Local Government and Regeneration Committee

Remit and membership

Remit:

To consider and report on a) the financing and delivery of local government and local services, and b) planning, and c) matters relating to regeneration falling within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment.

Membership:

Stuart McMillan (18 September 2012 - present)
Anne McTaggart (22 December 2011 - present)
Margaret Mitchell (16 November 2011 - present)
John Pentland (22 December 2011 - present)
Stewart Stevenson (18 September 2012 - present)
Kevin Stewart (Deputy Convener 1 June 2011 - 26 September 2012) (Convener 26 September 2012 - present)
John Wilson (Deputy Convener) (18 September 2012 - present)
Joe Fitzpatrick (Convener) (1 June 2011 – 6 September 2012)
David Torrance (1 June 2011 – 18 September 2012)
James Dornan (7 March 2012 – 18 September 2012)

Committee Clerking Team:

Clerk to the Committee
David Cullum

Senior Assistant Clerk
Fiona Mullen

Assistant Clerk
Seán Wixted

Committee Assistant
Fiona Sinclair
Local Government and Regeneration Committee

7th Report, 2013 (Session 4)

Annual Report 2012-13

The Committee reports to the Parliament as follows—

1. This report covers the work of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee during the parliamentary year from 11 May 2012 to 10 May 2013.

Introduction

2. This was our second year since we were established following the beginning of the 4th Session of the Scottish Parliament on 11 May 2011. The Committee was formally established, by a motion of the Parliament on 1 June 2011, and we met for the first time on 15 June 2011.

Membership of the Committee

3. There are seven members appointed by the Parliament to serve on the Committee.

4. On 6 September 2012, Joe Fitzpatrick MSP (Convener), ceased to be a member of the Committee following his appointment as a Scottish Junior Minister.

5. On 18 September 2012, James Dornan MSP and David Torrance MSP ceased to be Members of the Committee following changes to memberships of committees agreed by the Parliament. The Parliament appointed Stuart McMillan MSP; Stewart Stevenson MSP and John Wilson MSP as Members of the Committee.

6. At our meeting on 26 September 2012, we selected Kevin Stewart MSP (Deputy Convener) to be the Convener of the Committee. We also selected John Wilson MSP to be Deputy Convener of the Committee, in place of Mr Stewart. Finally, we appointed Stuart McMillan MSP to be our EU Reporter following the relinquishing of that post by Kevin Stewart MSP.

Presiding Officers agenda for parliamentary reform

7. In line with the agenda for the reform of parliamentary business during Session 4, as set out by the Presiding Officer Tricia Marwick MSP, we have been anxious to develop new ways of making our work more relevant and accessible.
An example of this is the decision we took in February 2013, to refer to ourselves in the first person in all our future reports (‘we recommend’, rather than ‘The Committee recommends’) etc. We took this decision to make our reports more readable and thus accessible to a wider audience.

8. We also took the conscious decision to get out of the parliamentary campus as often as possible to engage with members of the public, local community groups, representatives of businesses, voluntary and third sector groups as well as the public services. This face-to-face engagement is central to our aim of ensuring the work we carry out as a parliamentary committee, is grounded in the real-world experience of communities across Scotland. We will set out this work in more detail later in the report.

**Inquiries and reports**

**Public services reform and local government**

9. In the wake of the work of the Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services (‘the Christie Commission’), we agreed in 2011 that our first major series of inquiries should consider the impact of the Christie Commission proposals on local government in Scotland.

10. We decided to undertake a series of linked inquiries, taking place over a period of 18 months, looking at the issue of public services reform in local government. In order to provide more innovation and flexibility to the scrutiny process, we decided to structure this work into three distinct inquiries, or strands:

- Strand 1 - Partnerships and Outcomes;
- Strand 2 – Benchmarking and Performance Indicators;
- Strand 3 – Developing New Ways of Delivering Services.

11. This approach allowed us to vary and adapt the remit of Strands 2 and 3 based on our findings of Strand 1 of the inquiry. We also agreed to use a variety of evidence gathering methods along with the standard inquiry format of taking written and oral evidence and producing a report. This included fact-finding visits; round-table evidence sessions and one-off Committee events/conferences. We appointed Alex Linkston as our adviser for Strands 1 and 2 of the inquiry, and Bill Howat as our adviser for Strand 3 of the inquiry.

