhetoric, so many agencies and organisations—not only in the public sector but in the voluntary sector—are still sitting in their silos, and there is a huge job to be done to get across to all of us the message that working together actually makes us all stronger. You might have to give, but you will also get back. Until that reality happens, we—and, more important, people in poverty—will have problems.

Our working relationship with Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council is very good. On that point, I have to say that anecdotal evidence suggests that people do not know about the welfare reform grants, but we should remember that many folk who might be entitled to them have not necessarily had the best relationship with the public authorities throughout their lives and so are suspicious about the implications if they make contact.

I do not know whether the measure is unique, but we are now using the Accord card in the Aberdeen City Council area. When people go in for a welfare reform grant they can get money loaded on to their card, which they can use if they go to Asda and other supermarkets, but two food banks—Instant Neighbour Aberdeen and ourselves—now have tills that allow those people to come to the food bank to spend the money that has been loaded on to their cards. They come to us and get their produce, we get the return from that grant and they go away with more than they would get from other retailers. It is a very good win-win-win situation for the local authority, the beneficiary and ourselves. There is lots of room for partnership development, but it needs to be incentivised.

The final thing to mention is investment. As Carol-Anne Alcorn is, we are desperate for walk-in refrigeration. I am scrabbling around trying to find the money to get it, so that we can maximise the amount of food that is available to get out to people. Money is always needed.

Jamie Hepburn: The thing that has struck me above all about Dennis Curran's very passionate contribution is the requirement for Parliament to try to come up with practical solutions. In that vein, I echo Linda Fabiani's comments that we need to take a little bit more evidence and to consider the matter further. I know that we will discuss that later, so I will not linger on that point.

An issue that I will mention—although I am not necessarily asking you to comment on it, because the evidence is in the written submissions—which I had not particularly considered in relation to food banks, is the concern that is raised in the submission from Community Food Initiatives North East about the costs that zero waste regulations place on food banks for disposal of food. The flip-side of that, which is mentioned in FareShare's submission, is the concern that, as Carol-Anne Alcorn said, food that could otherwise be utilised by food banks is diverted to other usage. We need to think about that; it had not occurred to me as an obvious cause for concern.

I know that the convener is asking me to keep this brief, so I will do so. My question probably requires only a yes or no answer from the witnesses. We read in the *Sunday Herald*, or it might have been *Scotland on Sunday*—I cannot remember which—at the weekend that some general practitioners say that they are being asked to make referrals to food banks but are not happy to do so. I also read a comment in the paper stating that a referral is not required. Do your organisations require such referrals?

Witnesses: No.

Jamie Hepburn: It might be interesting to take further evidence to establish where that concern has come from.

Kevin Stewart: I agree with Linda Fabiani and Jamie Hepburn about taking further evidence. One thing that has caused me concern in the discussion is that somebody said that we need to scale this up. In reality, I would like to see all this being scaled down. Unfortunately, while we have the situation that we have with the UK Government, the likelihood is that we will have to continue to scale up such provision.

Although I am quite young—[*Laughter*.]—but I was in a family of working poor folk, when I was pretty young. However, I was never hungry and have never been hungry, so I do not know how bad that is. There is currently such constant change in the benefits system that people cannot keep up with it and folk are losing hope. We need to create a system whereby we restore hope, so that folk can get on with their lives and live with self-respect.

I thank everybody round the table for their efforts, but sometimes things are said and we do things without thinking about the practicalities. Carol-Anne Alcorn talked about cooking classes. Teaching folk how to cook properly is fantastic, but if the reality is that folk cannot afford to go home and switch on their cooker, we are just giving them false hope.

We could all go on about the subject for a long while, and today's evidence session has probably been far too short; we need more evidence. For the record, I thank the folks round the table for their efforts thus far.

The Convener: I will give the final word to Ewan Gurr. After listening to what has been said, do you want to make any final comments, observations or suggestions?

Ewan Gurr: I would like to respond to a handful of points.

First, on Annabelle Ewing's comments about children, our statistical evidence shows the number of children who have utilised food banks since we started operating. We note in our submission that there were 17,000 children among the 56,000 people who have been to a Scottish food bank in the current financial year. That is a concern to me, as a father.

In addition, I want to pick up on a couple of Ken Macintosh's comments and questions. We have been unashamed to commend the Scottish Government for the work that it has done already, including the report that it published in December entitled, "Overview of Food Aid Provision in Scotland" and the member's debate that Stuart McMillan recently brought to the Parliament. That is progress, because it means that a conversation is now happening. I would be pleased if it were to lead to creative solutions. More than anything, we need to educate ourselves about the extent of the problem; that is a big issue.

I strongly recommend to all the elected members round the table that you not only go to food banks but engage with the people who are using the services. It is very easy to speak to me—no one cares what Ewan Gurr and John Drylie at Dunfermline Foodbank have to say—but I really care about the people who are using our services. Your engaging with them will yield creative solutions.

On Linda Fabiani's point, Colette Douglas Home wrote an article in *The Herald* this week that began with the words:

> "There is one man in Scotland whose ambition is to be unemployed. His name is Ewan Gurr". [*Laughter*.]

I concur with her point—although, to be honest, that was not exactly how I put it—because those of us who run food banks ultimately want to see a society in which it is we who are queuing up at the job centre.

