Disability and Carers Benefits Expert Advisory Group (DACBEAG)

REVIEW

Final Report, November 2018

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to summarise the main findings from a review of the Disability and Carers Benefits Expert Advisory Group (hereafter DACBEAG or "the Group"). This includes implications and recommendations stemming from these findings, most of which were identified by members themselves.

Key findings
1. Although members of the Group indicated that they know what the purpose and remit of the Group are, there may be differences in the specifics of how purpose and remit are understood by various members. This is well exemplified with divergent opinions on the degree of detail to which operational advice should be given and views on whether the Group should give consideration to affordability of its advice.
2. Although both the Group and the Scottish Government (SG) recognised the impact of advice produced by the Group to date, both sides also saw limits of this advice. In particular, three aspects of the nature of the advice may have inhibited the impact of the Group - namely, the extent to which advice was challenging, detailed, and evidence based.
3. With regard to the first of these three aspects, it was acknowledged that the extent to which the group provided challenging advice was at times limited. Multiple factors, which may have had an impact on this outcome, were identified by Group members. Most importantly, it was suggested that some of these factors may have been related to particular circumstances that are no longer present.
4. Secondly, [REDACTED]. In relation to that, survey and interview data suggest that the Group may not have sufficient skill set to provide specific, technical advice. This comes on top of potential discrepancies among members around the issue as to whether such advice lies within the purpose and remit of the Group (see paragraph 1 above).
5. Thirdly, [REDACTED]. In relation to that, there seemed to be a lack of clarity among Group members as to what evidence base may be expected. Group members felt that their advice drew extensively on qualitative, rather than quantitative, evidence that was based on lived experience of benefit claimants and this may have given an impression as if the Group advice was based on personal opinion of individual members.

6. Several further areas of the Group's operation emerged in the survey questionnaire and interview data as the most important determinants of the Group's effectiveness. Each of these areas carries challenges and opportunities which the Group can build on in the future.

7. It is worth noting that this review is a snapshot, while there has been a trajectory of development with the Group.

Implications and recommendations

1. Given some contrasting views among Group members as to what really falls within the purpose and remit of the Group, the Scottish Government should provide clarity on these issues after discussions with members. Examples of such discrepancies were identified in the first section of this report to facilitate these discussions.

2. The Group may want to pursue an even closer and more proactive engagement with Scottish Government. According to survey and interview data, this could make the Group better positioned to provide more challenging, detailed as well as timely advice.

3. Closer relationships and proactive engagement with the Scottish Government could give the Group a better sight of future plans among policy makers. This would in turn enable the Group work more timely under limited resources and constraints of time by helping it to prioritise its work better. The Scottish Government could also facilitate a better prioritisation of work by considering how well its requests for advice are aligned with the remit of the Group. The Group and the Scottish Government should commit to timely resolution of queries around the Group's priorities, and the relative importance and urgency of items it its work programme.

4. Given uncertainties about the evidence-based requirements, the Group should seek clarity from the Scottish Government on the type of evidence required, and be more clear about the form, strength and value of evidence underlying its advice. In addition, the Group may want to discuss within itself about the evidence base that it draws on in providing advice and how to expand it by engaging other stakeholders and external experts including those from abroad.

5. The Group may want to consider the nature of steer (i.e. how specific it should be) that it would like to receive from officials and discuss it with them. In addition, the Group could benefit from asking proactively for a more detailed steer or clarification on explanations, if required.

6. The Group and the Scottish Government may want to discuss what feedback mechanisms can be put in place to ensure that all Group members understand the impact of advice, why some advice may seem as not acted upon, and how advice could be improved in terms of quality and usefulness for policy purposes.

7. Following clarity on the above issues, the Group and the Scottish Government may want to discuss membership issues to ensure that the Group has sufficient

skills around the table and that work is distributed more equally among members. Advancements in this area could make the Group more effective and able to work more timely.

8. Group members may want to find ways of knowing each other better, both in terms of their professional expertise but also on a personal level, to enable more harmonious and effective collaboration.

9. There are apparent limits to which significant improvements can be made by the Group itself. Above all, the Group remains a non-statutory body with members understanding their engagement in terms of volunteering. Hence, the Group may have to work with severe constraints of time among its members. This has a range of implications (e.g. participation in workstreams, frequency and duration of general meetings and attendance at those) which set limits on what the Group can realistically achieve within tight time-scales. At the same time, the secretariat is not currently resourced to take on more of Group's work pgoramme.. Therefore, some of the challenges identified in this report may not be overcome without fixing these underlying issues. In particular, the Group and Scottish Government should consider the following:

   - Particularly with respect to paid organisations who make up the membership of the Group, whether it should be a condition of membership that it is considered part of the core role of advocacy and representation of those organisations' missions, and that due time and resource is set aside to engage with the group. However, implications for small organisations and members from the academia need to be considered.
   - The group consider what organisational approach to meetings, and/or working model with respect to producing proposals (e.g. producing proposals in meetings, or working from pre-developed proposals within set parameters), will be best able to meet the agreed remit and approach.
   - The group and the Scottish Government consider what professional support may be required to augment the current secretariat, how to resource it, and where the secretariat can be best located to fulfil the agreed remit and approach most effectively.

Outline of this report

The report starts with background information on DACBEAG followed by a section on research methods used in this review. The findings of this research are then presented in three separate sections. First of them identifies some of the key issues around the remit and purpose of the Group. The second section is divided into three parts which unpack key critical issues around the nature of the advice produced by the Group. The third section of this paper deals with more generic issues related to the Group functioning by identifying what respondents to the survey questionnaire and selected interviewees perceived as strengths and weaknesses of the Group. The report ends with conclusions and recommendations.

