



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

PUBLIC AUDIT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 16 January 2013

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CONTENTS

	Col.
INTERESTS	1099
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	1100
“BEST VALUE IN FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICES IN SCOTLAND—OVERVIEW REPORT”	1101
“BEST VALUE IN POLICE AUTHORITIES AND POLICE FORCES IN SCOTLAND—OVERVIEW REPORT”	1119
“MAJOR CAPITAL PROJECTS”	1135
SECTION 23 REPORT	1136
“Commonwealth Games 2014 progress report 2: Planning for the delivery of the XXth Games”	1136

PUBLIC AUDIT COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

*Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)

*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

*Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP)

*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Colin Keir (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)

*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

John Baillie (Accounts Commission)

Andrew Laing (Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary for Scotland)

Gordon Neill (Audit Scotland)

Martin Walker (Audit Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Public Audit Committee

Wednesday 16 January 2013

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 10:00*]

Interests

The Convener (Iain Gray): I welcome everyone to the first meeting in 2013 of the Public Audit Committee. We have apologies from Mary Scanlon, who has been sent to Serbia rather than to the committee.

We welcome to the committee Bob Doris, who is replacing Sandra White. Item 1 is to ask him whether he has any interests to declare.

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): Thank you, convener. It is a pleasure to sit on this committee.

The Convener: You had better wait until you have done it for a while before you decide whether it is a pleasure.

Bob Doris: Well, the seat is comfortable and the coffee is warm, so that is a good start.

I have nothing to add to my declaration of interests, which is publicly available on the Parliament's website.

The Convener: Thanks very much, Mr Doris.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

10:01

The Convener: Item 2 is to decide whether to take in private item 7, which is discussion of our approach to the Land and Buildings Transaction Tax (Scotland) Bill. Do members agree that we should take item 7 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: I should also have asked everybody to ensure that their phones are switched off.

“Best Value in fire and rescue services in Scotland—Overview report”

10:01

The Convener: The first of the main items on our agenda is the first of two briefing sessions from the Accounts Commission on best-value reports. I remind colleagues that they will be briefing sessions. The fire and rescue and police services are, of course, still local government functions. The audits are therefore carried out by the Accounts Commission and the reports are not formally laid in the Scottish Parliament. However, the chair of the Accounts Commission, John Baillie, has kindly come to the meeting with some colleagues to give us a briefing and provide the opportunity for members to ask questions.

For the first session, John Baillie is joined by Gordon Neill, who is portfolio manager for fire and rescue services best-value audits for Audit Scotland. Would John Baillie like to introduce the report?

John Baillie (Accounts Commission): Thank you, convener.

As members probably know, I am fond of short introductions—I suspect that most people around the table are fond of them—but on this occasion I plead indulgence from the committee. I will still be within the allotted time, but I would like to take slightly longer than normal.

As we know, Scotland’s fire and rescue services have played a crucial role in ensuring the safety of communities. However, their remit has continued to develop beyond fighting fires to include responding to road traffic collisions, flooding and civil emergencies.

Our report, which was published last July, draws on recent best-value audits of Scotland’s eight fire and rescue services. The report was published at an opportune time, given the forthcoming establishment of the national Scottish fire and rescue service. The national service will inherit many aspects of strong performance, although our work has found marked differences in how the existing eight services deliver fire and rescue services. Such differences are not entirely explained by local context, and they will present opportunities and therefore challenges in developing the new national service.

Over the past decade, there has been a steady reduction in the numbers of fires and casualties. There are now around 23 per cent fewer house fires and 33 per cent fewer casualties, despite significant reductions in budgets and the uncertainty about the future of the service in

Scotland. However, the falls have not been as quick as they have been in other parts of the United Kingdom. The levels of house fires and deaths are almost double those in England and Wales.

The factors behind those differences are complex. They include issues associated with deprivation, such as poor housing, high levels of smoking and alcohol abuse, but it is fair to say that, in themselves, they do not explain the full picture.

We also found that five of the Scottish services are among the six most expensive in the United Kingdom on a cost-per-head basis. I stress that the reasons for that are not fully understood. For example, the remoteness of rural and island communities is clearly an important factor behind that higher cost, but it is not the whole story.

Nonetheless, the way in which services use public money has been improving, with plenty of room for more improvement. Most notably, there has been progress in the use of the integrated risk management planning approach, which provides each service with a structured approach to identifying community risks and using that to prioritise its resources. However, that approach has the potential to deliver much more. For example, the deployment of fire stations and firefighters is not based enough on an objective assessment of risk. Progress in that respect has, frankly, been too slow.

We acknowledge that decisions about changing services, such as closing or merging facilities, can be difficult. The role of elected members in the governance of fire and rescue will change with the advent of the national service. However, we did not, in general, see effective enough strategic leadership by elected members on existing fire and rescue boards, and there are important lessons to be learned about the need for a board to work in partnership with senior officers to help to deliver change.

We are also clear that the new service will need to find ways of engaging effectively with communities and, indeed, the workforce over service change. I also note that we found a commendable willingness on the part of the eight existing fire and rescue boards, working with the senior fire officers, to prepare their local organisations for integration within the national service. That bodes well for the new service as it develops its approach to local engagement.

We also found that the eight existing services tend to work in isolation, with only limited collaboration among and between them. Unsurprisingly, therefore, we found striking differences across the country in how the services are managed locally. Those differences covered a

range of aspects, including: the numbers and locations of fire stations; the balance of resources between prevention and emergency response; how performance is measured; the roles of full-time, retained and volunteer firefighters and non-uniformed staff; crewing levels; and shift patterns. We note that the issue of retained firefighters is a particularly significant one that will need to be addressed by the new service, with every existing service having concerns about the sustainability of the current system in terms of sufficient recruitment and training and retention.

Differences can also be seen as an opportunity for the new service. Our best-value audits found much good practice and innovation, which need to be exploited by the new national board. Ultimately, however, I hope that this report has helped to set out some of the difficult decisions that will need to be faced in the new national set-up. The aim must be to retain the momentum of improvement that we found in our work.

Finally, the report sets out a range of recommendations—42 in all—to contribute to that momentum. They are aimed particularly at those who are concerned with the development of the new service, but also at existing players.

My colleague, Gordon Neill, and I will be happy to respond to any questions that the committee has.

The Convener: You have painted a picture of the legacy that the new national service will inherit. Although there are some positive aspects such as progress in reducing the number of house fires and deaths—it is important to acknowledge that—you drew attention to two striking measures of performance and productivity: the fact that we have five out of the six most expensive fire services in the UK; and the fact that, in spite of the reduction that you mentioned, there are still almost double the number of house fires and deaths from fire in Scotland that there are in the rest of the UK. That is striking. Could you say a little more about why that is the case?

John Baillie: The auditors struggled to find definitive reasons to explain the situation. There is, of course, the deprivation issue, but England and Wales also have deprivation. It is an area for further research by the national board and others. I suspect that this is the point that lies behind your question, but I think that if we can get to the bottom of the matter it might signify or suggest a significant change that might be made to the approach taken in Scotland.

The Convener: With regard to creating an audit trail for the new audit framework for the new national service, what is the information that is lacking and which the new service should pursue in order to shed some light on the issues?

John Baillie: There are several issues, particularly the fact that the funding for the service in England and Wales almost created the incentive to take a certain approach. I ask Gordon Neill to tell the committee about the issues that emerged in his audits and which highlighted the differences between us and England and Wales or ideas that are at the moment speculative or conjectural rather than based on full evidence.

Gordon Neill (Audit Scotland): The one striking difference between Scotland and England and Wales is the specific funding for prevention, which is higher in England and Wales. There is some evidence that the increase in funding had an impact on reducing the number of fires and deaths in subsequent years.