On the concerns about our assimilation with the welfare state, I made my point clear a week past Sunday in an article in the *Sunday Herald* in which I said:

> "We have to be absolutely aware that if we are not careful we could just be moulded into the infrastructure of the welfare state and that is just not our intention. For us, by working with churches and ultimately with communities,

we create sustainable food banks that are not Government or state-reliant. It is a crucial thing to avoid ever being assimilated with the welfare state. That is not an acceptable policy shift that we want to see."

Despite the fact that local authorities have made a number of approaches to our food banks, we have given them every indication that we will not support their entering into service-level agreements or being remunerated for the amount of food that they distribute. We would prefer to be resourced by the community for the community.

Those are the main points; there is one other point, which Denis Curran mentioned. It is crucial that we remember that people are at the heart of the issue; human dignity is the key issue. I am speaking not as someone who provides food banks for other people, but as someone who has used a food bank. I know how it feels—I know the shame, embarrassment and feelings of failure that people feel when they go to a food bank because they do not have enough money in the bank account to buy toilet roll. I know what it is like because that is the situation that my wife and I were in three years ago.

11:15

Procuring money to run a food bank was not so easy then. It is a big issue now, and we have "support and connect" grant applications and other such things, but that support did not exist three, four or five years ago. Our bank balance ran very low; Dundee Food Bank is fortunately in a very sustainable position now, but at that time, because two big batches of funding that were due to come through had not arrived on time, my wife and I had to apply for council tax benefit and housing benefit because my income had been cut by two thirds.

I know how it feels, but I also know the love, grace, mercy and compassion that reside on the other side of the threshold of that door. I know about how we try to ensure that people get support. The results of the research that we carried out in Dundee Food Bank between November 2012 and March 2013 were telling. We discovered that 2,022 men, women and children had used the food bank within that five-month period, and that, interestingly, only 33 had used the food bank on four or more occasions for a situation that had not been resolved in the short term. That is key: we work with people to support them towards sustainable living and ultimately to try to address some of the issues that they may be facing.

I hope that I have given a comprehensive overview in response to points that have been raised. I thank the committee for giving me the opportunity to offer closing remarks.

The Convener: That is no problem at all. I thank everyone for coming along today to inform and advise us in order to give us a better understanding of where things are at present, and of just how bad they are.

The committee has been going out as much as possible to try to get as clear a picture as we can. We have visited local authorities, food banks, DWP centres and Atos centres. We have so far gathered as much information as we can, and it just keeps on building up. We have heard about horrendous individual circumstances from people who have spoken to us, and about collective situations that have alarmed and concerned us. There are things that stick with me—for example, one local authority representative told me that they know of groups of people who wait at the back of supermarkets for food to be thrown out so that they can go into the bin and try to find it. We have heard the stories of people walking for miles, and of mothers and fathers going without food in order to keep their children fed.

As Denis Curran kept reminding us, this is 2014 and we should not be hearing those stories, but we are. We will continue to listen to people like Denis and to collect information as best we can. We will get it from wherever we can and try to inform the Government as best we can about how we can address the issues as we move forward.

In answer to the question that kept coming up, local authority officials will be coming before the committee on 18 March to discuss the Scottish welfare fund, so we will raise with them directly some of the issues that have been raised here today.

If needs be we will get the DWP before the committee again and speak to whomever we need to speak. We have been trying to do so, which was one reason for our discussion today. I thank all our witnesses for their contributions. I certainly feel better informed—although I do not feel better, having heard what we have had to hear, but that is the situation that we are in at present. The committee will do what it can to try to ensure that the issues that you have all brought to us this morning are addressed.

11:18

Meeting suspended.

11:25

On resuming—

The Convener: We now have the second panel of witnesses before us. We are considering food banks and whether there are possible links to the UK Government's welfare reforms.

I welcome Dr Filip Sosenko, a research associate, and Dr Nicola Livingstone, a teaching fellow and research associate, from Heriot-Watt University. I invite the witnesses to make a short introductory comment and tell us a bit about their work. We will then open up to questions and further discussion.

Dr Nicola Livingstone (Heriot-Watt University): Thank you very much for inviting us along today and giving us the opportunity to report to you on the key findings from our Scottish Government-commissioned report, the "Overview of Food Aid Provision in Scotland". It was interesting to be in the public gallery for the round-table discussion. A lot of what was expressed in that discussion was complementary to and reinforced what we found and what our research brought out with regard to food aid provision in Scotland.

We conducted our research in September 2013. We were commissioned to do an overview—a scoping study—of food aid provision across Scotland, and we had three objectives to consider. The first was to identify the providers that exist and the scale of provision across certain areas in Scotland, how the providers monitor things, if anything, and whether they monitor the people who are using their services at all. The second objective was to identify where the Trussell Trust fits in the scope of provision across Scotland and how its data reflects general trends that other food aid providers have experienced. The third thing that we were requested to do was make recommendations as to whether the supply and demand of food aid can be effectively monitored. Going into the future, is it possible to make links between welfare reform and food aid provision or the increases in food aid that have occurred over the past couple of years?

