Written submission from Midlothian View, 24 November 2026

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Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

1. Executive Summary

Midlothian View is an independent local news organisation established in 2014 to provide news and information to residents of Midlothian and the surrounding areas.

Over the past 12 years, we have grown from a small experimental website into an established local news publisher, reaching tens of thousands of readers each month through our website, mobile app, daily newsletter, weekly podcast and, since October 2026, a free monthly printed newspaper.

At a time when many traditional local newspapers have experienced declining circulation, reduced staffing and financial difficulties, Midlothian View has continued to grow. We have employed a full-time journalist, provided opportunities for journalism students, organised election hustings and helped hold local public bodies to account.

However, our experience also demonstrates the significant financial challenges facing independent local journalism. Despite a substantial readership, generating sufficient income from advertising and reader subscriptions remains difficult. Our continued development has been made possible partly through financial support and technical expertise provided by our parent company, Pigeon Penguin Web & App Development Limited.

We believe there is a sustainable future for independent local journalism in Scotland, but achieving that future will require innovation, diversified income streams and greater recognition of the role smaller publishers play in their communities.

We have also demonstrated that our publishing model can be replicated elsewhere, having launched Glasgow View in January 2026 using the technology and infrastructure developed for Midlothian View. We believe this offers opportunities to establish local news publications in underserved communities at comparatively low cost, particularly where initial funding could support the employment of a professional journalist.

In particular, we would welcome:

- Greater opportunities for independent local publishers to participate in Scottish Government, local government and other public-sector advertising campaigns.
- Continued support for the BBC Local Democracy Reporting Service.

- Greater recognition of independent and hyperlocal publishers as an important part of Scotland's news media.
- Support for the development of sustainable local journalism and opportunities for young journalists.
- Fairer commercial relationships between independent publishers and major technology platforms.
- Support for pilot projects that establish independent local news publications in communities underserved by existing media.
- Create a Scottish Local News Fund to ensure Scottish publishers are not disadvantaged while equivalent support is available elsewhere in the UK.

Our experience suggests that local journalism does not have to be in terminal decline. With the right approach, it can grow, reach new audiences and remain an important part of community life.

2. About Midlothian View

Midlothian View is an independent news organisation covering Midlothian and the surrounding areas of East Lothian, West Lothian, Edinburgh and the Scottish Borders.

Midlothian lives somewhat in the shadow of Edinburgh. News from the capital naturally attracts considerable attention from regional and national media, while important stories affecting Midlothian residents can receive comparatively little coverage.

Midlothian View was established to help fill that gap.

Our strapline is **"Midlothian View – News Worth Reading**".

Our aim is to provide interesting, informative and enjoyable content. If someone finishes reading an article and thinks, "That was interesting", then we have achieved something worthwhile.

The name Midlothian View reflects two things: we provide a view of what is happening across Midlothian, and we give people the opportunity to contribute their own views.

We are politically neutral and aim to present facts fairly, allowing readers to form their own opinions. Our approach can be summarised as:

"We provide the facts, you decide your view."

We currently reach approximately 80,000 readers per month, with readership having reached as high as 140,000 in some months.

Our publishing channels include:

- The Midlothian View website.

- The Midlothian View mobile app for Apple and Android devices.
- A daily email newsletter.
- A weekly podcast.
- A free monthly printed newspaper, launched in October 2026.

We aim to make our news accessible, easy to read and enjoyable. Although advertising is essential to our business model, we have always tried to avoid overwhelming readers with intrusive adverts.

3. How Midlothian View Started

Midlothian View was founded in 2014, shortly after I established my software development company, Pigeon Penguin Web & App Development Limited.

At the time, I wanted a website that would demonstrate to prospective clients what my company could build. Midlothian View began as that demonstration project, allowing me to experiment with website features and technologies.

There was no grand plan to establish a news organisation.

I started publishing council press releases and other local articles, and gradually the website began to attract readers.

An important turning point came when [redacted] of the Federation of Small Businesses suggested that I contact my local MSP, Colin Beattie, to ask whether he would contribute to the website.

I sent an email, not really expecting a response. To my surprise, Colin replied within an hour and offered to write a monthly column.

That experience helped me realise that politicians, councils, businesses, community organisations and individuals all wanted opportunities to communicate with local residents.

