



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 16 January 2025

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE

2nd Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- *Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)
- Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)
- *Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
- *Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
- *Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)
- *Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

- Miriam Craven (Social Security Scotland)
- Ally MacPhail (Social Security Scotland)
- David Wallace (Social Security Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Diane Barr

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 16 January 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Collette Stevenson): Good morning, and welcome to the second meeting in 2025 of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. We have apologies from Mark Griffin. Before we begin, I want to place on the record the committee's thanks to Katy Clark for her contribution to the committee's work this session and wish her well in her new role.

The first item of business is a decision on whether to take agenda item 3 in private and to consider our forward work programme and a draft report on our post-legislative scrutiny of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 in private at future meetings. Do we agree to take that business in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Social Security Scotland

09:30

The Convener: The next item of business is an evidence session with Social Security Scotland. I very much welcome to the meeting David Wallace, chief executive; Miriam Craven, chief operating officer; and Ally MacPhail, deputy director of organisational strategy and performance—I hope that I got that right, Ally. Before we move to questions, I invite David Wallace to make some opening remarks.

David Wallace (Social Security Scotland): Thank you very much, convener, and thank you for the invitation this morning. I will keep this really brief. As you said, I am accompanied today by Miriam Craven and Ally MacPhail—I think that most members will have met them at some stage previously.

It has been a year since my colleagues last appeared before the committee, when we discussed the progress that we were making, as well as some of the challenges that we were facing at that time. We are now in the sixth year of our operations as an agency and we are delivering 15 benefits, seven of which are unique to the people of Scotland. I am proud that we now support more than 1.4 million people across Scotland. Last year, the agency was responsible for paying out £5.2 billion of benefit support and, importantly for me, £1.9 billion of that was paid out directly by our own hand. The figure has trebled since the previous year and it will continue to grow.

The latest statistics for the disability benefits show that our clients are experiencing quicker processing and call times than previously. Organisations that I have met and spoken to recently have said that they welcome our approach and the improvements that have been made. In October 2024, we successfully launched a pilot of our 15th benefit: the pension-age disability payment. It will become available in 13 more local authority areas in March before opening nationwide across Scotland by April. In November, we completed the national roll-out of the carer support payment.

We continue the transfer of benefits from the Department for Work and Pensions to Social Security Scotland and we remain on track to meet an ambitious timescale of completing a case transfer for everybody to Social Security Scotland by the end of 2025. That includes more than 60,000 disability living allowance awards from DWP moving to the new Scottish adult disability living allowance. I am delighted that our latest client survey results, published in November, show

that 90 per cent of respondents who are in receipt of a payment from Social Security Scotland rated the overall experience as either good or very good.

There is, of course, lots more work to be done, and this year sees the transfer of functions needed to deliver benefits from the Scottish Government's social security programme to Social Security Scotland. I know that we will want to touch on that, as the programme is coming to its planned closure. We also have two new benefits to introduce this year: the pension-age winter heating payment and the carers additional person payment.

I would like to put on record our standing invitation to committee members, new and old: you are very welcome to come and visit our headquarters in Dundee or Glasgow. It is always lovely to have members coming to see the work that we are really proud of and are working hard to deliver for Scotland. Thank you.

The Convener: Thanks very much, and thanks for that invite. Our previous visit was very helpful and informative, particularly when we did the walk-through of the adult disability payment application process. It was helpful to see that visually, so thanks very much for that.

I invite members to ask some questions, starting with Paul O'Kane.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning. David Wallace's introduction was very helpful in setting some of the context. We are interested, first, in the operational challenges of taking on the remaining functions of the current programme. In particular, what progress has been made on reducing the risk score of bringing the project to its closure?

David Wallace: I will speak a little bit about those challenges and then ask Ally MacPhail to come in on the risk scores and mitigations.

Some of the challenges are described as "operational" but they are much wider than simply being operational challenges. It is an incredibly complex and large programme that is being closed down, which has hugely successfully delivered the 15 benefits. I think that the cabinet secretary spoke last week about the mitigations that are in place around continuity of leadership and people, and that is important for us. From the agency's perspective, making that work is not just an operational challenge—it is structural, as well.

We recognise that we will need to change our structure to accommodate people coming into the organisation with new skills and capabilities and ensure that they are supported correctly. An element of cultural change has to happen in the organisation, as we recognise that a lot of our

focus for the past six or seven years has been on the live benefits. The shorthand pitch of my role versus that of programme colleagues has always been that that we are absolutely focused on the live benefits.

There will be a change in the culture, and definitely in the structure, of the organisation as people come across, and the cabinet secretary spoke about some of the changes that are already starting to happen. We anticipate that people with the skills and capabilities will move from the programme into the organisation to provide that capability. We will not approach the closure of the programme as a cliff edge, where the expertise will disappear. We will make sure that the expertise is brought into the organisation and structured correctly so that it can continue to deliver.

Ally, do you want to say a little bit more about the risk score and what has moved on since it was put in place?

Ally MacPhail (Social Security Scotland): I am happy to do that. I would like to cover quite a lot, but I will try to keep it as brief as I can.

The first thing that I would like to say is about risk culture in the organisation. The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing has the red risk pieces taken from our audit and risk committee in August last year, so the information is obviously slightly dated. Within the organisation, we have never been shy of embracing the right risk score for a very complex piece of work that we know that we need to do. On the programme closure risk still being red, that is right, and it feels right in the organisation, because there is something about complexity and proximity. Even though the mitigations have moved on and matured, the risk score and our risk tolerance on that feels absolutely right. David Wallace said why that is so important in not only closing a programme but setting up an organisation for the future. That is one element of it, and we are not frightened of the risk.

Another thing is that we are viewing this very much as an opportunity. This is Social Security Scotland planning for the future and having an opportunity to properly revisit its operating model, which is a real positive. We are moving from being an organisation that has supported a programme, implemented change and operationalised that to being an organisation that has digital and change capacity embedded and is able to move that forward beyond the end of the current programme.

I will move on to the piece about mitigation. As I have alluded to, an awful lot of work has been done on the risk. A project has been set up and it has joint governance. It is not a project that sits within Social Security Scotland; it sits within social

security more broadly. The joint governance includes not only David Wallace and his executive team but the senior leadership in the social security directorate. We are taking that work forward with a view to what the organisation's operating model needs to look like, but with an understanding of what currently exists. What capability exists within Social Security Scotland in a change and digital space and what will it need to look like going forward? How do we need to enhance and grow that? I say "grow that", but the issue is not always about headcount. It really is about capability.

We are doing that with an understanding of where we are and where we need to be. That work is on-going and it will continue for the next 12 to 15 months. I can speak in a huge amount of detail about the work that is going on, but I do not think that you need that here. I can give you that assurance on how we are moving it forward.

