



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

Tuesday 2 June 2015

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WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE
10th Meeting 2015, Session 4

CONVENER

*Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con)

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP)

*Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)

*Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Mark Ballard (Barnardo's Scotland)

Suzanne Conlin (Scottish Women's Convention)

Marion Davis (One Parent Families Scotland)

Ann Henderson (Scottish Trades Union Congress)

Hanna McCulloch (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland)

Nina Murray (Scottish Refugee Council)

Angela O'Hagan (Scottish Women's Budget Group)

Jo Ozga (Scottish Women's Aid)

Belinda Phipps (Fawcett Society)

Anna Ritchie Allan (Close the Gap)

Bill Scott (Inclusion Scotland)

Jill Wood (Engender)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Simon Watkins

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Welfare Reform Committee

Tuesday 2 June 2015

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Women and Welfare

The Convener (Michael McMahon): Good morning everyone, and welcome to the 10th meeting in 2015 of the Welfare Reform Committee. I ask everyone to ensure that mobile phones are switched off or in flight mode. Joan McAlpine has submitted her apologies for this morning's meeting.

Our first item of business is the second oral evidence session in our women and welfare inquiry. I should call it our "women and social security inquiry", as I think that we will change the name officially following the discussion that we had at our previous meeting.

We are using a round-table format for our discussions today. We have taken such an approach in the committee previously, and I believe that members think that it works quite well. The format enables us to benefit from keeping the discussion fluid, and it is a bit less stilted than a straightforward question-and-answer session.

If anyone wants to ask a question or make a contribution, they should indicate to me. I ask everyone to talk through me rather than talking over one another. We will try to keep the discussion moving as quickly as possible to ensure that we get as much information as we can in the time that is available to us.

I am delighted to welcome Anna Ritchie Allan, project manager for the close the gap project; Jill Wood, policy manager with Engender; Bill Scott, director of policy for Inclusion Scotland; Belinda Phipps, chief executive officer of the Fawcett Society; Nina Murray, women's policy development officer with the Scottish Refugee Council; Angela O'Hagan, convener of the Scottish women's budget group; Suzanne Conlin, member of the board of directors of the Scottish women's convention; Ann Henderson, assistant secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress; and Jo Ozga, policy worker with Scottish Women's Aid.

I hope that you all feel that the committee will get some benefit from our discussion this morning. I will kick off the session by asking Jill Wood a question. I thank everyone for their submissions, and in particular I thank Jill Wood for hers, which has 22 recommendations at the end. It is always

useful for us to get clear and distinct suggestions on what we can do.

My question for you, Jill, comes on the back of your submission. Just ahead of the conclusions and recommendations, your submission states:

"A targeted policy response that aims to redress this gender discrimination and is aligned with Scottish Government action to tackle the drivers of women's inequality is sorely needed."

You make 22 recommendations on how to address the "sorely needed" closure of the gap. What are the priorities among those recommendations? Where would we have to start in order to make progress?

Jill Wood (Engender): The recommendations are split between existing Scottish Government policy under the powers that we already have on social security, and the policy areas that are to come with the devolution of further powers. I should say off the bat that our submission is a joint report that was written with the close the gap project, Scottish Women's Aid, the Scottish Refugee Council and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, most of which are represented here today.

Our first recommendation is that the Scottish Government should develop a specific concrete action plan to tackle the impact of welfare reform on women, which we now know a lot about. That needs to be joined up with other devolved policy areas that relate to gender equality.

Welfare is primarily a gender equality issue for us, given the extremely disproportionate impact of welfare reform on women. House of Commons library analysis puts that impact at 85 per cent of all related cuts, but we are looking at the reasons behind that figure: the structural reasons that drive the fact that women are twice as dependent as men on social security and that unpaid women carers are twice as likely to give up paid work in order to care.

If we want to do something different and gender the approach, our response must take stock of those dynamics with regard to women's caring responsibilities and the pay gap, and link them to policy areas in Scotland such as employability, social care and childcare. I think that we are all aware that Government responses can often exist in their own areas.

Our approach fits neatly with current Scottish Government commitments to prioritise gender equality. The agenda works both ways. It needs to be gendered to have a more positive impact on women and to prevent further harm to women from those policies. In addition, however, if the analysis is not gendered, the policy agenda undermines other areas of Government work,

when in fact it can support the ambition to be better on gender.

The first recommendation is to develop a specific plan, because the response is not targeted at women and there is a blanket approach. A lot of the Scottish Government's work has definitely had a positive impact on women, but it has not targeted them in particular.

Several colleagues who are here today represent particular groups of women, which raises the key point that should be made right at the start that women are not one homogeneous group of people. Many different groups, such as refugee women and disabled women, need targeted responses.

The Convener: That brings me to my second point, which is a question for Bill Scott about multiple impacts. Perhaps Bill can give us an idea, from Inclusion Scotland's perspective, of the added impacts of welfare reform on the disability community.

Bill Scott (Inclusion Scotland): The problem is not only that so many of the cuts are targeted at disabled people and their benefits but that disabled women are impacted because they are also carers or lone parents, because they are black or because of their sexuality. All those factors come into play. For disabled women, there are not just two factors but many factors in their lives.

The cut to child benefit, for example, is one of the biggest cuts that have hit disabled women. That cut is not targeted at people who are disabled, but it impacts disproportionately on them because they—like women in general—rely on benefits for far more of their income as they are less likely to be in work, and they are less likely to be the only recipient of benefits in the household.

They are also more likely to manage the budget in their household, so the impact falls again on them, as does the need to cope with the cuts that are falling on the household. Whether there is a cut to child benefit or a cut to a partner's benefit, the women are the ones who are put in the position of coming up with the rent and putting food on the table et cetera. We know from many studies in the past that the purse holder is often the target of domestic abuse, because they are held responsible for not being able to do those things.

There are many impacts of welfare reform, and for disabled women the multiple impact is disproportionately greater, given the sheer scale of the income that is lost from those households.

Belinda Phipps (Fawcett Society): The Fawcett Society's interest is in women overall,

although individual groups of women suffer different levels of disadvantage.

Our big issue is that the benefits system full stop has been designed with a one-size-fits-all eye. It is a male eye, with certain presumptions about the way that the world works.

Fundamentally, the system needs to be designed through a female lens. It can be checked through a male lens, but it must be designed through a female lens. We know that women's lives, because of the way in which they are brought up and the gender-differentiated way that they are treated, mean that they are much more likely to be poor. For example, women make up two thirds of the low paid. There is also a pay gap, which increases women's poverty, and women are much more likely to have caring responsibilities. Women are presumed to be, and quite often are, the primary carers of children, yet the welfare system does not take that into account in relation to benefits.

The Fawcett Society recently conducted an investigation into jobseekers allowance. The intention of the jobseekers allowance scheme is to get people back into work in the belief that working will alleviate poverty. When we look at that assumption through a female eye, we see that jobseekers allowance creates all sorts of problems for women. If a woman is a primary carer, particularly if she is a lone parent—more than 90 per cent of lone parents are women—she is at a very high risk of being sanctioned for failing to come to an appointment on time. In talking to women, we have heard many dreadful stories of women who fully wanted to be at their appointment but could not get there because there was no bus, it snowed, a small child had a hissy fit or needed to go the lavatory, childcare arrangements broke down at the last minute and so on. Sanctions seem to be applied without any understanding of the lived experience of women, who are, by and large, poorer and the primary carers of children.

Fundamentally, if Scotland were able to do so, a redesign of the system taking a female point of view would be very helpful. Until we can get to the stage where our young boys and girls are brought up without the gender differentiation that pushes women into low-paid, lowly valued work and until we change the situation where carers are almost exclusively women while boys stay away from doing any of the domestic support work, we have to design our system through a gendered lens.

Ann Henderson (Scottish Trades Union Congress): From the STUC's point of view, it would be interesting to draw out the contrast between the very inflexible nature of the benefits system and the fact that it does not provide security—as was referred to in the previous

meeting—and the labour market. In our discussions with the Scottish Government around the fair work convention and about what would be a good and fair workplace, we have seen some real opportunities for looking at how we design jobs, workplace interventions and support for people who are in work in a way that better reflects their life cycle, the changes that take place in their lives and some of the points that Belinda Phipps mentioned.

That kind of approach to work, which we are keen to support, is in contrast to how the benefits system operates. That system is sanctions driven and punitive and does not deal with the realities of—in this case—women's lives. Quite a contradiction is developing. We really need to explore how that fits with other parts of the Scottish Government's policy and other things that we can do in Scotland. I hope that we will get into a wee bit of discussion about that today.

We promote flexible working practices, for instance, to try to assist parents—in this case, women—to stay in the labour market, yet the sanctions that apply if they miss an appointment while seeking work are completely contradictory to that approach. I hope that we can discuss that today.

Anna Ritchie Allan (Close the Gap): Ann Henderson mentioned women's participation in the labour market. We want to make a specific point in relation to employability and job-seeking support services, which is that women continue to have a very different experience from that of men in the labour market. Generic employability programmes will serve only to replicate existing gender patterns of skills acquisition and employment.

Belinda Phipps and Ann Henderson mentioned the gender pay gap, which has an impact on women's pay. It therefore impacts on poverty, including children's poverty. The pay gap affects women throughout their lifetimes and impacts on their income in retirement. Until we address the inequalities of the pay gap and the lack of flexible working, as Ann Henderson mentioned; until employability programmes address occupational segregation, where women are clustered into low-paid and undervalued jobs; and until we take cognisance of the gender barriers to employment, occupational segregation will be further entrenched and the gender pay gap will widen.

10:15

Angela O'Hagan (Scottish Women's Budget Group): Thank you, convener, for reframing the debate in terms of women and social security because, ultimately, that is what we are talking about. It is about protection and recognition of

transitions and life circumstances, as my colleagues have clearly set out.

I will pick up on some of the points that have been made. In the Scottish women's budget group submission, we put the biggest emphasis on the cross-portfolio and cross-disciplinary analysis that the Scottish Government and the committee need to do. Central to that are the budget and spending plans, how revenue is raised in Scotland and the economic strategy. The economic strategy is where colleagues have started to take some of the debate.

Although the inquiry is necessary and welcome, the next steps are as important. In the scrutiny of public spending and public authorities, we must consider the extent to which there is a robust gender analysis. Time and investment need to be put into improving gender analysis and awareness across public authorities, because decisions are repeatedly made in a way that completely ignores the conditions and circumstances to which colleagues round the table have alluded. The reason why we need that improvement in equality impact assessment and in the understanding of what constitutes gender awareness and therefore the impact on women and men is that so many of the measures that we see are gendered, along the lines that Belinda Phipps and others have talked about. That has an effect on women and on the whole recasting of gender relations and that transformative shift that we seek.

As Ann Henderson said, there is a contrast between what we are talking about trying to do in Scotland in some of the discourse and some of the practical and policy realities. "Scotland's Economic Strategy" talks about investment in infrastructure, so we want to scrutinise that, to see what the Scottish Government means by that investment. Does that include the care infrastructure that would support women and men in their roles as carers, workers and parents? Are we talking about the kind of economic growth that recognises the care economy, the transitions in people's lives and the need for a social security system that is not so gender biased and rigid in its administration that it completely ignores the lived reality of people's lives? As Belinda Phipps and others have said, sanctions cut right across the daily realities.

We need to see that policy read-across in the further social security powers that are being devolved. What energy is being put in at this end, in Scotland, to remove some of the administrative barriers to making the system more humane and to craft a different approach to social security and social investment and protection in Scotland?

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Over the course of our deliberations, we have found that the vast bulk of folk who come here, no matter their ability or disability, want to be in

employment. Many of them face barriers to getting into employment because, as Angela O'Hagan just said, the system is far too rigid.