**Strand 1 - Partnerships and Outcomes**

12. Strand 1 of our work on partnerships and outcomes examined the community planning process and commenced in December 2011. We reported our findings to the Parliament on 22 June 2012.

13. In our report, we recognised that the ambitions for community planning partnerships (“CPPs”) in Scotland have not been fully realised over the last 10 to 15 years. One of the principal reasons for this being the cultural challenges required for success. The lack of this has posed the greatest test to partnership working, and in turn, the effectiveness of CPPs. Bodies, and individuals within those bodies, who are unwilling to break out of a silo mentality and work with other
bodies to deliver shared outcomes through the sharing of resources and information, present a considerable, if not insurmountable, challenge to effective partnership work. These findings have influenced the approach we have taken to the other strands of the inquiry.

Strand 2 – Benchmarking and Performance Indicators

14. Informed by the issues identified in Strand 1, we turned our attention to the development of an effective benchmarking structure across Scottish local government. Strand 2 looked at benchmarking, and in particular an examination of the work being undertaken by the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) in partnership with the Improvement Service (IS).

15. Consequently, Strand 2 examined the work that has taken place over the last two years in the development of benchmarking and comparative performance data and cost measurement, as well as to assess how these can contribute to the performance of local authorities in Scotland and in turn the services they deliver. We were also keen to use this strand to probe whether local authorities, along with the various inspectorates, were ‘counting the right things’ in terms of benchmarking.

16. We decided to undertake a much more focussed evidence gathering process so as to provide an additional impetus to the delivery of the benchmarking project. The focus of this process was a one-day conference we hosted in the Parliament on 10 September 2012. This conference brought together stakeholders from across local government and the public services to discuss benchmarking.

17. The conference was webcast live and, in another first for the Parliament, we took advantage of our newly established Committee Twitter account to seek questions from those watching online for the speakers at the conference. Several such questions were received in this way and those tweeting questions were able to hear answers given live online on the day.

18. This conference was further supported by a preparatory round-table evidence session, with key witnesses, which we undertook in the week before the conference so as to identify key issues for discussion.

19. In late October, we took oral evidence from COSLA, Council leaders and IS, on the benchmarking project, and reported our findings and recommendations to the Parliament on 28 November 2012.

20. In our report we endorsed and welcomed the introduction of benchmarking, and urged local authorities to get fully behind this exercise and ensure that its full potential could be realised. We considered the work has the potential to bring about a huge step forward in improving the quality of services and deliver cost savings in coming years.

21. We followed up on this report by taking further evidence from SOLACE and COSLA in January 2013 on delays to the launch of the benchmarking project, which was scheduled to be introduced by the end of 2012. Following, our exhortations work on the project, the benchmarking project went live across local authorities in March 2013.
Strand 3 – Developing New Ways of Delivering Services

22. Utilising the information we had gathered during Strands 1 and 2 of the inquiry, we launched Strand 3 of the inquiry on 9 November 2012. The aim of this strand is to examine progress in relation to the development of shared services and other innovative ways of achieving economies of scale, and harnessing the strengths and skills of key public sector partners to deliver the best possible quality services in local areas.

23. In advance of commencing oral evidence taking on Strand 3, we secured a pre-inquiry debate in the Parliament on the subject of public services reform. This took place on 26 February 2013. The aim of the debate was to discuss the findings of Strands 1 and 2 of the inquiry and to use of the views of the Parliament to inform our approach in relation to the delivery of public services. This was the first occasion we had sought to inform a piece of inquiry work with a dedicated parliamentary debate in advance of taking evidence. We found the experience most useful.

24. We were also anxious to gain as much experience as possible on the situation on the ground, in relation to the delivery of public services, and how CPPs were operating in this regard. To this end we undertook four fact-finding visits to Cumbernauld (January 2013); Aberdeen (February 2013); Glasgow (February 2013) and Maybole (April 2013) to meet with local community and voluntary sector groups, and third sector organisations. This allowed us to examine their experience of CPP engagement and the delivery of public services. This public engagement greatly informed our inquiry providing us with the opportunity to discuss the performance of CPPs and service delivery, first-hand, with the people most affected by them, service users.

