



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# **Social Justice and Social Security Committee**

**Thursday 15 June 2023**

**Session 6**



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**SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE**  
**16<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2023, Session 6**

**CONVENER**

\*Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)

\*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)

\*Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab)

\*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

\*Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

\*Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Kenny Anderson (Scottish Wider Access Programme)

Marion Davis (One Parent Families Scotland)

Jackie Galbraith (Colleges Scotland)

Sarah McCulley (Scottish Local Authorities Economic Development)

Sharon McIntyre (Skills Development Scotland)

Keith Robson (Universities Scotland)

David Stewart (Fedcap Scotland)

Philip Whyte (Institute for Public Policy Research Scotland)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Claire Menzies

**LOCATION**

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)



**Scottish Parliament**  
**Social Justice and Social  
 Security Committee**

*Thursday 15 June 2023*

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]*

**Decision on Taking Business in  
 Private**

**The Convener (Collette Stevenson):** A very good morning, and welcome to the 16th meeting in 2023 of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. We have received no apologies for today's meeting.

Our first item of business is a decision on whether to take agenda item 3 in private. Do members agree to take that item in private?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**Child Poverty and Parental  
 Employment Inquiry**

09:00

**The Convener:** Our next item of business is evidence from two panels of witnesses as part of our inquiry into addressing child poverty through parental employment. Over the past few weeks, we have held evidence sessions on issues around childcare. The focus of the discussion with our first panel is the provision of education and training. Barriers to accessing education and training was a strong theme in our recent call for views. Such barriers can, in turn, prevent access to the workplace and to work progression.

I welcome to the meeting our first panel. Kenny Anderson is director of the Scottish Wider Access Programme (West)—SWAPWest—and Keith Robson, who is senior public affairs manager at the Open University, is representing Universities Scotland. Kenny and Keith join us in person. We are joined online by Sharon McIntyre, head of careers information, advice and guidance operations at Skills Development Scotland, and Jackie Galbraith, principal and chief executive officer of West Lothian College, who is representing Colleges Scotland. I thank you all for coming. We are delighted to have you here.

Before we start, I have a few points to make about the format of the meeting. I ask witnesses and members who are participating online to wait until I or the member who has asked the question have said your name before speaking. Please give our broadcasting colleagues a few seconds to turn on your microphone before you start to speak. If you wish to come in on a question, please indicate that by typing R in the dialogue box in BlueJeans. You should not feel that you have to answer every question—if you have nothing new to add to what has been said by others, that is perfectly okay. I ask everyone to keep questions and answers as concise as possible.

I invite members to ask questions in turn, as agreed in our pre-brief, starting with Katy Clark.

**Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** I would like to ask about lifelong learning. What do you think the role of lifelong learning is in addressing child poverty? Is there an overlap with a just transition to net zero and training people for green jobs? Perhaps the witnesses in the room would like to respond first.

**Keith Robson (Universities Scotland):** Good morning, and thank you for the invitation to come along today. In our submission, Universities Scotland gave some evidence on the importance of lifelong learning and the opportunities that it

provides for students. In relation to poverty, lifelong learning improves people's ability to gain employment, to progress in employment and to provide for the family. The Open University has a wealth of anecdotal feedback from students who said that they wanted to be positive role models for their children and to show them that they could study and work; 74 per cent of our students work while they study with us. Across the sector, universities have a positive role to play.

A just transition is an area that needs to be developed. There are 19 universities in Scotland, and different institutions will play different roles. Some will do that up in the north-east while others will have different courses.

It has been highlighted in previous committee meetings that although we are very good about talking at a high level about the need for a just transition and green jobs, we are not so good at talking about what that means. We need to have a clearer definition so that we can ensure that the curricula are correct and so that we can support people, through, for example, access courses, to get into university or college for the first time. We need to gain their confidence and provide a pathway for them so that they can be on the right course for the right jobs and support their families.

**Kenny Anderson (Scottish Wider Access Programme):** In the Scottish Wider Access Programme, I take a slightly different perspective, which is the perspective of the students we work for. They are mainly students with no or few qualifications. The opportunity to return to education is their main point of learning. Their formal time in education when they were younger was often perhaps not as successful as they would have wanted it to be, which is why they have no or few qualifications. Having opportunities in the system to return to education is key to them. They see those opportunities as their chance to get back into education. That is clearly linked to poverty, because those who have not done well in education often reside in social and economic areas of disadvantage. People are looking for education to be part of their solution, and we, as a society and a system, should very much encourage that.

Most of our students are looking to return to education to gain a really good degree that will give them good employment in the future. The challenge for us across the board is in making the jobs of the future visible and attractive to people when they return to jobs. Currently, when we speak to our students about the type of jobs that they are interested in studying for and why they want to study for a degree, those jobs are often what they see as safe and secure ones, such as those in health, nursing, teaching and education. The challenge for us is in saying to them that jobs

in engineering and social science are just as important and that they are as able as anybody else to go into those jobs.

**Katy Clark:** I do not know whether anybody online has indicated that they want to come in. Obviously, we are particularly interested in child poverty. Being a student can be quite a difficult period, and formal education can be quite a difficult period for parents.

**The Convener:** I believe that Jackie Galbraith would like to come in.

**Jackie Galbraith (Colleges Scotland):** Good morning, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to represent Colleges Scotland.

The key thing about lifelong learning is that it gives people opportunities at different points in their lives. Colleges are really good for that. I will give a brief example from West Lothian.

There are communities in West Lothian in which there is quite entrenched unemployment and there is a long history of families that have struggled to get good employment and to stay in employment. For a lot of people in the community, it is really important to reach into the community and give people opportunities to have short courses that ease them into courses such as the ones that Kenny Anderson talked about—access to nursing or whatever it happens to be.

One wee example is that we are running courses in Blackburn partnership centre, where a general practitioner practice and other community facilities are based, with a group of women who have children and have not been in education. There is an on-site crèche that ensures that they can be happy that their children are looked after. Every single one of the women who have taken part in the taster course for childhood practice has taken up a full-time college course in August. They would never have contemplated going into the college before they took part in that course in the community.

In these financial times, it is challenging for colleges to reach into communities and do that. Perversely, part-time courses are more expensive to run, but it is really important that that is done.

I welcome the Withers review report recommendation that there should be more funding for part-time students, but the system should also have more funding for providers of part-time courses, because they really make a difference.

**Sharon McIntyre (Skills Development Scotland):** Good morning. I am head of careers information, advice and guidance at Skills Development Scotland, and I am pleased to be representing Skills Development Scotland today.

I will come in on the back of the other speakers, but I will take a bit of a different approach to the importance of lifelong learning to our economy and skills. At SDS, we very much see lifelong learning as being imperative in tackling the skills shortages in the economy, which we know extend across a number of areas.

On the national strategy for economic transformation, we are focusing on working with partners—who have already spoken—to achieve a stronger and seamless lifelong learning ambition so that it is easier for people in communities who are considering upskilling and looking at how they can retrain to create a much more secure future for them and their families. That is critical. Lifelong learning is about inclusive communities as well as personal fulfilment and is critical to the economy.

Our role as an all-age national careers service sits within SDS as a national skills agency, so we work with adults across Scotland every day to help them to navigate the options for their lifelong learning. We work closely with colleges to provide access to the courses that Jackie Galbraith talked about.

It is also imperative that the transition to net zero is seen as an opportunity and an economic lever. We have opportunities within our green jobs workforce academy, which is housed within My World of Work. The first speaker talked about the visibility of jobs—people being able to see what is out there and where. That is critical, and we want to ensure that My World of Work is used to the optimum in that way. We have an opportunity finder that tells anybody where opportunities are, particularly green skills opportunities. It also helps people to understand what skills they need to have to be able to take up those jobs and where courses and funding are available.

For us, in Skills Development Scotland, lifelong learning is a critical facet of our learning and education system.

**Katy Clark:** Are there Scottish Government policies that make it easier to provide education and training to low-income parents? Are there policies that are barriers, that make it more difficult and that need to be addressed?

Would anybody who is online like to come in first?

**Jackie Galbraith:** There are some policies that have definitely helped. The funding that colleges received this year and last year, the young persons guarantee and the national transition training fund enabled colleges to do many more short, sharp courses that were focused on the community. For example, we have a three-week skills boost course running right now with adults in the community that is linked in with NHS Lothian. At the end of those three weeks, they will get a

guaranteed interview for band 2 jobs in NHS Lothian.

Those courses are made possible by that funding but, unfortunately, it finishes this year, so it is a challenge for colleges to think about how they can use the funding that they have to meet all the different demands that they have. However, those policies in recent years have certainly been helpful to colleges, and it will be interesting to see what more flexibilities for colleges the Government comes out with in these difficult times.

The whole public sector is living in really difficult financial times and, for my college, the key thing is partnership working. There are many partners in West Lothian. We are all aiming to help the same people. The question is how we best work in partnership. We have created a partnership hub in our campus, and we now have 14 local and national partners co-located with us to help people in the community to connect into courses, whether short courses or, later on, full-time ones.

There have been some policies that have helped.

**Katy Clark:** Would anyone else like to come in, particularly on any problems that the committee needs to be aware of that need to be addressed and on which there could be improvements in policy?

**Sharon McIntyre:** To build on what Jackie Galbraith said, we agree that there are some policies and strategies that support low-income parents. For us, the recent lifelong learning strategy has been a fantastic approach to building that strength. It is very focused on partnerships, and we very much see ourselves in that partnership space.

09:15

In general, there could be a focus on targeting a lot more, given the situation that we are in with the cost of living crisis and the focus on poverty, which, as we know, is not really child poverty but poverty in the widest sense in our communities, across regions and nationally. If anything, we see a benefit in policies, in a wide sense, being targeted around our priorities, especially in the lifelong learning space, where we know that people and households are most at risk. Those people can be supported by a policy, in essence, but the real work is in the delivery and practice.

We need an opportunity to be more targeted in practice. I will give you an example. In schools, we work through a needs matrix. We have a targeted approach to those young people who are from households that might be struggling. We use Scottish index of multiple deprivation and equalities data. Our approach is driven by an

evidence base and an intelligence base, and that is validated with the school. We work closely with the school to focus on the young people who should be a priority for the careers service that year. That is done every year and is updated during the year, because circumstances change in households.

