



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Local Government and Communities Committee

Wednesday 29 June 2016

Session 5



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 29 June 2016

CONTENTS

Col.

MINISTER FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING	1
--	----------

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE
2nd Meeting 2016, Session 5

CONVENER

*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Mairi Evans (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)

*Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)

*Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con)

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Caroline Dicks (Scottish Government)

John McNairney (Scottish Government)

Kevin Stewart (Minister for Local Government and Housing)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jane Williams

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government and Communities Committee

Wednesday 29 June 2016

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:01]

Minister for Local Government and Housing

The Convener (Bob Doris): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the second meeting of the Local Government and Communities Committee. I remind everyone present to turn off mobile phones, as they can interfere with the sound system. Meeting papers are provided in digital format, so members may use tablets to consult them during the meeting. If people in the public gallery see members using tablets, that is what they are doing.

No apologies have been received for this morning's meeting.

We move straight to agenda item 1, under which we will take evidence from the Minister for Local Government and Housing on key areas of his portfolio. I welcome the minister, Kevin Stewart—good morning, Kevin—and his officials from the Scottish Government. Donna MacKinnon is head of the local government and analytical services division, John McNairney is the chief planner, and Caroline Dicks is from the more homes division.

Thank you for coming along this morning. You are all very welcome. As we have indicated, it would be good if the minister could make an opening statement to the committee before we move to questions.

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Kevin Stewart): Thank you, convener. I welcome you and other members to their roles in the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee this morning, and to discuss the wide range of issues in my portfolio. It is certainly different to be on this side of the table rather than your side, convener.

My portfolio is both challenging and interesting. You will have noticed that it includes aspects of the work of two previous ministers. I look forward to working closely with the committee while I serve as the Minister for Local Government and Housing.

Although there is much in my remit for me to cover, I will mention two areas that I do not cover. The Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland is now in the remit of the Minister for

Parliamentary Business, and local government finance, including council tax reform, remains in the remit of the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution.

I will make a few remarks about areas that are in my remit. The Government wishes to reinvigorate local government by reconnecting it with communities. Our aim is to transform our democratic landscape while protecting and renewing public services. One size does not fit all, but the principle of enabling local control, not on behalf of a community but by a community, will be key in all that we do. That will allow us to realise further our community empowerment agenda and require local government and its partners to relocate influence and control over some functions and local services closer to communities.

A central aim will be to further enhance local accountability and the quality of service provision, taking account of Scotland's different geographies, from the islands and through the mainland council areas to cities and their surrounding city regions. Government has already recognised that the right solutions for people might differ across Scotland's diverse communities—no one size will fit all.

We will work with local authorities to review their roles and responsibilities and get more powers into the hands of communities. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill, which was passed in the previous session of Parliament, provides a framework that will empower community bodies by encouraging ownership of land and buildings and strengthening communities' voices in the decisions that matter to them. We are developing the necessary secondary legislation and guidance. Three consultations on community planning, asset transfer and participation requests have been published, and we will continue to work with stakeholders to implement the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. Community planning in Scotland continues to improve both locally and nationally, but we recognise that the pace of improvement needs to step up. We expect that the 2015 act, together with other measures, will increase the pace and extent of improvement.

On participatory budgeting, we have committed to setting councils the target of having at least 1 per cent of their budget subject to community choices budgeting, to support the effective implementation of the 2015 act. We are currently looking at how the new commitment can be developed in collaboration with our stakeholders.

This Government has an excellent track record on housing. We exceeded our target to deliver 30,000 affordable new homes, which included more than 20,000 for social rent. We have listened to what our partners said about increasing the pace and momentum of housing delivery. Our bold and ambitious target over the next five years is to

deliver at least 50,000 affordable homes, of which at least 35,000 will be for social rent.

Communities flourish when people have good-quality, warm, comfortable homes to live in. That is why this Government's priority is to increase the scale and pace of supply of the right homes in the right places, particularly in the affordable rented and private rented sectors.

The Scottish ministers are committed to ensuring that we have a planning system that works for everyone. An independent panel completed a root-and-branch review of Scotland's planning system and published its report on 31 May. The Scottish ministers are considering the panel's recommendations and will publish our response in due course.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak to the committee this morning. I look forward to answering members' questions.

The Convener: In a minute, I will bring in my colleague Andy Wightman, who has some questions on housing—as I do, so we could start there.