Background information

Establishment of the Group

DACBEAG was established in April 2017, based on a 2016 SNP Manifesto commitment to establish a 'Disability Benefits Assessment Commission' to provide recommendations and guidance on how often assessments should be, what conditions should be given an automatic or lifetime award, and eligibility criteria. Ministers subsequently decided that the remit of the group should be expanded to cover all disability and carer benefit related issues. Thus DACBEAG aims to advise Scottish Ministers on specific policy options for the following benefits:

- Disability Living Allowance
- Personal Independence Payment
- Attendance Allowance
- Severe Disablement Allowance
- Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit
- Carers Allowance

Purpose and remit of the Group

DACBEAG is an independent group, reporting to the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People. The purpose of the Group is to provide recommendations and advice to Scottish Ministers, by request and proactively, on the policy and practice options being developed on disability and carers' benefits. This includes options for the benefits when powers over them are transferred to the Scottish Parliament, and options that would be implemented after the safe and secure transfer of the benefits. The Group's deadline for final recommendations is the end of this Parliamentary term.

To achieve this purpose, the remit of the Group is to:

1) Provide advice to Ministers on the benefits which are in scope, i.e. those that seek to help to meet some of the additional costs of a disability, those that provide financial support for people injured or affected by "prescribed diseases" in the course of their work, and carers' benefits. Currently these are:

   o Disability Living Allowance (DLA)
   o Personal Independence Payment (PIP)
   o Attendance Allowance (AA)
   o Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA)
   o Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit (IIDB)
   o Carers Allowance (CA)

2) Specifically advise on key areas for reform, including, but not limited to:

   o reform of the assessment of disability and carer benefits (from application to final decision and including data and evidence)
   o award periods, automatic awards and lifetime awards
   o eligibility criteria for disability and carer benefits

- o appeals
- o accessibility
- o take up of benefits
- o Agency delivery and operation

3) Use evidence from a number of sources to provide recommendations and guidance to Scottish Ministers on specific policy options being developed by the Scottish Government on the benefits within scope, including options for the existing benefits when powers over them are transferred to the Scottish Parliament, and options that would be developed and implemented after the safe and secure transfer of the benefits.

4) Develop a Group workplan and order of priority for the development of advice and recommendations, taking into account the Scottish Government's programme plan for Social Security.

5) Fulfil their remit by engaging with separate workstreams as appropriate, including the Experience Panels, Collaboratives and existing reference groups. Work undertaken may make use of Scottish Government analysis in the first instance, and take a view on the extent to which independent analysis is commissioned.

Membership of the Group

The Group consist of 20 members who come from a range of organisations reflecting a wide range of interests and perspectives. The Group is chaired by Dr. Jim McCormick from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Dr. Sally Witcher from Inclusion Scotland who acts as deputy chair.

Review of the Group

In establishing the EAG, it was agreed that the Group should be reviewed after 18 months and this is reflected in its terms of reference. This review was commissioned by the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People and is being conducted by the Social Security Analysis, Evaluation and Forecasting unit (SSAFE) in the Communities Analysis Division (CAD), Scottish Government.

Review methods

The review consisted of two stages. The first stage was carried out in October 2018 and it involved collecting data via an online survey questionnaire that was sent to all DACBEAG members on 1 October 2018 using Questback online survey software. The survey closed on 14 October 2018 having received 16 responses from DACBEAG members. Some questions were not answered by all respondents.

The survey was designed by researchers in the Social Security Analysis and Forecasting unit at the Scottish Government who also sought feedback in respect of the subject matters from the Chair, deputy Chair and DACBEAG members. The design

of the survey questionnaire was also informed by the analysis of the advice produced by the Group and ministerial responses to this advice (where given) since the group was established. The items of this correspondence that were analysed are outlined in Annex 1.

The survey consisted of 29 questions. There were 23 multiple choice questions and 6 open questions. Annex 2 presents survey questions including responses to the multiple choice questions (but not open questions). Responses to multiple choice questions were quantified whereas responses to open questions were categorised by themes to allow for a systematic qualitative and quantitative analysis.

The analysis of survey data was used to draft the interim report that was shared with all group members and key stakeholders in the government. All were invited to comment on this as part of the quality assurance process and have their feedback considered for this final report. Time given for comments was 2 weeks from the day the interim report was shared.

Following the interim report, the research entered the second phase which involved face-to-face and telephone interviews with selected DACBEAG members. Interviewees were selected based on their responses to survey questionnaire as well as their institutional affiliation. With regard to the latter point, members from various sectors (e.g. academic, voluntary, medical), and representing various groups (e.g. service users/benefit claimants with physical and mental disabilities, those on the delivery side, and service providers) were sought. Thirteen people were invited for an interview but some did not respond to the invitation or responded at a time when it was too late to conduct the interview and analyse the data. [REDACTED]. All interviews were audio recorded but only two interviews were transcribed and coded. The analysis of data from remaining interview was based on note taking during the actual interview and subsequent replaying of the audio recordings rather than a systematic coding of transcriptions. Following the completion of the final report, the draft was shared with key stakeholders in the Group and the government for quality assurance purposes.

Research Findings

1.   Purpose and remit

The first survey question presented respondents with the purpose and remit of the Group stated in full and asked them to assess their understanding of this prior to filling out the survey. Respondents reported strong self-perceived understanding of the stated purpose and remit of the Group. Out of 16 people who responded this question, 8 respondents said that they very strongly understood the stated purpose of the Group and 7 respondents said that they understood it strongly. Only one respondent expressed a weak understanding of the stated purpose of the Group.

Contrary to this quantitative data, however, qualitative survey and interview data suggests that there may be differences in how members understand what does and what doesn't fall within the remit and purpose of the Group.

First of all, there was a view that in their discussions and recommendations, the Group members did not give sufficient consideration to what was affordable. Some members contended that the Group should take into account financial implications of its advice at least on the general level by considering whether it is realistically available. Otherwise, the Group may be wasting its time in producing advice that cannot be implemented and thus also putting the government in a difficult situation. Conversely, there was also a view it was not within the remit of the Group to consider what was affordable as it was for the government to decide the levels of spending on social security.