Young people benefit from a partnership-oriented, targeted programme in school, which means that we see the young people whose parents and carers are the ones who are impacted by the issues that we are talking about when we talk about parental employment. However, the approach in the post-school space is more universal and demand led. Again, that is of great value, but there is also room to learn from some of the targeted and needs-driven programmes. The third sector runs quite a few of those.

SDS works in close partnership with the third sector on those targeted programmes, which are delivering particularly with young people who are not attending school at the moment. That involves looking at what is going on with those young people and their families and how we can support them as a partnership.

I wanted to make that more general point about the fact that we see targeting as being a priority and an advantage at this time, given the climate that we are in.

**Katy Clark:** Keith Robson, do you want to come in on that?

**Keith Robson:** Yes. First, with my university hat on, I refer to page 5 of our submission, which refers to the fact that, in higher education, student support is primarily focused on full-time students. That was picked up in the Scottish Parliament information centre briefing, which did not specifically refer to part-time students.

I will play more to my strengths and speak from an Open University perspective. Some 68 per cent of our students receive the part-time fee grant. If an individual earns less than £25,000 a year, they will be eligible for the part-time fee grant for most of the courses. The grant, which is administered through the Student Awards Agency Scotland, was introduced circa 2013. We have seen that as a huge boost to supporting people to come back into education. Twenty per cent of our students do not have standard university entry qualifications, but we are now finding that there is an increase in students.

Only yesterday, as I was leaving the office, one of our senior advisers contacted me. They had done a quick triage because, in the past few days, we had had three calls from students saying that they were not sure that they would be able to continue with their courses. We are therefore looking at pausing their studies with us, which we

can do, or we are looking at them dropping out because of the cost of living crisis and the fact that the part-time fee grant threshold has never been increased since it was introduced. With inflationary costs and wages going up, students are going over the threshold and are no longer eligible for the fee grant, so they are having to seriously consider whether they can afford to continue with their studies.

Therefore, that policy is extremely positive, but it needs to be reviewed in the current circumstances, if that opportunity is to still be available to people.

I will also quickly mention the upskilling fund. That has been very positive, but I think—I will double-check and confirm this, convener—that it, too, might be coming to an end. I will make a note and confirm that afterwards. That fund allowed people to access short courses for retraining or upskilling to get them back into the workplace.

**Kenny Anderson:** We certainly benefit from the policies on fair access and the Scottish Government's focus on it. We receive our funding from the Scottish Funding Council from that pot of money, so it has certainly helped us. We have received that money directly from the Scottish Funding Council since 2011, which has provided us with a lot of certainty. If we look at the history of how our organisation has worked, we can see that it has been a little bit more difficult for us when we have been reliant on project funding. Therefore, that policy has certainly helped us to strengthen the work that we do through our colleges and has assured them that that work will continue into the future.

The fact that we live in a country that has free tuition fees for our students gives them certainty when they progress to university. We should never underestimate the importance of that in their thinking. It comes up time and again when we talk to our students about why they have returned to education.

We found something interesting when we looked at the evidence about the ages of the children of our students who are parents. We have that evidence for more than 30 years. I always like it when my statistics are boringly reassuring about what I do every year. We noticed that, in around 2011 or 2012, we began to see evidence of the fact that universal childcare had been provided for three-year-olds, because the normal age of a child of returning students before that time was five and we saw it begin to reduce to three. That was interesting. We had not necessarily expected that at the time, but it made sense later on.

The work that we do requires an infrastructure. No matter how well our programmes run, we need a really strong college infrastructure and, within



that, we need a childcare infrastructure so that our students have really good childcare facilities. We also need a transport infrastructure so that they can get to their college.

I appreciate that one of the aspects that this committee in particular is grappling with is the impacts on poverty across a broad range of policy fields. We hope that education would be seen as part of that infrastructure, but we do not always have all the answers, because it requires a bit more of a holistic approach.

**Katy Clark:** Project 12 in the national strategy for economic transformation includes:

“developing a stronger, simplified lifelong learning system, including support targeted at those who need it most.”

To what extent do you expect that low-income parents will be the main focus?

I do not know whether Kenny Anderson wants to come in on that.

**Kenny Anderson:** It is probably for other people to say whether low-income parents will be the main focus. I hope that they will be.

In Scotland, we benefit from having the Scottish credit and qualifications framework. That has come up in two recent reports. It allows our education system to consider the people we feel that we have to target and where those resources should go.

A key element for people who are returning to education is targeting resources at people who are looking for development within SCQF levels 4 to 6. Some of the aspects that Jackie Galbraith spoke about and some of the pre-access programmes that our college partners run are really helpful for ensuring that students will be successful when they return to that level.

It is less about simplification. It is really important to have a lot of diverse routes that meet the needs of a diverse range of adults, because not all adult students are the same. However, if there can be a focus on those students, we will start to see the benefits of that in attacking poverty.

**Katy Clark:** Keith Robson, do you want to come in?

**Keith Robson:** No. I do not have anything to add.

**Katy Clark:** Do any of the online witnesses have anything to add?

If not, my final question is about how we ensure the availability of a diverse range of education. There have been several references to green jobs as well as to some of the caring professions that parents on low incomes look to. How do we

ensure that a truly diverse range of opportunities—which the economy needs and which will lead to well-paid employment—are available to low-income parents?

**Keith Robson:** We have to have greater collaboration and partnership. We could all give some good examples of that partnership between the sectors and between the institutions—some examples have been given already. I am attracted by the idea of the partnership hub at West Lothian College, which sounds positive and interesting.

As a sector, we look to provide opportunities—every institution will have good relationships with local colleges. The Open University is a national university, so we have students in every parliamentary constituency and region. We work with all the colleges outside the University of the Highlands and Islands network. We have articulation agreements and strong partnerships. Increasingly, we have to look to the third sector, and we are having discussions with SWAP about how we can work more closely. If we are to meet the challenges as funding reduces, greater collaboration is imperative.

**The Convener:** I believe that Jackie Galbraith and Sharon McIntyre want to come in. I remind everyone to be a little more succinct. Our next panel of witnesses arrives at around 10.10.

**Jackie Galbraith:** A very significant proportion of students in colleges are from low-income families, and we must continue to support more low-income families. It is lifelong learning: young people inspire their parents and their parents can inspire their young people. Right now, colleges across Scotland are celebrating the success of those students at SCQF levels 4, 5 and 6 that Kenny Anderson spoke about. When you see adults who have been through learning and their children with them, you can see that there is a positive story to tell. We also see parents who come along with their children, and then the parents start to think, “I wonder if this is for me.” Many of those parents have never been inside a college before. It is critical that we continue to focus on those families.

I have a final point about transport. Bus routes are being cut across West Lothian, which is cutting off the opportunity for young people—and, indeed, anyone in those outlying communities—to come in to college, even though it is just a few miles away. The fact that there are no buses available or they are not available at the right times is denying people in our communities the opportunity for lifelong learning.

**Sharon McIntyre:** On the diverse range of options, it is critical to talk about work-based learning options, too, and employers have a role in that space. We need a critical focus on local

market intelligence and information. The evidence is that the role of employers is critical in any integrated approach in a community.

We support the employability hubs in West Lothian and nationally, and we are developing much more integrated hubs in our cities and communities. It is imperative that employers are included and that work-based learning opportunities are part of that diverse portfolio of accessible options for parents on low incomes.

**James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP):** Sharon McIntyre, how we can develop apprenticeships and other work-based learning for low-income parents?

**Sharon McIntyre:** Hi James!

**James Dornan:** Hello, Sharon.

**Sharon McIntyre:** As you know, we have apprenticeships starting at the school-based level and going up to graduate level. Those are open to all, including low-income parents. We do not actually have eligibility criteria for low-income parents. The apprenticeships are universal, but, as I said earlier, even at school level we focus very much on encouraging young people to look at apprenticeships as an option and on supporting parents and carers to understand what apprenticeships are and how they could be of value to them and their young people.

09:30

Skills Development Scotland has a parents and carers strategy that is all about different ways of engaging parents, particularly low-income parents, and supporting a range of opportunities. That is underpinned by our all-age careers advice. We support low-income parents in the round, and apprenticeships are one of the pathways open to them.

**James Dornan:** Is there any measurement of participation of low-income parents, or parents in general, in apprenticeships?

**Sharon McIntyre:** We measure and collect information on take-up and placements, but I will need to follow that up with you, James, if that is okay. I do not have that information to hand.

**James Dornan:** Yes, it would be helpful if you could come back to the committee on that. If no one else wants to come in on those two points, I will move on.

My next question probably comes back to you, again, Sharon—I am sorry. Individual training accounts have been paused. When will those be reinstated and what impact is their absence having?

**Sharon McIntyre:** We are launching the ITAs in July. That has just been approved by the Scottish Government. There has been a delay in their launch due to budget discussions and the challenges around that. Working with the Scottish Government, we have agreed an approach, and we will be launching access to a total of 6,000 ITAs from next month, for the year 2023-24. Learners who apply will be part of the new launch and they will be able to take up an ITA through that process.

On the pause, we have not stood still on supporting those learners through a range of information that we provide through My World of Work and the careers information, advice and guidance helpline as well as our all-age service on funding and learning opportunities. Our website, My World of Work, provides an extensive list of opportunities for learners. When a learner has expressed an interest, we have still been able to support them and deliver a service. Even in that time, we have looked at the criteria underneath the ITA, and we are working closely with Scottish Government to explore the salary cap, which we feel needs to be explored again. That is giving us a chance to look at how we can improve ITAs, but they will be launched very soon.

**James Dornan:** Can you reassure me, to some extent, that nobody has been impacted severely negatively because of the pause of the ITAs?

**Sharon McIntyre:** Yes, I can. I am confident that we have a range of other support services in the learning space, and we have that one-to-one guidance.

**James Dornan:** In that case, I have to ask: why have the ITA? If you already have things in place and if, as you say, people are adequately supported and are not losing out if it is not there, what is the point of it?

**Sharon McIntyre:** That is a good question, James. It is about a wider visioning opportunity, and it is also under NSET. The focus is on empowering people with their own skills and giving them the ability to use a fund in a way that means that they can create a range of options from a funding base.