I have no doubt that there has been a significant increase in the affordable housing budget and that you have set ambitious targets. Is there enough capacity in the housing sector to ensure that the targets can be met? Will the houses be built where communities want them? Will they be in the most appropriate places, such as brownfield sites, rather than green-belt developments? Some local authorities aggressively release green-belt land because development there is easier, when that is not necessarily what communities want. Is there enough capacity in the construction sector to meet the targets from the budget that has been allocated, and how do we ensure that houses are built where communities want them?

Kevin Stewart: We have set ourselves a challenging target of 50,000 affordable homes, and my job is to ensure that everything aligns so that that is achieved. At this very early stage, I have already spoken to a number of folk and organisations who are pretty enthusiastic about the Government's target.

In terms of capacity, there has been an increase recently in the number of apprentices who have entered the construction sector. I had a meeting yesterday with Homes for Scotland to talk about some of the challenges, which we will try to overcome.

On your other point, we must ensure that planning is aligned with our ambition to build those 50,000 houses. It comes as no surprise that planning and housing are both in my remit and, with my officials, I need to ensure that everything

aligns so that the 50,000—at least 50,000—target is met.

The Convener: You mentioned the significant budget that has been allocated. I assume that the Government has done some modelling work in relation to the minimum of 35,000 social housing units that will form part of the 50,000 target. Is that something that you might now have to review in relation to the uncertainty in various sectors of the Scottish and UK economies following the Brexit vote? Do you have any concerns about additional costs in the sector? Could that compromise the Scottish Government's ambition to build 50,000 affordable houses? Even if it does not, can you give us some more information about the cost assumptions behind the allocation of moneys?

Kevin Stewart: I will bring Caroline Dicks in later, but I will start by talking about what has happened over the past few days, which of course is extremely worrying. The First Minister has been doing all that she can to instil confidence, but over the past few days, since the result of the European Union referendum came in on Friday morning, house builders and lenders have been severely hit by the shock to the stock markets. Share prices have fallen by as much as 40 per cent, although both sectors seemed to recover a little yesterday as markets stabilised.

I was in discussion yesterday with Homes for Scotland, which obviously has concerns, and I heard that one of its members had said that a Polish family had already withdrawn from a house sale because they were feeling a bit worried about the current situation. It is up to all of us to try to boost the confidence of the European nationals who have come to live and work here and who are welcome here. I am glad that all the leaders of our political parties joined the First Minister yesterday in reiterating that people are welcome here. However, I think that we will have a difficulty building that confidence.

Obviously, we are in the early days in terms of the fallout from last Friday's result, but you can be assured that I will be keeping a close eye on the implications of the result, as will all my officials. I have already asked Homes for Scotland and others to feed in information about anything that is happening out there, so that we can analyse exactly what is happening.

Caroline Dicks (Scottish Government): The convener asked about the modelling in relation to the Government's targets, and specifically the 35,000 social homes. The important part of the Government's budget for delivering those homes is the grant element that goes to housing associations and councils. That element has been increased significantly in the current financial year, to reflect the increase in the Government's ambition and targets. In the current year, the grant

budget in the housing supply budget has increased by £100 million, to support the Government's programme.

As the minister said, we work closely with our stakeholders. Earlier in the year, we discussed with councils and housing associations the level of subsidy that they would need to deliver the social homes. The Government increased the grant subsidy that was available to those organisations to allow the homes to be built.

The Convener: I know that there is no such thing as a typical home, but there used to be a working assumption that the, if you like, bog-standard home—I apologise, because that is not the correct terminology—would have a certain level of housing association grant. What is the notional housing association grant subsidy at present?

Kevin Stewart: I will bring in Ms Dicks.

Caroline Dicks: It depends. We have a table that shows different grant subsidy levels for different parts of the country. We can provide that table to the committee so that members can see the detail. The grant subsidy for a council home, for example, is about £57,000, which reflects the increase that I was just talking about. We have different subsidy levels for housing associations that might be building in the central-belt urban areas. We also apply a higher subsidy for housing associations that work in very remote rural areas or island communities, where costs might be higher—our subsidies will reflect that.

Kevin Stewart: We can supply all the detail in some depth, convener, if you so wish. Obviously, the question that you asked is quite technical and there are a number of answers to it. We can supply the committee with a breakdown of grants, so that you have full knowledge of what that means. As you probably gathered from Ms Dicks's answer, one size does not fit all.

10:15

The Convener: Absolutely, minister. I am very much aware of that. That information would be very helpful, but the committee will need some comparisons because the question that I am trying to tease out is whether it becomes more expensive to build than it would have been and whether greater subsidies are needed going forward.

There is no such thing as a typical housing association grant subsidy, of course, but it would be helpful if there was a table or a framework that allows us to see whether the level of subsidy needs to be changed. In previous years the Scottish Government has had to change that level of subsidy to meet its housing targets.