Secondly, there may be differences also in perceptions of what the purpose of advice produced by the Group should be. For example, there was a view that some of the asks for advice by the Scottish Government were too much focused on the operational details whereas the purpose of the Group was to provide a higher level, strategic advice in terms of directions for policy development with some consideration for delivery to ensure advice is realistic but perhaps without going too much into the operational-level detail. Another member said that the Group may have not provided "expert advice" in terms of reform but rather in terms of the functional aspects of delivering on the means and payments in play. This again indicates that the Group may have seen the asks from the Scottish Government to be focused mainly on operational details of benefits. However, this does not mean that the Group necessarily felt that providing detailed operational advice was beyond the purpose of the Group. Instead, what it suggests is that there may be different expectations among members as to what the purpose of the Group is. This resonates with an argument made by one member that there was 'a split in the membership from the "biggest" thinking to the operational thinking' and that the Group was 'a jumble of both'.

In addition, both survey and interview data indicated that some members were unsure about the alignment of some of the requests for advice made by the Scottish Government with the remit of the Group. There were 5 respondents who said that they were unsure whether requests for advice from the Scottish Government had been well aligned with the remit of the Group; 9 respondents agreed and 2 strongly agreed that there was an alignment. Examples of requests for advice that were not aligned with the remit emerged from interviews. These included advice on Universal Credit split payments and on Best Start Grant regulations.

The issues identified in this section may be further exacerbated in the future as it surfaced in the interview data that there are uncertainties around the purpose and remit of the Group in relation to the changing landscape of social security in Scotland. In particular, several interviewees raised questions about how the issue of operational advice was to be squared with the role of the Scottish Commission on Social Security and Social Security Scotland. It was noted that there needs to be more clarity about how exactly accountability and responsibility needs to be apportioned between the Ministers and the Chief Executive of the Agency to avoid duplication of work. For the moment, the remit of the Group is to advise Ministers and it was not entirely clear whether that extends to advising the Agency. A number of other interviewees raised similar though concerns regarding the clarity of the remit and purpose of the Group in the changing social security landscape. Below is just one illustrative quote:

'Given that we've got the Scrutiny Commission coming in January, we now have the advisory body for the Agency – that says to me that the role the Group has to play should change. The role has to become more clearly defined and specific. We need to be very clear about how we can add value. We have to keep asking ourselves a question where is our space in this.'

2. Effectiveness and impact of the Group

Regardless of the uncertainties around the remit and purpose of the Group highlighted above, most survey respondents believed that the Group had been effective in realising its stated purpose: 10 (out of 16) respondents agreed with the statement that the Group had been effective and further 3 respondents said that it had been very effective. Only 3 respondents were unsure about the effectiveness but no respondent disagreed with the statement that the Group had been effective.

Likewise, most respondents believed that the Group had had a demonstrable impact: 12 respondents (out of 16 who responded to this question) agreed with such a statement and one strongly agreed. 3 respondents were unsure but no respondent disagreed with a view that the Group had had a demonstrable impact.

In line with this, interview data shows that the Scottish Government has found advice produced by the Group very useful in advancing policy making in some areas. However, there was also a view that some of the advice had relatively little use and impact. Qualitative analysis of interview data with stakeholders in the Scottish Government and the Group indicates several reasons why this may have been the case, and why some members may be unsure as to whether the Group has had a demonstrable impact. These centre around three main themes – challenging advice, detailed advice and evidence-based advice. These are discussed in the subsections below.

2.1 A lack of challenge

First of all, [REDACTED]. This view resonated with the view of some of the Group members who accounted for this in various ways. Several Group members explained the lack of challenge by the fact that there was a high level of consensus within the Group around the direction of social security reforms. It was suggested that members were on board with the main principles of much of the legislation around the creation of the new social security system and that indeed much of what was being proposed by the Scottish Government was what members of the Group had campaigned for through their organisations for many years. In other words, there was a high level of agreement with the direction of reforms proposed by the government and the Group may have seen itself as part of a progressive change that it wanted to assist rather than challenge. Moreover, one interviewee noted that the Group wanted to influence the system of benefits by working with it rather than against it. It was acknowledged by interviewees that this may have resulted in the limited extent to which the Group provided challenging advice but it was also indicated that this was likely to change in the future because the policy process moved into a new phase.

Indirectly related to these views was an argument that the limited extent to which the Group provided challenging advice may have resulted from the fact that the system

that the Group advised on was built from scratch. It was indicated that there is usually more challenge when there is already a benefits system in place because changes in it inevitably produce winners and losers. This raises a range of dilemmas and tensions that are simply not there when the system is being designed starting with a blank paper.

It was also suggested that the Group tried to be as objective as possible in order not to become another lobbying body driven by interests of different organisations to which its members were affiliated. This pursuit of objectivity may have made the advice appear less challenging to the Government. Related to this, two interviewees explained that the Group had to be smart and strategic about selecting areas where it wanted to be more challenging in order to build a good long-term relationships with the Ministers. It was suggested that being critical to everything that the Government proposed, especially in the early phase after the Group was created, could have a negative long-term impact on relationships and could also produce noise that would overpower the voice of the Group at times when there are really important issues to advise on. This would reduce the influence of the Group in a long-term because its critical voice may no longer be heard when this was really needed. Therefore, it was suggested was more effective to be spare some of the critical voice for issues of fundamental importance.

Another explanation for a lack of sufficient challenge that appeared in the interview data was that there were instances when key information reached the Group too late to enable it to come up with a challenging voice. Some members even felt that the Group was informed about decisions after they had already been made instead of being consulted prior to that. Decisions around the involvement of Capita in the new social security agency, staffing issues in the agency and Young Carer's Grant were given as examples of the latter point. One member noted that there were instances when some information came to light from sources other than the government. An argument was made that giving expert advice in a rapidly evolving situation, when the Group did not always have access to the sort of information it needed, meant that it was likely to be less equipped to go in and challenge or make stronger statements. However, this argument was immediately followed by a clarification that this was more of a problem in the early stages of the Group functioning and that it had improved over time thanks to a maturing relationship between the Group and the Scottish Government.

On a flipside to the point about a lack of challenge, some members felt that where advice was challenging, it had not necessarily been acted upon by the Government; not yet at least. The examples of such advice are not given here to prevent possible identification of specific members that is likely given the size of this Group.