Empowering people to focus on their own skills can come from a variety of places. They can look at developing their skills, and that comes back to the discussion that we had about the future potential for a skills wallet, which would be an empowered approach for people and communities, especially parents who are on a low-income and who could use a skills wallet entitlement to ensure that they take up learning that suits their interests and career goals. We think that the ITA is an important tool to help people to navigate their careers.

The National Careers Service was built around career management skills, which means that we—*[Inaudible.]*—people to drive their own career or support their own pathway to reaching a green job. Career management skills are necessary for them to navigate the pathway to that. Individual training accounts are an empowered approach to the traditional service delivery that we support.

**James Dornan:** So, an ITA gives them flexibility in their learning process—that is great. That was really helpful.

I have one more question—I will not ask you to answer, Sharon, because you have done enough. I will start off by asking Kenny Anderson, and, if any other witnesses would like to respond, that would be great. Should there be workplace training and upskilling funds that are targeted specifically at low-income parents?

**Kenny Anderson:** Our programme is very much in and around academic development, and we are looking to provide them with that provision if they feel that that is what they need. I always try to bring my answers back to the needs of the adults we want to work with. The one thing that we always find when we talk to our students is that they are a very diverse bunch, so I would never want to be in a position in which a policy shoehorns people into one option.

We realise that SWAP is not always the best thing for all adults who are looking to return to education, but it has benefits for a number of them. I would prefer a more diverse approach in which, if somebody is looking to get back into the workplace, they have an opportunity to attend a local college that will provide them with that option. If they are looking for an education response that will take a longer period of time and will engage colleges and universities, they should have the opportunity to do that as well. It is about having options and choices and about the investment that provides such choices.

I am sure that Jackie Galbraith will be able to go into that in more detail than I have been able to.

**James Dornan:** There you go, Jackie. He has just passed the ball to you, so let us hear you run with it.

**The Convener:** I remind everybody to be more succinct in their responses, because we are running way behind time and a lot of members want to ask questions.

**Jackie Galbraith:** Okay. I will try to do that.

We must have flexibility to support work-based learning for those in low-income families—both those who are in work and those who are out of work. The ITA is a vital tool, but it runs out during the year and many people who are in low-paid jobs—for example, those in the care sector—want

to upskill both to do the job that they are doing and to progress in their job. Very often, they rely on things such as ITAs, and colleges having the flexibility and ability to tap into other resources to provide more of that learning is necessary.

**Keith Robson:** I promise that I will be extremely brief.

There are two perspectives on that. We produce a regular business barometer—our next one comes out at the end of the month—and last year it found a bit of disparity between what employees said they wanted, in terms of upskilling and reskilling, and what employers wanted. If we are considering targeted funding for low-income parents, we should think carefully about what the needs are.

That money might be better focused on something like the part-time fees grant and some sort of maintenance grant or access to a maintenance loan for part-time students. Part-time students, whether they are at the Open University or at college, do not have the same ability to access funding as full-time students, so that funding is vital in getting people retrained.

**James Dornan:** Thank you for that.

**Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** Good morning, everyone, and thank you for joining us here and online today.

I am going to try to merge my three questions, which relate to core structures and delivery models.

To what extent can course timetabling and structures be made more flexible in order to accommodate a more diverse range of students? I know that the majority of students in SWAP are parents, so, as we have heard, flexibility around childcare is important. The 2022 national strategy for economic transformation highlighted the need for flexible provision. What are your views on that? Do you have any examples of where there have been changes?

As I mentioned SWAP, I will ask Kenny Anderson to respond first.

**Kenny Anderson:** I will try to be succinct, but that is sometimes very difficult—my apologies, convener.

We are pretty passionate about the work that we do. There are some simple and straightforward measures that most of our college partners provide, such as providing flexibility for people to drop off their kids and then get to classes, rather than having the kind of structure in which they expect people to be there at 9 o'clock. Most of our college partners are incredibly good at sorting out their timetables so that students can look after their children and work. One issue for the people

whom the committee is trying to focus on in particular is that they are trying to juggle childcare and work. Our colleges are flexible in that respect.

Reflecting on the pandemic, we are trying to be as flexible as we possibly can with learners around blending face-to-face and online learning. We are looking at two-year provision of an access programme. My colleague in SWAP (East), Lesley Dunbar, is doing a really innovative piece of work with the national health service in Grampian and Moray College, where health practitioners who are working with the health board have the opportunity to study over two years, so that they do not lose their hours.

Those are the really helpful bread-and-butter elements that make life easier for students.

**Miles Briggs:** That is helpful.

Keith Robson, I know that the majority of Open University courses can be provided online. Does that also provide flexibility? Is the change in learning that happened during the pandemic the way of the future?

**Keith Robson:** Time and again, we hear from our students that our provision allows them to fit study around their work and caring responsibilities. We have a very handy study calculator—it is an Excel spreadsheet that enables people to work out all their different commitments in the week. It is very basic, but it helps students to think about the commitment that is required in a stark way. We got taken through that as a staff team the other day. As an institution, our model is very flexible and designed to suit our students' needs.

I draw the committee's attention to page 2 of the Universities Scotland submission and the innovative work that is being done by the University of the West of Scotland. UWS gives students their prospective timetable within 24 hours of enrolment to allow them to make their plans and arrangements in advance and to ensure that planning is not done at the last minute. There are other projects at Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of Edinburgh, to ensure flexibility to meet students' needs.

**Miles Briggs:** Thank you. Something else that the committee has heard relates to the different issues for people in urban and rural Scotland, especially around travel. That is also an issue for island communities. West Lothian is part of my region and is not necessarily that rural. However, Jackie Galbraith, as you have already raised the point that transport is a major barrier, do you want to add to that thought?

**Jackie Galbraith:** Good bus routes are really important. Our bus routes are not great, and we get lots of representations about that. I know that local politicians, councillors and others—including

the college and our student association—have lobbied the bus company, and there have been promises to address that.

I want to address your question about flexibilities in learning. Many parents who are returning to learning—I am thinking about those women I talked about earlier—have had bad experiences of education and are very isolated in their communities, so coming together in person is critical in order to build up their confidence and the value of and motivation for learning. We do a lot of online learning for students who want that flexibility—especially those in work—but for those who are on very low incomes and are isolated in their communities it is really important to give them the opportunity to come together.

For example, for five weeks over the summer break, we have 60 English for speakers of other languages students coming in, so that they can connect with one another as a community. There is a crèche on campus, and they will be learning English so that they can take part in courses. Online teaching is important but, for that group of people, it is also really important to think about in-person provision.

09:45

**Miles Briggs:** That is good to hear.

**Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** Good morning, and thank you for your time this morning.

How does the financial support for students in Scotland compare with support that is available in the rest of the United Kingdom? Is there any type of student support in other parts of the UK that we should replicate in Scotland? That question is for anyone who wants to answer it.

**Keith Robson:** In Wales, there has been funding as a result of the Diamond review, which has dramatically increased the number of part-time students signing up with the Open University. That is because there is a bespoke arrangement in Wales, which means that we are by far the largest partner. That is not just a shameless plug for my institution; it reflects the situation in Wales. The review resulted in grants that were not there previously, and it led to a significant increase in uptake. However, prior to that, Wales did not have anything like the part-time fees grant that we had. It was less about tuition fees and more of a support grant. We have flagged that up to civil servants in the past.

**Marie McNair:** Does anyone else want to come in?

**Jackie Galbraith:** I do not know the answer to that question, but I know that Colleges Scotland recently did some work to compare Scotland with

the other UK nations, so I am pretty confident that we could get that information to you.

There is also the issue of universal credit, which is a major barrier to engaging in learning for families—both those in work and out of work—because of all the conditions and impacts that studying has on their benefits. That is a big issue across the UK.

**Marie McNair:** Thank you, Jackie. That would be very helpful.

**Sharon McIntyre:** I want to come in very briefly on reducing the financial costs. On the other side of the coin and from a student perspective, we greatly value free bus travel, which has really made a difference to families and the pressure on their finances.

We are working with the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service on the fees for UCAS applications. From a CIAG point of view, we are focused on reducing financial barriers as well as on promoting methods of support.

**Marie McNair:** SWAP's submission says that unexpected crises are a reason for students not being successful. How can we improve crisis support for parent students? For example, would better links to money advice or the Scottish welfare fund be helpful?

**Kenny Anderson:** College student support systems are really good at ensuring that students have that finance, provided that students have the confidence to get in touch with us to talk about those issues. A lot of the issues stem from challenges and difficulties in respect of universal credit, as Jackie Galbraith mentioned. A particular challenge is that colleges are great with their discretionary funds, but those funds can sometimes cause difficulties for people on universal credit. When that challenge arises—oh my goodness!—the balance can go wrong and cause difficulties. It is less of an advice and information problem—if we could really get stuck into the benefits system, we might actually start to do some good.

**Marie McNair:** How should that be reformed to remove the barriers and cliff edges? Do you have any examples?

**Kenny Anderson:** Universal credit is a benefit that presumes that we are trying to get people back into work—that they should not be out of work and should get back into work. I hope that, when the Scottish Government looks at its benefits—the evidence on that has been good so far—the presumption of people going into education and education being a good thing is part of the principles that might be useful.

From a student's perspective, it is good for students to know that the work that they are doing

is valued when they come across all the different systems that they have to engage and become involved with as they try to navigate their time through study. They do not want additional stresses; they just want to be able to focus on their study. Once we have them in the system and there is investment in student support, that should be sufficient for them to get the proper advice that they require.

I am sorry to go on, convener. I promise that I will be succinct.

There are also issues around how we get people into the system, the guidance about money that they receive and some of the benefits that they get from becoming a student and getting involved in the system. There may be opportunities there for people to work more in partnership with some of the agencies that Marie McNair spoke about earlier.

**Marie McNair:** Jackie Galbraith, you have already touched on universal credit. Is there anything else that you would like to expand on?

**Jackie Galbraith:** The cost of living crisis has been huge for students and for families, and colleges across Scotland have done amazing things to mitigate it. Most of us provide a free hot breakfast and a free hot lunch for our students, to make sure that they have something to keep them going during the day.