In that respect, we identified eight areas for investigation. We concentrated on everything across the spectrum, from urban to rural. There were eight case study locations: Glasgow city, Dundee, Inverness, Fort William, Stirling, Falkirk and Angus, which included Kirriemuir and Forfar—everything from the very rural to the very urban. Whenever we identified food aid providers, we contacted them, initially by email. After making that initial contact, we conducted semi-structured telephone interviews at a prearranged time. We spoke to people who have been involved in the management and provision of food, rather than the service users themselves.

I will reflect on some of the key findings, and I will then pass over to Filip Sosenko, who will discuss welfare reform and the Scottish welfare fund a bit more.

Across the board, there was a notable trend in what we were getting from food aid providers. There has been a generally consistent and exponential increase over the past couple of years. As Ewan Gurr mentioned earlier, the key things that influenced the people who were using and accessing the food banks were benefit sanctions, benefit delays, welfare reform including the bedroom tax, and the disconnect in relation to the living wage and the changes in real incomes—or, rather, the lack of changes in real incomes—and the increasing cost of everything else, including food. Those were our key findings.

The Trussell Trust seemed to represent about 20 per cent of the food aid provision in Glasgow city. There are about 35 providers in Glasgow. There is some overlap between those that provide food and those that provide food parcels. Some providers, such as the Salvation Army, do a variety of both. Generally speaking, the Trussell Trust was the dominant provider of food banks and food aid in all the other chosen locations across Scotland.

11:30

We looked at eight specific regions. It is difficult to make a Scotland-wide comment, but the general trend is that the numbers of people needing access to food is consistently increasing. All providers have experienced an increase in demand, although supply does not seem to be an issue. Some links were made to the element of corporate social responsibility, with a lot of supermarkets getting involved in surplus food redistribution, which was seen as a positive thing by those who were providing the food aid and the parcels.

There is a question as to whether the growth in food banks is actively encouraging more people to use food banks and more supermarkets to get involved in providing the food, but I think that food banks are addressing a need rather than creating a need and that they are a symptom of a wider cause. If there was no need for them, we would not have them at all.

Logistical issues were brought up by the first panel of witnesses. Such issues arise not only in rural areas but also with regard to distribution within cities. We heard anecdotal evidence of people who were walking nine miles to get to a food bank to collect a food parcel, only to find that there was no food left, and then having to walk nine miles back. In Dundee, additional distribution services have been opened, so there is now a main central food bank and three additional distribution points. It is a matter of making the food banks more accessible to the people who need the food.

In rural areas, some of the food bank managers we spoke to said that certain charities or local

businesses had given them access to vans, which helped their distribution, especially in Angus, where the Kirriemuir and Forfar food banks cover an area of around 850 square miles. We heard that a lot of people in the more rural areas do not know how to access food from a food bank or that food banks are there to support them. One interview mentioned the fact that elderly people are hidden, because they are not aware that they can have access to food from food banks when they need it.

Food banks are a symptom of a wider cause, as I have said, and there is a stigma associated with them. The clientele who come to use food banks are different from those who use the more informal soup-kitchen types of food aid. Across the board, the people who are coming to access food banks and get food parcels for a short-term three-day period are typically housed and have access to facilities that will enable them to cook the food that they get. The soup kitchens typically have a slightly different sort of clientele—other vulnerable people in society who are experiencing different types of crisis, such as homelessness. In some rural areas, however, it was noted that there was a crossover and overlap and that people were accessing both the more informal services for hot meals and the food banks.

I shall hand over to Filip Sosenko at this point.

Dr Filip Sosenko (Heriot-Watt University): I want to make three points that are linked to the round-table discussion.

Last autumn, I interviewed a policy manager from one of the largest third-sector support organisations in Scotland, and she said that food banks are now part of the infrastructure for dealing with crisis. That comment captures the situation well, but we should not forget that, as has already been mentioned, many Scots do not have access to food banks because they live too far away from them. Furthermore, if they happen to live in an area served by a Trussell Trust food bank, they can receive only emergency crisis help, which entitles them to three food parcels over nine days. That is not a criticism of the Trussell Trust; it is a factual statement. You can get three food parcels and each parcel lasts you for three days.

My point is that there are high numbers of people who have to go without means of support for longer than nine days, and I want to quote some statistics. In the eight months to June 2013, there were 48,000 jobseekers allowance claimants in Scotland sanctioned for four weeks and 5,300 JSA claimants sanctioned for three months. If you are sanctioned for three months and can get emergency food for only nine days, how are you going to survive the remaining time? As I said, I am not criticising the Trussell Trust—there is a reason why it does things that way—but I want to point out that there is a high number of people who can use food parcels for only a short period of time.

Sanctioned JSA claimants are not eligible for crisis grants from the Scottish welfare fund: they cannot apply for a crisis grant. I have had conversations about the issue with colleagues from the welfare division of the Scottish Government, who say that there are legal limitations on how eligibility for a crisis grant is set—legally, they are not meant to subvert what the DWP is doing, and if people who have been sanctioned were eligible for crisis grants, that would undermine the policy of the DWP. I am not a constitutional lawyer and I do not know the ins and outs of it, but there is a legal issue with broadening the eligibility for crisis grants to include sanctioned people. That is the first point that I wanted to make.