25. We also undertook a formal public committee meeting in Ayr on 15 April 2013, taking oral evidence from members of South Ayrshire CPP, and key CPP partners from the Ayrshire area. The purpose of this meeting was to allow us to examine the challenges facing a CPP, in-situ, in its local community. Paragraphs 93 and 100 set this out in more detail.

26. We are currently considering all of the written and oral evidence we have received during the inquiry, and expect to publish our report on Strand 3 in June 2013.

Scottish local government elections

27. In May 2012, the local government elections took place in Scotland. This saw 1,223 councillors elected for a 5-year term to all 32 unitary local authorities in Scotland. Following the recommendations of the Gould Report in the wake of the 2007 local government elections, this was the first standalone local election to take place in Scotland since 1995. Scottish local elections in 1999, 2003 and 2007 having been held on the same day as elections to the Scottish Parliament.

28. Following the election, statutory bodies such as the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Management Board for Scotland, laid reports before the Parliament on the conduct of the election.
29. We undertook round-table oral evidence taking sessions, with key stakeholders, on the conduct of the election, on both 13 June and 28 November 2012. The aim of these sessions was to scrutinise the reports laid before the Parliament on the election, as well as to identify any issues which we may wish to include in our work programme to further improve the conduct of local elections in Scotland.

30. On 19 December 2012 we adapted the traditional Committee Reporter system by appointing two of our members, John Wilson MSP and Anne McTaggart MSP, to jointly act as Committee Reporter on the 2012 Scottish local government election. We tasked them to investigate specific matters on behalf of the Committee and report back their findings to us. The matters being investigated are:

- Voter Turnout and how this can be increased;
- Voter Registration and how this can be increased;
- Proxy Voting including postal voting;
- The Terminology used in and around elections;
- Reasons why people do not vote;
- Robson Rotation in respect of the ordering of the ballot paper;
- Diversity amongst voters and elected representatives including any matters associated with the eligibility to stand, donations and the nomination process, and
- The timing of future elections with a view to minimising clashes.

31. The Committee Reporters will report back to us by the end of May 2013, setting out their views on these issues and recommending what further action, if any, we may wish to take to scrutinise these matters further.


33. The 2009 Act requires the Scottish Government to set annual targets, firstly for the 12-year period from 2010 to 2022, and then for each 4-year period from 2023 to 2050. These targets must be reported to the Parliament every 5 years, along with the progress being made on achieving them.

34. On 29 January 2013, the Scottish Government's Low Carbon Scotland: Meeting our Emissions Reduction Targets 2023-2027: Draft Second Report on
Proposals and Policies ("RPP2") was laid in the Parliament. Under the provisions of the 2009 Act, the Parliament has a maximum of 60 days to report on RPP2.

35. Four parliamentary Committees scrutinised the RPP2 as it was relevant to their remit. These were Local Government and Regeneration, Infrastructure and Capital Investment, Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment, and the Economy, Energy and Tourism committees.

36. We focussed our scrutiny of RPP2 on three areas, namely:

- Local government spending and plans on climate change targets;
- Planning policy and climate change targets, and
- Communities aspects of climate change and the role of regeneration policy in delivering on climate change targets.

37. Despite a heavy workload in the first three months of 2013, we recognised the importance of scrutinising local government’s contribution to meeting Scotland’s climate change targets. We rescheduled our work programme for February and March to allow us to take written and oral evidence from key stakeholders on RPP2.

38. We published our report on RPP2 on 22 March and sought to improve and innovate further on the traditional committee reporting style by providing a shorter, more targeted report, setting out conclusions and recommendations, while omitting any major narrative on the views expressed in the evidence we received (since all of the evidence is already available online).

39. All 32 of Scotland’s local authorities signed Scotland’s Climate Change Declaration in 2007 ("SCCD"). Our central recommendations were that the quality and consistency of SCCD reporting be improved and that its structure and content be better aligned with the national strategies for emissions reduction. We also recommended that future Scottish Government reports to Parliament on RPP include a section specifically on local authorities.

The Delivery of Regeneration in Scotland

40. On 14 January 2013, while on a fact-finding visit to Cumbernauld, we launched our inquiry into the Delivery of Regeneration in Scotland. This work was a follow up to our scrutiny of the Scottish Government’s draft 2013/14 budget when we focussed on regeneration spending (see paragraphs 53 to 59).