Importantly, interviewees also indicated potential solutions to the problems identified above. For example, it was suggested that the Group could engage more closely with officials (e.g. more frequent visits at stakeholders within the government) and ask for information more proactively. It was also suggested that the Group may want to focus on upstream advice to ministers. Such upstream work would involve working with officials to give advice before the regulations come forward to Parliament as well as working around long-term policy options in order to play a more proactive function in addition to simply responding to the government's requests for advice.

2.2   Detailed advice

Another critical feedback coming from the government was that some of the advice lacked sufficient detail and depth. It was indicated that there were instances where the advice produced by the Group was too high level and not detailed enough to add significantly to the analytical work that had already been carried out in the SG at a high degree of nuance. It was suggested that high level advice could have been useful only if it provided fundamentally new thinking which was not the case.

To contrast this with views in the Group, there were 9 respondents (out of 15 who answered this question) who agreed with the statement that the group had been able to produce in-depth and detailed analysis and recommendations and 4 who strongly agreed. Only 2 respondents were unsure about this and none disagreed.

At the same time, qualitative survey and interview data indicate that some qualification of these optimistic views is necessary. For example, a view was expressed in the survey questionnaire that the Group should become more skilled at developing more specific (including technical/operation) advice. It was proposed that there could be two strands within the group: one working on more specific and technical issues of social security policy delivery and the other one looking at the long-term, strategic and transformative aspects of social security reform. In line with this, one interviewee noted that the Group may not have sufficient skill around the table to provide very technical advice.

The problem of a shortage of skills is just one of the potential factors that may inhibit the Group to produce more detailed advice. As noted in the section on remit and purpose (see above), some members may see highly detailed advice as falling outside of the Group's remit. If that's the case, this differential understanding of the remit among Group members may be a factor why the Group may not produce as detailed advice as it could.

Furthermore, there was a view in the Group that the degree to which advice can be specific depends on how specific the ask from the Scottish Government is. This highlights the importance of effective communication. In relation to this, the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed (7 and 2 out of 16 respondents respectively) that expectations of the Scottish Government from the Group had been clear to them. However, 6 respondents were unsure about this statement and 1 respondent disagreed with it. This represents a somewhat higher rate of 'unsure' responses compared to other questions. Similarly, although most respondents felt that requests for advice from the Scottish Government had been well aligned with the remit of the Group - 9 people said that they agreed with such a statement and a further 2 strongly agreed with it - there were 5 respondents who were not sure about such alignment.

Qualitative survey and interview data indicated that several members of the Group thought that the steer from the government had not always been clear and that a clearer steer would have been welcomed. It was pointed out that the Group had interactions with different individuals within the Scottish government who had a differing levels of understanding regarding the role and remit of the Group. On the flipside, some Group members felt that a lack of strictly defined steer gave the Group a fairly free hand to define its focus. Moreover, several survey respondents wrote that

the steer, lines of communication, expectations, vision and brief from Ministers had been clear or reasonably clear. [REDACTED]. [REDACTED]. It was added that the government can provide more specific steer in the future if this is what the Group needs.

Last but not least, it was also indicated in an interview with one member that the degree of detail at which advice can be developed will ultimately depend on the nature of the issue – some issues are quite specific in their nature and thus may involve more specific advice than others.

2.3   Evidence-based and distinctive advice

[REDACTED]. There was a sense that some advice was not so much grounded in the analysis of actual evidence as it was grounded in discussions during meetings which in turn reflected the views of members and organisations they belonged. While these inputs were seen as valuable as they were based on specific expertise of group members, a need for more evidence-based advice was expressed.

Related to this, [REDACTED]. It was noted that this may prevent the Group from adding new value because the Government does already listen to the voices of various stakeholder organisations. Whilst it was acknowledged may not have capacity to engage in such work due to constraints of time set by their day jobs, it was indicated that the Group could ask the government for any analytical work that may have been required to develop relevant and detailed advice.

Qualitative survey and interview data gives credit to some of these critical points but it also qualifies them. On the first point, a view was expressed that there were two inhibitors to Group's effectiveness. These were 'strong advocacy bias from individuals employed in organisations which represent disgruntled claimants and special interest groups' and 'a lack of systematic review of objective evidence'. This was indirectly affirmed by another member who felt that the Group relies predominantly on expertise on the lived experience of benefit recipients and less so on the experience of front-end workers involved in the delivery of the system (e.g. those involved in assessment). It was suggested that getting more of the views of the latter group would add to the evidence base on which advice can be offered. Moreover, it was suggested that getting a balance between getting views from the experience of different stakeholders would also signify a more democratic process of producing advice and recommendations.

On the other hand, the above should not diminish the importance of the evidence based on lived experience of benefit claimants. To the contrary, it was indicated by one interviewee that the Group could be more skilled at communicating how qualitative data based on lived experience of benefit claimants constitutes strong evidence. It was argued that officials may be prone to understanding evidence in quantitative terms whereas in fact one of the strongest points about how the new social security system is that it is being developed through acknowledging and valuing lived experience. It was suggested that there could be more clarity about when lived experience really adds value to policy and as such should be taken as robust evidence of what will work and what will not work and where it is simply a matter of personal opinion of an individual.

Overall, interviewees seemed to agree that experiential evidence (i.e. evidence grounded in members' experience of working with and talking to service users/benefit claimants and those on the delivery side) was the main sort of evidence on which advice produced by the Group was based. Beyond that, there doesn't seem to be a clarity among Group members as to what other evidence base may be expected, especially given the limited resources of the Group to perform analytical work. It was suggested that there are limits to how the Group was able to conduct its own analysis of evidence specific to commissions from the Scottish Government. These limits stem from the time and resource constraints that are discussed in the section 3.5 of this report. Nevertheless, it was acknowledged that in the absence of its own resources, the Group could be more proactive in asking the Government to conduct specific analyses of evidence to allow for more evidence-based, detailed and timely advice by Group members. Moreover, it was proposed that the Group could commission work to external experts or that it could be more active in organising events to engage outside experts, including experts in other countries.