My second point is about what Lord Freud said in July last year about the link between the rising demand for food parcels and welfare reform. He said:

> "The provision of food-bank support has grown from provision to 70,000 individuals two years ago to 347,000. All that predates the reforms."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 2 July 2013; Vol 738, c1072.]

I would say that welfare reform was not the main or an obvious factor fuelling demand for food aid prior to April 2013. However, there is enough evidence to say that, from April 2013, it has become a major factor fuelling demand for food aid.

I believe that Lord Freud's statement is factually incorrect. The changes to the welfare system started before April 2013. Yes, the majority of the harshest changes happened in April last year, but JSA sanctions got tougher in October 2012, five months before April 2013, and the absolute number of JSA sanctions was already rising a lot from about 2009.

In October 2008, there were 3,250 JSA sanctions in Scotland; in October 2010, two years later, there were 8,500. That is a jump in absolute numbers from 3,250 to 8,500 people sanctioned, and I believe that that is what fuelled the increase in demand for food aid in Scotland. The figure for October 2012 was 6,240, so there was a slight drop, but that is still twice as many JSA claimants as were sanctioned in 2007-08. Therefore, more JSA claimants were already being sanctioned in Scotland in 2010, 2011 and 2012, and sanctions got tougher in October 2012, which predates April 2013.

Additionally, in 2011 the coalition Government introduced new local housing allowance caps and changed the way in which local housing allowance is calculated. That change has diminished the

budgets of private sector tenants who rely on local housing allowance, and again it predates April 2013.

In April 2012, changes were made to the eligibility criteria for working tax credits. Since April 2012, couples with children have had to work at least 24 hours a week to be eligible for working tax credits, whereas prior to that the threshold was 16 hours per week. There is a cohort of families in Scotland whose budgets deteriorated before April 2013.

I am saying all that because Lord Freud said:

"All that predates the reforms."—[*Official Report*, *House of Lords*, 2 July 2013; Vol 738, c1072.]

To me, that is factually not correct; it is just that the harshest changes to benefits and the welfare system happened in April 2013.

Prior to April 2013, the main reasons for the rising demand for food aid were poor administration of the benefits system such as benefit delays, which predated the welfare reform, and rising food and energy prices, which were already squeezing families and households in 2009, 2010 and 2011.

It is clear to me that, since April 2013, welfare reform has been one of the key factors that is fuelling the rise in demand for food aid. In particular, I am referring to the bedroom tax, the fact that benefits were uprated by 1 per cent rather than in line with inflation, the reassessment of people on disability living allowance, the benefit cap and—south of the border—the localisation of council tax benefit.

The strongest evidence for that link is the fact that the demand for food aid grew at a faster rate after April 2013 than it did before that date. The Trussell Trust figures show that, since the reforms hit in April 2013, the demand for food aid from that point onwards has grown faster than before.

My last point is on further evidence. A few people round the table have called for more evidence to be collected, going beyond anecdotal evidence, on the impact of welfare reform on the demand for food aid. As a social researcher, I would say that the data that the Trussell Trust has collected on why people are referred is both robust and reliable, and not anecdotal at all. Obviously, other food banks have mentioned what their clients tell them, which is perhaps not systematic and is closer to anecdotal evidence, but the statistics that the Trussell Trust has collected are robust and reliable, and I see no reason why they should not be relied on.

Therefore, I do not think that there is much need for further evidence—I think that the statistics can be relied on in the future. It is a huge dataset; it is not thin. The data was collected systematically and in a consistent matter. As a social researcher, I do not have issues with the quality of it.

11:45

We also found that it would be difficult to collect any additional evidence on the link between welfare reform and the growing demand for food aid. That was mainly because food parcel providers and soup kitchens do not want to overburden themselves with collecting information in relation to case records. They would collect only information that was relevant to their operations, and the data that we are discussing would not be relevant to their operations. They would need to be strongly incentivised to carry out additional data collection. There are several issues with that.

The Convener: That was really helpful. Thanks very much for—

Dr Livingstone: Sorry, but I want to round off. I have a final thought—and this builds on what Filip Sosenko said about additional providers such as the soup kitchens and the drop-in centres.

One of the issues for additional providers was that they felt that collecting data would overstep boundaries with their clientele. They were concerned that the people who were coming to access the food aid from them could be deterred by having to give information—it might dissuade them from coming and continuing to use the services.

There is a difference with the users of food aid such as soup kitchens and other food banks that are not affiliated to the Trussell Trust. Those other providers were viewed as being more informal and unconditional in how they give and distribute food aid. The Trussell Trust provision has conditions attached to it, as it is only possible to get three food parcels within a six-month period from the trust, but there are food aid providers who provide food on a regular, sometimes weekly, basis to the same clients over and over again.

There is a further point, which reflects the additional research that Filip Sosenko and I carried out since we did the report, and it reflects the situation in the United States and Canada. I am not sure whether any of you are aware of how food banks are used in those countries. They emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and they have become an extension of the welfare state. They are a social safety net, and they have become normalised. They are embedded in society—they are entrenched.

It is interesting to note that there are currently volunteers in Canada with an organisation called Freedom 90. They have been working and volunteering for food banks for 20-odd years, and they are now working to make food banks

obsolete. They feel that the Government is now too reliant on them and that it is basically using them as an extension of the welfare state—it is using them in such a way that it is not having to fulfil its obligations to people in society.