41. The remit of this inquiry is to identify and examine best practice and limitations in relation to the delivery of regeneration in Scotland. We have received 51 written submissions in response to our call for evidence, and commence oral evidence taking in late May 2013.

Legislation

Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties Etc.)(Scotland) Bill

42. The Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties Etc.)(Scotland) Bill was introduced into the Parliament on 26 March 2012. The purpose of this Bill was to encourage owners of long-term empty homes and business premises to
bring them back into use by providing a statutory framework to vary the exemptions which such properties then qualified for in terms of Council Tax, or Non-Domestic Rates. The Bill also sought to abolish the Housing Support Grant in Scotland.

43. The Bill was referred to us for Stage 1 consideration and we took written and oral evidence on the Bill between 29 March and 30 May 2012. We published our Stage 1 report on the Bill on 22 June 2012.

44. As part of our consideration of the Bill, the Committee undertook a fact-finding visit to Shetland on 28 and 29 May to examine, first-hand, this impact on Shetland Islands Council of the abolition of the Housing Support Grant. Shetland Islands Council being the only local authority in Scotland still in receipt of funds from this scheme.

45. A majority of us recommended in our Stage 1 report that the Parliament agree the provisions of the Bill in relation to long-term empty properties, while we unanimously agreed with the abolition of the Housing Support Grant. The Parliament agreed the Bill at Stage 1 on 6 September. We considered Stage 2 amendments to the Bill on 26 September. The Bill was passed by the Parliament on 31 October 2013.

**High Hedges (Scotland) Bill**

46. The High Hedges (Scotland) Bill was a members' bill and was introduced in the Parliament by Mark McDonald MSP on 2 October 2012. The purpose of the Bill was to provide a statutory mechanism in Scotland to resolve disputes between private property owners in Scotland over high hedges.

47. We took written and oral evidence on the Bill between 5 October and 19 December 2012 and published our Stage 1 report on the Bill on 28 January. As part of our Stage 1 consideration, the Committee on a visit to Cumbernauld on 14 January 2013, examined the issue of the development of modern housing projects in proximity to existing woodland.

48. The Parliament approved the Bill at Stage 1 on 5 February, and we considered Stage 2 amendments to the Bill on 6 March. The Bill was approved at Stage 3 on 28 March 2013. Several amendments by Committee members were accepted at stages 2 and 3 of the Bill’s consideration, such as provisions relating to deciduous plants; and the statutory inclusion of national parks in the Bill. The Parliament also agreed amendments from a Committee member relating to statutory post-legislative scrutiny by the Parliament, or one of its committees, within five years of the coming into operation of the high hedge dispute resolution system. The inclusion of such a post-legislative scrutiny mechanism in primary legislation was a first within legislation enacted by the Scottish Parliament.

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Subordinate Legislation

49. We considered a total of 35 Scottish Statutory Instruments during the course of the parliamentary year. Two of these were subject to super-affirmative procedure; nine were subject to affirmative procedure, 23 were subject to negative procedure and one was not subject to any procedure. We recommended that the Parliament approve all of the affirmative instruments, two by division. Motions to annul were lodged in respect of three negative instruments, all of which were disagreed to by us.

UK Parliament Legislation

50. We considered two Legislative Consent Memorandum ("LCMs") in relation to pieces of UK Legislation with devolved implications in June 2012. LCM(S4)10.1 was introduced into the Parliament by the Scottish Government as a consequence of the introduction of the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill ("the UK Bill") in the UK Parliament on 10 May 2012. The UK Bill introduced provisions for a new system of electoral registration, known as Individual Electoral Registration ("IER"). This provides that each elector must apply individually to be registered to vote after the transition to the new system. The UK Bill also makes provisions for transition to this new system of registration, as well as introducing new methods by which electors can apply to register.

51. The second was LCM(S4)12.1 which was introduced into the Parliament by the Scottish Government as a consequence of the introduction of the Local Government Finance Bill ("the UK Bill") in the UK Parliament on 19 December 2011. The purpose of the UK Bill is to allow English local authorities to retain a proportion of their business rates receipts and to compel English local authorities to establish Council Tax reduction schemes to replace Council Tax Benefit.

52. However, on 17 May 2012 the UK Bill was amended at Committee Stage in the House of Commons. These amendments meant that the UK Bill had implications for executive competencies of the Scottish Ministers. As a result the Scottish Government lodged an LCM.