With regard to the group's deliberation being driven by members' organisational interests, rather than as the result of genuinely collective discussion, this challenge was acknowledged by several interviewees, in particular in relation to Group's work around the Social Security Bill. It was indicated as something that was arguably unavoidable in a group that is not a statutory body and consists of members who are full-time employees at other organisations, including advocacy groups, and who can devote only a portion of their working time to activities with DACBEAG that were largely seen in terms of volunteering. Nevertheless, there were views that the Group has tried to mitigate this to prevent becoming a lobby group, and that these efforts should continue.

2.4   Section summary

To sum up, this section highlighted some of the problems around the nature of advice produced by the Group, why they may have occurred and how these may be mitigated. In addition to this, survey respondents and interviewees identified factors of a more generic nature that may facilitate or inhibit the Group's ability to produce advice that makes an impact within the remit and in line with its purpose. These factors are discussed in subsequent sections.

3.   *Facilitators and inhibitors to the Group*

Answers to open questions shed light on what the Group members thought were the strengths of the Group that enabled it to be effective and make an impact. Below are the three most frequently mentioned themes that emerged spontaneously in answers to an open question in a survey questionnaire which asked directly about enabling factors:

- Members' commitment
- Fit-for-purpose membership
- Effective chair and deputy chair
- Good relationships and communication with the Scottish Government

On the flip side, the following themes appeared most frequently as factors that may have inhibited the Group to be more effective and fit for purpose:

- Constraints of time and capacity issues
- Limited resources of the Secretariat
- Intra-group cooperation
- Attendance issues

The discussion to follow unpacks these and other themes that emerged in the survey to draw a more nuanced picture of the functioning of the Group to date.

3.1   Member's commitment

Most respondents agreed (9 respondents) or strongly agreed (6 respondents) that Group members had been engaged and committed to the Group's affairs. Only one respondent was unsure about this and none disagreed. In addition, commitment and contribution by team members was one of the most frequently mentioned themes in a question about the enablers of the Group's achievements to date.

At the same time, survey responses and interviews suggested that there were some members who did not attend meetings regularly, did not send substitutes for meetings, and/or did not participate actively in discussions. Although it was suggested that this was limited to a small handful of members, there were also views that this problem had a negative impact on the meetings and that it should be addressed.

Although some absentees did send substitutes, the value of this was questioned. One interviewee argued that the strength of the group is contingent on the quality of relationships between the group members and with officials and ministers, and that continuity is essential for these relationships. Because many of the discussions in meetings drew upon discussions the Group had previously, sending substitutes didn't serve the purpose. Moreover, sending substitutes was seen as indicating that some members may perceive themselves as representatives of their organisations rather than as individuals with their own views, experiences, and skills. As such, sending substitutes may be in conflict with the aspiration of the Group to have a voice independent of the organisations that its members belong to.

In addition to the problem of attendance and participation in meetings, a point was made that workload of the Group was distributed unequally among members due to a particular focus of workstreams:

> *'The Group is large and diverse (which is good) however there has been an aspect of uneven distribution of workload due to the purpose being centred on 3 or 4 areas of heavy workstream activity which has fallen to about one third of the Group and their representatives.'*

The perception of commitment of Group members in general (as discussed above) broadly corresponded to self-perceived commitment - 9 respondents agreed that they had been active participants in the Group's work and further 4 participants strongly agreed with this statement; 3 participants were unsure and none disagreed. Furthermore, all but one respondent said that they spent time working for the Group's work programme outside of the meetings.

3.2   Fit-for-purpose membership

Apparent in responses to open questions in a survey questionnaire and in interview data was the respect for the expertise, knowledge and experience of fellow members. Indeed, membership was seen as one of the key strengths of the Group. In line with this, there were 11 respondents who agreed with the statement that membership was fit for purpose; 2 were unsure and 2 other disagreed with this opinion while one person did not respond to this question. Qualitative data suggests that critical views on membership are likely to be related to the issue of low attendance by some members – a problem that was limited to a handful of individuals (see previous subsection).

However, it also surfaced in the interviews that the Group may be short of expertise in some areas, for example the expertise in local delivery of benefits or skills needed to provide very specific, detailed advice. There was also a view that it was important to regularly refresh the membership to make sure that the Group has right skills and that this should involve members self-reflecting on whether their own skills are relevant to the Group.

Survey data sheds some light on the latter point (i.e. the self-perceived alignment between members and the Group). First of all, most respondents felt that the Group provided a good platform for them to make a contribution to the Group's purpose – 9 respondents agreed and 4 strongly agreed with such a statement; 3 respondents were unsure but none disagreed. Some responses to open questions in the survey questionnaire indicate that there may have been a suboptimal alignment between professional interests/expertise of members and the focus of Group discussions.

Overall, 10 respondents agreed and 1 strongly agreed that being a member was in line with their expectations whereas 3 disagreed and 2 were unsure about this. Notably, the number of people who disagreed and were unsure about this statement was somewhat higher than in responses to most other questions in the survey and the number of people who strongly agreed was lower. Thus, these responses may be seen as indicating a possible mismatch between expectations about membership and what it actually involves.

3.3 Effective chair and deputy chair

The effectiveness of the chair and deputy chair were another theme that frequently surfaced in responses to open question in a survey questionnaire and in interviews with members of the Group. In line with this, 5 respondents strongly agreed and 10 other agreed that the general meetings were conducted in a way that enabled the Group to fulfil its remit. Only 1 respondent was unsure about this.

A view expressed by one of the members that although the Group chair strived to ensure that voices of members are equally valued, there were occasions when certain views within the Group were curtailed and that this reflected inequalities of power within the Group which corresponded to sectoral inequalities between organisations where members had their affiliation.

3.4 Good relationships with the Scottish Government

Overall, the relationship with Ministers, and the Scottish Government more broadly, was the third most frequently mentioned theme in the open question which asked respondents to identify what enabled the Group to be effective to date. This relationship was described with adjectives such as 'good', 'effective', 'constructive', and 'honest'. In addition, the support by secretariat was frequently praised.

However, there were also some critical views. First of all, some interviewees felt that the steer from the government was not clear enough. However, as discussed in section 2.2 of this report, not all interviewees would agree with that. [REDACTED]. It was also added that the Group was intentionally given quite a detailed remit but also a relatively free hand in terms of working within this remit. It was added that for a more specific steer would have been welcomed but were not received.