I will finish off with a quote. There is an academic called Graham Riches. Reflecting on the Canadian situation in 2002, he suggested that food banks

"enable governments to look the other way and neglect food poverty and nutritional health and well-being ... In countries where they are in their infancy, the question of whether to support their development should be a matter of urgent public debate."

That is pretty much where we are at today. I wanted to leave you with that final thought.

The Convener: Thank you. Your document was very informative, and your contribution this morning has certainly clarified a few issues for me, in particular on whether there is a link between the statistics that we heard at our round table this morning and the welfare reform changes. Whether we need scientific evidence of that is another question. I do not query your evidence at all, but it is like asking whether bears do certain things in their natural habitat.

However, there seems to be a general concern. You mentioned the Canadian study, and concerns were expressed earlier this morning about food banks and food provision becoming part of the system.

My concern relates to the Scottish welfare fund. We have had evidence from Government officials—and further anecdotal evidence was presented this morning—that, as part of the process, the Scottish welfare fund is referring people to food banks. Does that concern you, given the experience in Canada, or is it a matter of accepting the reality that the welfare changes have created a huge problem, so there is a need to refer people, because that is the only way of helping them?

Dr Livingstone: It is probably a mixture of both, especially considering the informal providers that provide food on an unconditional basis.

Dr Sosenko: It just happens that I have been leading on the evaluation of the Scottish welfare fund. We are nearing the end of our fieldwork and we have now interviewed about 70 applicants to the Scottish welfare fund. Referring to food banks is fine, and it is useful to applicants, as long as it does not replace the grant. There is only anecdotal evidence. Ewan Gurr mentioned Dundee City Council. There is anecdotal evidence that, on some occasions, Scottish welfare fund officers, rather than giving a crisis grant, would refer an applicant to a food bank for three days' worth of food. However, I have no grounded evidence for that. What I am saying is that it is all right to give a grant and to refer someone to a food bank, as an additional source of support.

The Convener: According to the information that we have so far—the Scottish Government has just produced a bit more data—more people are trying to access the Scottish welfare fund, and more people are being supported through the fund, but the average financial award to individuals has gone down. It seems that a combination of things is happening. People are being supported by the Scottish welfare fund, but not always in terms of finance. That is something that you are comfortable with, is it?

Dr Sosenko: I do not have access to the latest statistics on the average amounts that are given in crisis grants, but in most cases it is not big money at all—it is short-term emergency or crisis help. Applicants often find themselves needing to apply for a further grant, although they can only apply for three crisis grants within a rolling 12-month period. What does someone do when they have exhausted their three crisis grants and are still in need—and they have exhausted their food bank vouchers as well?

The Convener: We can see that it is a major concern when people's problems escalate.

Jamie Hepburn: Dr Livingstone and Dr Sosenko have answered a lot of my questions in their comprehensive opening remarks, and I thank them for that. I have a few further points to discuss, however.

Dr Livingstone, you made the clear point that food banks address a need and meet a demand; they do not drive the demand. I have seen a copy of the letter that the UK Government sent to Glasgow City Council, and I have recently seen it referred to in the press. UK Government ministers were suggesting that one of the things that has caused the growth in the demand for and the number of food banks is the fact that supermarkets are somehow being more efficient in dealing with food waste. To be frank, I find that laughable—or I would find it laughable if it was not so sad. What do you think of that suggestion? Is there any evidence that that is the case?

Dr Livingstone: On supermarkets driving the growth of food banks, I would say no. From the evidence that we have, they seem to be supportive of surplus food redistribution, which cannot really be a bad thing; it has to be taken as a positive aspect of having food banks, and people are getting access to food.

There are food banks in some more rural areas and, even though they are Trussell Trust food banks and they typically take only non-perishable foods, some supermarkets will give them perishable foods, too. They get fresh fruit and

vegetables, which they redistribute in addition to the food that they would typically give out in a food parcel. The recipients benefit from that redistribution.

It is not just the supermarkets though: a lot of the people we spoke to commented on the vast amount of support from local communities. A lot of people feel that people are being empowered in local communities, driving the food banks through their churches and active volunteering.

Therefore, support is coming from the wider community, too, and the supermarkets who are providing and donating food to food banks are only an element.

Some supermarkets do not give food directly. For example, Tesco has an arrangement with the Trussell Trust. The trust's food banks have two national collections per year and the trust also carries out smaller local collections, which happen around four times per year. People from the trust go to supermarkets and set up outside. They give people a shopping list of goods that they would find useful. People can choose whether or not to contribute to the food banks. The trust does massive food collection drives for non-perishable foods. Tesco will tot up how much has been collected and gives 30 per cent of the overall food value to the food bank, so that it can buy additional food as it needs it. Therefore, it is not just that surplus food is being redistributed; the food banks are being given access to additional food when necessary.

Jamie Hepburn: Dr Sosenko said earlier that Lord Freud is incorrect to say that welfare reform is not a driver of the increase in demand for food banks. Is anyone who talks about supermarkets being more efficient in dealing with food waste also wrong?