David Wallace: I should emphasise the point that Ally has made about the fact that we see this as an opportunity. We are not fearful of the change; the organisation is incredibly excited about it. We have spoken before about the need for change and the cabinet secretary reflected on that. We know that change needs to happen inside the organisation. Some of that is technical and we need to continue to keep up with activities. We need to change to improve the service for our clients, and there is policy-driven change as well. At the moment, those come into joint organisations in slightly different ways, and we have to prioritise them.

Those pressures will still all be there, but we believe that the change will help us to prioritise and ensure that we are delivering policy things while looking at the other improvements that we need as a single element.

Paul O'Kane: That is what I was keen to explore next. The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice spoke last week about moving from the discovery phase of the programme to day-to-day business. We know that policy innovations come along—for example, the announcement in the budget about the two-child limit and the delivery of a payment with regard to that. You are closing one programme and that has come along, so how do you intend to prepare for that? What do you think the challenges will be in trying to move to the business as usual space?

David Wallace: Ally MacPhail has probably spelled out some of those. We do not particularly see this as a cliff edge moment. There will clearly be a point where the programme closes, but that work is already happening and it is bringing our teams together. Our chief digital office is already working closely with programme colleagues. They have always worked really closely together, but we

are changing our structure to allow those teams to work seamlessly together and have joint ownership of current and future challenges. That is already happening, which is a comfort.

I certainly do not envisage a moment in time where people move; it will happen during the course of this year. Indeed, it is already happening.

Ally MacPhail: It is easy to think about a programme ending being a terrifying moment, but it is important to remember that the transition has been taking place over a period. Social Security Scotland is an organisation that has already developed capability for change. Looking at low-income benefits, particularly best start foods, we see that it was Social Security Scotland that took forward the changes to remove income thresholds for that. That is an example of changing an existing benefit, not introducing a new benefit, but we are building that capability incrementally. There is definitely something about making sure that the talent that exists in the social security programme is recognised and transferred across appropriately so that we have it in Social Security Scotland.

Paul O'Kane: On the point about building capability, horizon scanning and preparedness, the Government policy on the two-child limit was sent to the Scottish Fiscal Commission a week and a day before the budget was introduced. When was Social Security Scotland made aware that it might have to deliver that innovation?

David Wallace: We probably saw that in a similar timeframe. As we are operating now, that is a very much a policy matter for the Scottish Government. Our policy colleagues and our programme colleagues are currently dealing with that in the way that they would with any other benefit. We will be involved in such benefits at the appropriate times, and those that are slightly further away from being operational are currently policy considerations for the Scottish Government.

Paul O'Kane: On building the system, we know that there has been a lot of debate and conversation in the past few weeks about the need for DWP to transfer data and the interaction between the two Governments. What is your role in that and what do you require to be prepared to build the system that will ultimately deliver whatever the policy intent is?

09:45

David Wallace: We have the luxury of our programme colleagues working predominantly on that. Once the policy is formed, the service design has to be formed, and that is currently the role of programme colleagues. We will be engaged in that at the appropriate point.

That is the same process that got us to the 15 benefit launches. It has always been the case that our Scottish Government colleagues work with DWP on the policy, and the service design of those things is sometimes done slightly in tandem. We have operational requirements, which our programme colleagues are well aware of.

We have some desires for what the service will look like, which we might come on to later. Our ask is for minimal manual processing where that is possible. The more we have to manually touch cases, the harder it becomes and the more resources we need. We would expect to become more involved once it becomes clearer what the policy and the service design look like.

We are aware of the debates and the discussions and we stand ready to do what we need to do to ensure a successful delivery, as we have done with the other 15 benefits.

Paul O’Kane: On the requirements that you listed, are you at the table and having those conversations now?

David Wallace: We are aware that they are going on. We are not into the detail of it because, as I understand it, the policy is still being worked on, and we will not always be able to usefully contribute to that, but we are consulted where we feel that we need to be.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Good morning, panel, and thanks again for the invite to visit your headquarters. I have been a few times and have always found that beneficial for my knowledge.

Over the years, the risks of overpayment of carers allowance have been highlighted. Do you envisage similar risks with carer support payment? If you do, what are you doing to minimise those risks?

David Wallace: I will say something to open and then ask Miriam Craven to say how we are minimising such risks, because some of the mitigations are at the operational end.

The process that we referred to for how benefits have been delivered applies to the transfer of carers allowance to carer support payment, too. In the early days, we collectively spoke a lot about a safe and secure transition, which remains one of our programme colleagues’ priorities. In essence, as members know, that means that carer support payment as it comes across will be similar to carers allowance, so the risk will be inherent in the benefit as it comes across. More broadly, that risk exists for all benefits that are administered by us, the DWP and any other organisation in the country. The risk of fraud and error is inherent in benefits administration.

The short answer is that, yes, such risks will exist. For carer support payment, one advantage is that the risks are highlighted and very public and, as we have developed the payment, we have had the opportunity to be mindful of those risks. Most of the mitigations are in our operating environment, so I invite Miriam Craven to say a bit more about how we are handling that.

Miriam Craven (Social Security Scotland): Good morning, committee. For carer support payment, it has been important to have safeguarding in place for clients. We have built a system where carers can apply in arrears, which will allow them to have more flexibility in looking at their exact earnings.

We also have a provision for looking at average earning calculations for the benefit. We have done a lot of testing and user design with our carers to make sure that the information is clear and easy to understand. We are building in quality and assurance checks as we go through. We also have wider external links established with bodies such as His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. Building in safety for clients that will allow them to apply in arrears has been welcomed.

Marie McNair: How does Social Security Scotland’s practice of overpayment recovery differ from that of the DWP?

David Wallace: You will be familiar with some of the debates about finding the balance that took place during the passage of the legislation. We apply the principles of fairness, dignity and respect to all elements of our operations and what we do, so they apply equally to debt recovery as to first decisions and engagement with our clients.

We published a debt management strategy in 2023, which emphasises ensuring, wherever possible, that we speak to our clients and try to make voluntary arrangements. There is an absolute emphasis on making sure that nothing that we do pushes our clients into financial hardship. That is at the forefront.

I am mindful of the work that has been done on general public sector debt and ensuring that a single organisation that is seeking to recover debt does not have a knock-on effect elsewhere in the public sector that makes things difficult. Our strategy takes all that into account and, in particular, it aims to ensure that, wherever possible, we operate with the agreement of individual clients and in a way that does not push them into financial hardship.

Marie McNair: It is good to hear that assurance. Going forward, will there be any change in the organisation’s debt recovery practice?