There was clearly an appetite for a dedicated local news website.

In many ways, I describe myself as the **"accidental editor"** of Midlothian View.

What began as a technical experiment has developed over 12 years into a genuine local news organisation.

4. Why Local Journalism Matters

Local journalism plays an important role in a functioning democracy.

It informs residents about decisions being taken by their elected representatives, scrutinises public spending, highlights community concerns and gives local people a voice.

Without effective local journalism, important decisions can be made with little public awareness or scrutiny.

National and regional media organisations cannot cover every council meeting, planning application, local controversy or community initiative. Yet these matters often have a more immediate impact on people's lives than national news.

In Midlothian, we believe Midlothian View helps fill a gap in local news coverage.

Our reporting covers local government, public services, community organisations, businesses, education, sport and the many individuals who contribute to life in Midlothian.

We also provide a platform for opinion pieces, which we call "Views", allowing people to contribute to local debate.

Election Hustings

For the past five years, Midlothian View has organised election hustings for General, Scottish Parliament and local government elections.

These events have been well attended and provide residents with an opportunity to question candidates directly.

We believe such events are an important part of local democracy, particularly where few other opportunities exist for voters to hear candidates debate local issues.

Without local news organisations willing to organise and publicise these events, opportunities for direct engagement between candidates and voters could be reduced.

Independent Regulation

As Midlothian View grew, we wanted to ensure that we had appropriate editorial standards and a robust complaints process.

In 2023, we joined Impress, the independent press regulator.

Impress helped us establish a clear complaints process, with escalation available both to me as editor and to Impress as an independent adjudicator.

We have received relatively few complaints over the years, and have generally been able to resolve concerns directly.

I believe independent regulation helps demonstrate that smaller publishers can operate to professional standards and be accountable to their readers.

5. The Importance of the BBC Local Democracy Reporting Service

Midlothian View joined the BBC Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) in 2018.

The BBC funds a network of Local Democracy Reporters who cover the work of local authorities and other public bodies throughout the UK.

Midlothian shares its reporter, [redacted], with East Lothian.

The reporter's role includes attending council meetings, examining council documents and reporting on decisions affecting local communities.

The resulting articles are made available to participating news organisations through the BBC's Local News Partnerships scheme.

Midlothian View receives LDRS reporting covering Midlothian, East Lothian, West Lothian, Edinburgh and the Scottish Borders.

These articles are consistently informative, professionally produced and valuable to our readers.

They also play an important role in holding local councils to account.

For a relatively small independent publisher, the LDRS is particularly valuable because it provides access to important public-interest journalism that would otherwise be difficult for us to produce with our available resources.

Without the scheme, we would not have the capacity to provide the same level of coverage of local authority decisions.

We believe the LDRS demonstrates how publicly funded journalism can support a diverse local news sector without requiring every publisher to employ its own specialist local government reporter.

Continued support for local democracy reporting is therefore extremely important.

However, the LDRS should complement rather than replace investment in original reporting by local publishers. A reporter covering multiple council areas cannot realistically investigate every issue deserving public attention.

6. Investing in Original Journalism

In 2025, Midlothian View recruited its first full-time reporter, [redacted].

This was an important milestone for us.

Until then, our capacity to produce original journalism had been limited by the time and resources available.

Employing Liam has significantly increased the number of articles we publish and the range of stories we can cover.

He has been able to shine a spotlight on local people, businesses and organisations, as well as pursue stories that we previously lacked the resources to investigate.

Recruiting a full-time journalist was a calculated financial risk.

Our expectation was that producing more original journalism would attract more readers, which would make Midlothian View more attractive to advertisers and eventually generate sufficient additional revenue to cover the cost of employment.

This illustrates one of the fundamental challenges facing local journalism.

Quality journalism attracts readers, but increased readership does not automatically generate sufficient income to pay for the journalism that produces it.

Nevertheless, we believe investing in professional reporting is essential to our future.

Opportunities for Journalism Students

We also work with Edinburgh Napier University to provide opportunities for journalism students to contribute articles.

This allows students to gain experience of writing for a real news publication and to build a portfolio of published work.

Unfortunately, our limited finances mean that we have not been able to offer paid student placements.

The quality of work produced by students demonstrates that Scotland continues to develop talented young journalists.

The challenge is that the number of paid opportunities available to them is limited.