I will paint a wee picture. Imagine someone who has a disabled child, who is in receipt of carers allowance and who would have childcare difficulties if they worked outwith school time. If they earned more than £110 a week they would lose everything, but they are desperate to work. Employers have the flexibility to allow that to happen, but it is still all very difficult; if the person loses the benefit, they have to earn £27,000 a year to break even.

That is an example of someone who is desperate to work and a system that is impeding work. Should we in Scotland have the ability to get rid of that rigidity and to apply common sense to help folk who want to go back into work to do so and to ensure that they do not lose anything as a result?

Bill Scott: We did an analysis of the work programme last year, because I was to speak at an employability conference. I worked out that, since the programme started, any disabled person who has been on it has been four times as likely to be sanctioned as to be placed in what is called a positive outcome—in other words, work for any period. The system is punishing people rather than supporting them into work.

Everything that disabled people said about the work programme from the outset is coming true. It cherry picks by working to get into work those who were closest to the labour market when they were referred, because that is easier. People who have never been in work, or who are far from the labour market because they have acquired impairments or are a woman, are not given the tailored support that they need.

A lot of time is spent pushing people who cannot work towards work, which is a waste of resources, rather than helping into work those who genuinely want to move into work and who are capable of part-time work with support but who might not be capable of full-time work because of their impairments. Someone with multiple sclerosis or ME would be much more interested in part-time work, because fatigue is a huge factor in their lives and they are often unable to work a full day. They cannot get support for that from the current system, because it recognises only full-time work as valuable. Universal credit will mean that the system will punish people who do not take additional steps to move from part-time work to full-time work. We need to redesign the system.

The people who know best how the system affects their lives are the women, including disabled women, who are in the system. They can make recommendations. We ask the committee to

urge the Scottish Government to work with people to genuinely coproduce the future benefit system in Scotland so that it takes into account all needs, and particularly childcare needs. Parents of disabled children face additional barriers on top of the normal childcare barriers to get the childcare that fits the needs of their child, who might not be able to go into a conventional childcare setting.

Belinda Phipps: If it were possible for Scotland to redesign the system, that would be the optimum solution. We need to think more broadly about where we want to go. If I could give the Scottish Parliament a magic wand, it would be fantastic if we had a system that enabled people—men and women—to earn a living wage by working four days a week, rather than five. In that scenario, the working week would become a four-day week. That would allow the benefits of the unpaid work that society needs, such as caring for children and other people and all the community activity that takes place.

If we had a magic wand, that approach would work for women, but it would also work for men. The alternative is to make less bad the system that we have. Unfortunately, it is rigid and complicated and has not been designed with a female eye. That is by far the messier and more difficult option.

I urge Scotland to think about integrating what it does on benefits and social security with what it does on supporting people into work and to recognise that people have lives outside work, which involve unpaid work that society needs just as much as the paid work.

Ann Henderson: I was just looking at the report that Edinburgh Napier University published yesterday, in which some of the organisations that are represented here were involved. The Scottish Government commissioned it to track welfare reform and it includes powerful testimonies, which overlap with our concerns about women accessing the labour market. For example, there is a powerful description of the difficulty of getting ready to go to work or to attend a compulsory job interview after having been up all night dealing with and supporting a child with a disability in the home. I am sure that the committee will read the report.

There is something in there that we cannot wait to sort out. The STUC supports the devolution of further powers, but there are steps that we need to take now to recognise such pressures and the lives that women are living.

The wee case study that I mentioned sums up, in a way, the evidence that was taken at the committee's previous meeting on the value of unpaid work. There may be some other way in which allowances can be devised or support can

be given in such family situations. We do not necessarily need to wait until we have additional powers; we need to look at the options now.

I will pick up a point about the living wage. The fair work convention has made a commitment to promoting and extending the living wage. We support that, but I am concerned that the living wage has become a kind of shorthand that is not adequate for the aspiration. If we match up what we would define as the value of care, including childcare, care for the elderly and the skills that are involved in providing good-quality care for everybody in our communities, it becomes clear that the living wage is not high enough. It is just not enough, to be honest.

That links in with the problems of occupational segregation. I want a campaign that says that care workers are worth a considerably larger amount. The recently published report entitled “An Independent Review of the Scottish Early Learning and Childcare Workforce and Out of School Care Workforce” gives us an opportunity to have that discussion. What national standards do we expect for payment around care? It is not enough for us just to keep on saying that we really value unpaid care; we need to put some figures on that value.

I do not have the statistics in front of me, but there are examples; I know that the Scottish Government has done work in that area. In a two-wage household in which both workers are on the living wage, income drops because of the knock-on effect on working tax credits and child tax credits. We need to look at the interrelationship between some of the headlines and what is happening with household income rather than look just at individual income.

Jill Wood: I will come back briefly on the points that were made about the lack of flexibility in employment support and about further powers. A recommendation in our report specifically mentions the need for the committee to push, through whatever avenues it may have, for as much flexibility as possible in the clause in the Scotland Bill that sets out powers over employment support as the bill goes through Parliament.

Nina Murray (Scottish Refugee Council): I have more examples of the inflexibility of the system, which follows on from what Jill Wood said about employment support. We work predominantly with women with newly granted refugee status and women who arrive in the country under the refugee family reunion policy. Those women face multiple barriers that are similar to some of those that have been discussed. In addition, there are barriers that arise from their experiences prior to arriving in Scotland, such as trauma, health issues and persecution.

There are particular issues in the welfare system. Those women come into the welfare system already at a disadvantage, as they do not know much about what is a very complex system, and our evidence shows that they are facing financial hardship and dependency issues.

There are particular impacts on those groups of women from the system and its inflexibility in relation to their needs. For example, we are finding that, of our clients who are being sanctioned, approximately 90 per cent are being sanctioned in the first six months that they are on welfare support in Scotland. That suggests that there are issues with their understanding of the system and their English language skills. We know that almost two thirds of our client group have a very basic level of English, which certainly implies issues with the complexity of the system and how it affects them and with the way in which they are being punished rather than supported through the system at an early stage.

We have other examples. The refugee women's strategy group that we work with has been working, with Scottish Government funding, to develop a tailored employment support programme for refugee women. The women developed the programme themselves with the Glasgow ESOL—English for speakers of other languages—forum and they then participated in it.

The system was evaluated, and the group developed a model of targeted employment support that really worked for the women. Rather than being put on to a general work programme that did not meet their specific needs, the women said, “This is what we need to help us into employment.”

As others have said today, the women really want to be in employment, but they have needs that are not being met with regard to their English language skills and information technology literacy, and they have issues with childcare, which may affect their availability to participate in programmes.

Scotland could really do something if it had the powers to design more tailored employment support to meet the needs of those different groups of women. That would be beneficial.

10:30

The Convener: It is interesting to hear your comments on women refugees who have been sanctioned within six months. We have had communications with United Kingdom ministers who insist that the sanctions regime is a last resort. It is hard to imagine that someone has reached a position of last resort within six months of arriving in the country. That is just more evidence of the contradiction between the UK

Government's position and the reality on the ground.

Jo Ozga (Scottish Women's Aid): I will reiterate something. Nina Murray and others mentioned employability support. Women who have experienced domestic abuse find it difficult to get back into work when they feel able to do so. There is very little support for them to build their self-esteem and confidence and little understanding of the impact that the abuse has had on them.

According to research by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2 per cent of women lose their jobs as a result of domestic abuse. They often then struggle with applications for employment and support allowance, as the system does not recognise the impact of domestic abuse on their physical and mental health. They also go through the process of applying for jobseekers allowance, with its conditionality requirements, and they are sanctioned as a result of not being able to cope with those requirements. We make a plea for employability support programmes that offer specialised support to women in that situation.

Suzanne Conlin (Scottish Women's Convention): We have found a lot of the same issues as have been mentioned. Women tell us primarily that the system is punitive. It is not supporting them back into work—a lot of them are finding that it is keeping them out of employment and holding them back. A lot of the thresholds, particularly for tax credits, prevent them from going for promotions and accessing employment. They feel that they are stuck in poverty; instead of the system supporting them out of poverty, it is keeping them there.

One of the things that we are looking for is more support to get women back into employment and education and for women to gain skills. We find that the impact is even worse for women in rural areas. They find things much harder because they do not have a lot of stuff on their doorstep. A lot has been said about transport and childcare, and all those issues make it much harder for women who live in rural communities to even get to job interviews on time.

Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning. On the issue of sanctions, I note that the submission from Inclusion Scotland states:

"Sanctions for lone parents on JSA have risen from under 200 per month prior to 2008 to 4,700 per month now."

That is shocking, yet ministers are in denial about it. It is just unbelievable.

My question is on jobseekers allowance and how people are dealt with when they go along to the jobcentre. I am thinking in particular of people

with mental health issues, which are often overlooked. Has anyone seen any evidence to suggest that mental health is taken into account? Do people who are working in the jobcentres have any skills that enable them to recognise people who have mental health issues? I would welcome any comments on that.

The Convener: Before others come in, I think that Clare Adamson has a similar point.

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): No, thank you—I will come in afterwards.

The Convener: Okay.

Bill Scott: The evidence shows that, if mental health is taken into account, it is taken into account in a very negative way. Of the disabled people who are sanctioned, 60 per cent have either mental health issues or learning difficulties or both.

That brings us back to the same problems that refugee women are experiencing. These people may have an incomplete understanding of the conditions that apply to them. They may agree to conditions that are completely unrealistic for them—for example, they may agree to make 30 job applications in a week when it takes them hours to complete a single application. It takes me hours to complete a single job application, let alone someone who has learning difficulties. Whether or not that is targeting, it is certainly a complete disregard of the barriers that people face in meeting the conditions for the receipt of benefit. Women with mental health issues are therefore being disproportionately affected by the sanctions regime.

Suzanne Conlin: Women tell us the same thing. The assessments that they go for are often based on physical issues, and there is no real understanding of mental health and what has happened to them. The push is for full-time work when part-time work is often more suitable for women with mental health issues to support them back into the workplace. We find a lot of issues.

Bill Scott: I want to make one more really important point about that. We have just published a research report that very much echoes the Scottish Government's tracking study. One of my huge concerns is that women who were victims of sexual abuse have had to relive the trauma of their abuse in the assessment system. That echoes what has just been said. They have met a male assessor for the first time and have been asked to recount the details of why they had post-traumatic stress syndrome. That is a completely different experience from disclosing that to a general practitioner whom a woman has known for years. To be forced to disclose that in an interview with somebody whom they have never met and go over

the details and how it has affected their mental health is appalling.

That would not have happened in the old paper system that existed for the disability living allowance. A woman would have been able to disclose and she would have got medical evidence to support her claim, and that would have been it—the award would have been made. Now, the concentration is on the physical effects rather than the mental health effects.

One woman was visited at home on a Saturday night by a male assessor, who spent 15 minutes hammering at her door. She phoned the police. The assessor left a note and said that he would come back on the Tuesday. Rather than face that, she dropped her claim.

Those are the sort of issues that exist. If we are going to design a more humane system, we have to take into account mental health issues that affect people and tailor the system to deal with them rather than force people to go through an assessment that is usually unnecessary to get the benefits that they need to live on.

Jill Wood: I want to mention another specifically gendered element that Bill Scott brought up at our last event. In order to be eligible for ESA on mental health grounds, women have to provide different forms of proof that they are eligible for it because they are women. I think that Bill Scott might know more about that. They have to provide two forms of—

Bill Scott: A woman who is at risk of self-harm or suicide must have more wrong with her than a man who is in the same position. The assessors' instructions—the regulations and guidance that they are bound by—for people who apply for ESA and go to the assessment tell them that there must be a higher level of risk for a woman than for a man. To get employment and support allowance, a woman has to be in greater danger of suicide than a man. Again, I find that to be pure and outright discrimination, and I am sure that it is challengeable. However, somebody has to take a case before those regulations are struck down.