David Wallace: We are looking at that, and there are a number of things to consider. To be

clear, our policy position is that, if errors have been made on our part that a client could not possibly have been aware of, we will not seek recovery. We are talking about debt recovery when the client—I choose these words carefully—should reasonably have been expected to tell us about, for example, a change of circumstance that caused an overpayment.

There is a differentiation for those with on-going benefits, as we could seek to recover an overpayment from an on-going benefit. Clearly, it is much harder and less cost effective to do that for a one-off payment. We have the powers to enforce deduction from on-going benefits, but we have not yet used them, because we are still looking for the correct processes and building the capability for proper appeals and redeterminations. We want to ensure that people can challenge decisions at every point in the process.

In short, we will need to move to a position where we seek to recover when we can see that we should be able to recover payments.

Marie McNair: Thanks—that is helpful.

The Convener: To follow on from that, what progress has been made in reducing the level of official error?

David Wallace: If you are looking for figures on official error, I will need to come back to you, but I will ask Miriam Craven to come in on how we are dealing with that at the front end. This is similar to the response about carer support payment, as a lot of the controls are focused on our operational teams when they are handling and processing claims. The aim is to minimise errors happening rather than having to deal with them at the back end. A lot of our effort has gone into making sure that the teams that deal with claims are minimising any potential for official error at the start. If it is helpful, Miriam Craven can say something.

Miriam Craven: Operationally, we have done a huge amount of work to implement what is in our error control strategy and our quality and performance framework. In a practical sense, that is about having quality checking through the client's whole journey. We have checks at different stages as our staff are working through cases, and we have checks post payment. We have dedicated resource that looks at whether any error has happened.

When we are checking the whole way through, all that work gives us a lot of learning that we can take back to the teams. We can look at where improvements are required—is it to do with the guidance, learning and development for staff, how the system is handling or the information that we provide to the client? All that quality checking allows us to reduce the amount of official error.

As for reducing risk, you can imagine that, when a new benefit is launched, there is more such error. As we have gone on with launching each benefit, we have brought in the learning from that, particularly in relation to quality and performance. In its report this year, Audit Scotland commented that the work that the sampling team is doing in looking at quality is really helping the organisation to look at how we are handling error.

The Convener: That is really helpful. You touched on Audit Scotland, and some of the recommendations in its annual audit report touched on fraud. Previously, you have participated in the national fraud initiative. Will you run that again this year?

David Wallace: We piloted participation in the national fraud initiative back in 2022. The response from that, which I think came out through the Audit Scotland work, was quite a low hit rate, for want of a better term—there was a low level of matches. Perhaps that is not hugely surprising, given the benefits that we were dealing with. We were at the early stages of any disability benefits, so we were dealing predominantly with one-off type payments.

For the national fraud initiative to be successful, there has to be something to match against, and the 17 cases that arose were predominantly about residency. That flagged up that somebody had received a benefit in Scotland but perhaps, under the initiative, their residency was not coming up as being in Scotland. For low-income benefits, that was entirely understandable, because residency at the point of claim is the important issue.

Given where we are with on-going disability benefits, I think that the position will have changed now. We expect to try to participate in the initiative again and see what comes out. There is something about being really clear on what a match might mean. The cabinet secretary had an interesting discussion with the committee last week about disability benefits not being income dependent, as there can be a misconception about that.

One issue is what matches are liable to come through the exercise, but the short answer is that, yes, we are keen to participate again. We are in active conversations with the Cabinet Office about how and when that could be achieved. I should probably give a bit of a warning about the Audit Scotland report versus where we are currently. We are discussing now our participation in a pilot, and I would expect participation to fall into the next financial year.

The Convener: That is really helpful.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Good morning, panel. I remind colleagues that I am on ADP.

I had a very helpful meeting—or I thought it was helpful—with Ally MacPhail and his colleagues just before Christmas to discuss key performance indicators. I am surprised that this far down the road we still do not have a process that we can monitor from end to end or that records how each claim is doing. It makes it very difficult for the Government and for this committee to scrutinise the system to see whether it is working and to make sure that we are getting value for money. Where are we on that process, how long will it take and for what reasons it is taking so long to deliver a system where we can see a breakdown of each stage of the process, from when someone applies to when they get the final decision?

David Wallace: I will say something on that and then ask Ally MacPhail to expand on it. He has fed back on some of the conversations that have taken place.

On the overarching performance of the agency, I come back to the social security charter. I will not dwell on it, but the charter has just been refreshed with a whole series of measures that people and stakeholders tell us are important for us to monitor. I have said it before but I am very proud of the charter so I will repeat it. I always point to the example of the softer measures in the charter, such as kindness. I see the charter as the place to look to for the combination of measures as to how the organisation is performing.

10:00

I am conscious that the committee has been keen to see a breakdown of that client journey. There are some things that we would also like to be able to break down more readily in that journey, and there are some things that we just may never be able to flag and monitor in some parts. Again, this comes back both to the agile nature of the technology that is being developed, but also the types of information that we hold.

I can use nationality as an example that feels quite live at the moment because we get quite a lot of questions about the nationality of clients coming into the system. It is not something that has any bearing on eligibility. It is not something that has any bearing on our decision-making process. I would not expect us to put a flag in the system that records that information because it is simply not relevant.

The bits that would help the journey that we have spoken about before, Mr Balfour, are things such as flagging when information or supporting evidence has been requested and when it has been received. That would let us break down that journey in more detail. There are system limitations at the moment that mean that those things are not recorded in a ready way.

Jeremy Balfour: I find that quite surprising. We designed a new system from scratch less than eight years ago and yet now we are saying that the system cannot do what we want it to do. Either that is the fault of whoever designed the programme at Scottish Government level or there is something wrong within Social Security Scotland. It is not an old system; it is a system that is eight years and younger, and yet you are telling me that it has not been designed in such a way that we can monitor that information. There seems to have been some kind of breakdown somewhere, either within the design team or within your staff.

David Wallace: I would defend where we are with the system. As I was saying in the earlier response, we have delivered 15 benefits within six years.

Jeremy Balfour: That is not the point. I am asking about data collection. Why has the system not been designed in such a way as to get the information? At the moment, when you write to a general practitioner, how long it takes for that GP or medical professional to write back is not monitored. For me, that would be a key indicator of how the system is working. I appreciate that the agency is delivering all those benefits but that is not the issue. The issue is around the performance indicators. Why was the system not designed to provide such indicators in the first place?

David Wallace: In short, it is because the system was designed to get money to people as quickly as we could, so we took the agile approach. I am not being critical of what has been developed—it is the nature of an agile programme and how we have built it to deliver minimum viable products. We also built the system on a single platform. Unlike elsewhere, we do not have a complete end-to-end system for one benefit and then start again with a different system for a different benefit. It has always been about prioritising improvements, functions and capabilities, where there are many competing elements.