On your question about the significantly higher costs and the higher number of fires in Scotland, the situation is, as John Baillie made clear, complex, with a number of factors to take into account. We never got to the bottom of the issue entirely; in fairness, though, I note that the fire and rescue service itself does not fully understand the situation.

As John Baillie has suggested, rurality is undoubtedly a factor, because it means that the service has to spread resources thinly over a large area. As a result, it cannot reap the benefits of economies of scale. It was telling that one of the cheapest and most cost-effective services was Lothian and Borders, which has a number of stations such as Tollcross that have very high call-out rates and therefore produce economies of scale. Another factor is undoubtedly deprivation, which is generally higher in Scotland than it is in England and Wales, and one might argue that the type of property is another factor, given the emphasis on tenement buildings in urban areas.

Beyond that, however, it is difficult to tell. You start to get into obscure arguments about the shape of cities: because Dundee, for example, is a very long city bounded by the Tay, you need a number of stations at regular intervals; on the other hand, Edinburgh's circularity means that you can have a number of stations in the centre that then feed out.

The only other point that I would make about costs is that the pattern in fire and rescue is not unique and tends to be seen in other services such as education and police. However, I certainly think Scotland's rurality is a factor.

The Convener: Is there information or data that the service should be keeping and which should be available to the auditors but which is not there—or is the issue not that at all? Is it just that the research has not been carried out to identify all the factors that correlate with the outcomes?

Gordon Neill: High-level cost information is available and allows us to say, for example, that Lothian and Borders is less expensive than Highlands and Islands. However, things start to get difficult when we try to get under the surface. The information does not tend to be held consistently or in a way that allows us to see how much is spent on prevention, home fire safety visits, emergency response and so on. Because we do not have that kind of underlying information, it is difficult for us to match costs to impact.

The Convener: So you think that the formation of a national service will provide an opportunity to correct that situation.

Gordon Neill: Absolutely.

10:15

Colin Keir (Edinburgh Western) (SNP): Good morning. My question relates to the work of locally elected members in councils around the country. I should, at this point, own up and declare my membership of the Justice Committee, which heard the same criticisms about locally elected members of fire and police boards—for example, the lack of effective leadership and various other matters—as are highlighted in the report before us.

Do you agree that perhaps the problem for the locally elected officials who sat on those boards was that they were limited in what they could do in dealing with operational issues, on which they could not have any great say? It is difficult to lead an organisation when you have no role in the operational side of things and you are stuck with the stuff that comes around the edges, such as pensions, salaries, and terms and conditions. Do you agree that, with the new set-up, having a national board will give the locally elected members opportunities in their dealings with the local service leadership, so we may not get quite the same problems that we had in the past?

John Baillie: It is fair to say, as the report says, that there is a general feeling of disappointment that local boards have not been as effective at strategic leadership as might have been expected. Of course, like everyone else, the board members need to respect the operational autonomy that falls to the chief fire officer and so on. However, I think that part of the issue is that the service and authority have been very much officer led. To me, that is down to there being not enough training and support to board members locally on what they should be doing and how to find out things when there have not been the resources to provide them with the information. The board members are busy people, so provision of support is important.

Added to that is the difficulty that all council members have of taking a corporate view on the one hand while looking after their ward interests on the other. On the deployment of fire stations, for example, the ward interest can be very vocal—most of us want a fire station that is a mile down the road—so there is an extremely difficult balance to be achieved. Those issues partly explain the councillors' position but, with better training and more support, members locally and nationally would be in a better position to be more effective. One could also add in the issue of poor scrutiny, although it all falls into the same general box.

I do not know whether Gordon Neill wants to elaborate on anything that I have said.

Gordon Neill: Clearly, board members cannot get too involved in operational matters, but that has not been an issue in fire and rescue to any significant extent. This is a generalisation—there are some very good elected members who have set the correct strategic approach—but elected members have generally not been involved in setting the strategic direction or monitoring what is happening and matching that against the strategic direction.

That may sound a bit jargony, but I mean that, for example, integrated risk management planning—that also sounds very jargony—is about trying, at a high level, to match resources to where the community risks are. There is a lot of objective evidence produced for that.

Elected members have generally been slow to engage with the process and have tended not to get involved in whether resources such as fire stations and firefighters should be in one location rather than another. The members have been slow to monitor what has subsequently happened and have really left it to officers to get on with things.

Colin Keir: My second question follows up what you have just said—and the same question might apply to the police, which we will consider later on. What extra help can we give the locally elected members who will be dealing with the senior fire officer to ensure that they are able to do their job? How do we get away from the reality that, when the board members would head down to the local senior fire officer, they were in effect working off the chief fire officer's agenda? The board was supposed to provide a degree of scrutiny, but in effect that was being dealt with by the fire officer himself. How do we avoid the issue about reporting on and reporting to? How do we get around that?

John Baillie: We need to start by asking boards some broad questions about what they are trying to achieve and whether they have prioritised the fire service in the way that they think it should be prioritised. Of course, any disagreement in that

respect is a question for discussion between the boards and the chief fire officer. Inevitably, some disagreements will arise, but that is quite healthy.

The question is the extent to which locally elected members cite operational issues as the reason for not getting involved. As we will probably see when we come to discuss police boards, there is a tendency to accept that reason rather passively instead of challenging it and saying, "Hang on, this is our area and community. We engage with the community and should know what it wants. We have looked at the IRMP and see where the risks are. Why are those risks not being matched with resources?" There are quite a number of examples of that around Scotland, because fire station locations are predominantly historical in nature.

Colin Keir: What can we do to help?

John Baillie: First of all, we need to get the general point across and then supplement it with more active and positive training and, indeed, more support. Of course, it is easy to say that more support is needed; there is a question about how it will be funded. Councillors are very busy people—

Colin Keir: I was one myself.

John Baillie: —and we know that in allocating their time they constantly have to balance all sorts of issues. More support on information, the interpretation of information and indeed the prompting of questions about information would help as it helps anyone who sits at the top of a particular function to work properly. He or she will not have the time to devil too much, so there is a clear need for support for the scrutineers—in other words, the members.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): Mr Baillie, you will be familiar with the report that was carried out by Her Majesty's chief inspector of fire and rescue authorities on the Highlands and Islands service following your own Accounts Commission report. Assuming that you have read it—which I am sure you have—I wonder what your observations on that report might be.

John Baillie: I should point out that Gordon Neill was part of the team that worked on the issue. It is fair to say that the momentum created by our criticism was followed through and, being positive, I think that the board has taken to heart a number of points that we made and which have been followed up in the report that was issued this month.

Clearly, there will be much local discussion about the deployment of fire stations, which was one of our major criticisms. I have already mentioned the issue of history. The effect of history has prevailed more in that region than in

most, partly because of remoteness and—again—rurality. Generally, however, I see the report as something positive that is continuing the momentum. In some ways, it is pushing at a door that is more open than it was perhaps a year or a year and a half ago.

Perhaps Gordon Neill can elaborate on the point.

Gordon Neill: Highlands and Islands has made significant progress on some core issues such as the training of firefighters. It is in a much better position with regard to workforce health and safety, and it is catching up with fire inspections of business and commercial premises. However, it has been able to reach that position as a result of a lot of additional support from other services, which raises the issue of capacity: once that support is withdrawn, will it be able to continue that work? Essentially, the chief inspector's conclusion was, "Can you keep Highlands and Islands on life support for a bit longer to embed the good work it has managed to achieve over the past eight months or so?"

The other big issue is that deployment of fire stations. We tend to talk in shorthand about closing or merging stations when the question is actually whether stations are in the right place and whether the resources are available where the risks are. That issue has not been fully addressed yet. In fairness, members have gone as far as we could reasonably expect them to go in eight months. Five stations have been closed, but they have been stations at the extremes, where activity was at a very low level. From the point of view of integrated risk management planning, a thorough assessment of where the risks are and where the resources are is something that has not really been grasped yet.

