



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

Tuesday 27 May 2014

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WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

9th 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:

Mandy Littlewood (Heriot-Watt University)

Dr Filip Sosenko (Heriot-Watt University)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Simon Watkins

LOCATION

The Adam Smith Room (CR5)

Scottish Parliament

Welfare Reform Committee

Tuesday 27 May 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 ninth meeting in 2014 of the Welfare Reform Committee. Please ensure that your mobile phones and other electronic devices are switched off.

The first item of business is a decision on whether consideration of the committee's approach to the Scottish Government draft budget 2015-16 should be taken in private at all future meetings. Do members agree?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Review of the Scottish Welfare Fund Interim Scheme

10:00

The Convener: The second item of business is an evidence session on the review of the Scottish welfare fund interim scheme. We took evidence on the Scottish welfare fund from a range of local authorities and from the Minister for Housing and Welfare on 18 March. The evidence sessions will inform the committee's work on the welfare funds (Scotland) bill, which we expect to be introduced next month.

I welcome back Dr Filip Sosenko, research associate at the school of the built environment at Heriot-Watt University, who gave evidence to the committee on 4 March on another study that he conducted for the Scottish Government on food aid. I also welcome his colleague, Mandy Littlewood, a visiting research fellow at the institute for housing, urban and real estate research at Heriot-Watt University.

I understand that Dr Sosenko would like to make some introductory comments. After that, I shall invite questions and discussion.

Dr Filip Sosenko (Heriot-Watt University): Good morning and thank you for inviting me. I shall start with a brief overview of what we have done. In August last year, we were tasked by the Scottish Government with carrying out a qualitative study of how the interim arrangements for the Scottish welfare fund were working. The aim of the study was to inform the permanent arrangements, and specifically to add depth to the administrative and statistical evidence about the operation of the interim arrangements.

Mandy Littlewood and I and two colleagues from Heriot-Watt carried out interviews and small group discussions with third sector organisations in October and November last year. We interviewed 15 third sector support organisations representing a range of clients from various equality groups and with various vulnerabilities.

In January, February and March this year, we carried out in-depth interviews with 77 applicants to the Scottish welfare fund. Those 77 people varied in their background and circumstances. Some of them did not have specific vulnerabilities, some had medium-level vulnerabilities and some had highly complex needs, and there was a good split between people who were successful in their application, those who were partially successful and those who were unsuccessful. There was also a good spread of equality groups and types of vulnerability.

The headline findings are that, in our view, the interim arrangements are a good start but there are areas for improvement. Some of our recommendations are probably quite straightforward and relatively easy to implement, and some are probably less easy to implement.

I turn to our specific findings. In general, Scottish welfare fund staff come across well and are helpful and supportive to applicants, but there is a problem with accessibility in that not everyone who is in need and could benefit from the fund is aware of it. Awareness and knowledge of the fund among third sector organisations' staff vary, so there is room for improvement there. We also found some evidence of gate keeping on the part of Scottish welfare fund staff, which is why we have recommended that all attempts to apply should be logged on the system.

Some applicants whom we interviewed were concerned about how long it takes to get a decision, and there were also concerns that it is not always clear how decisions are made or justified, so we have made recommendations with regard to those things as well. Finally, there is room for improvement in relation to joined-up working and signposting in particular. I will stop there. Thank you.

The Convener: Ms Littlewood, do you want to make any comments?

Mandy Littlewood (Heriot-Watt University): Broadly, I would say that, given the time that the scheme took to get up and running and the time for which it has been running, it has made a very good start, and we must commend staff for that. They come across well to the users. People feel that they are dealt with well and that the staff empathise with their situation. People do not always get the outcome that they want but, by and large, they understand; they realise that not everybody can get access to the moneys.

However, as Filip Sosenko said, we see the need for improvement in some key areas including how transparent the scheme is, how easy it is to access and decision making. It is important to ensure that advocates for applicants are kept in the loop, because often it is the advocates rather than the applicants who will engage in the review process. Because applicants tend to be vulnerable, there is a tendency for them to give up if they get a negative response, whereas if they are in touch with someone who will help them as part of a review, they are more inclined to be involved in one. That is a particularly important aspect for the scheme to improve on.