The partnerships are critical. There are lots of third sector and public sector partners. That is why we have created the hub. They come on to campus to work with our student funding teams and point people to the funding that they can access via different means. They help parents to find out how to get free uniforms for their children and even how they can get Christmas presents for the children. Partnership is therefore fundamental in these difficult times.

Structurally, I totally agree with Kenny Anderson. We have to address the universal credit system, because it is a huge barrier. Colleges are doing really well with the funding that they get and the funding that they pull in from partners to support students who are in dire need at the moment.

**Marie McNair:** As no one else wants to come in, I will hand back to the convener.

**The Convener:** I invite Paul O'Kane to ask some questions.

**Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** Thank you very much, convener, and good morning to the panel.

I am particularly interested in information and advice that are provided to people who are looking to get back into education and training, particularly

parents with a low income. I will start with the universities. The Open University has a dedicated helpline, and people can speak to advisers. Is that effective for people who are looking for information and advice? What more can be done in that space?

**Keith Robson:** Yes. My colleagues work extremely hard, and it was particularly challenging during the pandemic trying to make sure that students were supported at a difficult time. When students are aware of the services, they are well supported.

The challenge for any helpline is getting the information out there so that people are aware of it. We do that through our partnerships with colleges and through advertising, but there is always more that can be done to improve things. Nobody should rest on their laurels. Once people reach that touch point within the service, it is good, but we need to make sure that people are aware that they can phone up in the first place and make an inquiry or come through our website, which takes them through a series of steps.

**Paul O’Kane:** Obviously, there is a challenge in getting the information out there. My next question is to the other panel members. In your spheres of influence, what methods have you employed to tell people who have so much going on in their lives and many demands on their time that they can access the opportunities?

**Kenny Anderson:** One of the hardest things that an adult has to do when they are returning to education is pick up the phone and speak to somebody to begin with. In SWAP, we very much rely on our college colleagues. We ask students how they found out about SWAP, and we find that it is the community engagement that colleges do that allow people to find out about us.

Information, advice and guidance have to be trusted. The organisation needs to be regarded as an open one that will spend time with people and talk to them. Investment in the first point of contact is essential for us to bring people in.

After colleges, the next way that people find out about SWAP is through their family, friends and those who have been through the programme, because they are trusted. We actually often ask our students to do our marketing for us—that is useful, because someone knowing that people from their background have been able to return to education is far more likely to have an impact than a leaflet or newspaper article. Social media has also been more beneficial for us in getting messages out than the standard ways.

**Sharon McIntyre:** As others have said, our focus is on My World of Work for our online presence. That has a chat function so that we can support people online. We also have our CIAG

helpline, which has qualified advisers at the end of the phone. If that is someone’s preferred way of engaging with us, we are there with our helpline at the ready.

Colleagues will know that we also have centres, community venues and integrated employability hubs across Scotland to engage with people and share information. Social media is critical. We have looked at how we can move content on to TikTok, and we recently trialled an Instagram Q and A, in which a lot of young adults participated. We also have new marketing material that has a quick response—QR—code that people can scan with their mobile to access advice. We constantly consider how we can improve the way that we deliver information, advice and guidance.

**Jackie Galbraith:** I will not repeat what others have said, but it is important for people in communities that any organisations that they engage with can tell them about what is available to them. The partnership hubs that I spoke about are partnerships with community learning and development staff, the Department for Work and Pensions and Skills Development Scotland. Those partners working closely together means that they pass on information to each other. I am delighted to say that Skills Development Scotland will join our partnership hub very soon, and the Open University is very welcome to come along and talk to us about being located on our campus as well.

**Paul O’Kane:** The committee is always glad to provide opportunities for synergy

My next question is about partnership working. Jackie Galbraith mentioned the DWP, which I suppose includes Jobcentre Plus. Are advisers in that setting doing enough, and are they trained well to share opportunities and be supportive by taking people through the process and getting them the right information and advice?

**Jackie Galbraith:** They are trained in their own skill set. The key thing is that, the more that they know about the local college and about Skills Development Scotland, the better the advice that they give people will be.

Colleges across Scotland are good at those relationships. They do not tell people to go to one place for some advice and to another place for different advice. If everyone is in one space, it makes a huge difference to connecting people to education, because they can sort out funding, childcare, mental health problems and everything else—whatever the issue happens to be—when partners come into the same space. They have the skills; it is just about connecting with everybody else.

**Paul O’Kane:** I imagine that provision might look different in different parts of the country, so it

might be helpful for us to reflect on what good looks like.

10:00

**Sharon McIntyre:** First, I thank Jackie Galbraith—I am delighted to work with her and the Open University.

The point about partnership is absolutely critical. We have strategic agreements with Social Security Scotland and the DWP. We share continuing professional development learning—upskilling each other—because, when we are in front of a customer, we have to make sure that we can offer a range of supports that go far outwith our own services. I say that to let you know that there is a framework for review underneath that.

**Paul O’Kane:** That is interesting.

The committee has been particularly interested in childcare and in the use of the option for two-year-olds that has been rolled out to specific families as a means of getting people back into education and training. To what extent have you engaged in that space? There have been challenges in identifying families and getting the right holistic support for them. The family centres across the country work on the partnership hub model that we have just discussed. Have you had much engagement on the roll-out of 1,140 hours to two-year-olds—essentially, in getting to those parents?

I do not know who might want to come in on that. Does Sharon McIntyre have any views from the perspective of the more co-ordinating role of SDS?

**Sharon McIntyre:** We are most influential through the community planning partnerships. In sub-groups of the CPPs that we are on, there has been a particular focus on childcare schemes, vouchers and the promotion of places. Our role is instrumental in supporting solutions where, at customer level, childcare is an issue. The flexibility of childcare is incredibly important.

For us, childcare sufficiency is still an issue nationally. I know that the committee has looked deeply into that. Again, we work in partnership where we can, especially with the private, voluntary and independent sector providers of childcare—not just with local authorities. That is important. Those partnerships are critical.

There is a perception of a hidden cost in the wraparound of childcare. When it comes to take-up, it would help to understand the situation that households are in. It is not about just a simple matching of childcare that suits the employment needs; it goes wider than that. We get a lot of information about childcare sufficiency from our

local and regional discussions. We are focused on that, in partnership.

**Jackie Galbraith:** Colleges are critical in developing the childcare workforce to meet increased provision. That happens across the country. Partnership with the council’s early learning and childcare team is critical both in raising the visibility to communities across the area of what childcare provision they are entitled to and is available, and in ensuring that we can support the providers when it comes to the people who will end up working for them. I have no doubt that a good number of the women in Blackburn I talked about earlier will end up being early years practitioners, because so many jobs are available in that area.

**Kenny Anderson:** Students who are parents see it from the perspective of what they require as a support mechanism for childcare, which is broader than just the childcare providers. It is about ensuring that they have a support mechanism in their family and friends, so that they can return. In particular, for a number of our single parents, it is about support from their broader family. Rightly, we spend a lot of time talking about childcare providers, but it goes broader than that for students who are looking to return to education.

**The Convener:** I have one last question before we finish up, which I will put to Keith Robson, Kenny Anderson and Jackie Galbraith. What impact will the tightening of college and university budgets have on provision for adult returners and student parents, particularly low-income parents?

**Keith Robson:** If the budget continues to be reduced, a reduction in opportunity is inevitable. We are seeing job cuts across the sector, so fewer resources will be available in our colleges and universities and, potentially, there will be fewer opportunities—courses will perhaps not be run that would otherwise have happened.

The wider bit is about student financial support. If the part-time fee grant threshold is not increased, fewer opportunities will exist for people to access education via that route, which would otherwise have been a vital lifeline for them.

**Kenny Anderson:** We are a college-based programme, so we are always really concerned about the capacity in our colleges for running our programmes. SWAP access programmes require a lot of engagement and involvement from our college partners: we ask them to deliver more credits as part of those programmes because we are getting people ready quickly so that they can progress. I say this with love in my heart, but SWAP students are sometimes a challenging group to work with. They are well liked, and people like to teach them, but they come with a lot of

additional challenges. We see a real commitment to SWAP across all our colleges, but people such as Jackie Galbraith have to balance the books, and my job is to navigate that with some of the senior teams.

I have a quick example. One of our most popular programmes is access to nursing. Our nursing numbers are good and really consistent, and a lot of the drop in nursing applications for universities has actually been more from schools than it has been from adults. However, I am beginning to worry about our capacity for delivering the number of programmes that we will need to deliver in our colleges if things continue to go the way that they are going.

**Jackie Galbraith:** We deliver the access to nursing course, and it has been great to speak to the students on that over the year. It is fantastic to see how virtually all the folk on the course are going on to university to become nurses. We are totally committed to continue to do that; in fact, we have seen double the applications for those places for next year.

The tight financial situation that we face is undoubtedly really hard for colleges. Colleges are very agile—we will change and try to do our best, and we absolutely will focus on the people who are in most need. However, it is critical that the Government thinks about other areas that colleges could get funding from. Other pockets of funding could support colleges, not just from the education budget, which would help tackle poverty and achieve the economy that the Scottish Government wants. I encourage the Government to consider that point in order to see how we could support people and communities to get the careers and jobs that make them happy and content.

**The Convener:** That brings the session to an end. I thank the witnesses for their evidence.

10:08

*Meeting suspended.*

10:12

*On resuming—*

**The Convener:** Welcome back. We will now hear from our second panel on employability programmes. Expanding employability provision is a key proposal in the Scottish Government's "Best Start, Bright Futures—Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026". In the context of the current budget pressures, it is unclear what progress has been made so far and what the role of employability programmes is in the current tight job market.

I welcome our witnesses. David Stewart, regional development manager at Fedcap Scotland, and Philip Whyte, director of the Institute for Public Policy Research Scotland, join us in the room. Marion Davis, director of policy, communication and strategy at One Parent Families Scotland, and Sarah McCulley, service manager for employment and training at Falkirk Council, who is representing the Scottish Local Authorities Economic Development Group, join us remotely.

As with the previous panel, before speaking, witnesses should wait until I—or the member who is asking the question—say their name to allow our broadcasting colleagues a few seconds to turn on their microphone. Anyone who wishes to come in on a question can indicate that by typing R in the dialogue box in BlueJeans. Please do not feel that you have to answer every question.

