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Probing the patchwork of welfare services in Scotland

The experience as specialist advisors to a UK parliamentary committee

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PROBING THE PATCHWORK OF WELFARE SERVICES IN SCOTLAND: THE EXPERIENCE AS SPECIALIST ADVISORS TO A UK PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE

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In this blog [Dr Hayley Bennett](#) (University of Edinburgh) and [Dr Sarah Weakley](#) (University of Glasgow and Policy Scotland), reflect on their work supporting a Parliamentary inquiry into multi-level 'welfare', including identifying evidence, unpicking complexity, and developing recommendations.

There is a growing acceptance that Parliamentary committees are important actors in influencing government policy ([Geddes, 2018](#)). In 2020 the [Scottish Affairs Committee](#) sought the expertise of a Specialist Advisor to work with the Committee to assist in their inquiry into welfare in Scotland. This opportunity was originally advertised via the [UK Parliament's Knowledge Exchange Unit](#) and filtered through a variety of knowledge brokers who sit at the interface of academia and policy. We were each approached by one of these knowledge brokers, Nick Bibby of the [Scottish Policy and Research Exchange](#), with the advert for Specialist Advisor roles.

With both our research expertise on the UK welfare system (see [Hayley's research outputs](#) and Sarah's [recent series of papers on Universal Credit](#)), and the uncertainty of the COVID-19 context, we decided to collaborate in the role of Specialist Advisor to support this inquiry. This was a new role for both of us, and in the course of the inquiry we briefed Committee members, framed the broad issues, worked with clerks and Committee specialists to produce briefings for evidence sessions, clarified information, and contributed to developing the recommendations for the [final report](#).

Why examine 'welfare'?

Following the [2014 Smith Commission \(PDF\)](#), The Scotland Act 2016 devolved a proportion of 'welfare' powers to the Scottish Parliament. Through this process a number of reserved policies previously restricted to UK Parliament and delivered by UK agencies (such as Department for Work and Pensions, DWP) became the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament alongside some limited powers for the Scottish Government to alter aspects of reserved benefits such as Universal Credit, the primary working-age benefit in the UK. This process also led to the creation of a new Scottish Government agency to deliver devolved benefits, Social Security Scotland. Whilst a significant change in terms of devolved power, in practice only 15% of spending on benefits falls within the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament, with the UK retaining control over the remaining 85%.

The Scottish Affairs Committee set up a wide-ranging inquiry into welfare in Scotland which included an examination of the devolution process for devolved benefit administration, the effect of reserved benefits on people and organisations in Scotland, the interactions between benefits and services, and inter-organisational working. The



Committee also examined how benefits, experiences of poverty, and service provision had changed due to the COVID-19 crisis.

What do we mean by 'welfare' in Scotland?

Whilst there's an interest in the progress of administrative processes for the 'new' devolved benefits under the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament, the multi-level policy landscape for the welfare state is complex. Any inquiry into 'welfare' in Scotland must therefore examine benefits at the reserved, devolved, and local levels (for example, local authorities have a key role in housing benefit administration and, increasingly, decision-making in terms of discretionary housing payments and the Scottish Welfare Fund). 'Welfare' is therefore much broader than discrete policy domains around social security and the main delivery organisations such as the DWP or Social Security Scotland. Based on Hayley's previous research examining various organisational tensions and complex multi-level policy 'boundaries' in local welfare systems in Scotland (see [Combating Poverty in Europe](#)) and our previous research with [What Works Scotland](#), we understood that multiple public service partners (including health agencies, local government and the third sector) are increasingly supporting people to navigate the benefits systems, access emergency aid, and provide anti-poverty initiatives to fill perceived gaps in support.

As such, we framed our discussions with the Committee using the idea of welfare as a 'patchwork' that requires both an understanding of how people experiencing poverty must navigate various systems and services, alongside an examination of multiple professions and policy domains to uncover the complex relationships between policy priorities, resources, services, and need. Adopting this understanding of welfare as a patchwork, the Committee examined the evidence from a wide range of witnesses who shed light on the complex working arrangements and the ways in which various policy decisions affect the activities and work of neighbouring agencies, charities, communities, and individuals. The Committee engagement team [also ran a survey](#) asking for people's first-hand experience of the benefits system in Scotland.

Inquiry findings

The Committee heard about good examples of support and initiatives, however there were also large gaps within the patchwork, plus some frayed edges, and parts loosely held together. Navigating different policies and services could be very difficult for people experiencing poverty, and for professionals working at the frontline. Unsurprisingly, we heard about the difficulties of relying on digital-by-default application processes and the



limitations that low benefit levels and conditionality places on people's life choices. We heard how numerous organisations such as local authorities, charities, and health agencies were providing face to face support for people accessing benefits. The final report achieved cross-party support and included recommendations to improve data sharing across organisations, increase communication and collaborative working, and for the UK government to examine the effectiveness and use of conditionality in response to the reality of the COVID-19 labour market. All the details on the [evidence and report recommendations can be accessed online](#).