We would welcome initiatives that help independent publishers create more paid entry-level journalism opportunities.

Sports Reporting

Our reporting has also expanded into sport.

During the past year, Midlothian View reporters have obtained media accreditation to cover the Scottish Open golf tournament and football involving Hibernian and Heart of Midlothian.

This has allowed us to broaden our editorial coverage, develop the skills of our contributors and attract additional readers.

It also demonstrates that smaller independent publishers can provide opportunities for journalists to gain experience across a range of reporting disciplines.

7. Digital Innovation and Reaching Audiences

Midlothian View has always been a digital-first publication.

Our website remains our principal publishing platform, supported by a daily email newsletter and a weekly podcast.

In November 2024, we launched the Midlothian View mobile app for Apple and Android devices.

The app was developed by Pigeon Penguin Web & App Development Limited and includes four main features:

- **News:** Local news presented in a clear, accessible format.
- **Business**: A searchable directory of local businesses.
- **Offers:** Special offers from participating local businesses.
- **Loyalty:** Our Loyalty Pigeon system, enabling businesses to offer customer loyalty programmes.

The app is gradually developing a regular readership.

One of its advantages is that readers can access Midlothian View directly, rather than relying on social media platforms to show them our articles.

This matters because publishers have little control over the algorithms used by Facebook, Google and other technology companies.

Changes to those algorithms can significantly affect how many people see news articles, even when readers have previously expressed an interest in a publication.

Building direct relationships with readers through our website, app and newsletter is therefore an important part of our long-term strategy.

8. Returning to Print

In October 2026, after 12 years of publishing exclusively online, Midlothian View launched its first printed newspaper.

It is a free monthly publication funded through advertising from local businesses.

Our initial print run is 5,000 copies, distributed through public spaces across Midlothian, including libraries, leisure centres, community halls and cafés.

Midlothian Council has been supportive of our distribution efforts. We have been delighted by the response to our first two editions.

Readers have welcomed the return of a free local newspaper, particularly those who do not regularly use social media or who were previously unaware of Midlothian View.

This has been an interesting discovery.

Despite the growth of digital media, there remains an audience that values receiving local news in a traditional printed format.

Our newspaper combines original print content with selected articles previously published online, opinion pieces, a local business directory and puzzles.

All print management, production and physical printing are undertaken in Scotland.

We also developed our own newspaper production software, integrated with the Midlothian View website, allowing us to produce the newspaper without relying on expensive external publishing systems.

Print Advertising

One particularly encouraging development has been the response from local advertisers.

We have found that some local businesses are more willing to advertise in a printed newspaper than through online advertising.

A physical newspaper gives an advert a different presence. Readers can return to it, leave the newspaper on a table or share it with others.

Online advertising, by comparison, can be passed over in seconds as readers scroll through articles.

Although it is still early days, we believe print advertising could become an important additional revenue stream for Midlothian View.

Our experience suggests that print and digital journalism should not necessarily be viewed as competing formats.

Instead, they can complement one another.

Digital publishing allows us to report news quickly and reach readers throughout the day, while print provides another way to engage local communities and businesses.

At a time when traditional newspaper circulation has been declining, we believe our decision to launch a printed newspaper demonstrates that there may still be opportunities for innovative, locally focused print publications.

9. The Financial Challenges of Independent Local Journalism

One of the biggest challenges facing Midlothian View is achieving long-term financial sustainability.

We have steadily grown our audience and editorial output over the past 12 years, but generating sufficient revenue to support professional journalism remains difficult.

Our income comes from several sources, including:

- Advertising from local businesses.
- Google AdSense advertising.
- Advertising in our printed newspaper.
- Reader subscriptions.
- Google News Showcase.

We believe having several sources of income is essential because relying too heavily on any one source leaves a small publisher vulnerable.

Advertising

Advertising remains our principal source of income.

On our website, we display a combination of advertisements from local businesses and Google AdSense.

Our preference is to work with local businesses, keeping advertising expenditure within the local economy wherever possible.

However, many smaller businesses have limited advertising budgets, and selling advertising requires time and resources that small publishers do not always have.

Google AdSense helps fill advertising space where we have been unable to secure local advertisers.

Public-Sector Advertising

During the Covid pandemic, the Scottish Government funded NHS public information advertising on independent news websites through an initiative organised with the Independent Community News Network (ICNN).