The Convener: Thank you. I start our questions by asking for some clarification. After the SWF was introduced, there was some widening and adaptation of the criteria. Did some of the people

whom you interviewed go through the process before the changes and some afterwards?

Dr Sosenko: Yes. Some of them applied to the SWF before October last year, when the criteria were relaxed for the first time. The criteria were further relaxed in April this year, but we interviewed people between January and March, so we did not pick up on the latest change to the guidance in our research.

The Convener: We were told at the outset that the principles of the SWF were for it to be flexible and adaptable, but you state in your report that

"an emphasis on strict adherence to rules and criteria rather than discretion in decision-making"

was evident. What was driving that? If those who were administering the SWF were adhering to strict rules and criteria, they were missing out on the principles of flexibility and adaptability. Why?

Dr Sosenko: That could be attributed to the culture among the revenues and benefits staff, who are principally in charge of processing housing benefit and council tax reductions, which do not require discretion. They face a phenomenon that we call cultural shift. In the morning, they might be processing housing benefit applications for which the criteria are very strict and there is no discretion. Then, in the afternoon, they might be processing Scottish welfare fund applications, for which the emphasis is on discretion. Therefore, people are under tension.

The Convener: It is a cultural thing.

Dr Sosenko *indicated agreement.*

Mandy Littlewood: That is why, in the recommendations, we point towards staff training and mentoring through contact with social work staff or staff who are engaged more with vulnerable groups, who might be able to offer insights into the broader skill set that is needed to deal with quite complex cases, including flexibility and responsiveness.

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Good morning and thank you for the report, which I found very interesting. Dr Sosenko, you mentioned that some of your recommendations appear to be easier to implement than others. Can you give us a few examples of those that you think might be more difficult to implement?

Dr Sosenko: We have made the recommendation that all applicants should be sent a decision letter and that advocates should be copied into the decision if the applicant has given permission for SWF staff to do that. That is fairly straightforward and should be easy to implement. However, staff culture will require more training

and is less straightforward, although it is still doable.

Mandy Littlewood: The whole idea of discretion is quite problematic. By its nature, it starts to open up the possibility of variability, which is why accountability and transparency are really important. That is an area where having better monitoring of people who do not apply, although it would not be at zero cost, would take local authorities a step further. On-going monitoring is always a costly area that needs staff resources, so the level of monitoring to monitor gate keeping will be harder to achieve. A financial commitment will be required to put structures in place and to ensure that there is good monitoring and that the processes are robust.

Discretion is very hard to measure. Outcomes are quite black and white, but discretion is about recognising nuances, picking up on things and interviewing well—asking people to say more about things in order to get the full story. Some of our respondents were aware that they had not put themselves across as well as they might have done, and there were people who felt that they had put themselves across a wee bit better when they had someone there to help them. In that respect, some of the recommendations around signposting and putting people in contact with people who can help them to put their story across well are useful. It is about the staff being good listeners and good questioners, and that is quite a nuanced area of training—and not without cost, of course.

10:15

Annabelle Ewing: Of course—I have always been a supporter of discretion in the benefits system at large. I was sorry to see it removed many decades ago, and it has not been restored by any subsequent Government at Westminster. I think that discretion is an essential component of fairness, but I take on board your point about issues of culture and training and about monitoring and accountability.

What was the experience of the respondents to whom you spoke of hardship payments from the Department for Work and Pensions? Were they aware of those payments and able to receive them?

Dr Sosenko: I think that about eight or 10 of the people we interviewed had experience of applying for the hardship fund. Some of them had got a payment but most had not. Most of them did not really like the experience of applying for the fund—they found the questioning to be not a very nice experience.

Mandy Littlewood: Inevitably, respondents draw comparisons, because they experience

different things in their life. There were quite positive comparisons between the Scottish welfare fund staff and some of the staff that people had come into contact with in the DWP. Inevitably, people will compare how they are treated. The third sector staff felt that one of the main advantages and benefits of the Scottish welfare fund was that the staff, whether or not they were able to exercise discretion effectively—more work needs to be done on that—showed compassion and empathy and dealt with people in a way that was fair and right. The DWP treatment in some cases was less good in comparison.