Reflections on what we learnt

There's already an insightful body of research into how parliamentary committees operate, the ways that evidence is understood, and the type of witnesses that provide evidence (Geddes, [2018](#), [2020](#); [Beswick and Elstub, 2019](#); [Bochel and Berthier, 2020](#)), including reflections on how academics engage in the politics of policymaking (see [Cairney and Oliver, 2020](#)).

Our experience has enabled us to better understand the mechanics of UK Parliament Select Committees and how elected members and parliamentary staff use evidence:

- 1. An objective voice, sensitive to member views:** The primary role of a Specialist Advisor, set out clearly in the job requirements, is to provide an 'objective' voice to the Committee and serve as the subject matter experts. In order to contribute to committee discussions and answer member queries effectively the Specialist Advisor needs to be knowledgeable on the academic and grey evidence pertinent to the inquiry (e.g. on the mental health impacts of sanctions) whilst also ensuring detailed understanding of the written and oral evidence submitted to the inquiry. By adopting an 'evidence-first' approach we were able to challenge assumptions or misunderstandings of the issues or evidence. Cross-party agreement for the report recommendations is important ([Geddes, 2020](#)) and achieving it requires skills in communicating across political party positions when crafting recommendations, especially where the evidence may counter government position (for example, finding a way to create a recommendation addressing the £20 uplift to Universal Credit).
- 2. Addressing the research and knowledge gaps:** Often committee members asked questions that didn't have simple answers due to a lack of evidence or independent insights. This included the inter-organisational dynamics between governments: often witnesses said street-level workers cooperated well and there was a lot of effort to build good working relationships at the local level, but there was very limited independent evidence on the larger organisational barriers and structural issues



relating to agenda setting and work-planning from organisations operating at different governance levels. For example, we heard how Southside Housing Association in Glasgow sourced time-limited Big Lottery funding to support their tenants with Universal Credit applications and '[managed migration](#)', but unforeseen changes to DWP roll-out meant that the time periods no longer aligned.

3. **Communicating research findings and proposing solutions:** The committee listened to a lot of evidence about the negative impact of low benefit levels and the lived experience of conditionality, administrative burden, and so forth. However, at times witnesses didn't offer answers to questions such as, "well, if this doesn't work, what number will?" "How much do people need?" "What is a practical recommendation that could garner cross-party support?". There were perhaps opportunities for witnesses to go beyond sensitising members to an issue or position on a particular policy and to introducing tangible policy solution policy solutions.
4. **Diverse knowledge claims:** As scientific researchers based in academia, we place value on research and evidence. However, like other researchers before us, we found that scientific studies are just one form of information that shapes decision-making in political spaces which involve "diverse sets of knowledge claims" (Geddes, 2020). Other sources, such as newspaper articles, attitude surveys, existing government policy or a pre-agreed stance, and experiences in constituencies appeared to play an equal role in terms of the information that committee members considered in their decision-making.
5. **Breadth (of Committee topics) and depth (of Specialist Advisor knowledge):** Through their role on committees, elected members build detailed knowledge of policy issues, evidence, and key actors. There are some committees that are cross-cutting, like the Scottish Affairs Committee, which requires members to absorb and engage in a wide range of information from six inquiries at the same time ([see Scottish Affairs Committee website](#)). As such, Specialist Advisors play an important role to ensure that the inquiries (and the recommendations) can effectively influence government policy, synthesising or introducing the best available evidence for members who may not consider themselves 'experts' on the inquiry topic. To create a shared level of knowledge about the key issues, one of our first roles was to provide a private overview session to members on the existing evidence on the inquiry topic, detailing devolution processes, budgets, various social security policies, and key actors.

Ways to get involved with Parliament

Our experience echoes the [Commission on Parliamentary Reform](#) (2017) which found that people often valued their involvement with committees, and that for many the



experience encouraged them to learn more about and become involved in the work of the Parliament. We've learnt a lot about the committee process, evidence use, and working with Parliament, and we greatly benefitted from parliamentary committees moving to a virtual format; we believe this can enable more diverse academics to engage in UK Parliament where where the logistics of regular travel to London posed numerous challenges. The Universities Policy Engagement Network recently released a report, [Opening Up Parliament](#), that heard from hundreds of academics and knowledge brokers across the UK about how they engage (or do not engage) and what can be improved to ensure Parliamentarians are hearing from many more academics in their work.

- One way to get involved in UK Parliament is to get connected to the UK Parliament's [Knowledge Exchange Unit](#) (KEU). An easy way is to [follow them on Twitter](#).
- If you are a knowledge exchange professional in a university and would like to join the KEU network to get weekly round-ups of opportunities to engage, you can email the organisers of KEU at keu@parliament.uk.
- The Scottish Policy and Research Exchange (SPRE) also collates opportunities for academics to submit evidence to inquiries at UK parliament and all devolved parliaments and assemblies. You can sign up for their monthly newsletter or join their network of academics, The Brokerage, [on the SPRE website](#)
- [Dr Danielle Beswick](#) (University of Birmingham) and [Dr Marc Geddes](#) (University of Edinburgh) recently authored a report, '[Evaluating academic engagement with UK legislatures](#)' ([PDF](#)), that we encourage you to access if you are interested in this work.

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