The Convener: Having heard that, I will write to the United Kingdom Government and ask it specifically to explain why that is the situation, as that is an appalling set of circumstances.

Belinda Phipps: I thought that some specific examples might be helpful. If a person is female, the system does not work for them, but if they have anything else at all—if they cannot speak English very well, are disabled, have mental health problems or are a lone parent—there are issues.

I have an example that was sent to me this morning. The person said that, a few years ago,

"My husband was made redundant and we had to claim job seekers. I had a baby and there was a foot of snow outside. Post delivery and buses were cancelled and I live in a rural area up a hill where nobody on our village road was able to get out that day. I phoned to let them know that I couldn't get to them in the town with my baby to sign on that week but I would come as soon as I could perhaps the following day. I called first thing in the morning. They sanctioned my payment that week. I put in a challenge to get it reassessed. I didn't eat properly that week whilst still breast feeding. I was so stressed. We coped. Then when I was to launch my business I applied for a small start up grant. I was refused because there had been a sanction ... It was such a humiliating experience. It is well known that shame is a trauma yet they do this to people. I don't think it's about saving money at all. It is an ideological driven exercise which enslaves."

A caller to a Gingerbread helpline—a single parent with a five-year-old child—was pressured by her work programme provider to look for full-time jobs. Her provider did not explain about the parent flexibilities. They exist but they are not being explained to people who might get them.

Another caller

"was required to attend two three-hour sessions during the summer holidays. She was told not to bring her children, but no suitable childcare was available."

A further caller

"was told ... to pay for childcare himself during the summer holidays whilst on the Work Programme. He was also told that he has to look for full-time work when his child turns 11."

He is a lone parent and that is not correct.

In the report, there is example after example of the unfair system being applied punitively or the easements and flexibility in the system not being communicated or allowed to a person and then, when that person is sanctioned, the ability to appeal not being communicated clearly to them. People are in a no-win situation.

Over and over again, the inquiry listened to individual people with heartbreaking individual stories. The people who are articulate and more able to handle it fully acknowledge that they were able to get their sanctions overturned because they are reasonably well educated and they say, "Lord knows how anybody who is depressed or disabled or who cannot speak English does it." Those are the people who cannot speak up for themselves. They have no money.

Ann Henderson: I will pass on to the committee a couple of reports from different trade unions. The STUC has a number of affiliated trade unions.

The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, which mainly has workers in the retail sector, produced a report on the impact of some of the changes over the past few years under the previous United Kingdom Government. One of the points that it picks up is the drop-off in the number of women returning to work after they have had a

baby. There is an issue about what workplace conditions have been negotiated for women to return to work, and there are concerns about poverty as a consequence of not returning to work, given the capping and freezing of benefits and the impact on maternity benefit. There are also concerns about postnatal depression and a number of conditions that are associated with mental health following the birth of a child, which the system and employers in general are inadequately prepared to support and deal with. Sometimes, women do not return to work not really because that is the best choice but because the system has not provided the supports to phase a return or mentor them when they go back to work, for instance. There are a number of things that employers and trade union representatives could do together.

Unite the Union has been doing some interesting work on the mental health of its trade union reps in the workplace. There is an emerging issue there as well. For us, the role of trade union reps is important in collectively trying best to support people to stay in work, to return to the labour market or to do what is best for them at a particular time in their lives. The anecdotal evidence and, now, some case studies show that, as Unite has demonstrated, the mental health of reps is deteriorating. They have to deal with horrendous cases—really difficult situations. Many trade union reps—in fact, many advice workers—are not experts in the complexities of the benefits system, such as the in-work allowances and the way in which all the benefits overlap with one another, so it is difficult to get the appropriate signposting. The effort that trade union reps make and the trauma and pressure that they experience are becoming an issue.

Given the Scotland that we want to be part of, and our aspirations to work closely with trade unions and employers, to respect the fact that collective bargaining can be an asset, and to work with human resources and in a workplace, we need to look at that issue. Facility time and support for union representatives is important, and we should see that as an investment in helping people to manage and negotiate what is currently a difficult economic situation. I can pass on some of those reports to the committee.

10:45

The Convener: I will bring Angela O'Hagan in, and then go back to Clare Adamson before we move too far from the points that she wants to make.

Angela O'Hagan: Thank you, convener. I want to link some of these points together. We are talking about a systemic failure to prioritise equality, dignity and decency, despite the

legislative requirement to do that through public sector equality duties and the duty on public authorities to ensure social welfare under the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968, and the commitment to end child poverty and so on. We are seeing the cumulative effect on women's lives, and the chaos being wreaked on people's lives by reforms to welfare that are politically motivated and seek to drive people out of the system and reduce the welfare spend as a deficit reduction measure, with no regard for the cost to people's lives, and subsequently to public services. The Fawcett Society identified a triple jeopardy in the cumulative impact of the loss of women's jobs, the impact of public spending cuts on women's lives, and the withdrawal of public services.

By Professor Diane Elson's reckoning—Diane was with the committee last week—the choices at UK level to remedy previous spending decisions through 82 per cent cuts to public spending, as opposed to 18 per cent in tax revenue, are politically motivated and we need to lay that bare. Consistent with that is the impact of the council tax freeze in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK—it has been rolled out and mitigated differently in different places. That freeze is having an effect on the poorest among us and their access to services, which again compounds the cumulative effect of the systemic failure to recognise the differential impact of cuts to the benefit system. Poor people rely most on the public services that are being withdrawn and, according to colleagues from the Poverty Alliance and the Child Poverty Action Group, the council tax freeze is not reaching those with the lowest incomes—again, compounding that cumulative effect.

Let me take the committee back to the budget and to how resources are being allocated to mitigate and eliminate the excesses and consequences of those political decisions. In plan F, the Scottish women's budget group and the UK Women's Budget Group set out a series of ways in which some of these decisions could be rectified, and some of those are within the scope of the Scottish Parliament and Government. With the further powers that are being discussed, there is an opportunity to reverse some of the cuts to public services and address some of the administrative barriers that are causing the kind of chaos that we are hearing about. The equality pledge that the Scottish Government has made is a welcome step to putting business responsibility for workers' rights back in the frame. There are currently plenty of levers, and more to come, but they must be seen across the piece—that is our biggest plea through plan F, and it involves how public resources are allocated and the scrutiny that is applied to public authorities about their decisions. How are decisions taken, such as the one Bill Scott mentioned about the criteria needed

for women to demonstrate the poor state of their mental health being set at a higher level than for men? Public health directors have come out against that, but it needs to be followed up. How did that systemic failure take place within a decision-making process that results in such an effect on individuals?

Clare Adamson: We talked about what has happened so far in terms of reform of the social security system. We do not have a static system, because of what is still to come, including extra powers. I would like to tease out the impact. The Fawcett Society and close the gap both mentioned the effect of universal credit on lone-parent families. I am also very concerned about the cuts of £3 billion still to come to disability benefits, in the move from disability living allowance to personal independence payments. Can we tease out what that transition is doing and what problems you expect?

Bill Scott: We expect that half of the current recipients of the higher rate mobility component of DLA will lose it in the transfer to personal independence payments, because the new walking test is the ability to walk 20m, whereas the DLA test was the ability to walk 50m safely and repeatedly. You may have noticed that some high-profile cases have already been reported. A paralympian lost her mobility component when she was reassessed for the new benefit. The Department for Work and Pensions expects around 50 per cent of the current recipients of the higher rate mobility component of DLA to lose it.

That will have a particular impact on Scotland, which is far more rural than the rest of the United Kingdom. We have people who live a lot further from services, retail and so on. The loss of the mobility component and, probably in about a third of cases, the Motability vehicle will mean that people will just not be able to reach services on their own, which will impose extra costs on them at a time when they have lost benefit. There will be a severe impact.

One of the main problems is that, if there is a delay in the transfer of benefits, we will already have lost a large part of the budget that we might want to use in a different way when we get control of DLA, carers allowance and PIP. If the vast majority of people have already been transferred to the new benefit, people will have already lost and the Scottish Government will not be able to raise sufficient funds to put that right. If the transfer took place just now, we might be able to stop that loss to disabled people's income.

Kevin Stewart: Just the other week we took evidence from a woman who is in work, has the higher rate mobility component of DLA and is very afraid that PIP will be withdrawn. Has Inclusion Scotland or any other organisation done any

analysis of the net contribution to the public purse of folks who are in work and currently receive that higher rate mobility component, who may lose out?

Bill Scott: Disability Rights UK has done work to investigate how many disabled people currently in work are likely to lose entitlement to benefits that help them remain in work. The problem is that someone cannot say with absolute certainty that, if they lose their mobility component, they will lose their job, but it will probably be a contributing factor in some disabled people losing their jobs. There have been studies—I can look them out for you and send them on—of the likely actual loss to tax revenue.

Kevin Stewart: That would be extremely useful; thank you.

Anna Ritchie Allan: I will return to Clare Adamson's point about lone parents. As has been mentioned, the vast majority of lone parents are women. We know that the new income support rules require single mothers to take part in work-focused interviews when their youngest child is one and women with children as young as three or four can be required to undertake mandatory work activity. Recipients of jobseekers allowance can be referred to Jobcentre Plus staff to complete unpaid four-week work placements of up to 30 hours a week.

The implications for childcare are obvious. Those who do not comply face sanctions. We know that childcare is massively expensive—prohibitively so for a lot of people. In some ways, that is one of the most immediate barriers to women accessing or going back into the labour market after having children. Lone parents are particularly impacted in that respect. Childcare provision is patchy, particularly for women with disabled children and for women living in rural areas but, if they do manage to secure childcare, they will probably have to take part-time work in order to balance their paid work with their childcare responsibilities. Part-time work is largely concentrated in low-paid, undervalued jobs, however, and that means that many women are working below their skill level and their potential, which impacts on their pay, their progression and their income in retirement. It also means that women's skills are being underutilised, which has an economic impact on local economies and on Scotland's economy.

Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): I will touch on a different but connected point. Have any of the groups that are represented here today done any analysis on the impact of the benefits cap? The talk now is of reducing its level further. All the evidence that we have had thus far has suggested—if not pointedly, then subtly—that we should have a human rights-

based approach to developing or fixing what is a broken system.

In looking at the news yesterday, I saw that Lord Kerr, in the Supreme Court, has ordered that a judicial review of the benefits cap and its impact on children should proceed. Given that 85 per cent of all the welfare cuts impact on women and that the majority of them will be the carers of children, I would like to find out whether any work or analysis has been done that could help us understand the issue.

The huge impact on people in refuges who had suffered domestic violence was picked out shortly after the benefit cap proposal was made, and it was changed quite quickly. Has there been any campaigning work to understand the issue?

On top of all that, would a withdrawal from the European convention on human rights and the repeal of the Human Rights Act 1998 take away the ability to address the challenges that Bill Scott spoke about? For example, would such measures have prevented Lord Kerr from recommending that the benefits cap should be judicially reviewed because, with reference to the rights of the child, it does not provide

“adequate food, clothing, warmth and housing”,

which are

“the basic necessities of life”?

The fundamental point is that we are talking about bits of the system that matter greatly and about there being a detrimental impact on people's ability—perhaps with somebody to advocate on their behalf—to challenge the system overall.

I know that there is quite a lot of stuff in there, but that seems to tie up lots of the points that people around the table have made.