Annabelle Ewing: That is not the first time that we have heard that. I suspect that it is perhaps not so much to do with differences between the individual officials—I am sure that officials across the piece seek to do a good job and to do the best that they can—but is to do with the rules that they are applying. Perhaps there is a feeling of ownership of the Scottish welfare fund, because people have been involved in creating it and have bought into it, whereas people do not feel that with some of the rules that they have to apply from the Westminster Government. Obviously, I am not seeking to have you stray into the murky world of politics, so I will stop at that point and pass on to somebody else.

Dr Sosenko: On the issue of discretion, the fact that the fund is on course to be spent by the end of the financial year is perhaps a sign that staff have been gradually getting better at exercising discretion over the past financial year. Obviously, the relaxation of the eligibility criteria must also have played a role in that.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Have you made an assessment of the fund's success in alleviating hardship? Clearly, the fund is a replacement for another system, so in some ways we are considering whether the process works as a replacement. However, is it successful in its overall objective of alleviating hardship, or could it be improved?

Dr Sosenko: We have not been asked to compare the Scottish welfare fund with the social fund, so we have not looked into that. However, we found clear evidence that, where applicants had been awarded full grants or substantial grants, the grant had genuinely helped to alleviate or prevent hardship. It is clearly a useful scheme that helps some of the most vulnerable people in society. Likewise, we have found evidence that applications that were rejected or which resulted in small awards being given might have been missed opportunities for preventing or alleviating hardship.

Ken Macintosh: The fact that you are not comparing the SWF with the previous scheme perhaps means that you will not be able to answer my next question.

It strikes me that there are a number of issues with how long it is taking to process applications. The scheme provides emergency help in crisis situations, but there seem to be a number of applications that are taking a little bit longer than we might wish. Some of the figures that the committee has been given suggest—it was not obvious—that the new scheme is slightly slower than the previous system. That could be because nobody knows about the new system; the old one was straightforward and everybody knew about it, and the slowness could be just a teething problem.

Dr Sosenko: The target processing times were shorter under the social fund than they are under the Scottish welfare fund, so that is probably why there is a difference in waiting times.

Ken Macintosh: What were the target processing times?

Dr Sosenko: The applications had to be processed by the end of the working day under the social fund.

Ken Macintosh: What is the target under the Scottish welfare fund?

Dr Sosenko: It is two working days.

Ken Macintosh: That probably explains the difference.

Dr Sosenko: There are statistical and administrative data regarding waiting times, but ours was a qualitative study and our sample was not a random representative one. It is probably better to ask Scottish Government research colleagues about average waiting times. In our sample, the majority of people got their decisions within the target processing time. However, if someone is in a crisis and gets their decision after two working days, that may not be fast enough.

Mandy Littlewood: There were situations in which all the stops were pulled out. We came across people who got money within a couple of hours because they really needed something, but there were people who waited the two days and had no electricity or food and went to a food bank in the interim. It is clear that waiting for two days will have an impact on someone who has nothing at all. There is no getting away from that.

Ken Macintosh: Do you know why there is now a two-day target processing time as opposed to the previous target?

Dr Sosenko: No.

Ken Macintosh: The other issue that has emerged is that there is still a lack of choice. Applicants seem to be grateful and pleased when they are given an award, but there have been a number of comments about the lack of choice—in particular about the lack of cash and the effect that

that has. Did you study that in depth, or did it just emerge from your questioning?

Dr Sosenko: Third sector support organisations were more concerned about the lack of choice than were the applicants whom we interviewed. In general, as long as the method of payment suits the applicant, they are not too bothered whether they get cash or vouchers for Asda. If somebody is going to do their shopping at Asda anyway, it does not matter to them whether they have cash or vouchers. A few applicants were concerned about the lack of choice, but most were not. Support organisations were more concerned about people not having choice and about that possibly being demeaning.

Mandy Littlewood: There are examples on the other side of the coin. Some people are quite vulnerable and not good at shopping, looking for things or measuring things, and find it easier to have a carpet fitted for them, for example. Organising getting a carpet fitted can be quite a challenge for quite vulnerable people, so having someone come to lay a carpet or to deliver a bed removes much of the stress of having to find a person to do that. There are some benefits to taking such responsibilities out of people's hands.