Tavish Scott: Is that the case in other parts of Scotland as well?

Gordon Neill: It is not unique to Highland. I would say that the Highlands and Islands is probably at one end of the spectrum, but it is a national issue.

Tavish Scott: Do you think that the nettle has not been grasped on risk because local fire boards in all parts of Scotland approach the assessment of risk with the view, "We're going to keep that fire station open"? Mr Baillie made an observation about how councillors act, depending on whether they are wearing their corporate hat. The bottom line is that they represent people who, as he said, take the view that they would like the fire station to be a mile down the road.

John Baillie: My impression—this is an impression rather than a view that is based on solid evidence—is that it is more convenient to retain the status quo. Who is pressurising boards

to change and to match resources with priorities? As a consequence, I feel that our report and the subsequent report to which you refer have created a momentum, a climate of change and a greater willingness to look at the issue. The first stage is, of course, the integrated risk management process.

Tavish Scott: I agree that considerable progress has been made; I am aware of a lot of that.

I want to ask about the pan-Scotland point. The logic of creating a single centralised national service is that the problem we have discussed will not exist because everything will be dictated from the centre. There will be local committees, but local elected members will still be busy—there will not be a change in that regard. They will sit on another local committee that involves the ambulance service, the police service and the other emergency services. How will that improve scrutiny of what happens in the single fire service?

John Baillie: The momentum that I am talking about exists not just in the Highlands and Islands. There is greater awareness of the need to apply the IRMP process, and that in itself will help. The central monitoring of that will help, too.

I believe that a key aspect of the process is national support—which we can talk about separately—and the provision of much better, more thorough local support. I believe that part of the problem has been that members have not had the available data or the training that enables them to know where to look for it.

Tavish Scott: I take all that on board. I will be persuaded when I see evidence of it.

The Audit Scotland report made some pretty fundamental observations on retained firefighters, but if we did not have retained firefighters there would not be a service in most of Scotland; that is the case across the board and not just in the part of Scotland that I represent. One of the key messages of the Audit Scotland report—I am sorry; I keep calling it the Audit Scotland report, but it is the Accounts Commission's report—is that the current system for retained firefighters is not sustainable. What is the alternative?

John Baillie: That is a concern. There are several approaches that could be taken. Gordon Neill can talk about this, but I believe that in England the approach to sustainability involves higher retention salaries and the like. Ultimately, the issue might be about money.

Gordon Neill: There are two factors in recruiting sufficient retained firefighters. One is pay and the second relates to lifestyle. Lifestyles have changed: people tend to work in a different part of the country from the area where they live.

The old model, which involved someone who was at work being able to respond to a call-out immediately, tends not to hold as much as it used to, so services have increasingly struggled to recruit sufficient retained firefighters. That is an issue not just in Scotland but throughout the UK.

A few years ago, a new model was adopted in south Wales. It is more expensive, but it places more emphasis on the annual retainer—which is almost a salary—and less emphasis on call-out fees. That model is felt to be more attractive. Some services in England have also made a bigger push to recruit female firefighters. Again, 50 per cent of the population is almost instinctively excluded from recruitment. There are a number of potential solutions to—

10:30

Tavish Scott: Have those solutions meant that the number of firefighters has reduced in the areas where those different salary mechanisms have been tried?

Gordon Neill: Yes. There has been some success in south Wales. Tayside had a look at the model in south Wales and started to develop some proposals to introduce it. That has been put on hold with the development of the new national service, but there is scope for the national service to look at the idea.

Tavish Scott: So your guess on retained firefighters would be that the new national force will have to find a new mechanism to financially support men and women who are firefighters, and at the same time the overall numbers will reduce, because that is the only way in which the service will be able to afford to proceed, given the budgetary pressure that it will be under.

Gordon Neill: I do not know whether the numbers will reduce—that would just be supposition—but the service will certainly need to find a new model.

John Baillie: A supplementary to the causes already mentioned is the unwillingness of employers these days to release people for retained fire service duties.

Tavish Scott: Yes. Thank you.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): The timing of the report is important, given the changes that are going to take place in the fire service, and I am sure that it will be interesting and compulsory reading for those who are putting together the new national fire service.

There are three points that I want to look at. First, I note from paragraph 56 on page 16 that

“many chief fire officers are frustrated at the lack of information shared by NHS organisations”.

That is in connection with the data protection legislation. Are there any signs of movement on that? Is there a way through it? It seems strange that that problem exists with the national health service in particular, and that social work, housing services, the police and others do not have the same restriction.

John Baillie: It is fair to say that that is one of the things that the new board will have to address. Perhaps part of the problem in the past has been the need to deal with eight separate boards and eight separate interpretations. I am hopeful—although, again, it is a hope rather than something that is based on evidence—that something can be done to resolve that, because it is clearly important.

Colin Beattie: Was the problem with the NHS across the board or with a particular health board?

Gordon Neill: The problem was with the NHS across the board. There are sensitivities in the NHS about releasing what it perceives to be sensitive information. For example, we could be talking about an elderly person who lives on their own and who has just been discharged from hospital, or about someone who suffers from mental health problems. There are clearly concerns about releasing sensitive information to other people, so we can understand why the NHS has the problem.

There have been initiatives in different parts of the country to try to address the problem. Tayside has started to inch forward and make some progress and Strathclyde introduced—forgive me; I cannot remember exactly what it is called—a community planning unit where people from police, housing, social work and the fire service were located in one building. There is certainly some evidence that that is helping people to build up a network and relationships, and to start sharing information better. However, it is a national issue.

Colin Beattie: So, we will have to wait and see what the new organisation can negotiate.

Gordon Neill: Yes.

Colin Beattie: Paragraph 59 states:

“In 2007, Audit Scotland commented on the need ... to improve ... performance information”.

Paragraph 62 says that

“effort was made to establish a national performance framework in 2009”,

but it continues by saying that

“Only in recent months has progress been made in agreeing an initial set of common measures.”

Would it be correct to say that there has not been much focus on that, or that it has not been prioritised?

Gordon Neill: Yes, I would say that that is a fair comment. The Chief Fire Officers Association Scotland agreed a menu of performance measures, but in practice individual services picked from the menu as they saw fit, and some of the definitions that they used were different. Progress has been slow.

Colin Beattie: That is astonishing. Paragraph 62 states that, even when services have agreed the performance measures, the definitions are different. To have standard definitions seems to me to be a pretty basic thing.

Gordon Neill: Yes.

Colin Beattie: Okay.

John Baillie: I will elaborate. The Accounts Commission and Audit Scotland have banged on about performance indicators and performance information for years and years. Members are probably familiar with the recent benchmarking project for councils. We were part of that, with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers.

Generally and initially—I have put two adverbs together—there is hesitation among those whose performance might be on show as a consequence of indicators. Why would people be keen to provide information if they could get away with not doing so, given that it involves the public clearly holding them to account? There is general reticence around the place, but once the process starts people realise that they can use the tool for their own purposes. Most information should start from that; people should use it for their own purposes, but they should also, as it happens, be accountable to the public for what it shows.

Once we start the ball rolling in an area, it starts to gain momentum, and doing the work becomes a non-event. I encourage the new board to get that under way and to follow it through.

The business of definitions is not as easy as it sounds. Ultimately, a definition is agreed and everyone applies it, but from what I have seen of the benchmarking project, it is astonishingly difficult to get data that are fully clean, collared and held on to consistently up and down the country in each data set. However, you are right that that can and should be done. I agree with you.

Colin Beattie: I hope that the incoming national organisation prioritises the issue.

My third point runs on from that and relates to paragraphs 57 and 58. In my area, Lothian and Borders Fire and Rescue Service is active in, and

puts a great deal of effort into, fire prevention and safety programmes. It is disappointing to read in paragraph 58 that

“no robust assessments of the impact of these educational programmes”

has been found, and that

“it is difficult to assess”

whether organisations are wasting their time. I suspect that they are not wasting their time, but nothing backs that up.