We can also explore how we can work with “Scotland's National Action Plan for Human Rights”—if, that is, we can have some sort of devolution of human rights—so that we can ensure that we have a human rights-based approach to the system.

Belinda Phipps: I do not know of any work yet, but I am sure that people will be beavering away. Netmums surveyed 2,000 mothers and discovered that one mother in five is going without meals so that her children can eat. The benefits cap is not going to improve that situation at all.

Jill Wood: I do not know about specific campaigns or any analysis that has been done on women generally. However, Carers UK has statistics on the benefits cap, which has impacted thousands and thousands of carers. If I remember rightly, the average is about £105 per week for those who have been affected, which seems a really high figure.

The majority of unpaid carers are women. That links to what Anna Ritchie Allan was saying about childcare provision. I have been thinking about issues around care. At previous committee meetings and in much of the work that we have done on the subject, points have been made about having to get childcare right, while also looking at things more broadly in the context of care provision.

Angela O'Hagan: In its concluding observations, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has already highlighted its concerns about the United Kingdom's actions in relation to public spending cuts and their impact on women. From a human rights perspective, there is already international attention on what is happening in the UK.

11:00

Ann Henderson: To come back to the references to childcare and the rights and entitlements of the child—which are about more than just a roof over their head—one of the drivers for investing in early years was the aim to protect and invest in the rights of the child. If we design a childcare system that has that at its heart and which guarantees provision for children—including support for babies and children under the age of three, rather than focusing simply on children who are three, four and older—that would alter the way that everybody interacts with the system. The child would have the right to a place in care, to early education and to nurturing. Such a system would deal with the rights of the child and protect the investment in the child but would also correspond to the reality of the rest of the systems. There is a presumption that, from the age of one, maternity pay and all other systems stop. There is a gap in the system, and the system is not meeting the rights of the child. When we talk about international obligations, I think that there are some avenues to be explored.

Jo Ozga: The UN special rapporteur on violence against women will publish her report later this month, following her visit to the UK last year. Welfare reform and the impact of public sector cuts and austerity policies on women were certainly issues that were raised by a number of organisations during her visit, so I am sure that the ways in which the UK is failing to meet its obligations to protect women will feature in her report.

The Convener: That report might come out in time for us to reference it, so we will keep an eye out for it.

Bill Scott: Human rights have also been used in relation to the bedroom tax. One right relates to

children. For example, disabled children cannot be forced to share a room with a non-disabled child or another disabled child—I am thinking of a child with a condition such as brittle-bone disease, which makes them prone to broken bones, sharing a room with a hyperactive child.

Bedroom tax cases involving disabled adults will not be heard by the Supreme Court until next January. That seems an enormous delay, given that those cases were lodged quite early on and that, by then, the bedroom tax will have been in place for nearly three years. Justice delayed is justice denied. Although the human rights are there, the court system needs to speed itself up in relation to human lives. It is not an effective remedy if people cannot get justice for three years—or six or seven years, or even a lot longer, in some equal pay cases.

I very much agree with Angela O'Hagan that there needs to be systemic change. We have been working recently with Scottish Government civil servants in the social security division on the Scottish welfare fund, which we already have powers over and which is a hardship payment—it is not quite a benefit—that is paid to people in crisis or who need specific items.

Some of the evidence that we gave the committee on disabled people's experience of the Scottish welfare fund was quite negative. The civil servants came to us afterwards and asked us to work with them to try to improve the delivery of the service. We have been working with People First, which is an organisation for the learning disabled, the Highland users group, which is for mental health service users, and the British Deaf Association, whose members have some of the biggest problems when it comes to engaging with the service, to design a training package for the local authority staff who deliver the service. We brought disabled people and practitioners together in one place and managed to restore what should have been there from the outset, which is staff seeing people who receive the service as human beings with specific needs that need to be addressed.

A training pack and information materials have come out of that, including materials that are more accessible—there are easy-read materials, British Sign Language materials and so on. There is also a film that can be used to train new staff to deliver the service to everybody—and I think that that will benefit everybody, not just disabled users.

My colleagues Sue Kelly and Ian Sneddon worked on that project with Dorothy Ogle from the Scottish Government's social security division, so some positive work is going on. The project is an example of how we can coproduce the delivery of a service in a way that takes people's needs into account and considers how best to meet them.

We need a systemic approach, but we have made a start with the benefit that we already have power over, which is a good thing.

The Convener: I have had discussions with people, either on a personal level or in formal sessions such as this one, about looking forward to the delivery of the Smith commission proposals and the potential for our new devolved powers to be used positively. When I have asked people to indicate what specifically they would like to happen, on more than one occasion, a suggestion has been made—Engender's submission touches on this—about reinstating benefits that have been taken away, rather than creating new ones. One example that has cropped up is maternity grants. Do you have a view on that, or specific ideas on gender-specific benefits that would be helpful?

Belinda Phipps: I was previously chief executive of the National Childbirth Trust. The maternity grant was paid as a lump sum quite late on in pregnancy. It depends what you want to achieve with such a grant, but one issue for pregnant women is making sure that they feed themselves properly, given that a poor diet during pregnancy increases the risk of premature birth, which is obviously devastating for the parents and expensive for the state.

There is an argument that a weekly benefit of a small amount, starting in early pregnancy, is needed. The suggestion is that, rather than giving a maternity grant, which is useful as a lump sum for a single large item, it might be better to start child benefit during pregnancy. For example, once a woman goes to report her pregnancy to a midwife, which happens early on, child benefit could start, perhaps at half the rate, which would allow the woman sufficient weekly income to meet her nutritional needs. That might be better than copying the previous benefit, which was not put in with a great deal of thought. Although it was popular, it did not achieve the objective that it was meant to achieve.

The Convener: That is helpful.

Ann Henderson: At a training course for women on Scotland's economy that the STUC ran a couple of weeks ago, we looked at the maternity box example—I think that it comes from Finland, although I might be wrong. That is not a small-scale intervention of the type that we have here. After a baby is born, the state makes a significant contribution towards the cost of a pram, clothes and basic provisions—I think that it probably uses vouchers. The contribution is completely equal for all families. Such an approach has real potential.

If we look at how we spend our budgets in Scotland, there are things that we could do without bringing back certain benefits. It is about recognising that people who bring children into the

world are making an important contribution to society and that practical assistance can be provided in a way that says to new mothers that the whole of society welcomes that contribution and that they will be supported with a very practical, serious financial contribution.

The cap on child benefit and the cap on maternity benefit that are being discussed are obviously not good things and will reduce household income. Our concern is about the continually reducing household income. On paper, it might look as though there are two wages coming into the house, but our evidence shows that the mother's health is not protected when a baby is brought into a household where income is being reduced. She may not feed herself properly during the first year of the child's life, because priority is given to the other things that need to be dealt with in the home. It is important that household income is raised and that it is protected during that period in a way that also protects the mother's health. We are quite interested in that approach.

Jill Wood: The convener said that our submission mentioned the reinstatement of benefits for certain groups. In fact, we mention carers and parents, but the point is a broader one and relates to the need for compensation for what has been lost, given that so much has been taken from women's income. The broader point is that there is a need for a gendered budget analysis that looks at where money has been taken away and how to remedy the situation.

One area that springs to mind is the carers allowance and the restrictions regarding full-time care. Many women—both younger and older women—provide part-time care, so we could look at flexibility within that model.

I want to jump back to the administration of universal credit. We have not yet discussed that today, but it came up quite a lot in a previous evidence session. It looks as if we are going to get powers in relation to the administration of universal credit in Scotland, so we could do something very different with regard to how and when it is paid and to whom. Ann Henderson's points about households touch on the issue of intra-household dynamics and who controls the spend, which is another very gendered, live issue.

Nina Murray: My point is not specifically on universal credit, but I want to pick up on the issue of dependency and household dynamics. We have found that, for refugee families and refugee women in particular, there is real dependency, whether it is on a partner for household income, on discretionary sources of subsistence such as the Scottish welfare fund, which Bill Scott mentioned, or on social work services payments for families with children.

The allocation of national insurance numbers is a specific issue for refugees that is causing significant delays in access to benefits payments. Refugees have 28 days to move on from Home Office-provided asylum support to mainstream welfare. Data from our service evaluation, which will be published in a couple of weeks, shows that it takes on average between 42 and 50 days after people receive refugee status for them to receive any benefits payments. That is a big gap; it is an administrative gap that is currently being plugged by discretionary forms of payment.

National insurance numbers are almost always allocated to the main asylum applicant, who is usually the male head of the household. Often, the female spouse is not allocated a national insurance number until several weeks down the line. We found that 40 per cent of our clients required significant advocacy from our service even to access a national insurance number, and there is probably underreporting of the issue.

We have also found that the benefits that are predominantly claimed by female clients are the ones that take the longest to be processed. They include employment support allowance, income support, child benefit and child tax credits, which take, on average, between 46 and 77 days to be processed. We are talking about women and families whose support will end after 28 days, so they are effectively left destitute for a period, purely because of administrative delay. Those issues need to be addressed. At present, local authorities and the Scottish welfare fund are plugging the gap, so something really needs to change.

For those who arrive under the family reunion scheme, the dependency situation is particularly problematic, because all the rights and entitlements to benefits come through the head of the household, who is usually male. The woman and any children who are joining that person have no rights in their own name, so all the benefits, once they are processed, go through the bank account of the male head of household—the sponsor—and the woman and the family have no access to those benefits. They have no financial independence in that scenario.

I am sure that that experience chimes with the experience of other witnesses—I see that Jo Ozga has her hand up.

The Convener: Jo, do you want to come in?

11:15

Jo Ozga: Yes—thank you. We strongly urge the Scottish Government and the committee, in looking at the administration of universal credit—if Scotland has the ability to change the payment system—to consider moving to a model in which

payment is not just made to one person in the household, which is normally the male head of the household.

Our Women's Aid colleagues in England, along with the Trades Union Congress, have recently done some research asking women who are experiencing domestic abuse whether they would request that the payment is split, given that the DWP offers an alternative payment arrangement in specific cases where there is domestic abuse. Women said that there is no way that they would be able to do that because it would put them at greater risk if they tried to assert any control over the money that is coming into the house. It is important that the administration is split at the very beginning and not through a request process.

Ann Henderson: The STUC would support the individualising of entitlement from the beginning.

We do not have time to discuss self-employment in detail, but I see that it is referenced in some of the submissions. There has been a rapid and disproportionate increase in self-employment among women, but we know that it is not corresponding to a higher tax take. It is probable that many of those women are struggling financially or, at least, are not in a high-income situation. The interrelationship between that situation and an inflexible benefits system, along with the possible consequences around universal credit and the administration of the system, need to be looked at. Those issues could perhaps be explored in more detail with a number of different organisations.

The labour market statistics are showing a change and everybody is noticing it, but we are not having a discussion about what it might mean for some of the policy initiatives that are coming forward.

Anna Ritchie Allan: I have a quick point following on from what Ann Henderson said about self-employed women. Although the numbers are growing, we know that women who run their own businesses face significant barriers. The reason why they start their own businesses in the first place is often that they have been forced out of the labour market as they have not been able to access flexible working, they have had problems with childcare or they have not been able to get a promotion because they have other responsibilities.

Work that has been done by Women's Enterprise Scotland in particular has identified that women experience significant problems in trying to grow their businesses as a result of a lack of gender-specific support and a lack of investment in general. Those women are concentrated among the lowest-paid self-employed people.

Angela O'Hagan: I want to reinforce a point and add to the list of recommendations. At the top of the list for me—I support the comments from colleagues in this area—is universal credit and the urgency with which the issues around payments and designated recipients have to be addressed.