However, I can understand that third sector organisations often seek personal responsibility and personal choice for people and so were quite sensitive to such choice not being available.

Dr Sosenko: In an ideal world, people would be given a choice of methods of payment, but that would clearly have cost implications for local authorities, which is why we did not make a specific recommendation on that.

Ken Macintosh: There is a general issue, which is that the scheme is replacing an existing scheme, and the first priority has to be to make it work effectively. The second issue is that it is an opportunity to reform the approach that we take to welfare. For example, should we try to build improved resilience into the scheme or, because the scheme is for dealing with people in emergencies and crises, should resilience be a secondary factor?

Can we use the data and research that are in your report to illuminate the larger picture in respect of whether the scheme should be reformed? The SWF clearly seems to be working as a replacement for the social fund, but are there obvious areas in which we should think about how we are approaching the subject, in terms of its success in helping people in times of difficulty, and giving them support that would benefit them in both the short and long terms?

Mandy Littlewood: That is where signposting becomes very important. Having the carpet, the bed or the money is not the end of the process,

but the start of another one. We need to make sure that those things are not an end point but a start, and that they link to local provision, whether in social inclusion projects or employability projects. It goes full circle. It might be too early for that to be happening, but we identified areas where signposting could be better.

Dr Sosenko: The scheme is not designed to deal with causes of long-term poverty and hardship.

On the shape that the scheme may take when permanent arrangements are in place, our research includes statistical evidence, and I suggest that Scottish Government colleagues look at various local welfare assistance schemes that have been implemented by local authorities in England. They may have implemented specific solutions that are not part of the interim scheme for the Scottish welfare fund, but which could be part of the permanent arrangements.

I looked recently at local welfare assistance schemes in Leeds City Council, Manchester City Council and Liverpool City Council. They have definitely developed solutions that are not part of the Scottish welfare fund, but which might be relevant and could be part of permanent arrangements. I can only encourage Scottish Government colleagues to study some of those local welfare assistance schemes.

10:30

Ken Macintosh: Finally, on choice, I note from your report that some applicants who were given starter kits for their flats were very grateful that they did not have to find a carpet, a cooker and all the rest, but others said that they could have got a better bed themselves, and so on. Were you able to analyse who had or did not have choice, and whether the fact that they had choice was important? Some people would be grateful no matter what, but how important was choice? Did you make a qualitative assessment or comparison of their satisfaction, or the success of the process in helping them, and the element of choice itself?

Dr Sosenko: We found that people who did not like the condition or the look of the items that they received said that they would have preferred to have had some choice. On the other hand, people who received goods of satisfactory quality or who would have got similar items anyway were less concerned about the lack of choice.

Mandy Littlewood: Some people got a voucher, but they found it quite difficult to spend it. In other words, when they had the choice, they sometimes found it difficult to find something for that amount of money that would fulfil their needs. In areas where people are simply given a fridge, they at least get a fridge, but in other areas they

might have been given £125 but found that fridges cost £140 or more, which meant that they had to find money.

It is a difficult issue. Choice is not choice if it does not meet need. It is probably a bit too simple to say that those who had choice were happier than those who had no choice, because sometimes having choice meant that—

Ken Macintosh: The choice that I am talking about is not the choice that comes with a £125 voucher. It is the choice between having a fridge or having a voucher.

Mandy Littlewood: Some people quite honestly admitted that if they had had the money they might not have bought the fridge, even if they had needed one.

Ken Macintosh: They would have spent the money somewhere else.

Mandy Littlewood: Indeed. The third sector has pointed out that people with very little money find it very hard to make good choices.

Dr Sosenko: I should point out that in the few interviews in which people made that statement they did not mean that they would have spent the money on booze. They would have spent it on, say, shoes rather than on a fridge.

Ken Macintosh: This gets to the heart of the issue of resilience. If you give people freedom, they can make the wrong choices. However, the whole point of resilience is to make choices for oneself. It is a big issue.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I am interested in signposting to the fund, advertising it and generally making people aware of it. Did you come across local authority areas where there is more awareness of the fund's existence? If so, are they doing anything different from the others in terms of how they were advertising it or signposting people to it?