This was a very welcome source of income for Midlothian View.

It also demonstrated that independent local publishers can provide an effective way for government and public bodies to communicate important information to local communities.

We would very much welcome greater opportunities to participate in Scottish Government, local government, NHS and other public-sector advertising campaigns.

It can be difficult for smaller independent publishers to identify and engage with the people responsible for placing public-sector advertising.

In our experience, smaller independent publishers can struggle to access public-sector advertising opportunities, particularly where campaigns are arranged through established media buying agencies or larger media organisations. We would welcome greater transparency about how public-sector advertising is allocated and how smaller publishers can participate.

We are not asking for preferential treatment or guaranteed financial support.

Rather, we believe independent local publishers should have a fair opportunity to compete for public-sector advertising based on the audiences they reach and the value they can provide.

Even a relatively modest share of public-sector advertising expenditure could make a meaningful difference to a small local publisher.

It could help support additional reporting, strengthen financial sustainability and ensure public information reaches audiences through trusted local channels.

Google News Showcase

Midlothian View joined Google News Showcase in 2023.

The agreement was facilitated through ICNN, helping smaller independent publishers benefit from commercial arrangements with Google similar to those available to larger media organisations.

Under the agreement, participating publishers receive regular payments in return for providing content to Google News Showcase.

This has provided an important additional income stream for Midlothian View.

Our current agreement ends in March 2027, and negotiations are underway regarding a replacement arrangement.

These discussions also take place against the background of the growing use of artificial intelligence in how online information and news content are accessed and presented.

For smaller publishers, the uncertainty surrounding future commercial arrangements with major technology companies is a concern.

Producing original journalism has a real financial cost. It is important that the organisations creating that content can receive appropriate commercial value when technology platforms benefit from it.

Reader Subscriptions

Midlothian View also operates a voluntary reader subscription scheme. Supporters can contribute £5 per month by Direct Debit.

However, despite regular appeals, only a small proportion of our readers choose to contribute financially.

This is a significant challenge.

Readers value local news, but many have become accustomed to accessing news online without paying directly for it.

We believe that if more readers were willing to contribute even a modest monthly amount, we could invest considerably more in local journalism.

For now, advertising remains our principal source of revenue.

Financial Support from Pigeon Penguin

Midlothian View has benefited from financial support from its parent company, Pigeon Penguin Web & App Development Limited.

That support has reduced over time as our advertising and other income have grown.

We are optimistic that the introduction of the printed newspaper will help us move towards breaking even and ultimately becoming profitable.

However, this remains an objective rather than a guaranteed outcome.

An important factor in our development has been our ability to build and maintain our own technology.

Because Pigeon Penguin is a software development company, we have been able to develop our website, mobile app and newspaper production systems internally.

This has allowed us to innovate at relatively low cost.

We recognise that this is a significant advantage that many other independent publishers do not have.

A local news organisation without access to technical expertise might face substantial costs to develop and maintain similar publishing systems.

Our experience therefore demonstrates both the opportunities available to independent publishers and some of the challenges involved in replicating our business model elsewhere.

10. The Role of Collaborative Networks

Independent publishers benefit enormously from collaboration.

Midlothian View is involved in several organisations and initiatives that help support smaller news publishers.

Independent Community News Network

Midlothian View joined the Independent Community News Network (ICNN) in 2018.

ICNN represents and supports independent community and hyperlocal news publishers across the UK.

Its members collectively reach substantial audiences, demonstrating that smaller independent publishers are an important part of the wider media landscape.

ICNN has been instrumental in representing independent publishers, supporting collaboration and helping smaller organisations access opportunities that might otherwise be available only to larger media companies.

Originally supported by Cardiff University's Centre for Community Journalism, ICNN became a standalone Community Interest Company in November 2026.

Scottish Beacon

Midlothian View is a founding member of the Scottish Beacon.

Established in 2023, the Scottish Beacon is a collaborative network of independent local and hyperlocal newsrooms serving communities throughout Scotland.

The network brings together around 25 independent publications, helping to share stories, strengthen collaboration and highlight issues that might otherwise receive limited coverage.

We believe initiatives such as the Scottish Beacon demonstrate the collective contribution independent local publishers can make to Scotland's media landscape.