My addition to the list of recommendations goes back to the comments that were made about the level and direction of carers allowance. It is important to use future powers to remove employment tribunal fees, given that we have seen a 91 per cent fall in sex discrimination cases, primarily in pregnancy and maternity-related discrimination. Again, we are seeing the cumulative effects with women losing their jobs when they are on maternity leave, having no access to justice and going headlong into the type of benefits system that we have been discussing today.

Colleagues who gave evidence to the committee last week, in particular Howard Reid and Diane Elson, spoke about the impact on levels of transfers and cash benefits through the change in the uprating system. That needs to be looked at again, as we have seen a loss of income across the piece because of that change.

My final recommendation, which colleagues have already touched on, is that we need to ensure that a gendered budget analysis is part of the scrutiny by this and other committees of draft spending plans and revenue-raising plans. A gendered budget analysis should be applied across the piece—that is a strong recommendation.

Belinda Phipps: On jobseekers allowance, it would be helpful if the guidance on easements was put in regulations. The easement for domestic violence is too complicated and it is insufficient. If a sanction is applied, it would be helpful if people did not lose jobseekers allowance completely, because there is a risk that they will lose other benefits if they have no jobseekers allowance. Most important, we need to ensure that what is available is communicated to people who are applying for jobseekers allowance along with information on how the rules operate, how to appeal and what to do if they are sanctioned.

If I had a magic wand, I would also deal with maternity allowance, which is below the minimum wage. If Scotland could make maternity payments at least at the minimum wage level, that would be very helpful.

Nina Murray: There is an additional recommendation from our perspective. The Smith commission talked about the executive devolution of asylum support to the Scottish Parliament and Scotland. We see that as an opportunity to create a system of support for people in the asylum

process that does not have an unacceptable gap when they have been granted refugee status. That causes people who have rights and entitlements to be destitute. If a support system was implemented locally that could ensure that there is end-to-end support for people who are entitled to that support, that would be a simple solution.

Suzanne Conlin: From our perspective, it is all about support. Most of the women whom we speak to are completely unaware of what will happen to them. That is still very much an unknown entity. I suppose that it is about support through the system. Many of those women know about only the part of the benefits system that they access, and they do not know what they will face in the future. It is about ensuring that there is support at the heart of the system, because most women do not know much of the detail and they are at the mercy of their adviser. It is about ensuring that there is a good support system.

Belinda Phipps: Another—

The Convener: I am sorry; I will come to Belinda Phipps after Annabel Goldie.

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): A lot of what I was going to ask about has been covered, and I will not duplicate the process.

I was struck by the recurring theme in all the submissions of training in jobcentres and better availability of advice to claimants, and by the point that Bill Scott raised on the provision of a service that is appropriate to women in certain circumstances. I think that that had a powerful resonance with us all.

Whether elements of benefits or welfare are reserved to Westminster or devolved to the Scottish Parliament, it seems to me that, wherever the provision comes from, those issues cross borders. Is there a place for every jobcentre having to appoint a dedicated officer for women? Should someone be appointed in each jobcentre to deal specifically with issues that arise that concern women claimants, rather than what seems to happen currently, which is that people who need to see someone go into the jobcentre and they are given someone to see.

Bill Scott: Usually, a designated officer will look after a person's claim throughout the time after they have signed on to make their first claim, but there should be some allowance for people to be able to request to see a woman worker rather than a male worker because of what we have already discussed. Mental health issues might make dealing with a male jobcentre worker quite difficult because very personal details will have to be disclosed. Those are difficult to disclose even to a woman, but maybe that is slightly less fraught. I agree with that approach.

There should also be more training that is aimed at delivering a humane approach in dealing with people. People in the system are not being treated as human beings; they are being treated as other, and anything that is done to them is seen as fair because we know that some claims are fraudulent. Because less than 1 per cent of people are defrauding the system, 990 people out of 1,000 are being treated as though they are attempting to defraud it, even though their claims are genuine. We need to reverse that. Sure, we should look after public funds, but we should not treat everybody as a criminal because a few people are criminals. That is one of the lessons.

People from Women's Aid, disabled people's organisations and Rape Crisis Scotland, for example, should be working with jobcentre staff to try to alert them to some of the issues that women face in the jobs market.

Nina Murray: I agree. There is definitely room for training and awareness raising among jobcentre staff. We have been working with the DWP to develop a refugee customer journey to provide a masterclass to front-line workers who deliver services to refugees so that they better understand those people's needs and experiences and where they are coming from.

However, there is only so much that we can do through training and awareness. Ultimately, these systemic problems still exist because the system is punitive and it is not supporting women into work. It is not supporting women who need support through social security. There is definitely room for training, but I do not think that it is the answer.

Ann Henderson: The Public and Commercial Services Union, which represents members who are employed through the DWP and so on, has repeatedly raised concerns with the UK Government about staffing levels, the cutbacks and the closures at some jobcentres, and there is a real issue about capacity. Training is important, but an issue that has been well flagged up is the move to call centres and away from face-to-face contact. In my view, having to apply online is completely discriminatory for a whole range of reasons that we do not have time to go into now.

Workers are trying to deliver a service without adequate resources and within a punitive system. When the redesign takes place, we will consider what could be done in Scotland fairly quickly, and there may be ways that we can look at staffing levels and additional support for jobcentres. Perhaps we could not move immediately to having everything done online, because there are other ways, and perhaps we could bring in extra public resources and recognise that some of the cuts at the local authority level have led to withdrawal of advocacy and support—for example, library

closures make it harder for people to access the internet.

A number of issues are bound up together, but we could perhaps make changes when we consider the whole Scottish spend, before rolling out some of the changes that Clare Adamson identified.

The Convener: Belinda, you wanted to make a point earlier, but I cut you off.

Belinda Phipps: Although we can do things to make the current system less bad, the ideal solution is a redesign, which we could perhaps make happen in Scotland. That would enable everybody to have a life that involves work, earning enough money to live on and covering caring responsibilities. It would be designed in the knowledge that, until things dramatically change in the world, men and women have different lives and we need a system that does not unfairly penalise women, or women with other disadvantages, as it does at present. We want Scotland to have the powers that it needs to create that system as an example to show that it can be done.

The Convener: I am happy to take final contributions. Witnesses will have come to the committee hoping to make various points, and if you have not got all your points across, now is your chance.

Bill Scott: I have made all the points I wanted to make, but I add that I have with me copies of the report that we have just published—it was only released at the weekend. It will show you a lot of the problems that people are facing in fairly harrowing detail. There are case studies, but there has also been some quantitative work. It is an impressive piece of work. I will leave copies here for members of the committee.

Nina Murray: One thing that has not been mentioned is the English language requirement. We mentioned people for whom English is not the first language and how they experience the system, and I would like to raise a few concerns about that. It is another example of inflexibility.

It is still to be seen how the system will play out, because it is quite new, but learners have said that they have been told that their language assessments are confidential and that they cannot access them. They are going through a mandatory system, but they are unable to access their own assessments. If someone has ESOL provision from a provider or college in Scotland, they have to withdraw from that course to do the mandatory DWP provision, but it only includes speaking and listening; it does not include reading and writing. There are a host of concerns about that. On the one hand, it is good that people have more access to ESOL classes and that the system is child

friendly, but on the other hand it is inflexible and it does not suit women who prefer more flexible or community-based learning. We must consider what we can do to influence the new ESOL strategy in Scotland and ensure that provision is better linked up and more holistic.

Jo Ozga: We have not had an opportunity to touch on the impact of the cuts on EU migrants in Scotland, and particularly on women who are experiencing domestic abuse, who have no recourse to public funds in certain situations—for example, they may have no entitlement to housing benefit and be unable to access refuge accommodation as a result. A number of women's aid groups in Scotland have made submissions to the committee and provided case studies on that issue. I urge the committee to consider what mitigation measures can be taken to ensure that women in such situations are protected.

The Convener: We will do that and we will include that type of information in our report.

Is there anything else that people want to contribute? If you come across more information or something that you think should be included in our report, please let us know. This is not your only opportunity to inform the committee and guide us in the right direction, so if any information emerges that you think would benefit the report, please let us have it.

We have heard some substantial and challenging evidence this morning and we will take that forward. We will produce a report after the summer and hold a debate on it in the Parliament, and I hope that you will see some of your recommendations included. On behalf of the committee, I thank all the witnesses for their contributions, which I found informative and helpful. Thank you for coming along.

11:31

Meeting suspended.

11:38

On resuming—

The Convener: We continue with evidence taking on our inquiry into women and social security. The witnesses on the second panel are from organisations that have a particular interest in the impact on children and families. We welcome Mark Ballard, head of policy at Barnardo's Scotland; Hanna McCulloch, policy and parliamentary officer at the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland; and Marion Davis, head of policy and research at One Parent Families Scotland.

Do the witnesses want to make opening comments? Have they prepared anything or discussed among themselves how they will lead us off, or would they prefer that we just go to questions?

Hanna McCulloch (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland): Having listened to the first panel, I thought that it would be worth flagging up the reforms that are having a disproportionate impact specifically on women and children in families.

Research that was prepared for the committee found that the average household in Scotland is losing something like £440 a year as a result of welfare changes. For a lone-parent family, the figure is closer to £1,800, which is a huge loss for households that are traditionally low income anyway.

The reforms that the Institute for Fiscal Studies says have made the biggest difference to child poverty are changes to the way in which benefits—particularly child benefit—are uprated from year to year. A family with two children will have lost £1,100 over the past four years through the reduction in the uprating of child benefit alone. That very much needs to be addressed.

The removal of the baby element of tax credits and changes to the way in which tax credits are administered particularly affect low-income families. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has taken a more hard-line approach towards recovering overpayments of tax benefits. There used to be a cap on how much money HMRC could take back, but that is now gone, and overpayments are being taken back in huge chunks, which leaves families in a really difficult position.

The benefit cap, which the committee has touched on, and the residence test that is being applied to European Economic Area nationals are having a disproportionate impact on women. An EEA national has to have a job or a genuine prospect of having one within three months, rather than six months, of coming to the country. As women are less likely to find employment quickly because of caring responsibilities, that means that they are losing access to a wide range of benefits. Also, because EEA nationals who are seeking work are no longer entitled to housing benefit, women who leave relationships because of domestic violence or for other reasons and lose their right to reside can no longer access housing benefit.

That is a rundown of the main reforms that are having a specific impact on families with children.

Mark Ballard (Barnardo's Scotland): Like many organisations, Barnardo's was aware that the welfare changes were having a

disproportionate effect on women, but I was shocked to find that as much as 85 per cent of the impact of welfare changes falls on women. That means that, in many ways, when we talk about the impact of welfare changes on children—as you would expect Barnardo's to do—we are talking about the impact of welfare changes on women and children. The two go together.

That gendered statistic must change some of the way in which we think about the child poverty strategy, in which Barnardo's, along with CPAG and One Parent Families Scotland, has been involved. The Scottish child poverty strategy clearly makes the link between women and child poverty. Page 8 of the 2014 to 2017 strategy highlights that groups that face a significantly higher risk of poverty include

"single parents and families with three or more children"

and

"Families containing a disabled person".

We heard particular evidence from Bill Scott about the impact of welfare reform on families with disabled children.

The most recent quarterly poverty briefing from the Scottish Government highlights the fact that 17 per cent of young mothers are in severe or extreme poverty, compared with 8 per cent of all mothers. It also highlights the impact of being a lone parent and of having a disability.

There are already clear and strong links between women and poverty, but they are not brought out enough in current child poverty approaches in Scotland. Hanna McCulloch outlined some of the reforms that have had disproportionate impacts on women—in particular, the impact that changes to tax credits have had on women on low incomes. We heard from the earlier witnesses about the impact of moving lone parents, who are predominantly women, on to jobseekers allowance when their youngest child turns five.