We have had similar conversations about fraud and error. At the moment, there is an emphasis on front-end operational mitigations. Miriam Craven may want to come in on this. It is not that we are not monitoring some of that, but the way that the teams have to monitor it means that stats or information cannot readily be pulled out so that we can produce a position on that.

We are focused on driving performance, on how we can improve and on how we can get information back, whether that is from GPs or other health professionals. We do not have a system that records those elements of the journey. However, we clearly record the end-to-end journey

and we continue to publish the statistics about how long it takes from end to end from a client perspective.

Miriam Craven: You have seen what progress has been made across processing times across all 15 benefits. In particular, we can look at the disability benefits and the latest statistics, which show applications for adult disability payments at 49 days and for child disability payments at 59 days. Those performance outcomes are due to the performance culture that has been brought in, looking across the organisation at the performance of everybody who is involved in the processing of those cases, understanding a lot more about what the case load looks like and tracking the application through each stage of its journey.

As David Wallace said, some of that work has to be done manually and is then not available to be published as statistics. Our priority has been on getting what information we can to handle day-to-day operations and to know where we are with those cases, checking daily and weekly performance across all our applications. We do not want to just drive on one key performance indicator. We want to drive on the quality of the decisions and to get them right the first time.

We also want to encourage our staff to be curious about what is causing delays and what else we could be doing. We also want to think about collectively being curious and thinking about how each person contributes. We have looked at staff productivity and how we can unlock productivity.

Some performance measures have been around developing the experience of our staff, around learning and development, understanding the conditions more and utilising our integrated health and social care teams to help. That has helped with performance and decision making. We would not have got to some of those things if we had focused on just one key performance indicator. It has been about the whole journey and process for the client.

Jeremy Balfour: The issue for policy makers is that if we are looking to evaluate how the policy is working, we can only do so based on data. If we want to change policy because it is not working, it is very difficult if we do not have that information.

Our current difficulty as a Parliament is that we want to review the system and say that it would be better to do this or that, but we do not have the information to work with. That is what is lacking within Social Security Scotland.

David Wallace: I accept the broad point. I must also emphasise that we have had to prioritise where our analysts have focused their time on some of that data. If we rewind a couple of years—and I think that this committee was

involved at the time—we had to prioritise our ability to provide the Fiscal Commission with the data that it was looking for.

It all comes down to priorities. I know that the committee will be well aware of the work being done on the independent adult disability review. We are contributing to Edel Harris's work. We will feed into future policy direction and will be extremely interested in what Edel Harris has to say about some of those things. It comes down to resources, priorities and our ability to draw out of the system. In a sense, operationally, as you have heard from Miriam, there are some things that we would like to be able to do slightly differently.

However, I do not want to apologise for what has been done. What the programme has delivered for us is, by definition, the ability to deliver 15 benefits. You have asked me directly before, Mr Balfour, about my biggest challenges. I have always said that the pace of delivery of 15 benefits in six years has been ferocious. It has been done in an agile way, and we do not have all the answers to all those questions. However, it will come down to a question about the priority of those particular bits of data.

Ally MacPhail: Is it okay if I say a little bit about what we are doing? If it is reassuring, Mr Balfour, the meeting that we had was useful for us. Your challenge is valid and fair, and the conversation that we had that day definitely helped with our thinking.

David Wallace and Miriam Craven have covered some of the process points about where we are and why we are where we are very well, but we are live to what you are saying. We spoke that day, when we met analyst colleagues, about the work that we are taking forward on our performance and quality framework. I would just like to say a little bit more about where that work has got to and how I think that it will help.

Because of our charter and our values, as an organisation we do a lot to be transparent. That shines through in what is a well-written and well-informed SPICe briefing. There is an awful lot in the statistical information that we put into the public domain and continuously improve.

You have challenged us to a conversation about how that information is presented and our ability to segment it. We are working on that. We are live to some of those issues, but the information is there. It is the same with research and insights. There is a level of assurance from the reports and the scrutiny in this forum and others. There is an awful lot there, and it is out in the public domain. Our performance and quality framework looks to provide context and meaning to the information so that it is relevant and reflects back on our performance in a more focused way.

Performance in the broadest sense is what we are looking to try to achieve and quality in how we are working to meet those objectives. What I want that to do, and what the conversation with you will help us to do, is to home in and focus on how we can use all that data and evidence and link it to our performance outcomes so that when we come here we can have that more focused conversation—clearly, the committee is a key audience.

I am not saying that we cannot do that—the SPICe briefing is a testament to it—but we can do more, and we are doing more, and that work is progressing. The offer is still open. I am keen to continue that conversation with you and your fellow committee members, if that is appropriate.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I thought that Mr Balfour made some very reasonable points. I would be a bit more concerned about the answers if it were not for the fact that the end-to-end delivery time appears to be improving. That is positive, but it was a challenging question from Mr Balfour, and quite rightly so.

Those improvements are based on staff delivering at the coalface. I want to look at support for staff and how they are faring. Looking at your staff survey for 2023, I can see that 59 per cent of staff think that they have all the information that they need to do a good job, and 64 per cent think that they have all the tools that they require to do a good job. I think that it is reasonable to say that the figures have come down quite substantially over the past couple of years. Why is that the case, and what is Social Security Scotland doing about it? Do you believe that the figures being down has impacted the delivery that Mr Balfour was talking about?

David Wallace: I will say something, and then I will bring in Miriam Craven on the detail of the impact on people on the ground.

These survey scores are not unconnected to the previous points. As time has gone on, the complexity of what we do has increased. The number of benefits that we process has increased, and the complexity of those benefits has increased as well. Our staff do a phenomenal job, but we are asking them to do quite a difficult job as those changes come in. For all the reasons that we have discussed, we are frequently updating and improving the system, both for new benefit launches and, quite significantly, just to make continual functional improvements based on agile development. Our people continually have to deal with change. Change has been a feature ever since we were set up, and it will be a feature for a while. That is difficult, and we do not underestimate the challenge and difficulty that we are asking some of our people to participate in. I

do not think that those scores necessarily say that the tools or the information have got worse; they are to be seen against the context of the changing environment and complexity of things.

Bob Doris: I am not seeking to contradict you, Mr Wallace, but the statistics contradict what you are saying. If staff are saying that they believe that they have less information and not enough tools, that is what staff are telling you. Is there a lack of confidence among staff due to the complexity? That is the only other explanation that I can think of. I am not trying to contradict you, but the staff are saying something different, and they will be listening to these exchanges.