Mandy Littlewood: Knowledge of the fund and awareness of advertising were very low across the board. I am struggling to think of a local authority that could be held up as an example of one that had made a big splash and had made people very aware of the fund. Where people were in touch with their housing association, council or someone who could signpost them to the scheme, it worked well, but we are concerned about those who are not in touch with a lot of services and might therefore be falling through the net. The situation may be better now, but when we carried out the research awareness was quite low.

Dr Sosenko: We need to remember that, when the scheme was implemented, so much was going on with welfare reform that some of the advertising efforts of local authorities were not productive, and

third sector organisations were more preoccupied with welfare reform changes.

Kevin Stewart: Inevitably, one of the difficulties when massive change happens all at once is that it is difficult for folk to get their heads round some of the very basic things. Obviously, as with everything else, people focus on what affects them most, rather than on what they consider to be minutiae, at the time.

You talked about folks who had already had contact with social workers or third sector organisations, and about their being the most likely people to be signposted to the fund. Did you find that social workers, food bank staff or other organisations in any parts of the country were better at that signposting than others? Were you asking folks where they heard about the fund and what help they had received in trying to access the fund?

Mandy Littlewood: I did a fair amount of interviewing in Glasgow, which is obviously a very different environment from other places. Historically, it has had a very wide network of organisations, and it has a very large housing association sector and strong community-based work, which play an important wider role across the board. If we are considering learning lessons in Scotland, Glasgow has a lot of interesting things going on, with a lot of people who are very connected to services. That goes back to the old partnerships in Glasgow and the large extent of service provision. People would probably know to go to the Govan Law Centre, Money Matters or the various other places in Glasgow that are well renowned for helping people. People are highly networked there.

I have some concerns regarding coverage in some rural areas, where the level of provision might be quite patchy in comparison with the cities. Dundee is probably quite similar to Glasgow in that respect.

Dr Sosenko: We found evidence that some support organisations had been unsuccessful in supporting applicants to the Scottish welfare fund, in that the applications were rejected. The applicants were discouraged from pursuing things further.

Mandy Littlewood: We came across some third sector organisations that had had a few negative experiences before the eligibility criteria were relaxed, which had coloured their judgment about whether to suggest such applications as a route for people in need in the future. Some of the less specialist organisations might need even more information or outreach to get back into the process. Money Matters, the Govan Law Centre and strongly welfare-oriented organisations will always use the fund heavily and will heavily

encourage people towards it. Some minority third sector organisations, if they have had a bad experience and do not see the fund as something that helps their service users, might need to be brought back into the process.

Kevin Stewart: In my neck of the woods in Aberdeen, Community Food Initiatives North East, which is a FareShare organisation and a food bank, has been referring folk to the Scottish welfare fund. Beyond that, it is able to help folk to move forward in other ways.

Do you think that the staff who deal with the Scottish welfare fund are signposting folks on to other things as well as they should, to try and get them out of crisis, or is that not happening yet?

Mandy Littlewood: The picture is still quite variable. There were examples of people being signposted towards food banks if they did not get money from the Scottish welfare fund. That would be very much a response to a crisis so that something was delivered. I came across less of—I was less aware of—the more positive signposting, such as staff helping someone by pointing them to a furniture or employability project, for example. Things are not being done holistically across the board.

Kevin Stewart: The preventative scenarios are not in place yet.

Dr Sosenko: Indeed. We found that the picture is patchy, which is why we recommended that decision letters should signpost people to support organisations in their area. That would definitely improve things and make them more joined up and holistic. One of the main reasons for localising the social fund was that local authorities would be better at integrating support. Signposting is at the heart of achieving that ambition. That is why we included that recommendation.

Kevin Stewart: I think that Ms Littlewood said that one reason for things being patchy could be that the scheme is in its early stages.

From the work that you have done—including your previous work—do you think that there is a learning process? Are folk adapting to make things much better than they were, or is it all too much for them?