If we look ahead to the discussion about where the £12 billion of welfare cuts might come from, there has been a lot of emphasis on young people, such as moving 18 to 21-year-olds on to youth allowances and restricting housing benefit access for young people. There is also the impact on larger families from things such as the benefit cap and restricting child benefit for larger families, although that now seems less likely.

11:45

When we think about child poverty, we should recognise much more explicitly that social security for women and child poverty go hand in hand, because it is not the children but their parents who are poor. The impact of welfare reform is hitting

the mothers of those children disproportionately, as we heard from Engender. We know that lone parents are particularly likely to be in poverty. We therefore need much more integration of the child poverty conversation that takes place not in this committee but predominantly in the Health and Sport Committee and the Education and Culture Committee with the social security conversation that takes place in this committee.

Marion Davis (One Parent Families Scotland): We are pleased that the committee decided to look at women and welfare, because 92 per cent of single parents are women and a lot of the impacts on women with children are affecting single parents. In our submission, we looked at income adequacy and—Hanna McCulloch referred to this—the impact of changes to benefit rates and the freezing of benefits. We also looked at the new sanctions regime, which has had a big impact on single parents not only through reducing benefit but through affecting health and wellbeing, which I can go into in more detail later.

Employability is also important, because welfare reform has had a major impact on single parents' access to training and education. We have been talking about benefits, but there is a broader-brush policy context.

I was interested in what Mark Ballard said about young parents being flagged up as a group whose income has suffered. Because of the avalanche of benefit changes, we sometimes forget that young parents' benefit payments are less than those of older parents. That situation is going to become worse, because the age bracket is to move up to 25, so there is an issue for young parents.

I echo what Mark Ballard and Hanna McCulloch said about single parents and the gender perspective. We have always felt that it is important to highlight that one of the reasons why single parents are in poverty is that the majority of them are women.

The Convener: Mark Ballard referred to the pending £12 billion in cuts. There is speculation that child benefit will be one of the targets. Can you give us an idea of how that will impact, on top of what is already happening? Have you done any analysis of where the cuts will fall, who will suffer most and how large the impact will be?

Mark Ballard: At this stage, it is hard to understand what the picture will be, because how the £12 billion reduction in welfare spending is going to come about is still unclear. There is a degree of optimism that the £12 billion reduction could be achieved through people moving off welfare and going into employment. However, for many of the families we work with, their need for support—the reason why we are working with

them—is one of the reasons why the parents are not yet able to move into employment.

It is not clear generally where the £12 billion of cuts will come from. Our concern has always been to highlight potential unintended consequences of the cuts. For example, we know that, if a move was made to reduce housing benefit for families with more than two children, it would put those families at greater risk of falling into crisis and there would then be more need for intervention from local authorities and perhaps organisations such as Barnardo's to support those families. However, it is a hard picture to work out.

On a related issue, I was struck by a recent report from the end youth homelessness coalition, with research from Heriot-Watt University. It examined a similar issue—the impact of removing housing benefit from 18 to 21-year-olds. There is a potential net saving of around £130 million if all housing benefit is simply taken away from that group but, if we look more closely at the figures, we find that some kind of exemption would be needed, particularly given our discussion of exemptions for under-21s who are lone parents or in other families with children, where it is recognised that it would make no sense to take housing benefit off those groups.

If we go through the exemptions and add in a prediction of the impact of increased homelessness among young people if housing benefit is taken away from them, we find that a saving that appeared to be £130 million, which is the cost of housing benefit to 18 to 21-year-olds, dwindles down to £2 million or £3 million. That is simply not worth doing if there is even a slightly higher rate of homelessness, as the savings would disappear.

We talk about welfare savings but, given the need for necessary exemptions and the impact on other services—local authorities would have to support individuals under 21 who declared as homeless—the savings all disappear. It is still unclear how the savings in welfare would be delivered without having massive unintended consequences and follow-on costs and without causing misery and poverty for the people who rely on those benefits.

Hanna McCulloch: Child benefit is a particularly important benefit for women, because it tends to be paid to the carer of the child in the household, who tends to be the woman. It is often paid directly to the woman, which gives her control over it. At the moment, there are many suspensions, sanctions and delays, but child benefit tends to remain a constant, so it is a guarantee of some income for households with children while difficulties are leading to other benefits being suspended.

The fact that child benefit is universal or close to universal means that uptake is very high. On the question of where to invest money to ensure that low-income families are benefiting, our perspective is that child benefit is vital, so cuts there would be devastating for us. The proposed freeze on child benefit for the next two years will have an extremely detrimental impact.

Marion Davis: We would be incredibly upset about child benefit being reduced or cut. As Hanna McCulloch said, among conditionality and sanctions, child benefit is the one constant.

The number of parents with children going to food banks in Glasgow has increased massively. There has been an explosion in that. Our staff are dealing with that daily. We are meeting young pregnant women in Lanarkshire, where we have a project. Because they have not eaten, our staff have to take them to Tesco to get something to eat before we can even address any of the other issues that we should be dealing with.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has an annually uprated minimum income standard. It has shown that a single mother can now afford only 57 per cent of that level. To make further cuts would be devastating. We said in our submission that we do not believe in

“the use of forced destitution as a policy instrument.”

We are seeing some of that at the moment, and that has an impact on children and their families. It is very sad to see.

The Convener: I concur with you.

Kevin Stewart: Over the past couple of weeks, we have heard a lot about the planned reduction in the household benefit cap from £26,000 to £23,000. We know from analysis that that would put tens of thousands more children into poverty. What would be the impact of that on those kids? Would a short-term gain have a major effect on the public purse? What would you expect to have to deal with in your organisations if the policy is implemented and even more kids are pushed into poverty?

Hanna McCulloch: The cases in which we have seen the benefit cap being applied have involved people with high housing costs. The cap tends to affect large families, although they are not the only group affected. It often affects lone-parent families in which the woman has left a relationship, perhaps because of domestic violence, and the family are then placed in temporary accommodation, which is expensive and takes them over the benefit cap.

Kevin Stewart: The money that is paid for the housing goes directly to the landlord, whoever that may be, rather than to the family, which is what

many folk think happens. The money goes nowhere near the family.

Hanna McCulloch: Yes—at the moment. The benefit cap is applied to housing benefit, so the money will be taken away from the housing element of universal credit.

The impact of a lower benefit cap would be on landlords and on local authorities' ability to make discretionary housing payments. The lower the cap, the wider the variety of families who will be caught by the change. At the moment, the majority of cases are in England where housing prices are higher.

Kevin Stewart: Or in places such as Aberdeen or Edinburgh.

Hanna McCulloch: Yes.

Mark Ballard: I have spoken about the need to have a more explicit link between the child poverty approach and social security for women. I also highlight the clear links that we must make with the getting it right for every child approach. I think that that is the main thrust of Kevin Stewart's point.

I was recently talking to staff at a long-standing service that we have that works with children who are at risk of being excluded from school. The reality is that the increasing driver for those children's school behaviour is their family being in financial crisis. That crisis comes as a combination of a reduction in family income that has come from the benefit changes and a sudden crisis, such as the need to make unaffordable repairs, the application of a benefit sanction or a delay in paying benefits.

The knock-on effect of the benefit changes can be seen in a child's performance at school. We know that school exclusion has a long-term negative impact on children. There is a clear link back to the services that we have. They are not anti-poverty services but are there to tackle other issues, such as supporting children to stay in mainstream schools, but they are coping with the consequences of welfare reform.

The national performance framework talks about improving the life chances of children, young people and families who are at risk. There is a clear link between some of the things that are putting families at risk, such as the impact of benefit caps and sanctions, and the work that we must do to ensure that every child in Scotland has the best start in life.

12:00

Marion Davis: I will touch on the case that went to the appeal court—the Supreme Court—that was taken by CPAG. It involved two single mothers

who argued that the benefit cap discriminated against women. The appeal court found against that and said that, although the cap discriminates against women, that discrimination is not manifestly without reasonable foundation and is therefore lawful.

I mention that decision because, although the measure was upheld as lawful, three of the judges criticised it for not being in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which the UK Government has signed up to. The convention requires the Westminster Government to provide certain levels of support for children. The fact that at that level that criticism was made of the benefit cap shows that the policy is not really going in the right direction for children's rights and wellbeing.

Kevin Stewart: On discriminatory practice, it is proposed to remove housing benefit from young jobseekers aged 18 to 21. Have any cases gone to court on discrimination in that regard? In my mind, that is also discriminatory on the basis of age.

Marion Davis: I am not aware of any cases.

Kevin Stewart: Maybe they will come. As Christina McKelvie said, things might be made more difficult if human rights legislation is withdrawn in any way, shape or form.

I will change tack a little. One Parent Families Scotland's submission states:

"As they stand, the draft clauses set out in the UK Government's Command Paper appear to devolve the Work Programme to the Scottish Government whilst maintaining the current sanctioning regime which underpins both referrals to, and the policing of the Work Programme by the DWP. It is difficult to see how such arrangements can be described as the devolution in any meaningful way."

Will you comment on that? It seems a bit bizarre to me that this Parliament might control the work programme, but the DWP will still control sanctioning.

Marion Davis: One of the big changes around single parents has been the requirement for them to sign on when their child is five and then become part of the jobseekers regime, which means that they have to sign on and look for work. As part of the new welfare-to-work regime, we have the work programme. A high percentage of single parents who have signed on go on to the work programme after a year; at the minute, the programme is run by private contractors—in Scotland, they are Working Links and Ingeus. When single parents move to that part of the pathway, it becomes difficult to contact them and keep in touch with them. It is very difficult to get information about how things work in the work programme because it is a private sector contract and business interests are involved.

Through our engagement with single parents we have found that the work programme is not well geared up to the needs of single parents. It is very much about work first and it is work focused. What sits behind that is the same conditionality regime that is in place for jobseekers, which means that if a single parent does not comply with certain conditions she may lose some of her benefit. We talked about sanctions in our submission. We feel that that is not the correct approach. We would rather see lone parents being supported along the employability pathway and into work through a supportive framework than see them being sanctioned.

The last time that we looked at sanctions, around 9,000 single parents in Scotland had been sanctioned. We found that out only through a request under the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002. We have made another request to try to update those figures. We feel that the policy is not at all helpful in contributing to the eradication of child poverty.

The broader context is that welfare to work was not just about increasing movement into work and reducing the bill for the taxpayer; it was meant to contribute to a reduction in child poverty. However, the trend is in the opposite direction—child poverty is increasing, as I am sure that Hanna McCulloch will mention. Therefore, we are concerned about that part of the work programme not being devolved along with the rest of it, because that will mean that we will not have full control over how that part of welfare to work pans out.

Kevin Stewart: I recognise that all your organisations have contributed greatly to our work and to the reports that we have written.

As far as your continuous lobbying of the DWP and the Westminster Government is concerned, do you feel that you are being listened to by the DWP on the changes that it is about to introduce?

Mark Ballard: I would like to tell what I hope is a positive story on that. When David Mundell gave evidence to the committee some time ago, he made a commitment to meet organisations that work on child poverty in Scotland, including Barnardo's Scotland and, I assume, CPAG and One Parent Families Scotland. We discussed with Mr Mundell the UK Government's access all areas programme, which is designed to ensure that the specific needs of young people who have left care anywhere in the UK are taken into account in processes when they apply to the DWP. We had a positive response from Mr Mundell and he looked at DWP policy. Although there is a high-level commitment at the DWP to the access all areas approach, its implementation appears to be patchy. Now that Mr Mundell has returned to the Scotland Office, we look forward to working with him to follow up on that to ensure that the access

all areas approach is taken not just at strategic level but by every Jobcentre Plus so that we get the care flagging of young people, particularly in the context of sanctions. I am grateful to the committee for facilitating that process with Mr Mundell.