10:15

David Wallace: I am sorry; I was not trying to be complacent or to downplay the figures in any sense whatsoever. I was saying that staff were making those comments in relation to a complex, continually changing environment. Please do not think for a second—I say that both to you and to any staff who may be listening—that I am being complacent about that, but the numbers will reflect a position in which what staff are being asked to do is continually changing. It is not a steady state. I think that you had a conversation with the cabinet secretary last week about the fact that we will never reach a steady state. The change that people are being asked to cope with has been ever present.

I might ask Miriam Craven to give some input on this, but in case she does not reference it, I would like to reference how we have learned some lessons about pension-age disability payment versus some of our other benefits. In particular, if you look at guidance as being one of the tools, the teams dealing with pension-age disability payment are glowing about having that guidance and the tools available. If you think about having tools available in a wider sense, inevitably you will be back into some of the discussion with Mr Balfour about things that you would like the system to do, which our staff are still required to do and therefore have guidance as to how to do them.

Bob Doris: I am looking at why the numbers may have dipped. I hope that they will increase again over the next couple of years as steps are taken to address the issue. Miriam, can you say a little bit about what steps Social Security Scotland is taking to work on that?

Miriam Craven: If you look at the figures overall, you are looking at the whole organisation. What we have been talking about so far is predominantly what we would see as being within the operational space, which is where the majority of our staff are. However, we should remember that the organisation has lots of different remits,

with people working in human resources, digital, risk or analysis. There are lots of different teams that make up the organisation. For me, the survey looks at the whole organisation and continuous improvement. As a leadership team, we have been looking at the survey results to see how we act on the back of them and what we need to do.

In addition, we are a complex, large-scale organisation now compared to where we were in previous years. It is hard to compare like for like due to our scale now, and the fact that we are based across the country. We are looking at our people plan and thinking about how we deliver the tools that our staff need. That is about listening to and hearing from our staff about where the gaps are and what they need to get, and then practically looking at that.

David Wallace has given an example. When you are in the operational space of delivering a new benefit, you may need guidance. That has always come up, as you may know from previous years, and we have done a lot of work on it. The landing of a new benefit has improved, as David has said.

There is also a wider performance culture, which we talked about earlier, and how we bring that in. Performance is about our staff holding us accountable to make sure that we are delivering the tools that they need to do their job. That can be about making sure that they get the time and space to do the learning and development that they need. It can also be about their career growth and opportunities, giving them the skills that they need to do their roles. We are putting that plan in place, utilising our existing people plan and taking it into the next stages.

Mentoring and coaching play a part in relation to the softer skills around how we deliver to help support the organisation.

Bob Doris: I would like to have some concrete examples—due to time constraints, maybe not just now—of what you are doing as an organisation to support staff. I think that that would be helpful.

This is not my substantive question, but I noticed that 60 per cent of those who are working with clients, or who will soon be working with clients, feel confident about how to refer on for advice from other bodies and organisations. I am thinking about income maximisation and the discussions about how we maximise take-up of pension credit, which the cabinet secretary mentioned. I would hope that Social Security Scotland could assist with that. That figure means that 40 per cent of staff do not yet have that confidence around or expertise in signposting. Could you say a little bit more, or write to us, perhaps, about what more Social Security Scotland has to do to lift that number?

Miriam Craven: Yes, definitely. That is about practical intervention and making sure that we provide the training to our staff so that they know how to do that work. The policy is there and the understanding of how to do it is there, but we need to make sure that our staff are fully briefed and up to speed on that. Acting to make sure that that is happening across that 40 per cent so that the 60 per cent figure increases is a key priority for us.

Bob Doris: Finally, it would be remiss of the committee not to mention that we can see that over the past couple of years—I think up until September 2024—the whole-time equivalent staff absence figure appears to have gone from just under five days to 10 days. That is almost a doubling of staff absence, on average, over the course of a year. What is driving that, and how are you supporting staff in light of that quite worrying statistic?

David Wallace: I would like to make one final point on the exchange about referrals and the statistic that you quoted. We need to be a little bit careful about drawing a distinction between referrals and signposting.

We have a formal route to hand over clients directly to VoiceAbility. We do not have that facility with all the advice agencies, but we are working with Scottish Government colleagues to make sure that we will do so. I am very conscious we often come back to the topic of referrals. It is about appointing staff to pass off clients directly, and we have been doing that hot handover with VoiceAbility. I just wanted to clarify what we meant by that.

Regarding staff absence, I take your broader point. I am picking my words quite carefully. I am not complacent about staff absence. There is a context to the absences across the board, post-Covid. Ally MacPhail referred to the SPICE briefing, which has a lovely graph about what we saw during Covid and what we have seen post-Covid. As I understand it, the picture is generally the same across lots of sectors, particularly the public sector. Indeed, against a broad public sector average, we are probably tracking slightly below the average. However, your point is right: we are very concerned about anything that increases absence and impacts the wellbeing of our staff.

I will let Ally say a little bit about some of the things that we are doing, but I want to be clear that we are not complacent about absence figures.

Ally MacPhail: That is a very important point, and it is worth emphasising. While we are saying that we are probably not an outlier, we are live to the issue and we are taking action. A lot of what we are doing is what you would expect us to be

doing anyway, but it is probably worth covering off the range of things that are in place.

First—and we do this on an on-going basis and are not being complacent—we are working to understand workplace health and colleague wellbeing so that the interventions and the various things that we are doing are appropriate and not clumsy. That is what I am looking to try to put across.

We are doing the things that you would want us to do. We have a focus on colleague wellbeing and we have a plan that sits behind that. We are very open and transparent about how we are doing that, we lead as senior leaders and we role model. There is a link with attendance, as you would expect and as you highlight, but also to performance and how the organisation wants to take things forward and how it performs across the piece.

We have the right measures in place, supported by the Scottish Government. Our staff have access to employee assistance. We also have mental health first aiders—we have led the way for the Scottish Government to do the same. I would say that we are quite proactive and quite creative in what we do.

Another important thing—Miriam Craven might want to come in on this—is our particular focus on the trend that you have highlighted. We are not just working with our colleagues. The offer is holistic. We recognise the importance of good leadership and management, and there are some real basics around when a member of staff has been off and returns to work. There is a conversation at that point about their wellbeing, their general health, their return to work and any adjustments that need to be made to ease them back into the workplace in a safe and sustainable way. We are doing all that. I think that you would expect us to do that anyway, but I can reassure you that it is happening.

Miriam Craven: We are seeing some improvements in elements of what happens when people come back from longer-term sickness. As Ally MacPhail said, what is important is how we equip our line managers. We have an employee assistance team that can provide expertise and advice on how to support people, utilising what we call our employee passport.