John Baillie: I will offer a general point and Gordon Neill will speak about specifics. The general point is that, without the fire services getting cost data that measure spending on preventative programmes, and allocating costs to see whether programmes are value for money, it is difficult for them to prioritise properly what they do and to decide how much to emphasise prevention. There is a general call for the new board to get work under way on proper cost data and measurements of the spending that is allocated to activities.

Gordon Neill: We saw no evaluation of the community education projects beyond happy sheets—the sheets that ask how a course has been presented. That is not to say that the projects are not worth while; they are wide ranging and involve the police, health service people, fire and rescue services and a number of professions, and do not address just fire and rescue issues, but much wider social issues, and their benefits are long term.

We do not pretend that measuring the impact is easy. It is difficult, but if money and effort are being put in, it is important to find out whether they are making a difference. As we went round, the intuitive feeling among all the professionals was that the projects are worth while and important. The worry was that such projects might fall between stools as a result of budget cuts, and that shared initiatives might end as services cut their individual budgets.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): In his opening comments, Mr Baillie talked about “limited collaboration” between the services. It might be a bit naive of us to assume that that collaboration will become perfect when we have the single service.

I am thinking more about the relationship between fire services and councils, particularly in relation to the deployment and maintenance of things such as smoke alarms, and councils’ approach to installing sprinkler systems in new houses. The picture is bound still to vary throughout Scotland. Is work going on to iron out inconsistencies in the approaches of existing fire services and to ensure that the approach to issues

such as I have mentioned will be more consistent when the new single fire service starts to operate in April?

John Baillie: I do not know what the new board is addressing, as of today. However, I know that the inconsistencies among regions and boards are being looked at in order to see what is the best way to proceed. A judgment has to be made about the extent to which inconsistencies should prevail because some things fit particular areas well. The new board is considering those matters and trying to come to initial views on them.

Gordon Neill: The introduction of a national integrated risk management plan will undoubtedly help, to an extent. There will be much more consistency nationally on issues, including the emphasis on prevention and matching resources to risk. However, as John Baillie suggested, one of the costs of democracy is variability; some issues are for local democratic decisions.

Mr Coffey mentioned sprinklers, which is a good example. A year or two ago, Fife Council decided to fit sprinklers in every room in all council new builds. That is expensive, but it can be argued that it will be cost effective in the long run. It is for individual councils and housing departments to decide on such matters; the fire service cannot in itself make those decisions.

Mr Coffey asked a good question, but it is not easy to give a simple answer.

Willie Coffey: The report was written about six months ago, in July last year, so I expect that the current fire services will have addressed some, if not many, of the issues in it, and that some evidence that improvements in collaboration—even with the existing services—have taken place. I suppose that we can take up that matter with others.

I want to ask about the fire services’ rescue capability. There was a fairly well-covered incident in my constituency, which is in the Strathclyde area, involving a rope rescue which was the subject of various reports, reviews and inquiries. Do you have evidence that that issue has been addressed across the fire services in Scotland and that there is capability across Scotland should further incidents of that type occur?

Gordon Neill: To be honest, I cannot give a definitive answer to that. That incident caused shockwaves throughout the fire and rescue service, and I know that people have learned a lot from what happened or did not happen. However, I cannot give you positive assurance, as we did not look at that issue in the audit.

John Baillie: Could we come back to the committee on that if we have any data?

Willie Coffey: Of course. That is probably an issue for us to follow up. Rope rescue is a major part of any fire service, but clear deficiencies were identified in the report on that incident. As an elected member, now that we have moved on from that particular incident, and given your comments about limited collaboration, I am keen to know whether lessons have been learned and whether there is capability throughout Scotland to deal with such incidents.

The Convener: Perhaps you could write to the committee on that, Mr Baillie.

John Baillie: I am happy to do that.

Willie Coffey: I appreciate that.

Tavish Scott: Convener, can I ask a further question?

The Convener: Yes—if it is short and a supplementary.

Tavish Scott: It is a short supplementary on Mr Coffey's point.

Mr Neill said in response to Mr Coffey's question that resources would be matched to risk in the context of a national integrated risk management plan. Does that mean that, when a body does that assessment, resources will inevitably go to the main centres of population? Mr Neill talked about the Tollcross station, which will always have more call-outs than other stations. Is it the case that the assessment of risk will always find that the needs are greater in the centres of population?

Gordon Neill: No. There is already a big fire station in Tollcross, so I do not think that the data will suggest that there is a need for another one, although I am just an auditor and it is not for me to second guess what the IRMP will show. The point is that there is a limited amount of resource, so consideration needs to be given to whether it is where it needs to be. It is not a given that a national IRMP will draw resources from the Highlands and Islands down to the central belt. There are risks in the Highlands and Islands.

10:45

Bob Doris: I want to return to the worrying level of accidental fires in Scotland compared with the level in the rest of the UK. John Baillie suggested that potential reasons for that include deprivation, smoking and alcohol consumption. Another committee of which I am a member has recently considered minimum alcohol pricing, which we hope might help to tackle that issue. Did you compare the rate of accidental fires in, say, Glasgow to the rate in areas in England that have similar demography, such as Liverpool, in order to compare like with like? You have said that there are more accidental fires in Scotland, but we might

not be comparing like with like. Have you attempted to do that?

Gordon Neill: We attempted that to a limited extent, although we had to be careful not to let the audit become a major research project. In areas such as Liverpool or Manchester, the patterns are similar.

Bob Doris: The levels of accidental fires in places such as Liverpool and Manchester are similar to those in similar areas in Scotland. There is a more level playing field.

Gordon Neill: Yes. Research has been done on that.

Bob Doris: That is interesting, because the differential is dramatic. As an elected representative, I want action on that if it is needed, but you suggest that the reasons that Mr Baillie set out suitably explain the current situation. However, we still have to tackle the issue.

The report points out that additional funds are provided for preventative measures in England. However, we have established that there are reasons other than funding for the difference between Scotland and England. Is the quality of the additional investment in England being benchmarked to show whether it is getting results?

Gordon Neill: Yes. I hesitate slightly, because I am struggling to remember the details of a piece of academic research that was carried out in England and Wales that showed that the additional emphasis on prevention is having an impact. I cannot give you the name of the study off the top of my head, but research has been done on that.

Bob Doris: It would be helpful if you could point us to that research.

My final question, which is what I have been driving at, is this: how do we pay? It is all very well for the politicians round this table to say that we should spend another £0.5 million on preventative measures, but we would have to find the money. That is the challenge for us all.

It is interesting that fire boards have different strategies for preventative measures. Some use full-time firefighters, some use retained firefighters, and I see that Tayside Fire and Rescue makes heavy use of a voluntary service. Do you have any views on which model is more effective? This is a commonsense view, but it sounds like an expensive intervention to put a fully trained and skilled firefighter in a person's home to give a fire safety assessment. I do not want to use the word "cheaper"; is there a more affordable and more pragmatic way of doing that work?

John Baillie: Part of the problem is that it is, as I said, sometimes difficult to measure value for

money, because the activities are not costed in a way that enables the benefit to be matched to the spending. A preliminary question in deciding whether something is value for money is to ask, "What is the money and what is the value?"

Gordon Neill: At the end of the day, we are just auditors, so it is not for us to have a professional view on that; it is for fire and rescue professionals to decide on the most effective approach. However, instinctively, to me the approach that Tayside and others have used, with an emphasis on volunteers, seems to be more cost effective. The issue is broader than just the voluntary sector. For example, Fife Council uses its housing department to do such work—although for it, as a unitary authority, that is easier to do than it would be for others. If housing department staff happen to be going into a house, they will do a fire safety check. There are other models that could be used.