I invite members to ask questions in turn, as agreed in our pre-briefing.

**Miles Briggs:** I thank the witnesses for joining us today. I will start with a couple of questions about the "Best Start, Bright Futures" programme, which aims to move up to 10,000 parents into sustained employment and increase the wages of up to 3,000 parents who are already in employment. How much of that could be achieved through the employability programmes that are currently being delivered? Can you highlight to the committee anything specific that needs to change in that area? I am happy to bring in David Stewart and Philip Whyte first, before bringing in the witnesses who are joining us online.

10:15

**David Stewart (Fedcap Scotland):** Thank you for the invitation to talk to the committee today. I am delighted to be here, for personal and professional reasons. Personally, I have been in the sector for about 20 years, I have a long-term health condition and I am the very proud father of a seven-year-old daughter who absolutely tells me what to do every day. I experienced most of my educational and professional development as a mature adult and a parent, so a lot of what has already been spoken about today resonates with me.

Professionally, I speak for Fedcap Scotland, which is a not-for-profit organisation that is passionate about this area and about supporting as many people as possible. We work with the Scottish Government, local third sector partners and local authorities to co-design local solutions to national problems. Thank you for the opportunity to talk about that.

On your question, a lot depends on structures. Employability provision has a huge part to play,



because employment has historically been the best route out of poverty, and it still is, if the person has the right job with the right structure. People are experiencing many barriers and disadvantages and a lot of inequality just now, so we need to provide the right support.

Philip Whyte and I had a quick chat before we came in. Both of our organisations talk a lot about scalability. We are a national provider with a local presence, and we pride ourselves on being able to deliver at scale. A quarter of a million children are living in poverty in Scotland, so we need a big investment to address that. In a previous role, I worked for the Scottish Union of Supported Employment on reducing the disability employment gap and trying to move 160,000 disabled people into work. Such work cannot be done at a small scale or in a short time. We must collaborate with the Scottish Government and local partners to provide what people need, when they need it and for as long as they need it.

**Philip Whyte (Institute for Public Policy Research Scotland):** I concur with David Stewart. Ultimately, as he said, 250,000 children are living in poverty. To date, social security has done the heavy lifting, particularly through the Scottish child payment, in trying to reach the upcoming interim targets. That is right and proper, but if we want social security to be the only thing that does the heavy lifting to get us to the 10 per cent target by 2030, we need significant investment, the like of which has never been seen in Scotland.

Employability and childcare, which relates to the other half of the committee's inquiry, are incredibly important. It is not just about getting people into work. It is important to remember that there are stereotypes around poverty. Two thirds of the children living in poverty are in households where at least one person is in work, so this is not just about getting people into work. We often find that people who are in work are caught up in structural inequalities, not least low pay.

Employability must play a role, but David Stewart hit the nail on the head: scale is the issue. I am happy to go into this in more detail, but the core point made by the numbers in our submission is that, at the moment, there is a massive chasm between the overall number of people being reached by current employability programmes and those who are supported into work. That chasm alone is big enough, but the number of parents being reached by those programmes and supported into work is tiny in comparison with the aims and ambitions that the Government has set itself, so something has to give. As David Stewart rightly said, this is about scaling up.

**Sarah McCulley (Scottish Local Authorities Economic Development):** Thank you for having me here today. I am from Falkirk Council, but I am

representing local authorities across Scotland that co-ordinate or deliver employability provision through place-based approaches.

I echo what has been said on the question of scale. We are seeing increased investment this year in the delivery of parental employment support programmes across the country. The figures, reach and scale suggested are achievable, but partnership is key. There needs to be a holistic approach to ensure that the reach is achieved and that services are accessible to the widest group of parents in our local areas.

That is all about overcoming, or at least alleviating, some of the barriers that parents face. That includes addressing financial debt and providing childcare, affordable transport, sector-based training and fair, sustainable employment opportunities. To do that, we need to work in partnership and have collaborative and holistic approaches to service design and delivery.

It is not just about employability and jobs; it is about supporting parents to alleviate their real and perceived anxieties about a variety of challenges that they face personally and professionally to ensure that they get the right advice and guidance about the family income that could be achieved through employability. There is a perception that employability and increasing hours will make the family income greater, but that is sometimes a myth. Sometimes, working part time is the best option for parents and gives a much better outcome in relation to work-life balance.

A number of elements have to come together if we want to address the issue, and many of us are already putting in place the foundations to do so.

**Marion Davis (One Parent Families Scotland):** Thanks for the invitation to come along virtually. One Parent Families Scotland is an organisation for single parents across Scotland. We have family services in six local authority areas and in two of the pathfinder areas, which are part of the child poverty delivery plan. We have a range of national advice and support services through our freephone helpline and single-parent forum, and we provide a lot of web-based self-help, so we reach a lot of single parents. Last year, we worked with, I think, more than 8,000 parents, children and young people. We did that through specialist crisis interventions, single-parent tailored benefits and money advice family support—many of the things that Sarah McCulley mentioned—as well as through health and wellbeing and employability programmes.

I will pick up on what a previous speaker said. The aim of supporting so many parents into sustained employment can be achieved only through a range of interconnected policy interventions, not just employability. Employability

is only one part of what is needed. I know that the committee has considered childcare. We provided a submission on that, too. Childcare must be not only high quality and affordable but flexible to meet the needs of the labour market.

To achieve greater success for parents, particularly single parents, there needs to be more tailored employability provision, particularly for parents in priority families in the child poverty delivery plan.

We support the person-centred approach of the no one left behind strategy. It has been a really positive development on what went before. Although that is important, in addition, we need to recognise that some of the families that we work with face systemic barriers and discrimination. To challenge those, there should be more group-based programmes—there are some fantastic ones—and, as has been mentioned, we need to integrate family support and financial inclusion. Peer support—single parents supporting one another—is important in what we do.

In particular, we need to increase the wages of single parents who are already in employment. That is incredibly challenging. Local authority and other public sector employers probably offer the best opportunity for progression in that regard through in-work training.

We would like to see more ILM programmes—programmes that provide paid employment while people are being trained in the job. There have been ILM programmes in the past; I am not sure whether they are on-going. For example, the no one left behind strategy included an ILM programme for the financial years 2021 to 2023. We would like to see more of that, particularly in relation to childcare, to support single parents to move into that area of employment. I am sure that we will talk about a lot of those issues later.

**Miles Briggs:** That is very helpful. Thanks, Marion.

When I visited Fedcap, I was really impressed to see some of the work coaching that you are doing in Livingston. One of the conversations that we had was about sustaining people once they are in work rather than just matching them with a job and thinking, “Job done.” Do you want to add anything about other policy areas that can help to achieve that, especially given the number of people who get into employment but then find that the job fails and they are back to square 1. Has there been any learning on that?

**David Stewart:** Thanks for taking the time to come to see us. We would like to extend the offer to the whole committee to come to see what we do.

You are absolutely right that the issue is not just about getting people into work. There is a real concern about that. Before working on fair start Scotland, I worked closely with Sarah McCulley. The longest employability provisions were probably about 20 weeks, and we did very well on that. However, given what people are experiencing now, we need that longer-term provision. Twelve months of pre-employment support is fantastic, and then, once somebody gets work, they need 12 months of in-work support. That is crucial.

We have been talking about childcare and other barriers. Giving parents access to training in order to progress in work is important, but that must be at a time when they can do it. As an organisation, we have invested more than £12 million in Scotland, which demonstrates how committed we are to being here. Part of that commitment is our digital platform, the Fedcap hub, which all participants in the programme and all partners have access to. That allows parents who are in work to access training and development at a time that suits them, and we can track when they use it: the most popular times are between 7 o'clock at night and 2 o'clock in the morning. That allows people to go through the training at a time that suits them, based on their interests, at a pace that suits them and under no pressure.

Therefore, we provide that in-work support. The other day, I was speaking to a previous participant—a parent—who said that, before getting work, she did not feel as though she was a role model to her children. She moved into work and is now excelling and is aware of her amazing transferable skills. She has become one of the top salespeople in her company in the United Kingdom. She said that the in-work support was so valuable, and she is annoyed that her year has now come to an end.

I asked her about the difference between where she was and where she is now, and she said, “I now say no to my son less.” That is amazing—it is so simple, but it is amazing. Previously, she watched other children being able to do things and get things, and now she is able to say yes. She has purchased a 12-month pass to Edinburgh zoo, which sounds silly, but she now has the ability to plan and do things like that. She said that, on benefits, she lived from day to day, but she now has something that she knows she can do with her son. That is so important.

On other policy areas, we are keen to bring health, employability, poverty, disability—all these policy issues—together. I think that One Parent Families Scotland mentioned a lot about intersectionality in its submission, and we are passionate about that. We can no longer have commissioning for parents, poverty, disability and ethnic minority groups.

We are supporting 200 Ukrainians in Scotland. What about a Ukrainian woman who comes here from an ethnic minority community or somebody from Scotland who is from an ethnic minority community who is also a lone parent with a health condition and is looking for work? What programme do you advise her to go on? How can you say to her, "Forget that inequality and forget that disadvantage. We'll focus on this just now"? It just does not work like that.

We need more flexible eligibility criteria. We would like to change the no-wrong-door approach to the right-door approach. It does not matter what you need or when you need it; you can get it here, and as Sarah McCulley was saying, we can pull partners in to you rather than send you out to other people. We would be delighted to work with the Scottish Government to design something that looked like that.

10:30

**Sarah McCulley:** To come back to your original point about sustainable employment and job opportunities, the policy areas that are circulating at the moment, such as NSET and things like lifelong learning, correlate with what we are trying to do within the child poverty funding and parent employability support programmes to build those skills with people when they are in employment. We also work with a number of employers on business support. We are looking at workforce development, which ties in nicely with the work that we then do to upskill individuals to give them real in-work progression opportunities and careers rather than just jobs, while also supporting the employers and sustainable business. We are doing all that, and it lines up with NSET.

On Marion Davis's point, childcare continues to be a real challenge. Although it is less of a challenge across the central belt, the issues that rural communities face mean that childcare is an on-going challenge there. There is a lot of innovative practice out there that we could take learning from, but best start, strategic early learning and the school-age childcare plan policy areas will be key in aligning with the ambitions of employability.