11. Wider Challenges Facing Local Journalism

Our experience highlights several challenges facing independent local news publishers.

First, readership does not necessarily translate into revenue. A publication may reach a substantial audience but still struggle to generate sufficient income to employ journalists.

Second, producing original journalism is expensive. Reporters need time to investigate stories, attend meetings, interview people and verify information. These activities are essential but cannot always be directly linked to advertising income.

Third, smaller publishers have limited resources. Even with a growing team, Midlothian View cannot cover every story that deserves attention. There are undoubtedly important issues affecting our communities that we lack the resources to investigate.

Fourth, independent publishers are vulnerable to decisions made by technology platforms. Changes to search engines, social media algorithms and commercial agreements can affect readership and income, often with little warning.

Fifth, accessing advertising opportunities can be difficult. Smaller publishers may have valuable local audiences but lack the commercial relationships and sales resources enjoyed by larger media organisations.

Despite these challenges, we remain optimistic.

Our experience demonstrates that there is demand for local journalism and that smaller publishers can develop innovative ways of serving their communities.

The challenge is finding business models that allow that journalism to be produced sustainably.

12. Replicating Midlothian View – A News Organisation in a Box

In January 2026, we launched a sister publication, Glasgow View, by replicating the technology and publishing infrastructure we had developed for Midlothian View.

Because we had already invested considerable time and effort in developing our systems, establishing Glasgow View required relatively little additional technical work.

Our time and resources to develop Glasgow View have so far been limited. However, we wanted to establish a foothold in Glasgow, where the larger population potentially offers greater opportunities for readership, advertising revenue and long-term financial sustainability.

More importantly, we wanted to demonstrate that the model we have developed for Midlothian View can be replicated elsewhere.

In essence, we have created a "news organisation in a box".

We now have the technology and infrastructure to establish a functioning local news publication in another geographical area relatively quickly and at comparatively low cost.

Of course, technology alone does not create a successful news organisation. Local journalism still requires journalists, knowledge of the community, relationships with local organisations and the development of a sustainable readership and advertising base.

However, by significantly reducing the initial technical and operational costs, we believe our model could make establishing new local news publications more achievable.

The Public Interest News Foundation (PINF) has highlighted the existence of "news deserts" across the UK — communities where dedicated local news coverage is limited or absent.

We believe our model could offer a practical opportunity to address this problem.

With initial funding to employ a local journalist, we believe we could establish a new publication in an underserved community relatively quickly, using our existing technology and experience to minimise start-up costs.

The journalist would provide the essential local knowledge, reporting and community relationships, while our existing infrastructure would provide the publishing platform and operational support.

The objective would not be to create a publication permanently dependent on public funding, but to provide the initial support needed to establish a local news service, develop its readership, attract advertising and work towards long-term financial sustainability.

We believe this offers a potentially scalable and cost-effective approach to rebuilding local journalism in communities that are currently underserved.

13. Create a Scottish Local News Fund

Governments across the world are already recognising that local journalism is essential public infrastructure and journalism funds are becoming increasingly common. The UK Government has launched a Local News Fund worth up to £12 million to help sustain and innovate local journalism. However, Scottish publishers are excluded from applying in the first year because support for the press is a devolved responsibility. Meanwhile, the Welsh Government has established its own £210,000 Local News Fund, while Welsh publishers are also eligible for the UK scheme.

Scotland should not be left behind.

As support for local journalism is a devolved responsibility, Scotland should establish its own Scottish Local News Fund to ensure Scottish publishers are not disadvantaged while equivalent support is available elsewhere in the UK.

This could support public interest journalism, innovation and sustainability across Scotland's diverse local news sector, ensuring communities continue to have access to trusted local reporting.

14. Recommendations to the Committee

Based on our experience of developing Midlothian View over the past 12 years, we would offer the following recommendations for consideration.

1. Improve Access to Public-Sector Advertising

We would encourage the Scottish Government, local authorities, NHS Scotland and other public bodies to ensure that independent local publishers have a fair opportunity to participate in public information advertising campaigns.

This could include making advertising opportunities easier to identify, ensuring smaller publishers are considered during media planning and recognising the value of highly targeted local audiences.

We believe this could provide a practical way to support local journalism while delivering genuine value to public bodies.