53. We considered both LCMs at our meeting on 20 June 2012 and took oral evidence from a round-table of relevant stakeholders. Following evidence received we were content with both LCMs and recommended that both be approved by the Parliament.

Budget process

Scottish Government 2013-14 draft budget

54. In October and November 2012 we undertook scrutiny of the Scottish Government’s Draft Budget 2013-14. Innovatively, we decided to use this scrutiny to support our future work programme, namely our inquiry on regeneration policy (referred to in paragraphs 40 and 41). We also adapted our call for evidence to respond to specific requests from the Equal Opportunities Committee and the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee to examine issues relating to equalities and climate change as part of our budget scrutiny. We appointed Bill Howat as our adviser for our budget scrutiny.
55. We set six key regeneration-based themes which we asked stakeholders to respond to in relation to Scottish Government budget spending, namely:

- What does ‘regeneration’ mean to you;
- The regeneration strategy, resources and funding;
- Regeneration, equalities and preventative spending;
- Regeneration and sustainable economic development;
- Community led regeneration and CPPs;
- Regeneration and climate change targets.

56. Recognising the time constraints on budget scrutiny, and in anticipation of our future work on regeneration, we agreed a new approach to our oral evidence taking sessions on the draft budget. Pairs of Committee members took responsibility for questions on different aspects as follows—

- Strategic/Policy Issues – (Margaret Mitchell/Stewart Stevenson)
- Partnership working Issues – (John Wilson/John Pentland)
- Practical issues – (Anne McTaggart/Stuart McMillan).

57. We found this innovation useful in providing a consistency of approach in terms of the questioning of various witnesses on key aspects of the evidence we received.

58. Our scrutiny of the draft budget opened many avenues for us to explore further in our regeneration inquiry. While acknowledging good work ongoing at different levels of government, we were concerned at the absence of clearly identifiable, meaningful and measurable outcomes. This made it impossible for us to assess the effect of regeneration as regards sustainable economic growth or for any other measure.

59. In our budget report to the Finance Committee and the Parliament we sought an increased focus on community-led regeneration.

60. We argued that in providing funding to community groups, and others, there should be an increased focus on revenue supporting funding to complement one-off capital investments. Our themed focus of the 2013/14 budget identified important issues which we are taking the opportunity during our regeneration inquiry to examine in greater detail.

_Pre-budget scrutiny for 2014-15_

61. Given the constrained timetable for committee scrutiny of the annual draft budget between late-September and mid-November each year, we were anxious to ensure our work programme for spring/summer 2013 included an opportunity to carry out pre-budget scrutiny.

62. We agreed our approach to pre-budget scrutiny of the 2014/15 draft budget on 27 March 2013. We agreed to use our pre-budget scrutiny to both look back at the challenges faced by local authorities in recent years, and look forward over the next few years. This pre-budget scrutiny exercise will be strategic in nature, consider the big picture, and look at high level local government budget
information. We plan to take oral evidence from key witnesses in late May and early June 2013.

Petitions

PE 1423
63. During the parliamentary year we have received two public petitions from the Public Petitions Committee. On 3 December 2012 Petition PE1423 in the name of Gordon Hall on behalf of The Unreasonable Learners, was referred to us.

64. This petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to:

“urge the Scottish Government to review the considerable research into the thinking that underpins the approach to managing the contribution from staff that has been undertaken over the past decades and compare this with the assumptions that underpins existing management practice; and subsequently to use the findings to ensure that it harnesses the talent of its staff.”

65. We considered our approach to this petition on 12 December 2012 and decided to include the issues it raises as part of our consideration of Strand 3 of our public services reform inquiry. We will report our findings and conclusions on PE1423 as part of our report on this inquiry.

PE 1433
66. On 5 March 2013 the Public Petitions Committee referred Petition PE 1433 to us. This petition, in the name of John Hancox, called on the Scottish Parliament to:

“urge the Scottish Government to encourage public agencies such as Forestry Commission Scotland, Crown Estates, health boards, public trusts and landowners, public and private, rural and urban, to make land available for people to plant grow and harvest their own food.”