Dr Sosenko: Decision makers are under time constraints: they might have another person waiting on the line, for instance, and they will be under pressure to answer that call, rather than spend five or 10 minutes on signposting someone. Those constraints should be taken into consideration. Revenue and benefits staff may be less familiar with the local support landscape than social work department staff. That is probably where more joined-up work between the two departments could be beneficial.

Kevin Stewart: That would be in councils' interests in terms of prevention.

Did you come across any local authorities that had started the integration process and were not just relying on revenue and benefits staff, but bringing in welfare rights staff and others to help with the process?

Dr Sosenko: We did not interview people in local authorities. We just spoke to applicants and representatives of third sector organisations, who were mostly cut off from the decision-making process.

Mandy Littlewood: It is difficult to say what is led by the local authority. We did not speak to local authority representatives specifically. There are some examples of partnerships in Glasgow, where I think that the city council is working with the Wheatley Group and other registered social landlords. There is already quite a strong partnership approach in Glasgow.

Some local authorities have existing partnership approaches and will be better able to involve other people and tap into other resources. There is something to be learned from that. I suspect that some rural authorities have fewer networks, particularly where they are the main social housing provider and cannot tap into a big network of housing associations or other providers. There is more of a challenge in those areas.

There are good examples of partnership working out there, but it was not part of our study's remit to find them. They certainly exist, as we know from other work that has been done.

10:45

Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): Most of the points that I was going to raise have been covered, but I will pick up on a couple of them. The requirement for training is coming through strongly in the discussion. That is not to say that people have not been doing a very good job in administering a new scheme, but, with the review, we may be at a natural break point where we can look again at training. I like the idea of a holistic approach and joint training that allows for the signposting that we are talking about, which is an important point to emphasise.

Ken Macintosh raised one issue that worries me. One of the recommendations is on encouraging the speeding up of the decision-making process, particularly for crisis grants. A crisis grant is defined as a grant for an emergency or disaster. Perhaps the process is not operating as quickly as it should. I think that the word "judgmental" is used in the study by a couple of people, and perhaps judgments are being made

that a situation is not quite the crisis that the applicant thinks it is.

Did you pick up any thoughts about what could be done to improve the process? A crisis is indeed a crisis, so would you change the two-day criteria, for example? Organisations sometimes work towards a target rather than deal with something quickly.

Dr Sosenko: The crisis grant applicants to whom we have spoken would welcome a shorter target processing time. There are obviously resource implications, because if somebody phones at a quarter to five to ask for a crisis grant and the target is to deal with such requests by the end of the working day, someone will need to stay after hours to process that application. The question is whether it would be possible to process crisis grant applications out of working hours and during weekends.

Linda Fabiani: That leads me on to the next bit of my question. What I have picked up, entirely anecdotally, is that if someone has a crisis on a Friday afternoon, they cannot see anyone until the Monday. Have you come across any administrators of the crisis grant, and of the welfare fund generally, who run a helpline over the weekend?

Dr Sosenko: No.

Mandy Littlewood: No. I suppose that that is the down side of having a scheme that is administered by revenue and benefits offices. They provide a 9-to-5 service, unless the local authority uses its out-of-hours social work service as an alternative to cover the hours. Obviously, that would have its own co-ordination difficulties, as it would involve two departments instead of one. However, I did not come across anyone in the third sector talking about a weekend service.

Dr Sosenko: The issue came up in my interviews with third sector organisations, but it also came up in a few applicant interviews. People were clearly upset that they could not access emergency help over the weekend.

Linda Fabiani: I have heard anecdotally of cases where emergency social work has helped out and the person has then been referred on; the emergency is dealt with and then the person is referred to the welfare fund. Is the monitoring system such that those cases are apparent, or, when the person presents themselves to SWF staff, does it look like the first contact? You say in your recommendations:

"Every attempt at applying should be logged onto the system".

What should happen if the social work department has already dealt with a case and referred the person on to the SWF?

Mandy Littlewood: That is a difficult question, because the social work department might have been using a section 12 arrangement or other arrangements—social work departments have their own crisis funds. The gap might well have been filled by a social work department's crisis fund, and the person might have approached the SWF separately. There are some complex cases.

Linda Fabiani: That takes us back to the question of the lack of an holistic approach.