Thank you for those answers—we have a couple of supplementary questions before I bring in Andy Wightman.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Good morning, minister. How are the 50,000 houses going to be allocated in terms of geographic spread? Is the programme going to be demand led, or is it going to be proportionate? I am thinking about my own area, which has 2.5 per cent of Scotland's population. Would we get 2.5 per cent of the houses, for example?

Demand may be lower in our area but, at the same time, employment is also a lot lower and unemployment is a lot higher. Ironically, if the programme is demand led, a lot of the jobs in construction would be directed to places where there are already high levels of employment and areas that have high levels of unemployment would suffer. What is the Scottish Government's thinking on that? We could end up with a disparity, and the programme could increase the difference between the more prosperous and the less prosperous areas of Scotland.

Kevin Stewart: Obviously, the programme will be driven by need and each area has its own assessment of its housing need. Mr Gibson rightly talks about his own constituency, as he always does in this place. I will be visiting Ardrossan in the near future to visit a new-build site there. I am keen to get around the country and to talk to stakeholders in local government and in housing associations to see what they think is required.

I have already spoken to the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations and discussions with it will continue. However, the key thing for the Government is to make sure that the houses are built in the right places, where there is actual need. I will not name the area, but just the other week there was a suggestion that we should build more houses in a certain part of Scotland. However, I have been told that the reality is that the housing need there is almost nil. It would be pointless for us to build homes that remain empty.

In terms of opportunities for all, I am keen to see that the benefits of the programme, which will support some 14,000 jobs, are felt right across the country. In particular, I would like to ensure that we have all the right skill sets, as the convener mentioned earlier, and that we open up opportunities for apprentices.

I was at the Aberdeen campus of North East Scotland College the other week and I was pretty chuffed to hear from apprentices there—who were entering the painting and decorating aspect of the construction industry—about how much they had enjoyed their course. I would encourage others to look at entering jobs in the construction sector. As a cross-cutting Government, we have to ensure

that all the right skill sets exist so that we can achieve our programme right across the country.

I am sure that there will be opportunities for Mr Gibson's constituents and for others as we move on with this ambitious target.

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): Welcome, minister, to the committee and to your position and thank you for joining us this morning.

I would like to pick up on something that the convener asked you about in his first question. I do not think that you fully responded to it so, if you do not mind, I will ask you about it again. It is the matter of building on the green belt.

Members around the table will probably all have examples of communities that are getting upset about proposals. For example, in my community, there is a development plan to build on the green belt between Carnbroe and Calderbank, which is very much exercising the local community.

Will you pick up on that issue, which the convener raised? Will there be some kind of presumption against building on the green belt, particularly for private developers, in favour of looking for brownfield sites?

Kevin Stewart: A lot of these things are matters for local authorities to decide in their local development plans, and they have to consider them carefully when they come to formulate those plans.

A balance needs to be struck. We require land to build on because we require a lot more houses in this country. As a constituency MSP, I have heard somebody say, "Yes, we need more houses, but I don't want them next to me." If we are going to achieve our ambitious programme and, beyond that, see house building across other tenures too, we have to strike the right balance.

Of late, we have had the independent planning review, and the Government will respond to that shortly. However, I am not going to dictate to local authorities where they should and should not build. It is grand if we can get derelict and vacant land into use, and I am keen to see that happen. The convener called such sites "brownfield sites". At the same time, however, if you want me to sit here and say that there will be no building on green-belt land, I cannot say that.

It is for local authorities to get the approach right in their local development plans. Beyond that, as I said, a balance needs to be struck. Everybody wants more houses, and we need the right land to build them on.

Elaine Smith: Thank you, minister. I would probably want you to say that there will be no building on green-belt land, but I appreciate that you are clearly not going to do that. Can you

clarify that it will be a matter for local authorities and that there has not been a change whereby, if the plan is for more than a certain number of houses, the Scottish Government will decide?

Kevin Stewart: It will be up to local authorities to look at planning in their particular locales.

The Convener: I know that the planning review is on-going, but I note that, particularly in large local authorities such as Glasgow City Council, local development plans are sent to MSPs in about 20 boxes because they are so voluminous. They are impenetrable to MSPs, never mind to local communities, which are presented with a fait accompli. Sometimes, the issue is not whether green-belt land will be rezoned for housing but whether the community has any idea what the local authority is intending to do in its local development plan.