Bob Doris: Exhibit 17 on page 37 of the report sets out precisely the point that you are trying to make. The model in Tayside of using the voluntary sector is worth while, particularly in relation to reaching the hard-to-reach groups who could be most at risk. Unfortunately, although Tayside has the highest percentage of home safety visits, it actually had a modest increase in the number of fires, and other models are perhaps providing better results. If we look at the issue in two or four years, should we expect to see a dramatic improvement? Is exhibit 17 the benchmark by which we should scrutinise the matter?

John Baillie: We should expect the new board to look at the issue closely and to try to determine any anomalies and the reasons behind particular trends. The presentation in exhibit 17 is really just a starter for 10; at issue is the reason for that situation, which is, of course, what you are asking about—quite properly, if I may say so. The new board needs to research that and then to proceed to the improvements that we hope for.

Gordon Neill: The point that we tried to get across in exhibit 17 is not so much that that is the definitive way to measure and evaluate the impact of home fire-safety visits. The underlying point is that, nationally, the services do not evaluate that work. As auditors, we had to consider what would be a reasonable way to assess that. One way seemed to be to look at the number of home fire-safety visits and the change in the number of house fires. Tayside Fire and Rescue thought that the evaluation was reasonable, but it pointed out that, actually, the number of fire deaths in Tayside has come down significantly and that that would be a better measure. The eight services would probably argue for nine different measures. The underlying point is that the national service needs to find a proper way of evaluating preventative work.

The Convener: I thank Mr Baillie and Mr Neill for their evidence. You have given us useful pointers to the areas in which we can hope to see progress when we consider the Auditor General's audits of the new national service. The discussion has been extremely useful.

“Best Value in police authorities and police forces in Scotland—Overview report”

10:52

The Convener: We move to consideration of “Best Value in police authorities and police forces in Scotland—Overview report”, which is a joint report by the Accounts Commission and Her Majesty’s inspector of constabulary for Scotland. Mr Baillie from the Accounts Commission is still with us. He is joined by Andrew Laing, who is HM inspector of constabulary, and Martin Walker, who is an assistant director with Audit Scotland. The briefing will be on the same basis as the previous one. We are running a little late, so I ask colleagues to stay focused, and we will get through it.

I invite Mr Baillie and Mr Laing to make introductory remarks, if they wish to do so.

John Baillie: You will be happy to be told that my introduction is a bit shorter than the one for the previous agenda item.

The Convener: I was speaking to committee members.

John Baillie: I will return to my preferred format of a brief introduction.

We worked closely on the report with Her Majesty’s inspector of constabulary, Andrew Laing, who is here with me to present it. The report draws on the best-value audits and inspections of the eight police authorities in Scotland that the Accounts Commission carried out jointly with the inspectorate. I will make some brief remarks on the police authorities, and Andrew Laing will remark on the police forces.

The background on crime rates is generally positive. The crime rate in Scotland is lower than that in England and Wales for most types of crime, although violent crime is greater in Scotland than it is in England and Wales, and elsewhere in Europe. Aggregate levels of reported crime have been falling, although reported levels of domestic abuse and racially aggravated crimes have been increasing.

The context of our report is similar to that of our report on the fire services, in that a new national police force and board are to be in place from April this year. Therefore, the lessons from our work on leadership and governance in relation to police authorities are similar to those relating to fire authorities.

We found a mixed picture in how police authorities provide leadership and carry out their role to best effect. In general, there is much room

for improvement. We found improvements in the way in which police authority members scrutinise their forces and hold chief constables to account, but in our view there is still not the appropriate level of challenge, particularly in relation to value for money and risk.

In aggregate, we found that members of police authorities need to understand their roles better. That point must be considered by all stakeholders in the new arrangements. The respective roles of the Scottish Police Authority, the police service of Scotland and local authorities and their partners need to be clearly understood, in accordance with principles of good governance and accountability. That will be critical, because policing faces the same challenges as other parts of the public sector, with competing priorities in a time of financial stringency.

Our engagement with the current police authorities since publication of the individual audit and inspection reports has been encouraging, in that the authorities have committed themselves to working towards a positive transition to the new national arrangements. We provide at appendix 1 in our report a checklist of the issues for current police authority members to consider prior to April. We are confident that they are being acted on.

Appendix 2 in our report also sets out 24 key issues for the stakeholders in the new arrangements. I hope that that helps in providing the agenda to ensure a successful transition to, and the establishment of, the new arrangements.

I and the other witnesses will be happy to answer questions, but Andrew Laing wants to say something first.

Andrew Laing (Her Majesty’s Inspector of Constabulary for Scotland): I will echo one or two of John Baillie’s comments.

The report tends to show that policing performance in Scotland is good and strong against a range of measures. The record highs that are reported publicly in the press are hugely welcomed. The service was found to be well managed within reducing and reduced budgets against real-term costs, and showed strong levels of effective leadership.

It is important to note that there is good evidence of focus on partnership working by the service and many others. It is also important to note that local community policing has been at the forefront of each force’s strategic approach to policing in its area. Equally, there was a strong commitment to diversity and equality. All the forces that we examined are meeting their statutory responsibilities; often, they are going beyond them.

That said, there is room for improvement, primarily in improving understanding of the cost—not the budget, but the actual cost—of policing. I am sure that you have heard Mr Emery talking about that. That relates to the overall function of policing and the constituent elements. Some of the questions that were asked about costs in the fire service are probably equally pertinent and relevant to policing.

The report also shows that there is scope to improve accountability through better developed and supported governance. That point is at the front of many of our minds, at the moment.

The Convener: There is no question but that the report is very positive on performance against outcome measures. However, I have a question about one of the paragraphs that looks forward to the creation of the new single police force. Paragraph 22 says:

“It is critical that the respective roles of the Scottish Police Authority ... the Police Service of Scotland, local authorities and their partners are clearly understood and that policing services are managed in accordance with well-established principles of good governance and accountability.”

You must, therefore, have been horrified to watch the dispute that has broken out between the chair of the new Scottish Police Authority and the chief constable of the new police service of Scotland about exactly those lines of governance, accountability and responsibility.

John Baillie: If you were to substitute “interested to note” for “horrified”, you would have described my initial professional response to the matter. It is almost inevitable that there will be disagreements at the formation of a new service of that kind. You are alluding to the fact that it is a public disagreement.

In the report, we make the point on a few occasions that whatever is decided about who does what and when must be clear and unambiguous so that there is no further scope for confusion and disagreement. That would include the role at local level for members, councils and commanders. Andrew Laing might want to talk about the pathfinder projects that are currently under way on that. It seems to us that the matter needs some clarification, and the pathfinders will inform that. There could be different approaches for different regions of the country—who knows? The clarification is the key.

11:00

Andrew Laing: I offer an observation on that. The best-value report tends to reflect HMIC’s report on governance and accountability, published two years ago. The best-value report says that the system of governance and

accountability in the current set-up is good, although its implementation and the support that is given to councillors to undertake their role in holding chief officers to account is perhaps less well developed. It is envisaged that that model of governance, in which the authority and the force are segregated and in which the authority is responsible for governance and accountability and the force is responsible for direction and control, will move forward. The legislation, which is ample in its articulation, is capable of interpretation.

With a new service, new legislation and new leaders there were always going to be challenges around boundaries, as we are seeing at the moment. The challenge, both for HMIC and in general, is to create a system of governance that provides that level of segregation, allows the service to exercise its responsibilities under law, and holds it to far better account than hitherto. Holding the service to account will happen through a professionalised board with good levels of support that can do analytical work and ask incisive questions to hold the chief and the force to account.

Colin Keir: It is good that things regarding the dispute appear to be moving apace. If it is not sorted out soon, the Justice Committee will ask for a discussion of the problems faced by the two gentlemen concerned.