Staff can have a conversation with their line managers about what reasonable adjustments they might need, whether that is after a short-term absence or a longer-term absence. It may be about things such as caring responsibilities or other things that may have been limiting people's ability to work. We can then put practical steps in place around, for example, hours of work and roles. Open conversations allow for support.

Support for line managers has been helping with that improvement, giving them the ability to offer our staff the most flexible understanding so that we can support them day to day.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I want to turn your attention to the client experience of disability benefits. Quoting the "Measuring Our Charter" results, the excellent SPICe briefing, to which you have already referred, says that

"those in receipt of ADP and CDP were much less likely to say"

that

"they got"

sufficient

"updates, that the application"

process

"was easy to understand",

that they answered relevant questions as part of it, and that the application was

"processed within a reasonable time."

We have been over that last point, but I want to focus on the application process itself. In the current budget, £450 million is being spent on child disability benefit, and that figure is projected to go up to £618 million in the next budget, an increase of 37 per cent. Why is there such an increase when, as it says in our papers, people are finding the application process quite difficult?

David Wallace: I am mindful of the committee's recent exchange with the cabinet secretary about the increase. I would not challenge that, and I agree with what has been said in that respect about how, as a result of the process, the number of people applying is increasing and about the link with their experience of their process. People can feel that the experience is not so good, but they will still apply. I do not think that what you have quoted suggests says that people found the experience difficult and therefore abandoned an application; it is just that the process was harder for them to negotiate.

It will have something to do with the nature of disability benefits, which are more complex. If we are making a direct comparison with applying for the Scottish child payment or a low-income type of benefit, I would say that the nature of disability benefits is such that the application form in that respect will be more significant. Miriam Craven might want to say a little bit about how we arrived at the form but—and this goes back to Mr Balfour's point—we rely on gathering some evidence as part of the process, so it will take longer.

We have improved the process and made it quicker, but it will still be longer than the process

for some of our low-income benefits. We will never get our processing of disability benefits down to the sort of single-digit days that we have reached for processing some of our low-income benefits.

Liz Smith: I just want to interrogate that further. Are you saying that the reason for the very substantial increase in the amount of money that is having to be disbursed to those receiving, in this case, child disability payment is that the process is much longer and more problematic, as you have just described, or is it that far more families with children are making the application? That is an important distinction when we look at the policy's effectiveness.

David Wallace: I am sorry—I am separating the experience from the money. I cannot say much more on the money point than has been covered by the cabinet secretary.

I would point out from an operational perspective that, under the legislation backing all of this, anybody can apply for a benefit. We cannot refuse or reject an application; if an application comes in to us, we have to consider it, and if it meets the eligibility criteria, we have to pay the benefit. That is the budgetary arrangement that we have with the Scottish Government. That is why the relationship with the Scottish Fiscal Commission has been so important—our budget is based on its estimates.

10:30

Liz Smith: I understand that, but that said, there must be a reason for such an increase in the number of people making an application.

David Wallace: Yes, and, again, I do not disagree with the cabinet secretary on this. We talk about our benefits; we promote our benefits; and we have done a lot of work to ensure that people are aware of them. I am conscious that the level is different now, but that has to be seen against a moving background of a general uptick in the UK, too. There is a gap in that respect—all I am saying is that there is a moving UK picture, too.

We have made things easier, and we have promoted the benefits. Part of the ethos of devolving benefits was to destigmatise them and ensure that people could claim what they were entitled to. I go back to Mr Doris's point about people. One of the things that we emphasise strongly to people in the organisation is that their role is to help people who come to them to get the benefits that they are entitled to. I will invite Miriam to come in on this, but operationally, we are not making any different decisions about eligibility.

Liz Smith: I am not questioning the decisions or the criteria that you have set out—there is just a

bit of a contradiction here. The process is supposed to be much more user friendly and much easier; at the same time, however, your own survey is saying that people in receipt of adult disability and child disability payments are not finding it particularly easy, compared with the process for other benefits. Can you explain why that is?

David Wallace: I come back to the fact that, compared with some of our other benefits, the process is inherently more complex. The form is more complex; it asks for more details and requires evidence, so the process takes longer than it should have done.

Indeed, one overriding issue that has come through is information—in other words, people being kept up to date on the progress of applications. The longer the application process goes on and the longer people are not kept up to date on it, the more things deteriorate.

Miriam Craven: Is it okay if I come in?

Liz Smith: I am just trying to get to the answer to this mystery.

Miriam Craven: Looking at people's experience of the disability application form, you will remember that a lot of it was designed originally with people with lived experience. We used experience panels and now we have client panels to help us with looking at the design.

We should also consider the timeframe of this particular survey. It was undertaken at the most intense processing time within the agency and, as such, reflects the times at that point, how long it was taking to complete an application and get a decision, and the lack of updates on progress during that time.

Liz Smith: I am sorry to interrupt, but are you talking about May 2024?

Miriam Craven: Yes.

Liz Smith: Okay.

Miriam Craven: You will have seen that processing times have improved, and as part of our work, we have looked at the whole journey. For example, our online application form, which gets very high representation, moves you directly to the questions that are relevant to what you have just put in. Our paper forms have to cover everything, which means that they are longer. Overall, the application form is regarded positively, because of how the questions are written, its use of photography et cetera.

What was taking too long in that timeframe was the journey to completion once people had made their application. Moreover, they felt that they were not getting enough updates and that it was more complex to find information.

Some of the improvements that we have made, therefore, relate to the gathering of information; we are not only helping people understand what information they need to gather in support of an application, but improving how we gather information on the client's behalf. For some benefits, we have introduced the sending of text messages to update people on progress once we have received their application, where we are in the next stage and then what decision has been made. Those sorts of improvements to keep clients better informed have been made since the survey was carried out.

Liz Smith: That was helpful. Do you know from your discussions with the DWP whether it is having similar problems with the application process?

David Wallace: I am not aware that I have had a direct conversation with the DWP about comparability. As far as we can compare our experience figures with those of the DWP for adult and child disability benefits, we have seen that our satisfaction levels are running ahead of those of the DWP. That comes back to some of the work that Miriam Craven has referred to.

We have tried to make the application process as easy as it can be. We have absolutely built the forms around feedback from users and what they wanted to see in the process. For adult disability benefits, we have removed the majority of the face-to-face assessments. Our overall experience ratings, compared with those of the DWP, are higher, but that is not a conversation that I have had in depth.

Miriam Craven: I can give you some of those statistics, as I have them to hand.

Liz Smith: Thank you.

There are no more questions from me, convener, but I would just go back to the point that Mr Balfour made earlier. When it comes to our deciding on best policy, what do you think are the benefits that are working most effectively to deliver on the ambition that you have set out? It is important that we get the right data and that we can use good quantitative as well as qualitative measurements of what is most effective. That was my final point.