That leads on to a point that I wanted to make in response to Kevin Stewart's previous question. The legal framework around sanctions was set by Westminster, but there is discretion at Jobcentre Plus level and at adviser level about how it is applied. Access all areas is a good example of the ability that exists for discretion to be exercised in relation to care leavers within the existing legal framework. We would like it to be possible for much more discretion to be exercised in relation to individuals with dependent children, particularly—given the context of today's discussions—in decisions that are taken by advisers and in jobcentres concerning women with dependent children. That would not necessarily require a change to the legal framework or the legal responsibility, but it would require a change in guidance, approach and attitude at adviser level and at Jobcentre Plus level. There are things that can be done within the existing legal structure before we get into conversations about what future responsibility patterns might look like.

Hanna McCulloch: On a small scale, we have had some success. We engage with the DWP in Scotland through the customer user group, and small changes have been made.

On a larger scale, it is a different picture when it comes to the policies that are proposed in relation to welfare benefits. As an organisation, our objective is the eradication of child poverty, but we know that 100,000 more children will be living in poverty in Scotland by 2020 than was the case in 2012, largely as a result of welfare reform—and that is before we take into account the new freezes on benefits that have been announced, such as the freeze on child benefit. That gives an indication of the extent to which I feel that our findings are taken into account.

Marion Davis: There are different levels of engagement with the DWP. There is the legislative framework, and the operation of that legislation. The framework is in place, but there are different ways of implementing the legislation that lie along a continuum, in a sense.

In our submission, we said that there is an opportunity to develop a Scottish good practice approach to the sanctioning regime. We have the legislation, but it is implemented on a continuum that can change across different geographical areas and different offices. Some offices have extremely high levels of sanctioning, while others have much lower levels.

We meet regularly with partnership managers at Jobcentre Plus Scotland-wide, and we have tried to do some work with them. They have done some training with our staff to explain what is in place, and our staff have fed back views to them, saying, "Well, that's the legislation, but it's not what is happening on the ground."

There are opportunities, particularly around sanctioning, to ensure that jobcentre staff are implementing what is in the legislation. For example, there is some flexibility for lone parents and jobcentre staff must take account of the fact that women with children should be allowed to take their child to school before they go to work and should have the appropriate childcare to meet their needs in order to take up employment. Support should be in place when a single parent is on income support to enable them to take part in work-related activity.

That is all in the legislation: it is being pulled away in a sense with universal credit, but at present those provisions exist, and yet we are finding that, across the country, they are not being applied locally.

We have projects throughout Scotland and we have done a survey of single parents in different local authority areas. The survey is on-going, and we have surveyed about 150 single parents so far. Of those, 85 per cent have said that welfare reform has had a negative impact. That is a really high percentage. What gives the results credibility is the fact that the survey covers Orkney, Shetland, the Borders, Glasgow and Lanarkshire, and the same thing is happening across the board.

Christina McKelvie: Kevin Stewart touched on the question that I raised with the previous panel about human rights and related issues. I thank One Parent Families Scotland for drawing my attention to the information in its submission—I was looking for those details last night and I could not find them.

The submission notes that the

"International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ... monitor ... severely criticised the UK government for failure to meet the fundamental right to food"

—which is a basic need for us all—

"as set out in article 3."

It goes on to state that

"Amongst the causes of increased hunger in the UK, it identifies the Coalition's"

—it was still the coalition Government at that point—

"welfare reforms, including sanctions"

as having an impact in that regard.

I am hosting a reception for One Parent Families Scotland tonight, so if any of you want to hear testimony from some of the young parents that Marion Davis has spoken about, you are more than welcome to come along. The organisation's transforming lives programme is a bit more fruitful than some of the work programmes that I have seen young parents put on.

The question that I really want to ask concerns the issue of child hunger, and how we can make a difference. A few weeks ago, I asked whether organisations and lobbying groups would support a strong lobby for a cumulative impact assessment on all those aspects that may affect a woman, a lone parent, someone with a disability or a child who has challenges and disabilities. We need to ensure that, when universal credit is rolled out, it is tailored to meet the needs of such families. We should not be in a situation in which the UK—one of the richest countries in the world—can be criticised because children are going hungry.

Hanna McCulloch: On the point about food poverty, I am not sure whether the committee is aware of the research that we did on food banks last year with the Trussell Trust and Oxfam, which found that most families accessing food banks were doing so as a result of an income crisis. In most cases, that was the result of an administrative problem with the benefits system, suspension or delay of benefits or the application of sanctions. We know that that is one of the main causes of children being hungry.

I was involved in the research, speaking to families in Scotland using food banks, and it is worth noting that the situation is largely the result of UK policies. However, there are things that can be done at Scottish Government level and at local level to avoid the need for families to use food banks. The Scottish welfare fund is one of those things. We need to raise awareness of that fund, because many of the families that we spoke to did not know that it was there.

Affordable transport is needed to prevent people from being sanctioned in the first place. We found that transport was a big issue for a lot of families. While we can keep in mind the fact that the situation is largely the result of sanctions, delays and so on, we need to keep our eye on the ball when it comes to what we can do now, because the Scottish Government and local authorities have a duty to children.

12:15

Mark Ballard: I completely agree with Hanna McCulloch's analysis. One of the challenges, as we move to a new world of community planning partnerships, integrated health and social care bodies and integrated children's services planning

under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 is to ensure that addressing child poverty more broadly—things such as food poverty and child hunger are specific examples of that—is the responsibility of all public bodies that are delivering services.

The reality is that the kinds of poverty that we see are changing. The issue is not just the increase in numbers that Hanna McCulloch mentioned earlier—the prediction that the number of children in poverty will rise by 100,000 in Scotland—but the fact that the nature of that poverty is changing. It is not just a scale issue, but is about the kinds of poverty and the families that are not merely on a low income but are on no income because of benefit delays and sanctions. The way in which local authorities and the wider state relate to that and support those families and those children looks quite different from previous approaches to poverty, and that will have to be factored in.

We want to see an understanding of child poverty more broadly, and of families in destitution more specifically, as a central element in future plans for CPPs, integrated health and social care bodies and so on.

As we discussed in our responses to Kevin Stewart's question, the long-term impact of a period of financial crisis can reverberate throughout a child's life. It may lead to a school exclusion, for example, which is a long-term impact from a very short-term failure to meet a family's needs in crisis.

Christina McKelvie: You picked up on the issue of school exclusion, which is a clear indication of where a cumulative impact assessment would pick up some of the knock-on effects, such as local authorities having to pick up the pieces.

I have anecdotal evidence that kids are going to school hungry and are not able to function properly at school, and are therefore not getting the best out of their education. The whole impact of that is generational. Do you have any insights on that?

Mark Ballard: We have been reflecting in Barnardo's on the new GIRFEC guidance, which sets out eight indicators for wellbeing. If a child is assessed as having a wellbeing need, the named person, which every child in Scotland will have, will be expected to take action to address that need. If a child is in poverty, do they have a wellbeing need? If so, what would the named person do to help to address that need? That description covers 20 per cent of children in Scotland at present, and the figure is likely to rise. In some areas of Scotland, it is likely to be much higher. How will the system cope when the

primary factor that is undermining the wellbeing of the child under the terms of the 2014 act is the fact that that child is growing up in chronic or acute poverty?

We have a mechanism that is designed to do a cumulative impact assessment on the things that are undermining the wellbeing of the child. At the moment, there is a lack of clarity over the response when poverty is undermining the wellbeing of the child. We were reflecting on that in relation to how GIRFEC, which is an entirely laudable approach, will work in practice. A child cannot have wellbeing if, as you say, they have an inadequate diet. If they are hungry, they do not have wellbeing.

Marion Davis: We would be very supportive of a cumulative impact assessment. A lot of organisations have requested it, but Westminster has not yet come up with a process to do it. As regards food and hunger, practical examples of tackling hunger include breakfast clubs. That is why, in our submission to Glasgow City Council, we expressed strong support for the continuation of breakfast clubs. If there are changes or cuts to services, breakfast clubs are crucial—and preventative as well, in a sense. One Parent Families Scotland has also, for many years, supported the free school meals campaign. Coming at the issue from another angle, free school meals ensure that all children have a healthy, high-quality meal, no matter what the circumstances of their parents are.

The Work and Pensions Committee report on sanctions, entitled “Benefit sanctions policy beyond the Oakley Review”, called for a comprehensive independent review of the sanctions regime. That would be a great start, because we might then identify the fact that—as the Work and Pensions Committee mentioned in the report—financial sanctions are no more successful than any other method in ensuring that the welfare-to-work strategy works. There is a lot of international research around that too, which we touched on in our submission. The sanctions approach is not necessarily the most successful way of ensuring a successful welfare-to-work strategy. If we want that strategy to contribute to eradicating child poverty, it is certainly not the right approach.

Clare Adamson: We have just touched on the area that I want to cover. Obviously, we are taking quite a bit of evidence. We had a one-off evidence session on the effect of welfare reform on children’s services in which we heard that children’s services budgets are overspent. It is reported that a lot of that overspend is to do with people having mental health issues as a result of the sanctions regime or in-work poverty.

We hear about the overall savings to the benefits budget as a result of the proposals, but we are getting a picture of the societal costs being much bigger. The cumulative societal impacts will have a much greater cost in the long term than the one-off savings that we are getting.

Do you have any budgetary evidence or any evidence about the impact of welfare reform on your individual organisations? Can you compare where you are now with where you wanted to be and the work that you wanted to be doing on GIRFEC and tackling child poverty? What impact has welfare reform had on you and your capacity to continue to pick up the societal costs of what is being brought upon people?

Hanna McCulloch: I absolutely agree with your point about the impact. There is an impact on and cost for the child and their life, and there is an impact on local services. CPAG has done research on the cost of child poverty. I am struggling to remember the exact figure, but it is estimated that child poverty costs the UK economy about £26 billion each year in lost economic activity, health problems and welfare payments.

In a lot of the cases that we see through the early warning system, it is extremely clear that the knock-on impact is immediate and large. With sanctions cases, people often have to access services because they have mental health problems. In some cases, people have got into trouble with the police because they have been desperate. All of those things have a huge cost for public services. Mapping the true cost of one sanction would be a really interesting piece of work. I think that it would sharpen the minds of service planners and people who make budgeting decisions to see exactly how little they save by not investing in preventative measures.

Mark Ballard: Hanna McCulloch has brought us to the territory that I want to mention. We welcome the cross-party commitment to the Christie commission principles on preventative spend, but we see local authorities that want to do that preventative spend work but cannot, because the crisis management that they are having to do is too expensive to allow them to invest in that.

The threshold for accessing services that we run and that are funded and supported by local authorities as part of a preventative effort is going up and up, because local authority services for families who are in more serious crisis are overflowing. We then get the overspill of families who are in a more severe crisis than our services are supposed to be working with, which means that the families that would benefit from the light-touch, early intervention, preventative-spend approach do not get to our service.

The logic of preventative spend starts to unravel when the level of crisis that is faced goes up so significantly. That is a common report from our services. The families that our long-standing services are working with now are not the families that they should be working with. They are now working with families who are in such a severe crisis that we cannot turn them away, because they do not have the support that they need from the centrally supported statutory services. We are in a difficult situation in which the emphasis on preventative spend is being undermined by increasing levels of crisis. As I am sure members are aware, the Christie commission had fantastic statistics about the benefits of a preventative-spend approach and the long-term savings that it generates.