Mr Baillie, you said that local service problems were coming up and you seemed surprised that there may be differences locally or between localities. I understood that that was bound to happen, simply because of local needs and the fact that the newly constituted boards would see those as their priorities. We were always going to get those differences, so I did not understand your surprise at that. I assume that the recording back and the reporting mechanisms will be the same as in the fire service.

John Baillie: I did not mean to mislead the committee. It is entirely possible and entirely justified that there will be local differences in response to local needs. The question is the extent to which that happens and is justified and the extent to which it is not justified. It seems to me, frankly, that the local performance is absolutely crucial. To be effective, it must respond to community needs, and it is the role of both the police and the councillors to identify those. If I expressed surprise, I may have overstated that aspect of it and misled you.

Colin Keir: We went through the question earlier, but are there any glaring differences between the board set-ups for the police and fire services, or will identical problems be faced?

John Baillie: In principle, they are identical, but that is not the question that you are asking. You

are asking about the reality of comparing one region with another.

Colin Keir: I should perhaps make my question clearer. We heard earlier about the councillors, the reporting back mechanisms and all that sort of thing. Are we looking at the same problems?

John Baillie: In general, yes. There is not the broad support that some police authorities need for their members to be able to challenge and scrutinise effectively the strategy that is proposed by the chief constable. Again—and for similar reasons—there is an officer-led tendency. Andrew Laing and Martin Walker might want to comment further on the matter.

Andrew Laing: Perhaps I can provide a bit of context. One concern that emerged in the best-value reports related to the fact that a number of board members tended to be rather parochial in their questioning of larger forces such as Strathclyde and Lothian and Borders. The local arrangements that are emerging through the pathfinders free up local members in that respect, which I think is a positive step. Instead of challenging the governance of finance, corporate human resources and corporate strategy, locally elected members will now be able to focus on what is important to the local community in their discussions with the local commander and local partners.

I might be able to give the committee some confidence by pointing out that, while the local pathfinder scrutiny arrangements are very much developing at their own pace, the Scottish Government is providing broad overall guidance on those developments. This month, HMIC has commissioned a thematic inspection that we hope will report by mid-February and which will examine the emerging arrangements and try to provide some guidance, not on how this should be done, but on the best principles that should be applied. We are carrying out that inspection with Audit Scotland in order to develop what we would describe as best-value characteristics—and, more important, we are doing it jointly with the fire service inspectorate to ensure that the views on police and fire arrangements are shared by both inspectorates.

Spinning back a bit, in response to an earlier question on fire service performance, I should point out that HMIC has developed 22 strategic indicators for policing, is about to merge the fire service and police inspectorate's back-office service and will assist the fire service in developing broad strategic indicators against which it can be measured.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): In your report, you say that police support staff numbers are falling, indicate that, in the short term, those

posts are being covered by police officers and suggest that strategic workforce planning will be an issue for the new police service to address. With regard to ensuring that we have the appropriate people with the appropriate skills and, as far as cost effectiveness is concerned, on the appropriate wage, will workforce planning be helped or hindered by having a minimum of 17,234 police officers?

John Baillie: I certainly understand your concern about what is a big question. As the report points out, there is a general question about the current model's sustainability. Some backfilling is going on at the moment, and I am sure that Andrew Laing will want to say more about that—indeed, we were talking about it before we came into the room—and the use or perhaps misuse of police officers in staff functions. As you say, a minimum level for police officers has been established.

Andrew Laing will elaborate on the issue, because quite a lot of work has been done on it.

Andrew Laing: There has been some pretty high-profile press coverage about what we would class as reverse civilianisation—in other words, the notion that police staff are removed from the service and replaced with police officers. Indeed, only yesterday, there was a fair spread in the Tayside area.

Just to set a bit of context, I point out that there have always been individual instances of police officers going back to fill in vacant police staff posts. The reality is that it is a cost-effective means of backfilling in the short term. Very often, there are police officers who are not fully fit for front-line duties, who might be pregnant, who might have short-term injuries or who would for other reasons be out of the service and there needs to be scope to accommodate them within it. In short measure, it is a good, cost-effective way of making use of valuable resources.

Of course, police officers have generic skills and can fulfil a number of roles. However, the report draws out the very important question whether, as we look to shrink the police staff side of the business, which will inevitably happen as a result of the cost-cutting measures, this sort of thing will happen wholesale in the long term. The challenge that the report draws out for the Scottish Police Authority and the chief constable is to ensure that it does not happen routinely, but only if there is a valid business case for it. If you go back to the 1980s, it was a simple calculation—a member of police staff was around half the cost of a police officer. That business case has long since gone. Very often police staff come in at around the same cost as, if not more than, police officers who can undertake the jobs.

Tavish Scott: I will go back to Mr Laing's interesting observation to the committee with respect to the convener's question about paragraph 22. The area that I know best, and therefore the force that I know best, is the Northern Constabulary. At the moment, the human resources function and the finance function of that police area are the responsibility of the chief constable—is that correct?

Andrew Laing: Yes.

Tavish Scott: Therefore, would it follow that in the new set-up, the national force chief constable should control the human resources and the finance functions of the overall Scottish force?

Andrew Laing: If we were simply moving forward on a like-for-like basis, yes. However, in my professional view, that system has emerged—where finance and HR sit with the chief constable—because policing is hugely dynamic. Quick-time decisions need to be made that inevitably rely on HR, HR policy and finance being available so, under any guise, the chief constable would have to have that level of function.

Beyond that, if you look at the joint police board within Grampian, it has a finance function—a treasurer. The responsibility of the treasurer is not to carry out the day-to-day running of finance for the police; it is to provide the board with the relevant information and challenges that the board can then hold the chief to account on. That is exactly how I think the system was determined to be.

In terms of HR, it is slightly different, but we have to bear it in mind that the new Scottish Police Authority, with the back office that comes with it, has a significant resource—a significant number of people—so there is a human resource element to that and we need to factor in the responsibilities of the authority. The current debate and discussion is about to what extent those two functions provide direction and control over the resource. I will simplify that: the force needs a human resource function and a finance function and the authority also needs those functions; the question in terms of governance is whether the Scottish Police Authority wants to hold the chief constable to account for those elements or whether the Scottish Police Authority wants to have much more direction and control.

In my evidence to the Justice Committee, I made what I thought was a reasonably clear statement, which was that the legislation allows for both. I do not think that there is any difficulty in interpreting that. Section 4 in the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 gives an opportunity for the Scottish Police Authority to set up memorandums of understanding, schemes of delegation and schemes of administration that will

allow and facilitate the efficient running of policing, and I think that that exists.

The challenge is around how much the board wants to retain responsibility for governance and accountability and how much it wants to exercise direction and control. If it is the latter, somebody else who is independent must exercise the governance and accountability role. There needs to be clear segregation. In reality, I think that that role will fall back to HMIC, the Auditor General and, ultimately, the Justice Committee. I am not sure that the legislation was designed to do that, but it allows for that interpretation.

Tavish Scott: That is very helpful. Let me get this absolutely straight. Your assessment of what is going on is that your office, Audit Scotland and the Parliament will have to be responsible in the future for accountability and questioning and scrutiny, because the board that is being set up will simply seek to control aspects of the chief constable's work?

Andrew Laing: That is close to what I mean. What I am really saying is that there is a spectrum. At one end sit governance and accountability and at the other end sit direction and control. The further apart those are, in terms of audit and scrutiny, the better; that segregation is an important factor and it is a factor that we have always seen within policing and police authorities.

The more the board tends towards direction and control, the less it can legitimately hold itself to account. Somebody else would have to do that. My view is that the more the board veers towards direction and control, the more locus and the more intrusion will have to come through Audit Scotland from the Auditor General, from me, and, I suspect, from the Parliament through the Justice Committee.

11:15

Tavish Scott: I asked that question because, as the Public Audit Committee, we have a clear interest, through Audit Scotland, in where that balance would be reached on the spectrum that you have interestingly described.