The Convener: Did you want to come in, Ally?

Ally MacPhail: It was just on the client survey. I agree with your broader point about the importance of data.

Perhaps I can clear up what I think has been a past misconception. The client survey goes broader than individuals who put in an application form and then receive payment; it includes individuals who put in a form, irrespective of the outcome, those going through a case transfer

process and so on. Therefore, it is holistic. It covers not only those who have reached a positive outcome—or just an outcome, if that makes sense.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Good morning. We have touched on processing times. Your latest annual report shows that they have improved, but the adult disability payment and child disability payment are outliers in your normal performance. David Wallace, you said—if I wrote this down correctly—that the child disability payment has a more significant application form and takes longer to process. Can you tell us what the current processing times are for ADP and CDP? The 2023-24 figures for median times were 80 days for ADP and 101 days for CDP.

David Wallace: I do not have those figures to hand. We published the most up-to-date statistics in November or December.

Miriam Craven: We published the figures for ADP applications in October 2024, and we were at 49 days then. We published figures for CDP in September 2024, and we were at 59 days then.

Gordon MacDonald: How did you achieve that reduction, given that it is a more complicated process? How are you maintaining that reduction?

David Wallace: I will bring in Miriam Craven on that as well. As part of her role, she has led the improvement work, and she will continue to do so. I will also say something about the pattern of benefit launches. We have seen this for almost all benefits, including our disability benefits: the application process was taking too long for our clients initially, but there is always a bit of a bump until those things normalise. Some of those measurements were taken when processing times were at that peak.

We have discussed what happens at the launch of a benefit. Sometimes, when we launch a new benefit, we see pent-up demand coming into the system from people who have previously deliberately held back, which results in high demand. We have had the same conversation about the Scottish child payment and how both of its launches were aimed at trying to smooth out the potential for a huge number of applications to come in over a short period and overwhelming our ability to process them in a reasonable time.

We are always conscious that there will be a bubble at a launch, and how we prepare ourselves operationally to deal with that demand is a continual challenge. That said, we have had an improvement plan around those processing times, which Miriam has led. I invite her to say a little bit more about the detail.

Miriam Craven: Huge recognition is due to all the staff involved in driving that improvement and keeping the client at the centre of what they do. We have talked about staff surveys and client surveys, but at the heart of this we have a workforce that is committed to delivering for our clients across our 15 benefits. We are now supporting about 1.4 million people across those 15 benefits, which is a huge scale for an organisation to deliver on.

How did we approach that improvement, particularly with regard to adult and child disability benefits? We took a leadership approach, looking at performance across the board but focused on three priorities: turning strategy into action; improving performance; and continuous improvement. What do those things mean on the ground? What practical measures brought down those processing times?

First, the commitment to performance, which involves the performance culture that you have heard me talk about in a number of the other answers, was about constantly striving to ensure that we are delivering for the client. It was important to look at that culture across the whole organisation, from jobs at the front line to those in information technology, for example. It has also been about aligning our priorities across what the programme is looking to deliver and what Social Security Scotland is delivering. Some of that work was about enhancements around what we are looking to deliver when a benefit is launched as well as in relation to the benefits that have already been launched.

As you know, we refer to benefits having come in as a minimum viable product, meaning that there were gaps in terms of what was needed. Our focus was on continuous improvement and on aligning our priorities to ensure that we achieved the enhancements that we needed, which would help improve productivity and improve how our staff were able to tackle the issues.

One example of that improvement is the use of automation. Last year, IT improvements brought in automation that allowed us to do more of what we call straight-through processing at stage 1 of an application, where we do validation checks with other organisations, such as checking identification, bank details and so on, which we then did not have to do manually.

Gordon MacDonald: I was going to ask you about the manual processes. If you are committed to continuing performance improvements, what are your target dates for ADP and CDP? Secondly, given your commitment to improved performance, why has the processing time for the job start payment increased by 50 per cent from 16 days to 24?

Miriam Craven: I will go back to the first part of the question about where we are looking to get to. We have to acknowledge that part of the improvements that we have made are around improved technology, improved staff knowledge and increased productivity. We also need to remember that we do not just focus on the first application stage. Improvements are about balancing our current workforce so that we can deal with changes of circumstance. During this period, we have also been handling many large case transfers, which will start to settle down, and we also have to deal with reviews of cases. We have to continuously move staff around to be able to flex accordingly.

The statistics around processing times for the first applications are starting to show stability. We are not yet fully there with the case transfer reviews and changes to circumstances. I cannot commit to saying exactly where our ambition would be for those things until I can look at and understand the full workload. We have been working with our analysts to understand that and we keep moving towards that improved performance. We are looking at stabilising the situation and then making sure that we can commit to saying what our ambition is.

How can we bring in some tolerances on that? We have tolerances built into our measurements so that, once we reach a certain number of processing days, interventions are required and we need to move more people into that area, just as we would do with our telephony. If we see wait times starting to increase, we move our staff around. We have that flexibility. It is important for me that anything that we do around setting targets allows for flexibility to move resources around.

Does that help to answer the first part of your question?

Gordon MacDonald: It gives me a better understanding of the situation. I still think that you probably have a target that you want to get to for ADP and CDP, although whether you want to disclose it or not is entirely up to you guys.

You said that staff have to be flexible to meet demands, so you move them around. Is that why the processing times for the job start payment have increased substantially?

10:45

David Wallace: I will let Miriam Craven answer the last part of that question. First, however, I will say that, as you know, we have been keen not to set a single target that would become the public focus of what we do. As I have said previously, the reason for that is that we believe the true measure is the charter, not a single element of that.

In terms of where we are, the figures that Miriam Craven quoted about current processes and the nature of the disability benefits feel to me as if they are in the area of what we should be expecting. Just to reiterate a point that I alluded to in my opening statement, when we speak to stakeholders, processing time is not the thing that comes through now; it is far more about how we deal with cases that are more complex, how we give benefit advisers access to escalation routes and how we communicate to applicants. The conversations that I am having—Miriam Craven's experience will replicate this—are not singularly focused on that processing time point.

I will let Miriam come in on the job start payment, but there are other areas that we are keen to look at as well, not least the approval rate of all our benefits. The approval rate for the job start payment is not where we would want it to be, and that might have an influence on processing because, when applications come in, we will be trying to see how we can demonstrate that people are eligible for the payment. We have had conversations here before about the fact that people trying to prove that they have a job offer in their hand has been part of that challenge. Some of that may involve the team doing work to try to get people through the process as much as anything else.