Marion Davis: There has been a fair bit of research on the impact of sanctions and cuts to benefits, but not so much research on the threat of sanctions and the impact on health and wellbeing. We have received figures from our survey, but we also received comments from parents. I will read a couple to you. One parent said:

"Really terrible. It's made life difficult for me in fact my health has suffered from the stress."

Another said:

"All I know is I am struggling really badly to get by. It's sometimes a desperate feeling to be told by the Broo to pull your socks up and be positive when it's hard to give your kids a decent life."

That kind of thing has a severe impact on mental health and wellbeing. Almost illogically, it reduces the chance of moving into employment because, as we all know, to move into work, people need a level of confidence that will enable them to do well in a job interview and they have to feel that they can cope with work. Some of the policies that are in place are detrimental to that mindset and are resulting in ill health. More research on that would be useful and would shed light on the cumulative impact that is not easy to measure or see on the surface.

12:30

Margaret McDougall: Since 2012, single parents have had to claim JSA from when their youngest child turned five. I read with concern One Parent Families Scotland's submission, which says:

"In addition ... sanctions can now also be imposed on single mothers claiming Income Support (when their children are as young as 1 year old), as well as mothers claiming Employment Support Allowance (ESA) due to ill health".

How widespread is that? It just seems unbelievable. If a mother is to work, she needs childcare. How widespread is it that the benefit

circumstances of young mothers change when their child is as young as one? What is the childcare provision for women in that case?

Marion Davis: Welfare reform has impacted on single parents with children under five. A lot of the focus has been on lone parents who claim jobseekers allowance but, for those on income support, the conditionality has racked up, and there is a requirement to attend work-related interviews when the children are younger. As the youngest child gets nearer to three or four, work-related activity is now required to claim income support.

The sanctioning is not as severe as it is with jobseekers allowance in respect of the timespan and the amount, but a person can be sanctioned if they miss an appointment to meet their adviser. We have had a lot of cases in which single parents have not been able to attend an appointment because of a lack of childcare or perhaps because they or their children have been unwell. We have had cases in which pregnant young women who have had to sign on until a certain point when they were nearer to having their baby were unable to sign on on a particular day because they had severe morning sickness. They were sanctioned because of that.

Things have definitely become more stringent. Earlier, I mentioned a request under the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002. It revealed that more single parents with children under five were sanctioned than those who were on jobseekers allowance—I think that the figure was just over 5,000. We hope to have updated figures on that.

That issue has not had such a high profile, but it is indicative of the welfare-to-work trend for single parents. In a way, the approach follows the American model, which very much involves work first, and not so much what we previously had, which was more about human capital and looking at the person's potential skills and how they could move into better-paid employment. The issue is indicative of that general framework in which policy is developed.

Mark Ballard: The issue is the lack of integration of different systems. In our submission, we cite the example of our services working with a mother with a four-year-old child. The mother had a history of severe substance misuse problems. Barnardo's worked with her to move her towards more positive destinations. That woman is panicking and in fear because she knows that, in a few months, she will be moved on to JSA, as Marion Davis described, and she does not feel that she could cope with work. There is the danger that the blind imposition of the rules on the transition to JSA could undermine all the work and investment that have been put into securing better opportunities for her.

Obviously, we all hope that that woman moves into employment, but the way in which the systems interact means that there is no conversation to ensure that we support her as an individual. Instead, there is an adult support system that does not speak to the benefit system. That is at the heart of the problem.

Margaret McDougall: Clare Adamson mentioned children's services, which we heard evidence on a few weeks back. One thing that a witness said about North Ayrshire Council sticks in my mind because that is the area that I live in. It was that destitution among families presenting to the local authority had increased by 500 per cent, which is totally shocking. That is all as a result of welfare reform and the changes to welfare. How do we turn that around and reduce the pressure on services in the council? We also heard about the pressure on fostering and that the number of children being taken into care has increased hugely. Have you had the same experience?

Marion Davis: What you describe is definitely a trend. We have found that single parents in particular tell us that they are fearful, in some cases, of highlighting the difficulties that they face because of the fear of their children being taken into care. As well as the evidence that we see on the surface, research has shown that women go without food so that they can feed their children, with devastating consequences for the parents' health.

Given everything that is happening to women who are single parents and their children, the knock-on effect on services is definitely substantial. Our services, as well as Barnardo's, find that we are dealing with so many crises. Although we have funding to deliver support to parents and employability programmes, people are coming along who do not have sufficient finances to feed their children properly, so we are giving them food bank vouchers to sort out that bit first. We are putting on pizza-making classes on a Saturday morning for single dads in Edinburgh, because they do not have enough money to feed their children when they have contact time with them. It is getting back to a pretty basic and fundamental level.

Margaret McDougall: That is just the tip of the iceberg because, as universal credit rolls out, the stringent regime is going to get worse.

Marion Davis: It will also affect more people who are in work, because conditionality will be attached as well, which we have not touched on as it in the future. The number of sanctions will increase, because there will be a requirement to work more hours. It is going in the direction of more rather than less.

Margaret McDougall: One example that we were given in the submissions was of a mother who had gone to sign on with her two or three children, as it was during the summer holidays. She was sanctioned because the officer said, "You're not available for work because you have children there." She did not have anyone to mind her children so that she could sign on. Surely that issue should be addressed. Childcare should be made available for women who are seeking work and going on training programmes. Is childminding available for them? Do they get vouchers, or is any allowance made for that?

Marion Davis: The issue in the case that you describe may lead back to the claimant commitment, which we have not touched on. When someone signs on, they sign a claimant commitment. We have actually had someone sanctioned because she said that she could not work in the evenings and she later applied for a job in the evening; she got sanctioned because she had done something outwith the claimant commitment. In the case that you mention, it could be that the person said one thing in her claimant commitment but did something else. People might behave in a rational way to seek work but be sanctioned because the claimant commitment, which is a bureaucratic document, says something different.

As far as childcare in relation to welfare reform is concerned, as I said, we have a work-first approach, but we have no infrastructure to support it. Other European countries expect single parents to go back to work at a similarly early age, but they have childcare infrastructure in place to support that. It is never just about the cost of childcare; it is about flexible childcare that is available at weekends and outside the standard hours. There is family-friendly employment in some European countries so that, for example, employers accept that a child will be off sick and a parent might need some time off to deal with that.

Those societies provide support for workers as parents and the models there recognise the combined roles of worker-parent or worker-carer. However, in the UK, it seems that people are seen as workers and not much account is taken of the fact that they might require the kind of support that I have described.

Mark Ballard: It is worth highlighting again that there is a big difference between the legal framework and how it is applied. There is also a big difference between having sanctions as the last resort and having them as the first option. Changing the current situation would require not a change in legislation but a change in policy approach and guidance.

Hanna McCulloch: For people who are sanctioned wrongly or not told that they have a

say in what is in the claimant commitment or that they should have an opportunity to give a good reason for not fulfilling one of the conditions, access to information and advice services and advocacy services can be vital because, when people challenge a decision, it is often overturned.

To return to the issue of what can be done locally in Scotland, having information about accessing advice in places where women and children are likely to be could make a huge difference. For example, health workers in the healthier, wealthier children project have successfully referred low-income families to Money Advice Scotland. Perhaps that could be done through schools and nurseries as well.

Children's services are aware of what is happening, but it is not assumed that it is their role to do something to help parents on the lowest incomes. We have huge cuts and a huge increase in destitution, but at the same time breakfast clubs are being done away with although they are an important source of childcare, the cost of school transport is being put up in some local authority areas and children are being asked for £15 towards the cost of school trips.

It might only be a small role, but there is definitely a role for children's services in planning to help to maximise the incomes of families who have been sanctioned. That could be done through advocacy work, challenging sanction decisions and minimising the outgoings of low-income families at times of crisis, whether that is costs associated with the school day or with taking a taxi to a hospital appointment. People can claim back the cost of the fare, but they cannot go if they do not have that money in the first place. We therefore need to poverty proof the services that low-income families use.

Annabel Goldie: At the moment, we have the highest-ever number of women in employment in Scotland and the number of children in households with no work at all is at its lowest level ever, which is encouraging in the sense that something positive is happening. However, I was very struck by what Marion Davis said about the pattern of childcare provision. Is it your impression that, despite the welcome improvement in the number of hours available to parents in the year, the current pattern of provision is still too rigid?

12:45

Marion Davis: We obviously welcome any extension of childcare provision, which is moving in the right direction. However, the flexibility side of things is very important. We probably need to look a lot more at the opportunity to have childcare that meets the needs of the labour market.

We have a programme called Marks & start, which is run with Marks and Spencer and which has identified lone parents as a target group. We have put 120 single parents through that programme, which is tailored for single parents. There is support with childcare, and the hours are within the school day. After that is finished, when people go on to work for Marks and Spencer, they discover that, even on a 16-hour contract, they have to be able to work half of that time again. Sometimes, the work can be in the evening or on a Saturday. The appropriate childcare that is required to meet that need is difficult to find. Flexible childcare services are provided, including childcare at home, and we need more of that.

I hope that that is an answer to your question.

Annabel Goldie: Yes—that is helpful. Does either of the other two witnesses wish to add to that?

Mark Ballard: The childcare concern that is most frequently raised by the parents who we work with relates to the point that Hanna McCulloch has touched on about breakfast clubs and after-school clubs, which allow people to drop their children off at school early enough for them to be able to go on to work, and then to leave work and pick their children up. It is difficult to combine work with school hours if there is no wraparound childcare support outwith those hours.

The Convener: That has all been very helpful to us. I thank our three witnesses—

Annabel Goldie: Could I ask another question, convener? Is that permissible?

The Convener: You can, Annabel—sorry.

Annabel Goldie: I have a couple of questions, in fact. One is for Hanna McCulloch and refers to the written evidence from the Child Poverty Action Group. I was interested in your comment calling for

“Increased investment in the Scottish Welfare Fund”.

Do you have any sense of the increase that you want?

Hanna McCulloch: It is difficult to say at the moment, partly because even the money that has been made available to the Scottish welfare fund has not all been spent. It is difficult because there seems to be an element of unmet need for the welfare fund that is not being recorded, which is partly because people are not necessarily aware that it is there. Also, some local authorities are taking applications only where they think that there is a good chance of success, and we do not have an accurate measure of that.

It is difficult to put a figure on that, as there is a need for research. Ideally, there would be more investment and less rigid eligibility criteria. At the

moment, many families who are affected by welfare reform would not be entitled to a Scottish welfare fund payment anyway, particularly if they have been sanctioned. I cannot give a straight answer to your question, I am afraid.

Annabel Goldie: That is helpful.

Finally, I have a question for Mr Ballard. Did I understand you correctly when you said that the sort of changes that could be made by the DWP now are matters of practice and protocol? Is that correct, particularly in relation to the sanctions regime and its application?

Mark Ballard: My point was that there is an urgency to getting changes. We could make some immediate changes to practice and policy that would have a massive impact.

There is a much wider question around integration between, for instance, the GIRFEC approach, CPPs, child poverty more generally and the social security system. There are things that could be done immediately that would help a large number of families.

The Convener: I again thank our panel for adding to the information that we have received. We have had a couple of useful evidence sessions that have given us a lot of information and food for thought. As I said to the previous group of witnesses, if more information becomes available to you and you want to feed it to us, please do. The more information we have, the more substantial our report will be. I hope that we will challenge the system in a way that you want us to do. The more information you give us, the better. Thank you very much for your contributions.

Our next meeting is on 9 June. We expect to meet the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights, Alex Neil, and we will be reporting back on committee members' recent trips to local citizens advice bureaux and on the Craigmillar Parliament day.

12:49

Meeting continued in private until 12:58.

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