Secondly, there were views in the Group that the government shared information with the Group late. On a flipside, there was an indicator of a recognition in the survey and interview data of the limits to which officials may be able to provide timely information set by the rapid pace of developments in social security reforms. [REDACTED].

Thirdly, several members of the Group noted that some asks from the Scottish Government were often not within the Group's remit. This may have had an impact on the ability of the Group to deliver detailed, evidence-based and timely advice.
It is worth noting that this review is a snapshot, while there has been a trajectory of development with the Group. Many survey respondents as well as interviewees reported that many of the challenges that they highlighted have been resolved or are being resolved. For example, it was noted that engagement with officials became closer and more consistent from the start of 2018 following a letter of clarification from the then Minister for Social Security.

3.5 Time constraints and capacity issues

A government stakeholder noted that the ability of the Group to produce advice quickly enough was one of the concerns about the effectiveness of the Group. From the Group's perspective, half of survey questionnaire respondents (8) agreed that timescales for recommendations and advice set by the Scottish Government had been

reasonable but none agreed strongly. A further 5 respondents were unsure about this and 3 disagreed. When thinking about workstreams specifically, 6 respondents (out of 11) agreed and 1 strongly agreed that the timescales for recommendations and advice set by the Scottish Government were reasonable; 3 respondents were unsure and 1 disagreed.

Qualitative survey questionnaire and interview data sheds further light on Group's ability to produce advice within set timescales. In particular, it reveals three types of capacity issues that make it difficult for the Group to work within tight timescales. These are related to constraints of individuals within the Group, the Group itself, and the Secretariat of the Group. In addition, the issue of information sharing by the government that was already discussed above is another factor that may have affected the capacity of the Group.

Member's capacity

Six respondents agreed and 3 strongly agreed that the scale of demands on their time had been reasonable. However, as many as 5 respondents were unsure about this and 2 disagreed. This represents one of the highest 'unsure' and 'disagree' response rates among all questions asked in the survey questionnaire.

Moreover, in response to open questions in the survey questionnaire, many members noted that time has been a major constraint on their ability to contribute more to the Group. Their involvement in the Group was often seen as a volunteering activity that they can pursue only to an extent to which their day jobs allow. Below are just a few illustrative quotes from different respondents that highlight this problem:

> _'It's a volunteer group and everyone is busy with their day jobs'_

> _'Time, I think, continues to be an issue both for individual group members and for the group as a whole.'_

> _'I am acutely aware that I have not been able to contribute to the group in the way I would have wished due to time limitation.'_

> _'Time is the only factor!'_

Interview data indicated that capacity to devote time to the Group may be particularly limited for members from small organisations as well as members from the academic sector. Larger organisations have at times been able to pull in additional resources to conduct specific work by delegating work to other employees that were not members of the group. However, organisations with a handful of employees may not have this capacity. Likewise, it was suggested by another interviewee that members from the academic sector, who tend to have a highly specific expertise, may not be able to pull in additional support from within their organisations.

Group's capacity

Overall, general meetings were seen as effective by most Group members: 6 out of 16 respondents to the survey questionnaire strongly agreed and 7 agreed that the general meetings were productive; 3 respondents were unsure and none disagreed.

However, responses to open questions in a survey questionnaire and interview data indicated that agendas of meetings was usually packed and at times could not be fully covered during the meeting. It was common for meetings to run over the scheduled time. It is not possible to attribute this to this to the way the meetings were chaired because several interviewees pointed out that the number of issues that the Group has to discuss is disproportionately large relative to the frequency of the meetings and that there are also pertinent voices raised during meetings that should not be silenced because of time constraints.

As a solution, several members suggested extending the duration of meetings. An alternative solution proposed was to increase frequency of meetings or to organise ad-hoc meetings when necessary to help complete specific pieces of work. However, it was noted these solutions would likely result in further reduction of attendance as even the very committed individuals find it challenging to combine their day jobs with work for the Group and were often unable to attend meetings. Here we can see how the capacity issues discussed in the previous section spill over onto the Group capacity. Considering these constraints, 3 respondents strongly agreed and 8 agreed that the frequency of the general meetings was adequate, 3 respondents were unsure and 2 disagreed.

There was also a view that time constraints faced by individuals limited the capacity of the Group to produce the kind of evidence-based advice that the government may have expected. More specifically, it was suggested by more than one interviewee that the Group may not be able to produce evidence that is based on a targeted and systematic analysis of evidence or literature and that evidence will be grounded primarily in members' expertise from their professional life. One interviewee argued that there are certain insurmountable limits to what the Group can do as a non-statutory body, indicating that it was for the Ministers to decide whether this model was good enough or whether it should be augmented:

> This won't be in a sense of what literature review says; it will be evidence based on people's expertise from their professional life. It's for ministers to decide whether this model is good enough or whether it should be augmented.

Although this respondent gave examples of work where the Group was very effective in producing relevant advice within short period of time, this was qualified by a range of conditions (e.g. the nature of issue being specific, high commitment of time by group members) that may not always be present. This raises questions over sustainability of such effective performance.

Secretariat's capacity; Supportive but under pressure

Another capacity issue that was seen as constraining the effectiveness of the Group and its ability to provide timely advice was an under-pressure secretariat.

On the one hand, all respondents felt that the Secretariat took forward decisions of the Group effectively. There was an equal spilt between those who agreed and those who strongly agreed with this statement (i.e. 8 responses for each category). In addition, there were a few positive comments about the secretariat in answers to open questions. Moreover, several interviewees emphasised the high quality of work provided by the secretariat today.

However, several members felt that secretariat remained under-resourced even after the arrival of the Modern Apprentice. It was suggested that the commitment and professionalism of the existing secretariat cannot fully make up for the fact that it is still only '1.5 people' working in it (i.e. one person on full time and one on part-time basis). There was a view that a better resourced secretariat would allow the Group to produce advice more quickly. For example, it was suggested that a better resourced secretariat could pull together group discussions and turn them into advice much quicker. Another interviewee suggested that a better resourced secretariat, in particular one with additional support from senior level managerial and analytical staff, would increase the Group's analytical and stakeholder engagement capacity.