Miriam Craven: You asked whether the need to move staff around is the reason why the job start payment processing times have increased, and the answer is yes. I have to live within a budget and we need to live within the resource that we have, which involves having flexible resource to move around. We move staff from one benefit to another a lot, depending on times of year and on what we are doing, in order to live within the tolerances around the acceptable levels that we are now at in relation to the job start payment. As David Wallace said, there were a large number of denials because people were not eligible when they applied, and there was a lot of work within that. However, the issue is about moving staff.

To go back to ADP for a moment, we are 30 per cent faster at processing ADP applications compared with this time last year. However, what is key for me is the quality of those decisions, and I note that only 11.7 per cent of our applications have gone to redetermination, which is an important measure for me when I look at what we are delivering for the client.

Gordon MacDonald: We started to touch on manual processes. The audit report from Audit Scotland for 2023-24 said that there is a reliance on manual processes to allocate work and track application progress, and that

"Management accepted internal audit recommendations to further develop and improve the Social Programme

Management (SPM) case management system to reduce the reliance on manual intervention".

I think that is what you were starting to touch on. Could you say a wee bit more about what you have been doing to reduce that reliance?

David Wallace: I will refer again to some of my very first answers on this. We have a single system, which is the system that has been developed for new benefits. That is the system that we need to try to get improvements in—improvements that are referred to in the report and improvements that clients and stakeholders want to see.

On the point that Mr Balfour made earlier, it might feel like we have a brand new system, but there are elements that are probably coming towards the end of their life, which need to be replaced and continually updated. All those things are competing in the manual processing considerations.

I will let Miriam Craven say a little bit more about this, but in preparation for programme ending—I think that this has been referred to before—we have been working with our programme colleagues on what is called a single prioritised backlog; all the requests and issues that we would like to see addressed come into a single prioritised backlog. However, we have limited development, delivery and release time to do some of those elements. There will be things that we want to do that we simply cannot fit into the current programme of delivery. As has been discussed, there is the potential for more rather than less to come into that programme of delivery.

Miriam is at the front end, dealing with those manual handling processes. She might want to say a bit more about how those have been improved.

Miriam Craven: To build on what David Wallace said, it is important to understand the number of opportunities for IT continuous improvement releases in a world where you are also releasing a new benefit year on year. To take those opportunities for continuous improvement, we prioritise which ones we are looking at.

A lot of the automation that has been prioritised in the past year or so has been about improving productivity so that we can get a decision to a client more quickly. It has been about straight-through processing, and our system being able to identify it if someone does the first half of an application for a disability benefit, which we call part one, but we do not receive part two within a timeframe, so that we can then go back to the client and say, "You have not completed it. This is what we have." Being able to do that has been important, and introducing text messages and the

straight-through processing of validation checks has helped.

That has meant that we have had to deprioritise some of the improvements that you have just talked about, which were covered by Audit Scotland, around our staff having to manually track things through systems. We are working very closely with our colleagues in the programme and our chief digital officer on how we can extract information from the information that we have. We have seen lots of improvements. It is still not as sophisticated as we would like it to be, but we are learning with our digital colleagues about how we can extract information. There is not as much manual tracking, but it is not as automated as you would want it to be.

Gordon MacDonald: You are saying that that is not the way that you would want the computer systems to operate.

One of the other points in the Audit Scotland report was:

“Social Security Scotland and the Scottish Government Social Security Programme do not have the capacity to make all required improvements to the benefit case management system. ... an independent third party”

will

“conduct a digital maturity assessment.”

Where are we with that? What is the current situation?

David Wallace: I will come in on that. It highlights the point that we have just made about all the competing priorities and capacity. The digital maturity assessment was not necessarily directly linked to that point. Our chief digital officer was keen to step back and do a bit of work—again, from the end of programme—on agile delivery, looking right across all our digital estate. There is a lot of focus on social programme management, which we refer to as SPM, which is our core operating system, but that has to integrate with many other things that we have spoken about today—the debt recovery system and how people interact with that, the GP system, and how clients send information in to the agency.

We have developed in an agile way over the estate. We wanted to do a bit of work that stepped back from that and helped us strategically to prepare an investment case for what needs to be done in the future. Again, that links back to some of the challenges of programme ending. The programme, as you know, has a published business case that effectively covers the investment and the outputs that we would expect to see from it. One of our challenges going into business as usual is that we need to make sure that we have the right resources and investment for what we need to do for the future. The digital

maturity work is designed to do that. That work has been on-going since December and therefore I do not have any particular output to share with you at the moment, but that is what it is designed to do: let us step back and be clear about what we need to continue to invest in, and what that looks like in terms of scale and priorities.

Gordon MacDonald: I have one final question, which is on a slightly different area. In your annual accounts, your provisions number has increased six-fold, from £5.5 million to £33.2 million. Can you say what that represents?

David Wallace: I do not have it in front of me. If you will excuse me, that is something that I will need to take away and write back to you with.

Gordon MacDonald: Okay.

The Convener: I believe that Jeremy Balfour wants to come in, and then Marie McNair will, and that will conclude our session.

Jeremy Balfour: I think that the passing on of data to the First-tier Tribunal is meant to happen without paper; it is meant to happen through IT. Having spoken to a few former colleagues, there seem to be some issues with that working efficiently at the moment. Is there a problem and how quickly can that issue be resolved so that everything is not done on paper but through IT?

David Wallace: I do not know whether Ally MacPhail might want to say something on that. We have been aware of an issue whereby what we thought was being sent was not quite arriving. There has been a bit of work with the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service on that. Clearly, as we have covered elsewhere, anything that is manual for us is additional work for the courts and tribunals. We do not want to see that.

Our focus has been on making sure that we are hitting our statutory targets, and we have to do some of that on paper to ensure that we are up to date. I do not have an up-to-date position, unless Ally is clearer on that, but we are working to resolve that. Our focus has been on making sure that the service provides with no impact on our clients. Again, there is a manual process that we have had to absorb.

Ally MacPhail: David Wallace has said exactly what I would say. There is a digital interface. Some issues have been fed back to us, and we are working through those with colleagues in the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service. It is a live issue that we are currently managing. I cannot say more than that.

Jeremy Balfour: It may be helpful to get an update because at the moment it takes 20 weeks for a decision from the tribunal service. I understand that part of the reason is that it takes longer to deal with the papers, which is obviously

not giving the client the best service. An update on that would be helpful.

Marie McNair: I will pass on some positive feedback to you. Your outreach teams in your locality bases are working really well. I have had a lot of positive feedback from constituents who are engaging face to face with them, and they have also supported me in a few of my cost of living events. Thank you. If you could feed that back, that would be great.

The Convener: On that positive note, we conclude our public business for today. Thank you very much to each of you for the evidence that you have provided. We now move into private session to consider the remaining agenda items.

10:57

Meeting continued in private until 11:16.

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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