67. We considered our approach to this petition on 13 March 2013 and agreed to bring it to the attention of the Land Reform Group and to ask the Group for a written update on their work. We also agreed to include the petitioner as a potential witness, if we undertake consideration of the Scottish Government’s forthcoming Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill. To this end, the petitioner took part in conference at the Scottish Parliament on 26 April 2013 at our invitation, which considered amongst other issues, the availability for land for people to grow their own food (see paragraphs 80 to 82).

EU Priorities

68. In December 2012 our EU Reporter, Stuart McMillan MSP, travelled to Brussels along with reporters from other committees, to meet EU officials and be briefed on current EU policies of relevance to Scotland.

69. This forms part of the Parliament’s annual consideration of the European Commission’s Work Programme (“CWP”), which is integral to our early engagement with EU issues, as detailed in the Parliament’s European Strategy. The CWP details the work commitments of the Commission for the next 12 months, outlining both legislative and non-legislative proposals.
70. While there were no direct proposals or initiatives included within the CWP for 2013 which fall specifically within our remit, there are a number of EU policies continuing (or completing) their legislative journey in 2013 that are of significance to our current committee work programme, notably:

- Negotiations over the structure and scale of the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework;
- The future of structural funds in Scotland;
- Public procurement rules.

71. All of these areas are of significant relevance to our work, particularly our inquiries into ‘Public Services Reform: Strand 3 – Developing New Ways of Delivering Services’ and ‘Delivery of Regeneration in Scotland’.

72. In addition, COSLA wrote to all Scottish Parliament EU reporters in January 2013, outlining their key EU priorities for 2013, which were to:

- Ensure that local development is a key pillar of the Scottish Partnership Agreement 2014-2020 (and safeguarding the specific status of the Highlands and Islands as a transition region);
- Ensure that any new provisions secured in EU rules for Public Procurement are fully exploited in the Scottish implementation of the legislation, through the forthcoming Scottish Government Procurement Reform Bill;
- Work on any other EU limitations that may be placed on shared service arrangements, which are also currently being negotiated in Brussels.

73. On 27 February 2013 we agreed our EU priorities for 2013 based on the policies set out in paragraphs 70 and 72. We agreed to take evidence on the potential impact of changes to European Structural Funds from 2014 onwards on funding of regeneration projects, as part of our regeneration inquiry.

74. We also sought further information from COSLA on the potential impact of new EU public procurement rules on Scottish local government, and the impact of EU limitations on shared service arrangements for local government. We will feed this information into our consideration of Strand 3 of our public services reform inquiry, as well as informing any contribution we make to the parliamentary consideration of the Scottish Government’s forthcoming Procurement Reform Bill.

Other issues

Pre-legislative scrutiny on community empowerment and renewal

75. In order to provide more opportunity for public engagement on issues of major policy, we have sought to develop a more coherent focus on pre-legislative scrutiny in areas of forthcoming legislation.

76. Over the past year the Scottish Government has been consulting on its proposed Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill. This will be a major piece
of legislation, which is expected to be introduced into the Parliament in early 2014. We anticipate the Committee to be the lead committee for the consideration of this legislation.

77. The Bill could contain legislative provisions on areas such as community planning partnerships; community councils, more community control over public funding; methods of delivering services in the community; the right to buy land and passing public land and buildings to the community; use of land for growing food etc.

78. In order to prepare, we have integrated pre-legislative scrutiny of the above areas into our current work programme. During evidence gathering on Strand 3 of our public services reform inquiry, and our regeneration inquiry, we have taken every opportunity to engage with communities across Scotland on issues which may be contained in any Bill.

79. During our community engagement exercises in Aberdeen; Ayr; Cumbernauld; and Glasgow, we sought the views of community and voluntary/third sector representatives on how primary legislation could best empower them to deliver the best for their communities, and for Scotland as a whole.

80. On 26 April 2013, we participated in a one-day conference in the Parliament hosted by the Scottish Community Alliance entitled ‘The Future is Local - A day of debate, discussion and celebration of achievement by Scotland’s communities’. This brought together over 250 community representatives from across Scotland to discuss the future of community empowerment in Scotland.

81. From September 2012, we worked closely with the Scottish Community Alliance to utilise this conference as a platform for pre-legislative scrutiny of the policies in the Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill.