2. Recognise the Importance of the Local Democracy Reporting Service

The BBC Local Democracy Reporting Service makes a significant contribution to local public-interest journalism.

We would encourage continued recognition of its importance and support for its long-term sustainability.

The scheme is particularly valuable to smaller publishers that cannot afford to employ dedicated local government reporters.

3. Recognise Independent Local Publishers

Independent and hyperlocal publishers should be recognised as an important part of Scotland's news media, alongside established newspaper groups and broadcasters.

We would welcome greater engagement with independent publishers when developing policies, initiatives and consultations relating to journalism and the media.

Organisations such as ICNN and the Scottish Beacon can play an important role in representing the sector.

4. Support Opportunities for Young Journalists

We would welcome consideration of initiatives that could help independent publishers provide paid opportunities for journalism graduates and early-career reporters.

Our experience demonstrates that talented young journalists are available, but the financial capacity to employ them is limited.

Appropriately designed support could help develop the next generation of journalists while increasing the amount of original local reporting.

5. Recognise the Impact of Major Technology Platforms

The Committee should recognise the significant influence that major technology platforms have over the visibility and financial sustainability of independent news publishers.

Although some aspects of competition policy and regulation are reserved to the UK Parliament, the Scottish Parliament can play an important role in highlighting the experiences of Scottish publishers and representing their interests in wider discussions.

It is important that the organisations producing original journalism can build sustainable businesses and are not entirely dependent on decisions taken by technology companies.

6. Support Pilot Projects in Areas Underserved by Local News

We would encourage the Scottish Government to explore opportunities to support the establishment of independent local news publications in communities where dedicated news coverage is limited or absent.

Our experience of developing Midlothian View and replicating its publishing infrastructure for Glasgow View demonstrates that the technical costs of establishing a new publication can be significantly reduced.

A pilot project providing initial funding for a professional journalist, supported by an existing publishing platform, could test whether new local news organisations can develop sufficient readership and advertising revenue to become financially sustainable.

We believe this could provide a practical, relatively low-cost approach to addressing local news deserts in Scotland, with the potential to be replicated across multiple communities.

7. Create a Scottish Local News Fund

Scotland should establish its own Scottish Local News Fund to ensure Scottish publishers are not disadvantaged while equivalent support is available elsewhere in the UK.

This could support public interest journalism, innovation and sustainability across Scotland's diverse local news sector, ensuring communities continue to have access to trusted local reporting.

14. Conclusion – A Positive Future for Local Journalism

Much of the discussion surrounding local journalism understandably focuses on decline.

Traditional newspapers have experienced falling circulation, advertising revenues have moved online, and many news organisations have reduced their editorial staffing.

These are genuine and serious challenges.

However, our experience at Midlothian View provides a more optimistic perspective.

What began in 2014 as a website designed to demonstrate my software development skills has become an established local news organisation.

We now reach tens of thousands of readers each month, employ a professional journalist, provide opportunities for students, organise election hustings, participate in national journalism initiatives and have recently launched a free monthly printed newspaper.

We have achieved this with a small team, relatively low operating costs, a willingness to innovate and a strong focus on the communities we serve.

We are not yet completely financially self-sufficient, and we continue to face many of the challenges affecting the wider local news sector.

Nevertheless, we believe we are demonstrating that independent local journalism can have a positive future.

We also believe that local journalism should not be judged solely by its commercial performance.

Its value includes informing communities, scrutinising public bodies, encouraging democratic participation, supporting local businesses and helping people feel connected to the places where they live.

These benefits are difficult to measure financially, but they are important to Scottish society.

Our message to the Committee is therefore a positive one.

Our experience demonstrates that local journalism does not have to be in terminal decline. We have shown that an independent publisher can grow its audience, employ journalists, develop new publishing channels and move towards financial sustainability.

Through Glasgow View, we have also demonstrated that the technology and infrastructure behind our model can be replicated in other communities. We believe this offers an opportunity not only to support existing local journalism, but potentially to rebuild local news provision in areas where it has disappeared.

Local journalism in Scotland undoubtedly faces significant challenges, but we believe it also has a positive future.

With innovation, collaboration, fair access to commercial opportunities and targeted support to establish new publications, independent local journalism can continue to grow, strengthen local democracy and serve communities throughout Scotland.

Thank you for your time.

Phil Bowen

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