Dr Sosenko: To my knowledge, section 12 payments are harder to get than payments from the Scottish welfare fund. If somebody goes to a social work department for a section 12 payment, perhaps because it is outside the Scottish welfare fund's working hours, the chances of being successful are small.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): This is a good and extremely useful report. However, is it fair to say that, of necessity, it is a snapshot? Given the timings, we have gone through a year in which there has been a great deal of variation and some serious problems with the scheme in its early days, which had to be sorted out quickly. Are you confident that the snapshot was held when that early variation in the scheme had been eliminated?

Dr Sosenko: Most of the people we interviewed applied for the scheme in the autumn and winter last year, so that was a good half a year after it started operating. Some of them applied in July and August last year, which was closer to the beginning of the scheme, but most applied when the scheme had bedded in.

The guidance changed in October last year, so some of the people we interviewed had applied before then and some of them had applied after then. In that respect, the study was not perfect, and obviously we did not pick up people's experiences after the most recent change to the guidance, in April this year. It was a snapshot, but because we interviewed quite a number of people, it was a robust snapshot. The standard for qualitative social research is to have 40 or 50 interviewees, and we had 77, so it was quite robust in that sense.

Alex Johnstone: I am confident that it was robust and I do not have any issues with your methodology. However, we discovered significant variation between local authority areas, especially in the early part of the scheme. Initially, performance in certain local authority areas was vastly superior to performance in others. That has been evened out to some extent. A sample of 77 cannot cover 32 local authority areas. To what extent was there a geographical spread among your 77 interviewees?

Dr Sosenko: We covered 13 local authorities from every point on the urban and rural scale—from large urban areas to remote rural areas—but that is 13 out of 32 local authorities. We found some evidence of variation between local authorities in the quality of delivery but, because we covered only 13 local authorities and did not do a large-scale survey, we cannot make firm statements.

The Scottish Government's policy makers will need to consider how to ensure that there is no postcode lottery once the permanent arrangements are in place. If one local authority does badly, a mechanism should be in place to make it improve its delivery.

Alex Johnstone: In the scheme's early days, there was some evidence of massive differences—a variation of 200 to 300 per cent—in performance. In relation to the timing of your interviews, are you confident that that wild variation was eliminated in the second half of the year?

Dr Sosenko: In our study, we found nothing like that wide variation in the quality of delivery. We found some differences, but they were not massive. As I said, by sampling local authorities, we did not get the full picture, so we cannot make a firm statement about what has happened in relation to variation in the quality of delivery.

Mandy Littlewood: There is a role for on-going monitoring. If the variations were significant at the start and if improvements have been made so that the variations are less significant now, the way to maintain that is to have on-going monitoring or ad hoc revisits. The Scottish Government has a scheme for making quality improvement visits to SWF staff. That is a way in—there is a structure for maintaining quality.

We recommended that on-going monitoring should be embedded in the process. That will be important to ensuring that everybody stays on their toes and keeps the quality going.

Alex Johnstone: Would it be worth while to repeat your exercise in a year's time for interim or successor schemes?

Mandy Littlewood: The customer perspective is always important. Quantitative monitoring always provides the raw numbers, which can be interpreted, but speaking to people on the ground about their experience is always useful and provides a great insight. It is not always affordable—people cannot always commit to doing that annually—but ensuring that there is a qualitative aspect and a voice for the consumer is always useful.

Alex Johnstone: Perhaps some of those elements might lend themselves to the work of a parliamentary committee.

The Convener: We have exhausted our questions, so I thank the witnesses for coming to help us to understand their report. Will you continue to do work on the issue or is your work on it completed? Might we benefit from your knowledge on anything else?

Dr Sosenko: I am leading on a major element of a Joseph Rowntree Foundation-funded study on destitution in the United Kingdom, which is definitely relevant.

The Convener: We will watch out for that. We might see you before us again, if you take up an invitation.

Dr Sosenko: Thank you. I have applied for research funding from the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors for a small study on food banks and the proportion of households that are food insecure but do not have access to food aid. I await the decision on that funding.

The Convener: That would certainly interest the committee, so we might be in touch with you again. Thank you for your help this morning.

11:00

Meeting continued in private until 11:47.

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