Intervening factor: Information sharing by the SG

As already explained in previous sections, several interviewees believed that some information was shared with the Group late and this may have had a negative impact on the Group's ability to developed detailed advice. At the same time, it was noted that some members did recognise the pressures under which officials operate which may create barriers for them to share information at time that would be optimal for the Group.

Interview data highlighted that keeping the Group sighted of broader and longer term plans as opposed to asking for advice on specific issues/benefits at specific points in time may be helpful for the Group to better prioritise and manage its workload under the limited resources (as indicated in the subsections above). In particular, there was a view that the Group has largely focused on individual benefits and individual issues which was in line with the remit of the Group. It was suggested that it may be more effective to focus on more generic, cross-cutting themes and that this required officials to keep the Group sighted on longer term plans. It was suggested that the Group could benefit from having a wider sense of a range of ongoing and planned actions in the government in order to be able to strategically select issues of fundamental importance and those where it could really add value instead of 'getting bogged down in small scale issues'.

Last but not least, some survey and interview data indicated that some members felt that feedback was not always received from the government as to why some advice was not acted upon and whether and why some advice was not particularly useful. One interviewee suggested that a critical feedback from the government would have been welcomed as it would help the Group to improve its advice in the future.

3.6   Intra-group collaboration

All respondents agreed that the Group works harmoniously. Among them, exactly half agreed with this statement and the other half strongly agreed with it. However, qualitative survey and interview data indicated that several members felt that they did

not know each other well and that this may have inhibited a better cooperation and a fuller utilisation of expertise within the Group. It was also argued that this may have impacted on the confidence of the Group to produce more challenging advice.

It was suggested that the Group could have benefited from team building early on. Although the Group did have an Away Day, it seems that it wasn't particularly helpful in terms of members getting to know each other better.

3.7   Workstreams

Most respondents (11 respondents) said that they had experience of working in one of the workstreams within the Group; 5 respondents said that they had not had such experience. In addition, 7 respondents agreed and 2 respondents strongly agreed that workstream(s) they worked in were able to produce in-depth and detailed analysis and recommendations. 1 respondent was unsure and 1 strongly disagreed.

There were many positive references to workstreams in answers to open questions. These were related to the commitment to workstreams shown by members as well as learning opportunities that workstreams presented to those who engaged in them.

However, it was also noted that effectiveness of some of the workstreams was limited by a lack of timely, clear and sufficient information. Some respondents argued that the consequence of this was that some workstreams were delayed in starting work in earnest and the momentum was lost.

Moreover, it was also suggested that the Group could have a better procedure for signing off workstream outputs. Building on that, another member suggested that the problem is not simply about how workstream outputs are signed off but more fundamentally about the relationship between workstreams and the rest of the Group. In particular, it was suggested that workstream output should not just be reported to the Group for sign off but instead the Group should engage more actively with workstream outputs by feeding into it more extensively. There was a view that this may have not worked well thus far.

4.   Conclusions and implications

The first part of this report identified some of the key issues around the remit and purpose of the Group. Although quantitative data suggested that there is a strong shared understanding of the purpose and remit among Group members, it emerged from both the survey and interview data that there are points that may need some further clarification, in particular as the landscape of social security in Scotland has changed.

The second section discussed the effectiveness of the Group thus far. It was noted that both the Group and the government acknowledge the impact of advice offered by the group to date. At the same time, both sides also saw limits of this advice. Three aspects around the nature of the advice that may have inhibited its usefulness emerged from the qualitative survey and interview data. These related to the extent to which advice was challenging, detailed, and evidence based. Each of these themes

was unpacked in a separate subsections and views from members of the Group on what improvements can be made (or which improvements have already taken place) were identified.

The third section of this paper focused on more generic issues relating to the Group functioning to identify what respondents to the survey questionnaire and selected interviewees perceived as strengths and weaknesses of the Group. It indicated seven areas of the Group operation that emerged in the survey questionnaire and interview data as the most important determinants of the Group's effectiveness. Strengths and challenges of the Group in each of these areas were discussed.

Taken together, these findings have several implications that the Group may want to consider to be more effective in the future:

10. Given some contrasting views among Group members as to what really falls within the purpose and remit of the Group, the Scottish Government should provide clarity on these issues after discussions with members. Examples of such discrepancies were identified in the first section of this report to facilitate these discussions.

11. The Group may want to pursue an even closer and more proactive engagement with Scottish Government. According to survey and interview data, this could make the Group better positioned to provide more challenging, detailed as well as timely advice.

12. Closer relationships and proactive engagement with the Scottish Government could give the Group a better sight of future plans among policy makers. This would in turn enable the Group work more timely under limited resources and constraints of time by helping it to prioritise its work better. The Scottish Government could also facilitate a better prioritisation of work by considering how well its requests for advice are aligned with the remit of the Group. The Group and the Scottish Government should commit to timely resolution of queries around the Group's priorities, and the relative importance and urgency of items it its work programme.

13. Given uncertainties about the evidence-based requirements, the Group should seek clarity from the Scottish Government on the type of evidence required, and be more clear about the form, strength and value of evidence underlying its advice. In addition, the Group may want to discuss within itself about the evidence base that it draws on in providing advice and how to expand it by engaging other stakeholders and external experts including those from abroad.

14. The Group may want to consider the nature of steer (i.e. how specific it should be) that it would like to receive from officials and discuss it with them. In addition, the Group could benefit from asking proactively for a more detailed steer or clarification on explanations, if required.

15. The Group and the Scottish Government may want to discuss what feedback mechanisms can be put in place to ensure that all Group members understand the impact of advice, why some advice may seem as not acted upon, and how advice could be improved in terms of quality and usefulness for policy purposes.

16. Following clarity on the above issues, the Group and the Scottish Government may want to discuss membership issues to ensure that the Group has sufficient skills around the table and that work is distributed more equally among members. Advancements in this area could make the Group more effective and able to work more timely.