82. Our members participated in both the plenary session, and topic discussion groups of the conference, and discussed and debated issues such as taking care of community wellbeing; local people leading community regeneration; developing a local, low carbon future; how communities can run public services; why food production should be local and how to generate community wealth. This conference provided us with an invaluable opportunity to test and discuss the proposals in the forthcoming legislation with some of the very people it is aimed at empowering. This is a further example of the innovative and integrated approach we have taken to delivering on the Presiding Officer’s agenda for parliamentary reform.

National Planning Framework 3 and Scottish Planning Policy

83. Planning policy is one of the most complex, and contentious areas of public policy. Planning policy in Scotland is shaped and underpinned by two key strategies.

84. The National Planning Framework (“NPF”) sets out the Scottish Government’s national spatial planning policy, which is incorporated into local authority strategic and local development plans. It is designed to set out the big
picture for strategic planning and development, nationally, over the long term (20 – 30 years). Through the NPF, the Government sets out how and where the Scottish planning system should deliver on the strategic, economic, social and infrastructural needs of Scotland. The NPF and can also designate specific developments as ‘national developments’.

85. The Scottish Planning Policy (“SPP”) is a statement of the Scottish Government’s policy on land use planning, and sets out the purpose of the planning system and the core principles and objectives for its operation. The SPP is designed to complement the NPF.

86. In mid-2012 the Scottish Government launched a consultation on the third version of NPF, (NPF3, which is intended to run from 2014 – 2019). A review of the SPP was also announced to focus planning policy on sustainable economic growth and developing good quality, successful and sustainable place-making across urban and rural Scotland.

87. On 30 May 2012 we took oral evidence from key stakeholders on the area of planning policy as part of our consideration of two super-affirmative instruments relating to the current NPF2. This assisted in informing our approach to scrutiny of planning policy as part of our 2013/14 work programme. On 16 January 2013 we took oral evidence from Scottish Government officials on the reviews of the NPF and SPP. As a result of this work, on 13 March 2013, we agreed to consider further evidence on the development of the revised NPF and SPP as part of our inquiry into regeneration policy in Scotland. We expect to hear from the Government on their draft documents during May 2013.

Scottish Public Services Ombudsman
88. On 23 January 2013 we took oral evidence from Mr Jim Martin, the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (“the SPSO”), and officials, on his annual report for 2011-12. The SPSO is required by law to lay his annual report on the work of his office before the Parliament each year. This evidence session discussed issues such as the service delivery and workload for the SPSO; his budget expenditure for 2011-12; a review the operation of the SPSO, as well as the issues of corporate governance and the arrangements for the laying of special reports by the SPSO in individual cases before the Parliament (as allowed for in legislation).

89. We followed up that session with correspondence seeking elaboration on detail to a number of the areas covered in questioning. This correspondence, along with the response received from the SPSO has been published on our website.

Accounts Commission for Scotland reports
90. On 13 June 2012 we took written and oral evidence from Mr John Baillie, Chairman of the Accounts Commission for Scotland (“the Commission”), on the Commission’s overview report of Scottish local government for 2011-12. Part of the Commission’s role is to audit all local authorities in Scotland and publically report on whether they are spending public money properly, efficiently and effectively. The Commission is independent of both the Parliament and Government, and is supported in its work by Audit Scotland.
91. Given the importance of the work, and reports, of the Commission to our scrutiny of local government policy, we have invited the Chair and his official, to brief us on an annual basis on the Commission’s scrutiny of local government. This provides us with an invaluable opportunity to gain first-hand information into the issues confronting local government and ensure that so far as possible our work and the Commission complement each other.

Meetings of the Committee

92. During the parliamentary year, we met 32 times: two meetings were held wholly in public, six were held wholly in private and the remaining 24 had both public and private items on the agenda. Items we considered in private included the consideration of oral evidence heard in public, consideration to the text of draft Committee reports, our future work programme and the appointment of advisers for specific inquiries.

93. Thirty-one of our meetings took place at the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh. On Monday 15 April 2013 the Committee held a public Committee meeting at the campus of the University of the West of Scotland in Ayr. This meeting took evidence from witnesses representing community planning partnerships and community/voluntary and business groups as part of Strand 3 of our inquiry into public services reform.

94. We are indebted to all those who have assisted us by providing both written and oral evidence over the year.

Visits and public engagement

95. As a Committee we have been focussed on meeting with communities across Scotland as often as possible, taking into account our work schedule as a parliamentary committee and the effective, efficient and proper use of public funds.