You talked about local members. Would it be fair to say that, while in the new set-up local members will sit on some kind of local committee that is yet to be exactly prescribed in different parts of the 32 local authorities throughout Scotland, they will not have any say over the budget other than to say, "Yes, sir"?

Andrew Laing: There is a requirement under legislation for local members to agree on the local policing plan but, when it comes to resource and finance, the answer is that they have no direction over budget setting. There has to be recourse, and

that comes naturally through default, either in negotiation with the local commander, failing which an escalation to the assistant chief and, potentially, to the deputy and the chief. However, there is always direct access back to the Scottish Police Authority, so that negotiation can continue.

Tavish Scott: In your earlier answer, you mentioned the responsibilities of the Parliament and this committee. Do you envisage more of a challenge function for this committee and, indeed, the Justice Committee in future because there will be no effective financial oversight—or at least there will be oversight but no direction—by the 32 local authorities throughout Scotland?

Andrew Laing: In simple terms, the answer is yes. There needs to be an interest by the Parliament. If good governance and accountability sits into place, we will be working to nationally set priorities. The Scottish Police Authority will set a plan and the chief constable will set a plan and those plans will be extended into the local command areas—in fact, the local authority. Chief Constable House has said that a plan will be agreed for each ward area in Scotland—

Tavish Scott: As an islander, I carefully noticed that he said, “Except in the islands.”

Andrew Laing: —except in the islands.

That linear progression should suggest that we will do the appropriate things and that we will have the appropriate national priorities within the local context. There is a real opportunity through the local committees for their elected members to influence and shape the local focus on those priorities.

The answer is complicated. Two things need to happen in terms of the involvement of the Scottish Parliament in overseeing the budget and its right and proper distribution. First, we need a really good system of governance and accountability. It comes back to the point about whether the Scottish Police Authority will be an authority of direction and control, or governance and accountability. Secondly, there needs to be feedback from local areas to say that, although they are broadly happy with what is happening, they think that their resource distribution has been distorted.

Our role in HMIC will be to provide profiles across the 32 local authority areas. The performance measures that we are developing are designed to be applied across all 32 local authorities. There is a level of benchmarking within that. That information will be fed to the Scottish Police Authority and will be available to the Parliament and to its committees.

Colin Beattie: Overall, the report is quite positive. Of course, being the Public Audit Committee, we have to look for the bits to pick at.

I am looking at paragraphs 113 to 115 on special constables. Although the number of special constables has not really fluctuated for several years, there is a lot of variation among the forces. It is also clear that there has been a huge increase in the number of hours that these people work—paragraph 115 correctly refers to the potential impact of the European working time directive. Special constables are an effective resource—from the point of view of the police authorities, they are cheaper. However, in some cases the number of hours that they work seems to have doubled. That is quite an ask for people who generally have another job. How is that being managed?

Andrew Laing: There are a couple of issues here. The arrangements for the employment—if I can use that term—of special constables have changed over the past five years. Historically, special constables were recruited on a voluntary basis and received no remuneration. It is probably fair to say that the number of special constables was previously higher, but the number of hours that they worked and the commitment that they gave was perhaps lower.

Around four or five years ago, those arrangements were changed and a fixed payment was made available to special constables over a period. At the same time, a review was undertaken of the training of special constables. Special constables need to be trained up fully, but they are hugely valuable because, although they are cheaper, they are a very effective resource that can perform all the functions of a constable. Over a period, there have been a smaller number of special constables who are more skilled and better trained, so I guess that there has had to be a return on investment, in that there needs to be some return on the significant level of training that has been invested in those individuals.

The working time directive is indeed a challenge. Forces across the country are involved in monitoring special constables' working time, which needs to be looked at against the backdrop of their other employment.

Does that answer all your questions, or have I missed a section?

Colin Beattie: I am also interested in where all this is going. What is the pattern for the future? So far, the trend seems to be that there is a lesser number of special constables—in some forces, it is considerably less—but a huge increase in the number of hours. Where is that heading? Is there any sign of that tailing off?

Andrew Laing: No, I do not think so.

Sorry, one point that I missed is the more recent advent of people moving into the special constabulary as a first step towards becoming a police officer. That is a change from the past, when many people would come into the special constabulary for, if you like, a part-time career. Now, people who apply for the police are encouraged to become a special constable first or, alternatively, if they are unsuccessful at their first interview, they are encouraged to become a special constable. People will spend a couple of years as a special constable and draw on that training and they will then be taken into the service. That is the pattern and that strategic approach will continue to be taken, but my understanding is that there will continue to be a huge emphasis on trying to recruit to the special constabulary over the period ahead.

Colin Beattie: As of March last year, there were 1,443 special constables. What percentage of that number is accounted for by people who joined the special constabulary with a view to joining the regular police force? In other words, how many use the special constabulary as a sort of training ground as much as anything else?

Andrew Laing: To be entirely honest, I cannot put a figure on that, although I could come back to you with one. More and more, the service is encouraging people to do that. That is not simply about getting someone on a voluntary basis whom the service does not have to pay; the predominant idea is that people can come and test it. People do not really know what policing is like until they have come and tested it, so there is a real opportunity for people to come in and experience what a police officer does and then choose whether that is the right lifestyle for them.

Colin Beattie: That makes sense, but I would be interested to know what proportion fall into that category.

The Convener: If Mr Laing could write to us with that information, that would be appreciated.

Andrew Laing: Yes.

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): My question is for Mr Baillie. In the course of working on the two reports, did you see a discernible difference between the police service and the fire service on things such as partnership working and the way in which they approached shared services? If so, did you see anything that the national services could learn from?

John Baillie: Both services try hard to work with their partners in that area, and there is lots of evidence for that. I see that continuing and, indeed, strengthening as the new services come into play. Perhaps Martin Walker can embellish that general point.

Martin Walker (Audit Scotland): Part of the story here is that the consistent message is difference, if that makes sense. We did not see the same thing in all areas, as there were different approaches to partnership project working and so on and we saw different things in different places. That probably comes back to our earlier discussion about the fact that what works in one area might not necessarily be fit for purpose in others.

We tended to find that the positive aspects of partnership working included a commitment to involvement in community planning partnerships and in groups and projects—that kind of stuff—but we did not find many more formal partnership arrangements. That ties in with the earlier discussions on whether, for example, there could be just one HR function that covered all forces. There was not a huge number of formal partnerships to share backroom services, but we found that, on projects and people working together on the ground, across the piece there was a pretty good pattern of partnership in some shape or form in all the areas that we visited.

James Dornan: Did you find that, where that was strong, it was strong for both the police and the fire service in that area, or was it uniformly strong across the country?

Martin Walker: I did not cover the fire stuff; I covered the police stuff, so it is difficult to comment on that. I know, from our other audit work, that when there is a culture of partnership working in an area or within organisations, that tends to permeate all the organisations. If we find that a council is involved in good partnership working, it must, by definition, be working well in partnership with somebody else. Typically, that involves the likes of the police, the fire service and so on.

When we carry out audit work in the Highlands, we find that, because of the nature of the area, the people and the localities, it is almost part of the fabric of society that people will know each other and will work in partnership. We tend to find good partnership working on the ground in the Highlands, although we would not necessarily find that reflected in more formal structures in a more formal setting.

The situation varies, but we generally found that partnership working was much more commonplace and was becoming part of the culture right across the piece.

John Baillie: I will supplement that in terms of the fire service. We did not detect any difference in the willingness of either service to participate in partnership-type approaches to sharing any information that they could share and working

together on projects. There is just the same willingness to work within the family, if you like.

James Dornan: Was there any difference in the effectiveness?

John Baillie: The honest answer is that I do not know. Often, they were working in the same partnerships and it was difficult to measure.

James Dornan: Thank you. I am sorry for putting you on the spot about the fire service.