Dr Sosenko: Our study found that the food banks that took part in our research do not tend to run out of supply. If supermarkets are even keener to donate and do so more efficiently, that cannot increase the demand; the increase is on the supply side. All that it does is to make food banks more comfortable about supply.

Dr Livingstone: It would ensure that they had consistent supply whenever they needed it.

Dr Sosenko: To put that in a different way, supermarkets would fuel demand for food aid only if food banks sporadically ran out of supply. Then, with a more consistent supply, there would be more people using food banks. That is not what we found in our study, however. Supply is always of concern to food bank managers, but they do not tend to run out of food.

Jamie Hepburn: So, at best, Lord Freud and these other UK Government ministers are misinformed.

Dr Sosenko: I would say that, yes.

Jamie Hepburn: At best.

Dr Sosenko: Yes.

Dr Livingstone: That is where everything has been pointing this morning.

Linda Fabiani: Both of you referred to the formality of the Trussell Trust in collecting data, which is good, and to the fact that people can go only three times in a six-month period. I am aware that—as Denis Curran mentioned earlier and as you have confirmed—the smaller food banks do not keep such data for various reasons, and they are less judgmental.

Were you able to find any link between those who had been to the Trussell Trust the three times? Were the same people also presenting at the more informal centres? Or was that not something that you were able to pick out?

Dr Sosenko: We were given 10 working days to do the research and write up the report. We probably put in 30 or 40 days but that was still not long enough to probe such things in detail.

12:00

Linda Fabiani: I was just interested. In my own area, we do not have the Trussell Trust; we do not have any of the bigger, more organised food banks. That is why I was so keen that Denis Curran from Loaves & Fishes came to speak to the committee—in my area, the food bank is entirely run by volunteers through Loaves & Fishes and through the churches. I just wonder whether the client profile is any different in some of the areas. That is something that we can probe.

I was also interested that you do not feel that more research is necessary on this particular question, Dr Sosenko—

Dr Sosenko: Well—

Linda Fabiani: Sorry, I am misquoting you.

Dr Sosenko: I do not think that we need more statistical evidence on why people get referred to food banks—

Linda Fabiani: So the link has been shown as far as you are concerned.

Dr Sosenko: Yes.

Linda Fabiani: I would hate to compromise you in any way by my words here.

Dr Livingstone: It comes down to the issue of robustness. The UK Government approach is to say that there is no robust evidence, but what we

found from our snapshot across Scotland was that the Trussell Trust data was generally indicative of the full situation across Scotland as regards the growth of food banks and that the data was robust.

Linda Fabiani: I just wondered whether your research had shown up what further research might be useful. Did you reach a view on that?

Dr Livingstone: On informal food providers, we came across one food bank in Dundee that was run by a church. It has been run by the same lady for about 25 years. Even though they have seen a massive increase in users, they do not want to become affiliated to the Trussell Trust as a food bank because they do not want to have to conform to the referral system. I am sure that there are a multitude of other independent food banks out there that feel similarly about the way in which their help is conditionalised.

Dr Sosenko: On further research, I would be really interested to find out about the journeys that people make from becoming food insecure to knocking on the door of a food bank. From other studies, we know that going to a food bank tends to be the last resort, but it would be very interesting to find out what exactly people do and what strategies they employ.

Dr Livingstone: We have looked at the situation from the perspective of the providers, so getting a user perspective would be really helpful.

Dr Sosenko: I can bring in a few voices from the evaluation of the Scottish welfare fund because I interviewed a few people who used it and got food bank vouchers. Family and friends are the main sources of support that people with no income try to use before going to other sources. Also, they often live off the partner's benefits. It is not a comfortable situation if there is a couple with a young child and the mother has benefits, which the whole household lives off. One of the applicants for a Scottish welfare fund crisis grant told me that she shoplifted from a garage. That happens.

Dr Livingstone: It would be interesting to take a wider perspective and look at the people who use food banks in relation to the economic situation at the minute. We know that the UK Government is happy at the moment because unemployment has apparently been pushed down to 7 per cent. The position may just reflect a wider shift and people adopting different working patterns—someone might be working only 18 or 20 hours a week, on the minimum wage. Is that having a knock-on effect on people's need to use food banks, because the minimum wage—or the living wage—is actually insufficient to support people?

The Convener: A contributor made the point this morning that people do not necessarily have to be unemployed or totally devoid of income to have to access food banks. There are people on low incomes who have to access food banks.

Linda Fabiani: Yes, it was Denis Curran.

Dr Sosenko: I would like to say something on that point. Someone mentioned budgeting skills and I very much support third sector organisations teaching people who want to learn how to budget. However, someone can be the champion of the world in budgeting skills and still be on such a low income that they just cannot make it to the end of the month. It is not just about budgeting skills.

Annabelle Ewing: I would like to ask about the Trussell Trust and conditionality, which you mention in paragraph 4.12 on page 11 of your report. You state that although the general rule is three times three, the individual food bank manager has some discretion, taking into account a series of measures such as crisis versus long-term sustainability and other issues. I do not know to what extent, if at all, the Trussell Trust keeps separate statistics about the food bank managers' use of that discretion, and it might be interesting to find that out. It is fair to say that the general approach is as you have described it.