I stay in a housing development that is adjacent to green-belt land, or a stone's throw away from it. As a Glasgow MSP, I was not informed by the local authority that it was intending to rezone the land. That can build a lot of distrust among communities irrespective of how they feel about land being rezoned. I hope that real, genuine consultation—rather than tick-box statutory consultation—is a meaningful part of any planning review.

Kevin Stewart: The planning review has reported. As I said, it was published on 31 May, and I urge members to have a look at it. As I said, the Government will respond to the review in due course.

The planning system should be development plan led and it should be open and transparent. We have talked a lot about empowering people. I want consultations on development plans and other things to be easily understandable and for people to be able to have their say and influence decisions.

Having been on a council under the previous local planning system and at the beginning of the new planning system, I have come to realise that sometimes there are complexities for folk to understand. We need to get rid of those complexities to allow everyone to play a part in the formulation of the plan for their area.

Some of the work of the Scottish Government's planning directorate is moving things forward apace. For example, we have seen much more use of charrettes, and I think that the publication "Place Standard: How good is Our Place?" should be read by everyone. Openness, transparency and making things as easy as possible for ordinary folk out there to engage with the system are the ways in which I want to move forward.

If you do not mind, convener, I will bring in Mr McNairney to add to my comments.

John McNairney (Scottish Government): As the minister has said, we aspire to having a planned system. If communities can be fully involved in the policies and allocations in the development plan, they are more likely to feel that it represents a vision for their community.

One of the things that the review panel has said is that, with regard to community engagement and empowerment, planning needs to up its game not just to make the development plan system itself more accessible to communities but to move towards giving them the option to bring forward proposals that might, in turn, be part of the development plan. That early engagement is important.

It is also clear that, when there are interventions late in the system and the examination process—which has consistently suggested that insufficient numbers are coming through the development plan system—either allocates more land or looks for an early review, that can cause tensions within the local community. As a result, early engagement and front loading are very much part of the system that we want to promote.

Kevin Stewart: I am very aware that some communities are much more able to respond to these kinds of things than others, and I want to ensure that any community capacity building that is required also plays a part in the system.

The Convener: That is very helpful. Of course, irrespective of the capacity in a community, it has to know that something is happening before it can respond. I imagine that in considering its response to the review that has been published the Government will look at that matter in some detail.

Kevin Stewart: As I have said, we will publish our response to the independent review's recommendations in very short course. It is not for me to tell the committee what to do, but members might want to talk to the folks who carried out the review about how they reached their conclusions.

The Convener: Yes, but all I am asking is whether a key principle for you as minister in responding to the independent review that has now been published will be to take on board the question of how we ensure that communities are actually aware of what is happening in the local development process.

Kevin Stewart: The Government's response to the independent review panel will come out in due course. If you want to bring me back to the committee to discuss our response, I am quite happy to come.

The Convener: I am absolutely sure that we will want to do that.

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): Minister, you said in your opening remarks that the Scottish Government

"has an excellent track record on housing".

However, house building has fallen by almost 40 per cent since 2007, mostly as a consequence of the private sector. Is the speculative volume house-building industry model that we have in Scotland and the United Kingdom fit for purpose compared with the more self-build model that exists in the rest of Europe?

My second—but related—question is about planning. It seems to me that one of the problems that we have, certainly in Edinburgh, is that there is a lot of land lying derelict, notably down by the waterfront. It is owned by offshore tax havens, and it is at risk of dropping out of the five-year land supply—if it has not already done so—purely because the owner is not in a position to bring it forward.

Are you open to ideas about mechanisms to ensure that land that has consent and should be developed for housing is actually developed for housing, and that the priorities and interests of the owner cannot override the democratically expressed wishes of the local authority?

10:30

Kevin Stewart: The Government has an excellent record on housing: we managed to achieve 33,490 affordable houses, if I remember rightly, in the previous parliamentary session. The new target is much more ambitious than that.

On self-build, which featured in Mr Wightman's question, we already have a fund in the Highlands for that, and I have asked for more detail on the issue. I will look very carefully at all aspects of house building and I am not going to rule anything in or out. Mr Wightman can be assured that I will look at self-build and, if he wants to write to me, I will lay out what the Scottish Government is doing in that regard.

In terms of land banking—I think that that is what Mr Wightman was talking about—where permissions have been given in relation to land but nothing has been done, we will look at the situation. We have to wait and see what the repercussions of last week will do to the house-building industry as a whole. As I said earlier, the response to the referendum decision was not particularly good, but I can assure the committee that I will keep members informed of any repercussions.

Andy Wightman: I welcome the opportunity to communicate further with you, minister, which I will do.