The other policy area that is key for sustainable jobs is the fair work strategy. There are a lot of big ambitions in that strategy, some of which will be relatively easy to achieve over a short period of time. However, some of them will have unintended consequences for third sector and private sector organisations. We need to take a wee bit of time to realise some of that impact and support those businesses through the fair work strategy and bring them along with us, not just dictate what we see as being key areas for fair work to be successful in.

**Miles Briggs:** Thank you for that. Perhaps you could write to the committee with some more detail about those challenges so that we can capture that information. That would be helpful.

**Marion Davis:** I just want to add to the points that have been made, and particularly to pick up on what Philip Whyte said earlier. Employment ends will not be achieved without policies that help to tackle the crisis that many low-income parents are facing, especially single parents. One Parent Families Scotland has a model through which we offer support for parents who are facing serious and difficult issues that might result in a crisis. They are unable to buy food so we have to get them to a food bank and help them to pay for gas and electricity. They are often in deep debt. We need to sort out as much of that as we can before those people engage in employability work. There is a bit before employability that we need to fund and resource.

The point that I would like to make is that, if you are in a crisis, and we have all been through a lot of crises lately, taking the path to employment, training or education seems more like climbing a mountain than moving along an employability pipeline. We have seen substantial progress in reducing child poverty, in particular, but recent statistics show that it is not enough to meet the statutory child poverty targets. That is linked to employability. If you are in poverty and you are stressed, it is very difficult to even think about looking for a job. Child poverty will be tackled only if parents, especially single parents, get a boost to their income through social security and if they have access to early years and school-age childcare that is not only affordable but flexible.

Housing is also a key issue. We hope that the Government will use every tool at its disposal to drive a transformation of the labour market. We want all parents to have access to decent family-friendly employment—which they do not have at the moment—especially through public procurement, which is an option that we could use more.

I echo what Philip Whyte said about the Scottish child payment. That has been a real game changer. It has had a huge role in supporting hard-up families. However, it is losing value in real terms day by day. We would like the First Minister to act as soon as possible to increase that payment to £30. In fact, analysis by IPPR shows that it needs to increase to £40 if we are to meet the child poverty targets.

Although we are talking about employability to support parents out of poverty, we still need to tackle the poverty that they face, so that they will move into employability programmes, then into training, education and employment.

**James Dornan:** Given the change to the funding allocations last year due to the emergency budget down in Westminster, will you expand on the difference that that made to the plans to expand employability support for parents? What knock-on effect did that have? I will start with David Stewart and then ask Philip Whyte to come in.

**David Stewart:** Bizarrely, I had thought that that question was probably not for me.

Clearly, I cannot talk about budgets for local authorities, but I can speak overall. I am very fortunate in my job that I cover Scotland, so I have met about 80 per cent of local employability partnerships in local authorities in the past year, and I have engaged with 500 people across the different local authorities to get an idea of what they face. For me, at the moment, there is no winner in this. The lateness of and reduction in funding have had a knock-on effect for everyone.

Some amazing people work in local authorities, who are as passionate about addressing those issues as all of us in the third sector are about delivering on them. People in local authorities have experienced that situation; then, local providers have done so. Friends of mine who worked for other organisations that deliver fantastic work to people are now themselves unemployed because there is no funding to keep them on.

A knock-on effect is that, when the funding comes in, some of the organisations can no longer apply for it, because they do not have the resource to do so—and they cannot employ people for six or seven months, so we are losing good people from the sector.

Ultimately, the people who are most impacted are those we are trying to support—those we want to support. There is a real space for us, as a national organisation, to work with the right partners in smaller organisations to create solutions and maybe help and support them into a space that they could not normally get to, benefiting from the expertise that we have.

There have been a lot of challenges. Maybe other witnesses will add to that.

**James Dornan:** Thanks for that. See, you thought that you had nothing to say on it, but you did remarkably well.

**Philip Whyte:** There are a few things to unpack. Undoubtedly, the way in which the current fiscal framework works—the fact that we are still very dependent on UK Government spending decisions—does not help.

Last year, there was the bizarre situation in advance of the emergency budget review, in which, initially, the tax cuts that were proposed

under Liz Truss were going to result in additional money for the Scottish Government, given the way in which the fiscal framework works. When those were reversed, less than a month later, that money disappeared. A lot is at play.

However, fundamentally, to look at the medium-term financial strategy that was published a couple of weeks ago, the core point is that, at the minute, spending plans over the life of this Parliament outstrip the expected funding. Ultimately, politics is about choices. That is why, despite strong recognition of the circumstances last year and the difficult decisions that needed to be taken in-year—one of the first times that that had been done publicly and openly, which is to be respected and commended—we cannot escape the fact that employability experienced some of the most significant real cash cuts. While, for lots of other areas, in-year cuts involved deferred income and staffing changes that were not going to come to fruition, the area of employability saw a genuine cash cut—quite a significant one. It is understandable, therefore, that the budget review had to be undertaken, but it is inescapable that the Government's justification at the time was that the cuts would mean that, although the funding was being taken away, no existing activity would be impacted, and that it was simply not taking forward planned expansion. That belied the ultimate point, which is that that planned expansion is what is desperately required.

There have been knock-on impacts because that happened in-year. The parental transition fund is now delayed by at least a year from when it was meant to be brought in. Bits of expansion under “Best Start, Bright Futures” have also been delayed, and that will have a knock-on impact on the rest of the parliamentary session unless work is done to catch up.

It is good that that money is being restored, and increased further, in 2023-24, but if we go back to the start and compare the current number of people who are being supported against the ambitions that the Government has set, it is not enough to simply reverse and add a little bit on to the in-year cuts. Something has to go much further if we are to achieve those ambitions during this parliamentary session.

**James Dornan:** Philip, you are spot on in what you said, but does that also show the futility of the funding mechanism? People are waiting until the last minute. The Scottish Government is also waiting until the last minute to know exactly what it can pass on to ensure that the programmes are funded. The whole thing should be streamlined from Westminster all the way down to the level that we are talking about.

**Philip Whyte:** Absolutely. I am not going to disagree. There are still a huge number of issues

to work through in relation to the fiscal framework review, but that is for a whole different committee, and we could spend hours talking about the way that the fiscal framework currently works.

I appreciate the reasons why the emergency budget review had to be undertaken, but, ultimately, the point is that we know what expected funding looks like across the rest of the parliamentary session, and we know that it is less than what is in the spending plans that the Scottish Government has made. If we go back to the start of the parliamentary sessions, and back to the very first programme for government of the Parliament, we can see that it will be tight to deliver those plans.

Politics is about choices. The fiscal framework does not help in managing those budget decisions, but, if we are serious about meeting the ambitions that have been set in “Best Start, Bright Futures”, that will require some further difficult decisions about where we spend our money.

**Sarah McCulley:** I do not want to repeat anything that has already been said, but we need to remember that, although employability support is funded quite heavily by the Scottish Government through the no one left behind policy, it is also funded by local authorities through their core budgets, and through other external funding—such as European funding, UK Government funding and funding from a variety of other areas. Therefore, the double challenge is that, as we know, local authorities are trying to make significant internal savings and employability is not a statutory service, so there is the challenge of it potentially being seen as an area that could take some significant cuts with minimal impact. We need to bear that in mind.

On a more positive note, investment in parents has been significantly increased this year. Local authorities and local employability partnerships were aware that that might be the case, so they have put a lot of work into building the foundations of where key development is required, in what priority geographies and with what priority groups. That has been done by utilising local data to ensure that the increased investment is targeted in the most effective way.

On the point that was made a moment ago, not knowing our funding allocation is a significant challenge. We are not talking about just finding out at the last minute; this year, we did not receive grant offer letters until June, so we were already a quarter into our delivery year before we knew what we had to spend and what the parameters were around the provision that we wanted to deliver. Not only does our spend need to be committed, it needs to be out the door by the end of the year. That means running at a significant pace. However, at least communications prior to that

gave us the opportunity to work with wider partners about what we could start to put in a place and develop. That meant that there was a ready-made plan as soon as we had the green light on grant offer letters.

The positive thing is that we are there now, and we are moving forward at pace to increase the offer to parents at local level.

**James Dornan:** Thank you.

I have one final question. Do witnesses have any insights on progress with the £15 million transitions fund?

10:45

**Philip Whyte:** As I understand it, that has been delayed since “Best Start, Bright Futures” was published, which is more than a year ago now. Ostensibly, some of the reasons for that are budgetary pressures. The Government has also experienced difficulties in working with the UK Government to sort out what it was planning to do with the fund and, in turn, the impacts on reserved benefits. To consider it more widely, it is delayed, which is disappointing, particularly given what was announced by the UKG on childcare reforms, and it potentially shifts what you want to spend the budget on.

Going back to one of the questions that Miles Briggs asked, I note that this is where the £15 million fund becomes incredibly important. The original intention was that a lot of it would be dedicated to childcare—in particular, the up-front costs of childcare. As lots of other witnesses have spoken about, what is required is a much wider and more holistic offer to parents. That is the trick that we are missing. You could spend the entire £15 million just addressing childcare challenges and still leave a big black hole. What we do not quite have is recognition that there are so many issues that parents face—not only childcare costs but transport costs for getting to childcare, housing costs, costs for clothes for interviews and things that people do during the day.

Sorry—that answer took it a bit wider than you asked for. The short version is that the transitions fund has been delayed by at least a year and we need progress on it quite quickly.

**Sarah McCulley:** I asked about that this morning, and I believe that the first meeting between the Scottish Government and local government took place this week. I reiterate what has been said already: they were looking at the information and advice that had been received from His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the DWP in relation to the impact on benefits when using that fund. That is all the information that I have.

**Marion Davis:** We talked to Scottish Government officials about the parent transition fund a couple of years ago. Obviously, the aim is to tackle the financial barriers that parents face in entering the labour market, and, as Philip Whyte has said, the fund is particularly focused on up-front childcare costs. The UK Government has made some policy changes on that, although it will not help all parents with those costs. I imagine that that has changed the focus of the fund. We were never keen on that, anyway.