Willie Coffey: This is probably one of the best reports that I have seen as a member of the committee for a number of years. We must put on record our congratulations to the police for delivering the service that they deliver to Scotland's public. I am glad to state that, across a whole range of indicators, there is improvement across the board.

I return to the issues of accountability, scrutiny and the role of elected members—our local councillors. There is some comment in the report about the levels of engagement among our local councillors in their scrutiny role. Although training needs have been identified—significant training programmes are going on in local authorities—surely the scrutiny role is also predicated on quality information being given to local elected members. In paragraph 49 of the report, inconsistencies are noted in the quality of the information that is provided to local elected members to enable them to conduct such scrutiny. What measures are in place, particularly with the establishment of the single service, to ensure consistency in the information and data that are provided to local boards and councillors to enable them to engage much more effectively in their scrutiny role?

John Baillie: I will take a longer run at that question in my response. We have made the point several times in individual reports that it is not just that the members are not provided with the information, meaning that they cannot scrutinise, but that they should know to ask for information. I am talking about daft-laddie and daft-lassie questions that, almost inevitably, are quite piercing questions that get right to the nub of things. They are not as ill-equipped as some of them may think that they are, and if they do not have an answer to a question they should be asking, "Why is that not in the regular scrutiny package? Why is that not in the regular information that I get?"

I ask Martin Walker to respond on the other aspect of your question.

Martin Walker: In contrast to the fire service audits, which were done over a relatively short timeframe, this sequence of audits started in 2009, which is when we wrote the first report, so it covers a longer time period. It is interesting—we

comment on this in the report—that we saw the quality of performance reporting and performance information improve as we went around doing the audits. We might like to think that that was partly because other forces were picking up on the findings that we were publishing in the audits and choosing to make some changes. That is partly what audits are supposed to be about.

11:30

A point that, for me, is very relevant to a lot of this discussion, and which echoes John Baillie's previous point, is the need for members to have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. In the report, we say that in many boards there is a fairly passive relationship between the board and the chief constable and that, although the board will scrutinise the information that is presented to it, it will not, as John Baillie made clear, ask for particular information. It is possible to track that back to members' clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and their understanding that it is entirely fitting and appropriate for it to be part of their role to ask for information. Boards seem to have got into a sort of "It's aye been" way of doing things—they get these kinds of reports at this kind of frequency covering these kinds of areas—and might collectively have almost forgotten that they have the power and indeed responsibility to ask for information and to determine what information they get, which will put them in a much better position to carry out the scrutiny that is part of their responsibility.

On what that performance information might look like, the issue of the use of comparative information arose quite regularly in the audit work. We found that boards would typically get reports containing the latest performance information. The better reports would compare that information with information from last year or the previous quarter, but did not compare it with, say, the Scottish average or a similar force. At the risk of beating the same drum all the time, I think that there is an issue with board members being provided with the level of performance information that they reasonably ought to expect in order to be able to ask the daft-laddie and daft-lassie questions that John Baillie alluded to. That area can be developed and, from a national perspective, I think that there will be a better opportunity for local members or national board members to really understand their roles and responsibilities and to set their expectations with regard to the performance information that they need to fulfil their role effectively.

Willie Coffey: That was very helpful. I have to say that most councillors I know—certainly those in East Ayrshire—are not slow in coming forward.

Are local authorities focusing more on the strategic nature of scrutiny to ensure that our local councillors can step in and not only ask those daft-laddie questions but really engage in the strategic issues that will be very important for the service as it moves forward?

John Baillie: We have been encouraging councillors to take on a corporate strategic role on all manner of fronts. Sometimes they do; other times they do not. That is where it all starts. When it comes to, say, policing activities, councillors might have been knocked back by the debate about strategic and operational matters that has been going on for ever and, as Martin Walker has said, might have too readily accepted the response that something was operational and therefore none of their business. Obviously, I am simplifying, but I think that the challenge to such a response has been less thorough than it might be.

Paragraph 70 of our report says:

“we found in only a minority of police authorities ... members had influenced the type and quality of performance information they received to allow them to determine whether forces are delivering their strategic objectives.”

There is therefore evidence that only a minority of authorities are saying, “That’s what you’ve provided me with, but I want something different.”

The Convener: I thank all our witnesses, especially Mr Baillie, who has taken part in both evidence sessions.

This has been something of a transitional session, because next year the reports on the fire service and the police will be laid by the Auditor General. Given that, I propose that we do one thing and ask the Accounts Commission to do something else. First, we can send the *Official Report* of today’s meeting to the Auditor General to draw her attention to the points that we and the witnesses have made about things that it will be important to get right in the new set-up.

I also note that at the end of a parliamentary session a committee usually writes a legacy paper for its successor committee and I wonder whether it might be useful to ask the Accounts Commission to prepare such a document. It would not be a lengthy paper but would, from the commission’s experience of carrying out best-value reports, summarise the key things that it thinks will be important to get right or even get better when it comes to the audits of the national police force and the national fire service.

John Baillie: I am happy to accept the general principle behind your proposal and to discuss the detail offline. In the meantime, one immediate response that I can give the committee is that both reports have an appendix—I think that in both cases it is appendix 2—that highlights key issues

for the fire service, the police service and the new SPA. Interestingly—this might sound like an advertisement, but it is not meant to be one—when I was re-reading the reports, I noted that every point was a substantive one. Both new boards have a big agenda to get under way, and it is going to take more than 10 minutes to sort it out.

The Convener: That is a very fair comment. The tables in the reports certainly act as a starting point, but I thought that it might be interesting to give you the opportunity to elaborate on some of them for our benefit when we come back to the issue a year from now and see what is happening.

John Baillie: I am happy to contribute.

The Convener: Thank you.

I suggest that we have a two-minute break.

11:37

Meeting suspended.

11:41

*On resuming—***“Major Capital Projects”**

The Convener: Item 5 on our agenda concerns the six-monthly updates that we get from the Scottish Government on the “Major Capital Projects” report. The latest update has been circulated to members. It includes all the things that we asked for: information on community benefits, an indication of changes, and information on the non-profit-distributing projects and the hub programme. As no one has anything to raise, shall we just agree to note the update?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Section 23 Report**“Commonwealth Games 2014 progress report 2: Planning for the delivery of the XXth Games”**

11:42

The Convener: Item 6 concerns another update from the Scottish Government; this one is on the section 23 progress report on planning for the Commonwealth games. We raised some questions about security. The update tells us, as we probably already knew, that the budget for security has been increased. Does anyone want to raise any issues?

Mark Griffin: The committee recognised that the security budget would go up and down, so I do not have any concerns about it going up, but an issue that was raised in a debate in the chamber was who would scrutinise the additional spending of £37.7 million that the Government is providing, as that seems to be within the gift of the minister and the First Minister.

Another issue is the fact that all the money in the contingency budget seems to be getting swallowed up by the security budget. Audit Scotland raised concerns about a couple of the aspects of the games that will be running very close to the opening ceremony. If any additional funds are needed there, I have a concern that all the money will have been be swallowed up by the security budget.

The Convener: Okay. The only thing that we could do would be to write back to the Government and ask those questions. It does not seem unreasonable for us, as the Public Audit Committee, to ask how and by whom the additional security funding will be audited. That seems fair enough.

Mr Griffin also asked what the implications will be for other budgets if the whole contingency budget is devoted to security. Can we agree to write to the Government to get an answer to those questions?

James Dornan: Do we know the size of the contingency budget?

The Convener: The update says:

“The new budget will be funded by drawing £25.1 million from the ... contingency budget”.

I was not at the debate in question. I do not know whether Mr Griffin knows the size of the contingency budget.

Mark Griffin: Off the top of my head, I cannot remember.

The Convener: We can ask what proportion of the contingency budget that amounts to and what the implications are for other budgets. We just want that information.

Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: We now move into private session, so I ask members of the public and official report staff to leave.

11:45

Meeting continued in private until 11:48.

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