17. Group members may want to find ways of knowing each other better, both in terms of their professional expertise but also on a personal level, to enable more harmonious and effective collaboration.

18. There are apparent limits to which significant improvements can be made by the Group itself. Above all, the Group remains a non-statutory body with members understanding their engagement in terms of volunteering. Hence, the Group may have to work with severe constraints of time among its members. This has a range of implications (e.g. participation in workstreams, frequency and duration of general meetings and attendance at those) which set limits on what the Group can realistically achieve within tight time-scales. At the same time, the secretariat is not currently resourced to take on more of Group's work pgoramme.. Therefore, some of the challenges identified in this report may not be overcome without fixing these underlying issues. In particular, the Group and Scottish Government should consider the following:

   - Particularly with respect to paid organisations who make up the membership of the Group, whether it should be a condition of membership that it is considered part of the core role of advocacy and representation of those organisations' missions, and that due time and resource is set aside to engage with the group. However, implications for small organisations and members from the academia need to be considered.
   - The group consider what organisational approach to meetings, and/or working model with respect to producing proposals (e.g. producing proposals in meetings, or working from pre-developed proposals within set parameters), will be best able to meet the agreed remit and approach.
   - The group and the Scottish Government consider what professional support may be required to augment the current secretariat, how to resource it, and where the secretariat can be best located to fulfil the agreed remit and approach most effectively.

ANNEX 1 – items of advice produced by the Group and ministerial responses analysed in preparation of the survey questionnaire.

- Independent Scrutiny in Social Security, December 2017
- Group's advice and recommendations on the Universal Credit split payment proposal, June 2018
- Group's advice and recommendations on the Carer's Allowance Supplement, June 2018
- Group's advice and recommendations on Assessments, July 2018
- Social Security Bill: initial response, August 2017
- Group's advice and recommendations on stakeholder engagement and equalities, Social Security Charter and Social Security Agency, January 2018
- Group's advice and recommendations on the Social Security Charter, June 2018
- Group's advice and recommendations on Equalities Analysis, July 2018

ANNEX 2 – survey questions including answers to multiple choice questions

1. Before today, how strong would you say your understanding of this purpose and remit was?

Answer	No of respondents
Very strong	8
Strong	7
Not sure	0
Weak	1
Very weak	0
N	16

2. The Group has been effective in realising this purpose.

Strongly agree	3
Agree	10
Not sure	3
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	0
N	16

3. The Group has had a demonstrable impact.

Strongly agree	1
Agree	12
Not sure	3
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	0
N	16

4. What are the factors that in your opinion have helped the Group to be more effective and fit for purpose?

5. What are the factors that in your opinion have inhibited the Group to be more effective and fit for purpose?

6. Expectations of the Scottish Government from the group have been clear to me.

Strongly agree	2
Agree	7
Not sure	6
Disagree	1
Strongly disagree	0
N	16

7. Requests for advice from the Scottish Government have been well aligned with the remit of the Group.

Strongly agree	2
Agree	9

Not sure	5
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	0
N	*16*

8. The group has been able to produce in-depth and detailed analysis and recommendations.

Strongly agree	4
Agree	9
Not sure	2
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	0
N	*15*

9. Timescales for recommendations and advice set by the Scottish Government have been reasonable.

Strongly agree	0
Agree	8
Not sure	5
Disagree	3
Strongly disagree	0
N	*16*

10. The Secretariat takes forward decisions of the Group effectively.

Strongly agree	8
Agree	8
Not sure	0
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	0
N	*16*

11. Do you have anything to say about the relationship between the Scottish Government and the Group?

12. I have experience of working within one of the Group's workstreams.
Note: if answer is Yes, the respondent was taken to question 10. If Not, the respondent was redirected to question 12.

Yes	11
No	5
N	*16*

13. Workstream(s) that I worked in were able to produce in-depth and detailed analysis and recommendations.

Strongly agree	2
Agree	7
Not sure	1

Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	1
N	*11*

14. Thinking of my experience of working within workstreams, timescales for recommendations and advice set by the Scottish Government were reasonable.

Strongly agree	1
Agree	6
Not sure	3
Disagree	1
Strongly disagree	0
N	*11*

15. The Group works harmoniously.

Strongly agree	8
Agree	8
Not sure	0
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	0
N	*16*

16. Group members have been engaged and committed to the Group's affairs.

Strongly agree	6
Agree	9
Not sure	1
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	0
N	*16*

17. The general meetings of the Group were productive.

Strongly agree	6
Agree	7
Not sure	3
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	0
N	*16*

18. The general meetings of the Group were conducted in a way that enabled us to fulfil our remit.

Strongly agree	5
Agree	10
Not sure	1
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	0
N	*16*

19. Frequency of the general Group meetings was adequate.

Strongly agree	3
Agree	8
Not sure	3
Disagree	2
Strongly disagree	0
N	*16*

20. Membership of the group is fit for purpose.

Strongly agree	3
Agree	8
Not sure	3
Disagree	2
Strongly disagree	0
N	*16*

21. Do you have anything to say about the main meetings of the Group (e.g. frequency, attendance), membership and workstreams?

22. I have been an active participant in the Group's work.

Strongly agree	4
Agree	9
Not sure	3
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	0
N	*16*

23. I spent time working on the Group's work programme outside of the meetings.

Yes	15
No	1
N	*16*

24. I have a clear understanding of my role in the Group.

Strongly agree	2
Agree	11
Not sure	3
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	0
N	*16*

25. Being a member has been in line with my expectations.

Strongly agree	1
Agree	10
Not sure	2
Disagree	3

Strongly disagree	0
N	*16*

26. The scale of demands on my time has been reasonable.

Strongly agree	3
Agree	6
Not sure	5
Disagree	3
Strongly disagree	0
N	*16*

27. I feel that the Group provides a good platform for me to make a contribution to the Group's purpose.

Strongly agree	4
Agree	9
Not sure	3
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	0
N	*16*

28. What do you think could enable you to make greater contribution?

29. What do you think could be done to maximise the effectiveness of the Group in fulfilling its remit?