As Philip Whyte said, there are a lot of areas around childcare that are very costly. We have suggested the introduction of a job start payment that is similar to the new payment that helps young people with the costs associated with the transition to paid work. For young people, the job start payment is something like £230, and it is £404 for a young person with children. We thought that that was an opportunity to follow the principle of a cash-first approach whereby parents could use the cash for the areas in which they needed it. It could be used for travel to work, clothes or something else—they would make the decision.

**James Dornan:** Thank you, all, and thanks, convener.

**The Convener:** I am now going to pass over to Marie McNair before I bring in Jeremy Balfour.

**Marie McNair:** Good morning, panellists. The Scottish Government has a commitment to an all-age guarantee of support for those who are most disadvantaged in the labour market, focused on priority groups. One Parent Families Scotland has made a similar suggestion in its submission. What discussions on the issue has One Parent Families Scotland had with the Scottish Government?

**Marion Davis:** We have not yet had any discussions on that point. Our chief exec is on the child poverty board, and I highlighted to her that it might be of interest to the board. The all-age guarantee would build on the principle of the young persons guarantee, which is for anyone between the ages of 16 and 24, but it would focus on the priority groups. We think that it would be really positive, because, although the child poverty strategy has been an advance, we feel that more focus should be put on the parents who head up the priority groups in the child poverty strategy. We would like to see something really practical happen for those people, such as parents and carers, who are disadvantaged in the labour market and who have been out of work for a while. As far as I am aware, that work would involve SDS.

Access to support, and particularly to training and education, is very challenging for single parents. We have been involved in some interesting research with the University of the

West of Scotland and Oxfam. Although the report is not produced yet, it highlights the issues and challenges for single parents, particularly those who are in higher education. Child poverty is obviously inseparable from parent poverty, but the research shows that, although child poverty is a national priority with targets to cut it, the current policies do not address the educational needs of single parents—and single mothers in particular—in higher education.

For example, the commission on widening access, which is important because it supports those people who want access but might not yet have recognised qualifications, was established to promote access to higher education for disadvantaged groups, but those groups do not include single parent students, who are not mentioned in the report on it. The Oxfam report shows that Universities Scotland does not address the needs of that student group either. Therefore, a fair bit of work needs to be done on that proposal.

It is real challenge, too, to support single parents to access lifelong learning. Some of that is because of the UK benefits system's conditionality, which we might look at later.

**Marie McNair:** Conditionality in universal credit is very controversial. The UK Government suggests that it helps people to get into work and increase their earnings. Is there any evidence to suggest that the sanctions regime is having that effect? What alternatives should the UK Government and the Scottish Government consider in order to support people into employment? I put that question to Marion Davis.

**Marion Davis:** That is a huge issue for us. Conditionality and benefit sanctions are something on which we have done research, lobbied and tried to influence policy. The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a tightening-up of conditionality for single parents, and the UK Government has changed the earnings threshold from 15 to 18 hours at the national minimum wage, which means that anyone working below those hours will be subject to stricter work conditions, with the requirement to look for more work or increase their wage. Although single parents would have had limited or no work search requirements below that threshold in the past, they will now be subject to intensive work search requirements and the threat of sanctions.

We are seeing some of that coming through in our service in Glasgow, which is one of the pilot areas. The threat of sanctions changes behaviour and can impact on sustainable employment. A work-first approach that requires single parents to move into work means that they move into the wrong job, without the right support or childcare, and things fall apart.

Sustaining many single parents in work is really challenging, and we think that that intensifies poverty. We wish that the UK Government would move away from its very much work-first approach, which is not the right one for single parents. We know from our work and research that it disproportionately affects vulnerable single parents. If they miss an appointment, they get sanctioned and we end up having to take them to food banks because they have had their benefits cut. That has a huge impact on employability and adds to the crisis that families face, which prevents them from moving on and achieving what they want to achieve.

**Marie McNair:** That is absolutely horrific. Does anyone else want to come in?

**Philip Whyte:** I have two very quick points to make.

On the issue of priority groups, I reiterate a point that many witnesses made this time last year in response to “Best Start, Bright Futures”. There is still a risk that policy gets designed in a catch-all way or is viewed after the fact. Policies that are intended to catch everyone will be evaluated or looked at after the fact to see, for example, how many lone parents were affected. Instead, the priority groups should be the lens through which we design policies. That is a really important shift. If we really want to improve opportunities for people in those groups, policy making should start by ensuring that policies target those groups instead of just looking at those groups after the fact, as we often do.

Regarding conditionality, we have collected lots of UK-wide evidence, which I am happy to share with the committee, that suggests that the regime is still incredibly punitive rather than supportive. That ratchets up underemployment, because people are quite often directed to, and take, low-quality jobs. The Scottish Government is absolutely right in rejecting that model, but there is a risk of taking that too far and ending up with a passive cash transfer that does not bring in the wider support that people need.

For example, you could completely reject conditionality within something such as the Scottish child payment while also ensuring that the ready-made group of people there can benefit from wider support. There is no reason why the Scottish child payment should not come with signposting or passporting people to employability services, to the childcare that they might be eligible for, or to wider benefits. There has been a big debate about automatically passporting people from the best start grant to the Scottish child payment or vice versa. That is incredibly important, but I do not think that we have yet nailed passporting and signposting to the wider services that people can benefit from.

We can reject conditionality, because there is lots of evidence that says that it does not work and is harmful—in some cases incredibly harmful—but that does not mean that we should not use the social security system to enable people to reach wider services and support.

**David Stewart:** To put the idea of priority groups into context, we spoke about the “no one left behind” approach. Figures in our documents suggest that almost 6,000 parents, which is 22 per cent of the target group, are moving into work. Fair start is reaching 11,000 parents, of whom 30 per cent got jobs and 18 per cent sustained them. Our own delivery at Fedcap is getting 30 per cent of parents into work, of whom 26 per cent sustain employment. So, the national averages are good, but they are not good enough and more can be done. We need more focus on what parents need and how they can engage.

We also said that two thirds of children who live in poverty have a parent who is in work. That means that one third of children—more than 80,000—do not have a parent who is in work. That shows the scale of the task, because we need to provide for everyone.

**Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** I will develop that theme slightly further. I am interested in how the approach to that client group is different from the support given to those who are unemployed or economically inactive. Do we need different approaches? I would be happy for anyone to jump in and answer that.

11:00

**David Stewart:** That is a great question. We are talking about how the approach differs, but there are also some similarities. We talk about no one left behind, but we have identified that, just now, 786,000 people in Scotland are economically inactive. We talk about unemployment being at a record low and there being more jobs than people who are looking for work and more people in work, which sounds really positive, but nearly 800,000 people are economically inactive. Some of them are parents or students and 30 per cent of them have health conditions, but the only data we get is that 80 per cent of them are not looking for work. Up until this point, the attitude has been, “Oh well, if they’re not looking for work, we don’t need to worry about them,” but we need to understand why. Rather than taking a different approach, we are in the process of creating an innovative model for the pre-pre-employment stage. It is not about employment—it is about whatever people need and what matters to them just now, which can be anything.

The other week, I was in a forum about the national performance framework. We are trying to

create a national, inspirational framework that is also aspirational, but the challenge is that, for some people who are looking at that, the gap is too big, because they are so far away from it. If we go in and start talking about employability or progression too soon, they will just retract. We need a wraparound support service that brings in what people need to get them to a stage where they might be able to consider talking. That is the same for parents.

At Fedcap, we are also trying to look at a model that is not just based on a programme or contract, in which people come in and do so many weeks and that is them done. As a not-for-profit organisation, we are looking to reinvest and create almost a lifetime membership for people who come on our programmes. We realise that things change on a day-to-day basis. Instead of people needing to go back to the beginning, they can keep engaging and getting access to support so that, even when they progress, they still have that on-going support that will help them to get to where they want to go, no matter what happens.

What needs to change is eligibility. We have supported 3,000 people in Scotland who were economically inactive prior to coming on our programme. Through that, we have supported around 1,500 of those people—52 per cent—into work within 12 weeks, which is incredible. People talk about things such as the cost of transport and their health being barriers. Some people in the under-25 age group said that they were attracted to the programme because they wanted somebody to talk to. That tells us about the situation and the barriers that we are trying to address.

Of those 3,000 people, 40 per cent were not eligible for the programme. Can you imagine somebody with multiple barriers building up the confidence to apply? Think of a parent, with everything that they are experiencing just now, finding somewhere and reaching out to an organisation and being told, “Sorry—this isn’t for you. We need to find you something else.” The programme is not suitable because they are not looking for full-time work. We need an approach that does not involve that assessment, so that, if people come to us because they need our service, we can say, “We’re here and we’ll support you.” Then we can move them on to the existing programmes.

**Sarah McCulley:** The local employability partnerships and local authorities have been attempting to engage and support in-work parents, in particular, since the end of 2019. Lessons have certainly been learned with regard to our perception of the parents’ and employers’ response to the support that is available. There was a perception that parents would be really

keen to engage, as would employers, but that was not necessarily the case. Given that we had the pandemic and lockdown in the middle of that, we are a bit further behind than we would like to be with supporting those parents and employers, but continuous improvement has certainly been put in place with regard to how we engage with those parents and what we need to do to adapt to their needs.

That involves simple things. For example, pre-employment parents tend to have a bit more flexibility about their engagement with support staff and training. For parents who are working and have caring responsibilities for children, we need to think about flexibility in when we provide those support services. That needs to be outwith the normal 9-to-5, Monday-to-Friday office hours. We need to look, for example, at the difference between evening provision and the online provision that parents can undertake, potentially, once they have put their kids down at night. A variety of small tweaks and learning has already been established across the country when it comes to the motivation of parents who are in work and to trying to support them.

One of the biggest hooks for those parents—is it similar for the pre-employment parents—is the financial advice that they can gain. We need to provide the carrot that is really good financial advice to make sure that parents who are in work receive all the benefits that they are entitled to and that they get a robust better-off-in-work calculation so that they can consider the best option for them that will lead to a real-terms increase in their household income. We should not just make the assumption that increased hours will increase their income, because a lot is lost as a result of that. That motivating factor seems to be similar across both groups.

**The Convener:** Before I bring in Marion Davis, I note that we are running out of time and two members would still like to ask questions. I ask the panel, if possible, to be more succinct and concise in their responses. Thank you.