Many of the points that I wanted to explore have been dealt with, but you raised a point at the end about the additional research that you had done on the United States of America and Canada. I would also like to take up the comments that were made by the representative of the British Red Cross. To what extent has there been any examination of what is happening in other European countries? I recall a recent news item about a European Union fund that would have supported activity in that area, but from which the UK Government, for some reason, did not seek to apply for funding under that budget stream. Has that formed part of any additional research that you have carried out?

Dr Livingstone: The UK Government report that was published last week by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs reflects on food banks and food aid provision in Germany as well as in the US and Canada. That is the only other country that I am aware of on which there are studies that can offer a slightly different, more European perspective on food aid provision.

Kevin Stewart: I thank Dr Sosenko and Dr Livingstone for their evidence. Most of the points that I was going to raise have been covered by others, but I would like to go back to what Dr Livingstone said about health and nutrition in relation to the use of food banks. Have any studies been done, either here or elsewhere, of the impact of overreliance on processed food?

Dr Livingstone: In America, there have been journal papers and articles reflecting on the fact that the food that is typically redistributed from

food banks in the US and Canada does not meet nutritional standards. I am not sure about the UK, but what I have looked at from an historical perspective suggests that the food is insufficient in terms of nutrition.

Kevin Stewart: We obviously have a growing obesity problem here. Last week, one of our colleagues, Dennis Robertson, held a conference on eating disorder awareness. I wonder whether any studies that have been done on the use of food banks have shown that there is a greater prevalence for obesity or for eating disorders.

Dr Livingstone: Not that I am aware of. That would be hard to qualify.

Dr Sosenko: If such studies exist, they are probably from the US. Food banks have been part of the scene there for ages and there is lots of research on food banks.

Dr Livingstone: There is certainly potential to look at the nutritional value of the food that is redistributed through food banks in the UK.

Kevin Stewart: That is extremely useful. As I said, I cannot imagine going hungry, but I think that it could lead people to doing things that they would not normally do, because they are forced to. I hope that the situation does not go on long enough for us to be able to carry out such research, and that we can deal with the problem quickly and see the gradual demise of food banks. However, I suspect that we could be storing up something that will cost people and society a hell of a lot in the future.

Ken Macintosh: I have two questions, the first of which picks up on a comment that Linda Fabiani made about whether you can make distinctions between the people who use food banks. I thought from reading your report that broad distinctions exist. There is a difference between those who use inner-city soup kitchens and those who use Trussell Trust food banks.

Dr Livingstone: The clientele appears to differ slightly. As I said, people who access Trussell Trust food banks are typically housed and on lower incomes or experiencing a crisis, possibly for the first time, whereas those who use more informal food banks or inner-city soup kitchens tend to form a regular clientele with an alternative type of crisis, such as homelessness, drug addiction or alcoholism.

Dr Sosenko: They have complex needs.

Dr Livingstone: The referral system that the Trussell Trust uses means that its service evades those people, because a lot of them do not have the capacity to get referred, get to the food bank and use the food that it could give them.

Ken Macintosh: Dr Livingstone made the significant remark that, if we really want to help people, we need to act urgently before the use of food banks and that way of life become entrenched. A lot of the previous witnesses today placed great stock on not just giving out food aid but helping people to help themselves. The Cyrenians representative talked about cooking skills and building capacity and confidence, which a number of witnesses mentioned.

Has any research been done to show the success or otherwise of such approaches? What can we in the Scottish Parliament do to tackle reliance on food banks? Should we make crisis loans more available and give people money to make their own choices? Should we build capacity and give help? What might work?

Dr Livingstone: A good example that we came across of a cohesive community group is in Dundee, where a community partnership is run by a gentleman called Gordon Sharp of Faith in Community Scotland, who has been involved in the community in Dundee for many years. The partnership meets regularly and hears the opinions and experiences of people who provide food aid for a variety of people across the community—that covers everything from drop-in centres to the Trussell Trust food bank and the likes of the Salvation Army, which addresses a slightly different need.

Those people suggest that we need community action and to support people in the long term. Food aid provision is temporary and short term; the issue is how to build on that and what happens next. As Filip Sosenko and others this morning said, there is an opportunity that could be capitalised on to help people with budgeting, cooking and growing successfully out of reliance or dependence on food aid provision.

Dr Sosenko: Such actions are useful, but the main thing is repairing the safety net, which has been torn apart. Unless it is repaired, the situation will not change and people will still go to food banks. That raises the issue of welfare powers for the Westminster Government and the Scottish Government.

The Convener: Members have no more questions. I thank the witnesses for providing the research, informing us in a bit more depth about the work and answering our questions. I think that Dr Sosenko will be back before us in the future.

Dr Sosenko: I will be back in two months' time.

The Convener: We will continue to monitor the witnesses' research, which has been helpful to us.

I suspend the meeting to allow our witnesses to leave.

12:14

Meeting suspended.

12:16

On resuming—

Fact-finding Visit

The Convener: Our next agenda item is a report back from Jamie Hepburn and Ken Macintosh on their fact-finding visit to Deafblind Scotland as part of our your say work, which is looking at the impact of welfare reform on individuals.

Jamie Hepburn: First, I place on record my thanks to Deafblind Scotland for hosting myself and Ken Macintosh, and Rebecca Macfie, who came along to support Ken and me on our visit.