96. Between May 2012 and April 2013, various members of our Committee have undertaken six external visits around Scotland. This has included visiting Shetland in May 2012 as part of our Stage 1 consideration of the Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc.) (Scotland) Bill, and Glasgow in September 2012 to examine the Clyde Gateway regeneration project in preparation for our regeneration inquiry.

97. We visited Cumbernauld in North Lanarkshire in January 2013 to support our work on public services reform; regeneration and the High Hedges (Scotland) Bill. This included a fact-finding visit to a Scottish Wildlife Trust property, two briefing sessions with local government officials and a community engagement event with 70 people from the community/voluntary sector across North Lanarkshire.

98. In February 2013 half of our Committee members visited Aberdeen City, while the other half visited Govan in Glasgow. The purpose of these fact-finding visits was to support our regeneration inquiry, as well as engage with communities as part of our pre-legislative preparation for the Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill. Undertaking simultaneous visits to separate parts of Scotland on the
same day allowed us to double our engagement and fact-finding capacity and maximise the use of our time.

99. Both visits involved meeting with local government representatives, and community engagement events with between 30 to 40 people from the community/voluntary sector. We also visited community-based projects to learn from their experience and discuss their relationship with the public services. In Aberdeen members visited the Seaton Backies project, a community group which works to revamp the Backies areas of Seaton in Aberdeen, and to encourage the community to spend more time outdoors safely. In Glasgow, members visited the Tea in the Pot women’s community group in Govan to discuss the impact of regeneration funding and policies of vulnerable groups, such as women from deprived areas, and the refugee community.

100. We visited South Ayrshire on 15 April 2013 as part of Strand 3 of our public services reform inquiry. This day began with a fact-finding visit to Maybole to examine a community pathfinder project set up to identify what resources that local community has, and may need, in order to play a greater role in the delivery of public services. Mid-morning we undertook a community engagement event with 40 community representatives from across South Ayrshire at the University of the West of Scotland campus in Ayr. Our visit concluded in the afternoon with a formal public meeting of the Committee, again at the University, taking oral evidence as part of Strand 3 of our public services reform inquiry.

101. We have also expanded our use of modern technology in reaching out to as wide an audience as possible in terms of our work. During this parliamentary year the Committee has established its own Twitter account, which we have used to publicise our work, as well as interact with the public, such as during our benchmarking conference in September 2012 (see paragraphs 15 to 18).

102. We have also utilised the Parliament’s video conferencing facilities during the year to provide a cost efficient method of taking evidence from witnesses based outside Scotland, such as on 12 December 2012 when we took live oral evidence from witnesses on the Isle of Man as part of our Stage 1 consideration of the High Hedges (Scotland) Bill.

103. In advance of a formal evidence round-taking evidence session with community workers in October 2012, we hosted an informal breakfast meeting with them. This provided us with the opportunity to chat informally, and put them at their ease and also to hear their stories in advance of formal evidence taking. As a result, the evidence we received from them was clear, relevant and focussed and we were able to ask appropriate question and follow-ups to ensure we received the best evidence possible. This was another innovation in our approach to evidence taking.

**Equalities Issues**

104. Over the past year, the Committee set out its commitment to equalities in its work programme by examining the potential impact of issues such as public services reform and regeneration policy on vulnerable and minority groups. During our fact-finding visit to Glasgow in February 2013, we specifically met with
groups representing women from minority and refugee communities and areas of social deprivation, to discuss the impact of government regeneration spending on them.

105. We also invited representatives from minority groups we met over the course of the parliamentary year to take part in the Scottish Community Alliance conference in the Parliament on 26 April 2013.

106. As part of our scrutiny of the 2014/15 draft budget, we specifically sought information, as part of our call for written evidence, on the impact of regeneration policy and preventative spending on equalities.

**Climate change issues**

107. We have given considerable focus to issues surrounding climate change targets in our work programme over the last 12 months. Both our call for evidence on our scrutiny of the Scottish Government’s draft 2013/14 budget, as well as our consideration of the RPP2, centred in on the contribution which both Scottish local government, and national policy on regeneration and planning, should play in meeting Scotland’s carbon reduction targets for 2050.
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