**Marion Davis:** I very much agree with what Sarah McCulley said and with the local authority partnership approach. However, we would argue strongly that the approach to working with single parents is very different. Most single parents are women and many of the parents that we work with have had really challenging experiences. Many have split from a partner after domestic abuse, including financial abuse. Through our services, we bring parents together as well as providing one-to-one employability support. Through that, parents support each other. That is a crucial ingredient. We also use that as a model to co-produce our services with parents. We involve parents in the services that we deliver and we



have continual feedback from them on how we are doing.

I know that you want me to be succinct, convener, but I also want to say that it is important to recognise that in-work statistics are not the end result. This whole thing is about how employment can help to reduce child poverty in the target groups of the child poverty delivery plan. The latest stats show that 26 per cent of the children of single parents who are in full-time work are still in poverty. That compares with 7 per cent of the children of two-parent families. That is a good piece of evidence to show that, even when single parents are in full-time work, it is harder for them to lift their family out of poverty. They need support beyond the employability interventions that we have talked about.

In some research that we did recently, one in five of the parents in paid work said that they find it really hard to afford food, that they can no longer afford it, sometimes, and that they are eating their children's leftovers. More than half said the same about electricity and travel. One parent said:

"I have had to leave a job as I could no longer afford the petrol costs."

Another said:

"I use my car for work so because of rising costs I've had to stop activities".

That parent has stopped activities with their children because they need to pay for petrol. Someone else said that she cannot afford to get the bus so she walks six to 10 miles a day, including to get the cheapest food.

It is not about having just any job. It is about having a job that is well paid and sustainable.

**Jeremy Balfour:** Convener, I am conscious of the time. I am happy to leave it there so that we can move on to the next area.

**The Convener:** Thanks, Jeremy. The next question will be from Katy Clark.

**Katy Clark:** I will pick up a point that Marion Davis made. Does the increased focus on parents affect the scale of provision for other groups, such as young people and disabled people, or the way that they are treated?

**David Stewart:** I will maybe come at that question from a different angle. We want to support everyone, and ultimately, with the shift in funding and the various layers, I think that we will. However, I was at a local authority the other day and its budget allocation for parental employment was between £2 million and £3 million, with between £300,000 and £500,000 for the no one left behind scheme. That does not make sense. Maybe there is an opportunity for local authorities—if this is being devolved—to have the

money to deliver what they need in their areas, rather than it being predetermined which groups the money will go to.

For us, the only issue is that we want to support everyone, whatever stage they are at, to get to wherever they want to go. We do not want to make any assumptions about that. A mindset change is required, because it is not about a provider, an organisation or an employer saying, "We'll welcome anybody when they come to us." It is about how we can go out, be proactive and reach people to make sure that they are aware of what is out there and what help they can get.

**Katy Clark:** I suppose that what I am asking is whether services are expanding or whether resources are just shifting. Sarah, do you want to comment on that?

**Sarah McCulley:** I am happy to comment. We need to be mindful of the work that goes into employability planning in local authority areas. The planning uses local data, and we have local priorities that are linked to community planning partnership plans, child poverty plans and economic strategies at the local level, so it is much broader than just the funding that comes through the no one left behind scheme. As I mentioned, there is other investment in the area around employability. In the Forth Valley area, in particular, fair start Scotland is run by the local authorities, which means that we can align and integrate services much better. There is also the UK shared prosperity fund given the end of European funding.

There will be an impact because, as David Stewart suggested, if the funding that is targeted to a particular area increases significantly, we have to ramp up our resource and capacity to ensure that we are meeting the profiles of what is expected of us in the area. However, at the local level, we tend to look at the planning as a whole. We look at the other priority areas, such as those that you mentioned—disabled people, young people and suchlike—and we then look at the other provision that is available. In that way, we can tailor, mould and move things to ensure that the priority groups that we have determined at a local level are still serviced through whatever funding, provision and programmes are available at the local level. However, that differs quite significantly between local authority areas.

**Katy Clark:** I will move on to my final question. To what extent are parents now the central focus of the growth in employability activity? Philip, that might be a suitable question for the IPPR.

**Philip Whyte:** Yes. I am going to say something that I do not want to be taken as a flippant remark. Fair start Scotland was established in 2018, just after the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 and in

the year when the first tackling child poverty delivery plan was published. The two things came into existence at the same time but, despite that, all the evidence shows that parents have not been a focus. Since fair start Scotland was established, just a fifth of starts on the programme have been parents. As I said, I am not being flippant and saying, “No, of course they’ve not been a focus.” However, what we are seeing is that, despite the fact that the first tackling child poverty delivery plan also recognised that employability was key, that has not fed through into policy and delivery on employability.

On where the focus is now, if we look at how many people fair start Scotland has supported since 2018, when it was introduced, and compare that with the numbers that the Scottish Government has put into the best start, bright futures programme, we can see that the numbers that the Government wants to reach far outstrip the numbers that it has reached. However, that does not have to mean a shift in resources or focus from other parents. Sarah McCulley articulated really well that, particularly with the no one left behind approach at a local level, local employability partnerships have a keen focus on who in their area needs support. However, at a national level, that needs to come with additional funding and resources, so that it is possible to follow through on the policy priority of meeting our child poverty targets and, as part of that, helping more parents into work and increasing their earnings in work.

I hope that it does not have to be a zero-sum game or a case of one or the other, but focus on resources is absolutely required for us to be able to deliver on that policy.

11:15

**The Convener:** Thank you. I will now bring in Paul O’Kane with the last of our questions.

**Paul O’Kane:** I am particularly interested in the relationships and how we support employers. In its submission, the IPPR talks about the Government using soft power to try to encourage employers to really play their part. I suppose that there will be good, tangible examples. I am keen to understand from David Stewart how Fedcap engages employers in that.

**David Stewart:** As I mentioned at the start, I am passionate about that, as I am sure everyone in the room is. Fedcap is a partner of the Scottish Government-funded public social partnership. We fully believe that we can support people, upskill them and give them dreams and aspirations, but, if we do not have employers that are able to support those individuals and are confident enough in

supporting them or knowledgeable enough about how to support them, the job will not work.

We have our own employer solutions team that goes out and finds employers that are recruiting and supports them to support people with multiple barriers, whether they have a disability, are lone parents or need flexible working arrangements. To date, we have worked with 5,000 unique employers. We can deliver a range of things for them, such as helping them to achieve disability-confident status in development. However, the biggest point is that it is not about putting people forward for just any job. It needs to be the right job at the right time for the individual. They also need to be the right person for the employer. Otherwise, employers will stop coming to us.

We have multiple relationships, but I will mention just one. An organisation in Fife said, “We’re really good at doing tech but we’re really bad at recruiting. Now, we just come to Fedcap and it works.” When a parent comes on to our programme, they have a dedicated adviser, dedicated health and wellbeing support and in-work support, and our employer solutions team does the matching. That team will understand the individual’s skills and wants and the employer’s needs and wants and, to ensure sustainability, it will bring them together only when it is right for both parties. That relationship with employers is crucial.

**Paul O’Kane:** I wonder whether I can ask Philip Whyte about the IPPR submission—

**The Convener:** I believe that Marion Davis and Sarah McCulley want to comment.

**Paul O’Kane:** Of course.

**Marion Davis:** Employers are a crucial part of the jigsaw. In the past, we had a great programme with Marks & Spencer as part of a pathway approach. We supported parents to engage with Marks & Spencer. They did work experience there and had access to job vacancies as they came up.

Partnership approaches with big employers are good. Of course, there are some really big employers in the public sector as well, such as the NHS. There is a programme as part of the no one left behind approach that engages with the NHS, but we could do that on a larger scale. In the contracts that are given out to the public sector, there could be more of a focus on supporting parents in the target groups. As Philip Whyte said, we should actively key in on those family groups to proactively encourage recruitment of those parents.

**Sarah McCulley:** I will talk about the variety of approaches, if that is okay. I will try to be concise. Our local employability partnership has a variety of partners who have direct employer engagement—

we have Developing the Young Workforce, SDS, Business Gateway, the chambers of commerce and suchlike. We can all work together to ensure that we are sharing those resources and relationships when we require an in with a particular employer for a particular reason or participant. That is one way of doing it collaboratively and in partnership.

We have the luxury of being part of a local authority, which means that we can work with other local authority services to gain opportunities for participants. They tend to be well paid, with good conditions and ideally placed for parents, and we can broker parents into those opportunities. That is another approach that we take.

We work closely with our colleagues in procurement to make sure that there are community benefit clauses in procurement contracts that are coming up, particularly for big infrastructure projects. We align modern apprenticeships and employment opportunities with parents as well as with young people and other groups.

We are always looking at where we can establish supported employment opportunities for participants, particularly those who have long-term health conditions and disabilities. We look at how we can support businesses that want to give back to the community and support it but need to know how they can do that and how they can best support individuals who might require some additional support in the initial transition into employment.

That shows the variety of ways in which we engage with employers.

**The Convener:** I will bring Paul O'Kane back in, but we have run over our time, so please be as clear and concise as possible.

**Paul O'Kane:** I will direct my question to Philip Whyte, who trailed it earlier. Philip, in your recommendations about soft power, I detected something about carrots and sticks and how the Government encourages employers. Have those recommendations been well received by the Government? Has any progress been made, or do we need to do more to encourage the following of those recommendations?

**Philip Whyte:** We definitely need to do more. We aim to be a fair work nation by 2025, but what that means and what it will look like is not very well defined as yet. To date, a lot of this has come down to the devolution settlement and the power that the Government has. A lot of it is soft power. Essentially, it is marketing and public relations through things such as the business pledge and everything else. We need to look at what role the

tax system and the non-domestic rates system play. We have not quite tackled those things yet.

More than that, there is a role for businesses. Even if we imagine all employment powers being devolved to the Scottish Parliament, to take an all-stick approach is probably not the way to do it. There also needs to be a carrot as part of businesses' environmental, social and corporate governance policies.

To keep my answer concise, I note that we are nowhere near that yet. If we want to be a fair work nation in two years' time, however that is defined, more work will need to be done by the Government and business.

**The Convener:** That concludes our public business today. I thank all our witnesses for taking part and sharing their expertise.

The committee will move into private session to consider the remaining item on the agenda.

11:23

*Meeting continued in private until 11:32.*



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