I will not read out the whole report that is in front of us; obviously, members have that report. The main thing that I took from the visit—I think that the experience of deafblind people is not dissimilar to that of other groups of people with a particular condition—is that individuals are dealing with a system that does not meet their distinct needs. However, I think that the problem is particularly acute for deafblind people, which perhaps reflects a wider issue of society not recognising the factors that affect them.

From the individuals who spoke to us, it was pretty clear that the condition is not always visible to people. Sometimes neither element of their condition—the fact that they have hearing loss or sight loss—is apparent to people who deal with them. Almost invariably, one element is not apparent if the other one is. That is perhaps an issue for wider society, but it is particularly relevant for deafblind people who are trying to interact with the welfare system.

We were told about the lack of specific and necessary support. One deafblind person told us that only four social workers deal specifically with deaf people in Glasgow—that is not specifically deafblind people, but deaf people. Another service user told us that she had been put with the older people's social work team, even though she was only 45. Such a lack of expertise can sometimes cause difficulties for deafblind people who are accessing the welfare system.

Another issue is the lack of support and financial assistance to complete application forms for social security. Each individual who was present relies heavily on their guide communicator. One individual, who is entitled to eight hours of guide communicator support, had to use a huge swathe of that time—almost all of it—to complete the forms, which left him with no time to do other necessary things, such as go to the GP or get out and about.

Concern was expressed about the lack of information available in a format that deafblind people can access about what the personal independence payment and other benefits mean to those who currently receive disability living allowance.

There was a call from Deafblind Scotland for people who are registered as blind and deaf to receive benefits automatically and not be subject to assessment—and, crucially, not be subject to reassessment. I suggest that we take that on board as part of the work that we are doing.

We need to communicate our findings to the DWP, which is relevant to our committee. There are other wider issues that we should perhaps make the Health and Sport Committee aware of.

Ken Macintosh: I support what Jamie Hepburn said. The meeting was very helpful. We met three officers from Deafblind Scotland, who all spoke for the organisation: Drena O'Malley, who we all know and who is our main point of contact; Ruth Dorman, who is the chief executive; and Steven Joyce. We then met three people who use the organisation, who spoke to us as witnesses, as it were: Christine Fry, Frankie Thompson and Maria Crawford.

From a welfare reform point of view, what was striking was that the messages that we heard were very similar to those that we have heard from other witnesses about the difficulties that they are experiencing with welfare reform.

Two points that are specific to deafblind people also struck me. First, deafblind people may or may not have care or support needs, but before they have care and support needs, they have communication needs. If you are deaf, your communication needs are met automatically in many circumstances and you are then assessed for your care. If you are deaf and blind, your communication needs are assessed as part of your care and the cost of meeting those needs comes out of your care budget. Whatever care needs you have, you cannot even begin to access anything—you cannot go out of the house, you cannot go to the shops and you cannot fill in a form to be reassessed for work capability or do anything else relating to the welfare reform agenda—without using your guide communicator. Jamie Hepburn referred to that earlier.

There is therefore a bizarre difference between the support that is given to deaf people and the support that is given to deafblind people: deaf people automatically get communication support and deafblind people do not—it comes out of their care budget. That is quite upsetting for those in the deafblind community, some of whom had been deaf before and had gone blind.

The second point, which Jamie Hepburn touched on, is that deafblind people will not get better. It is yet another of the many examples at

the heart of the welfare reform agenda where we are reassessing people who clearly will not improve; we are treating them as if they will improve when they cannot improve. That is not just a source of frustration and it is not just illogical; it is very upsetting for deafblind people. The two points that were repeated over and over again at the meeting were that people felt stressed and anxious and that they felt bullied. That is a familiar story, given other people's experiences of the welfare reform agenda, but with the added complication that I mentioned.

I agree with Jamie Hepburn that we might need to look separately at the issue of why deafblind people have to have their communication needs met out of their care budget, as opposed to out of a communication budget. Perhaps we should explore that with the Scottish Government. If someone goes to Glasgow City Council, for example, the people who are assessing and helping them might not have any knowledge or experience of deafblind people and, therefore, there might be incidents in which people are put into older people's services, rather than having their specific needs addressed.

The Convener: I take on board the points that Jamie Hepburn and Ken Macintosh have made. This comes on the back of our your say evidence from our previous meeting, when we heard about people with degenerative and long-term conditions being affected by the work capability assessment in particular.

We need to flag up this issue to the UK Government. Given the fact that people who are not going to improve are continually being put through the trauma of these tests, we need to make sure that we are asking pertinent questions about that.

It would also be legitimate to ask the Scottish Government for a response on the subject of support that is provided via social services or health boards. We should ask about its awareness of the situation and what it might be able to do about using communication budgets to meet communication needs, rather than finding the money from care budgets. That might be the Scottish Government's responsibility.

So, there are two lines of questioning that we need to pursue. It would be useful to hear the responses. Do members have any other ideas?

Jamie Hepburn: I agree. Perhaps we should make our colleagues on the Health and Sport Committee aware of those issues, too; I think that that would be the relevant committee.

The Convener: That is a fair point. We should inform that committee, which might have this issue in its programme for future consideration. Thank you for that.

12:25

Meeting continued in private until 12:43.

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