My first question was about whether you consider the speculative volume house-building industry to be fit for purpose. There is no doubt that the companies have the capacity to build houses—the problem is that they are not building houses. Many people would argue that that is because of the model of house building that we have in this country, where the vast majority of houses are built by a very small number of companies, whose principal interest is as developers rather than as house builders.

Kevin Stewart: As Mr Wightman is aware, my feet are just under the desk. I am looking at every aspect of housing policy, including the ability to self-build, which—by the sounds of it—Mr Wightman is keen on. We have to ensure that we build housing across tenures. The key thing for me is the target of 50,000 affordable houses. Beyond that, the committee can be assured that I will look at all aspects of housing across Scotland. I will bring in Ms Dicks here.

Caroline Dicks: As the minister mentioned earlier, there was a meeting yesterday with Homes for Scotland, and there is close contact with that stakeholder in terms of supporting the private sector.

Mr Wightman mentioned statistics in his question earlier, and the main way that the Government has been supporting the sector is through the help-to-buy scheme. There was £305 million for building homes for shared equity between 2013 and 2016 and, in the next three years, a further £195 million will be provided by the Government to keep that support going.

There is a ring-fenced amount within that budget for smaller builders, with which there is engagement—a survey is being done at the moment—to look at what support they need to engage in house building, and to ensure that they are supported along with the bigger companies that might be accessing the help-to-buy scheme.

Kevin Stewart: Homes for Scotland is a key stakeholder and we constantly communicate with its members.

Ms Dicks mentioned the help-to-buy scheme. Since 2007, the Scottish Government has supported more than 22,700 households into home ownership. Three quarters of those are shared-equity buyers who are under the age of 35.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. I am sure that housing will be a recurrent theme in the lifetime of this committee. We will move on for the moment to a new subject.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Thank you for attending the meeting, minister. It is probably an opportune moment to declare an interest—I am still a councillor in South

Lanarkshire. Moving on to your more general proposals for local government, you told us at the start of the meeting that you wanted to “relocate influence and control” to local communities. I am not entirely sure what that means. Could you put some flesh on the bones and tell us whether you have any plans to change the size and number of local authorities?

Kevin Stewart: Having done the dual role of MSP and councillor for a year myself, I do not envy you at this moment in time. It was a rather onerous 12 months. I think that I coped, but others may have other things to say about that.

The Government’s manifesto set out our intention to

“Consult on and introduce a Bill that will decentralise local authority functions, budgets and democratic oversight to local communities”.

The timing of that bill will be determined in due course as part of the Government’s wider consideration of the content of its future legislative programme.

As I said earlier, we are clear that one size does not fit all; we will continue to grow and develop city deals, town centre partnerships and regional economic partnerships so that clusters of agencies and shared interests can work together for the benefit of their local economies and communities.

Beyond that, of course, we have the opportunity of city region deals and the new regional economic partnerships too. We will consult and we will come back and provide you with the timing of the bill at a later date.

Graham Simpson: You are talking about city regions. That suggests to me that you may be thinking of merging functions in councils. Perhaps you could comment on that.

Kevin Stewart: I am talking about the city region deals that already exist in Aberdeen City, in Aberdeenshire and in Glasgow, and soon in Edinburgh and other places. That is what I am talking about; I am not talking about merging anything.

As I said, we will consult on our proposals and we will come back with the timing of the bill after that consultation—after we have taken the views of the people and stakeholders into account.

Graham Simpson: When we talk about decentralising, are we talking about handing powers from councils to communities—whatever we mean by communities? Perhaps you could confirm that. Further, is there anything in your thinking about decentralising powers from this place to councils?

Kevin Stewart: First, I should reiterate the Government’s intention on community

empowerment. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, as far as I am concerned, was a flagship piece of legislation that went through in the last parliamentary session. During the course of its formulation, the predecessor committee to this one went right across the country to talk to people about their experiences and where they thought things were going well and where they thought things were not going so well. It is fair to say that that predecessor committee played a major role in the formulation of the bill, because many of its amendments were accepted and are part of the act that will be rolled out.

It became apparent as we went round the country that people in many places felt distanced from the local authority. I will give you two examples. We went to Lochaber and Fort William, where folks had a lot of views about their local authority, Highland Council. The overriding opinion was that Inverness seemed very distant. Beyond that, people seemed to be frustrated that they could not take control of various services themselves. I spoke to a group of folk who wanted to deal with the winter clearing services in their area because they felt that the council was not doing a good job. I can see absolutely no difficulty in that kind of thing happening.

We also went to the Western Isles, and it was quite surprising to hear from the folks in the southern islands how distanced they felt from Stornoway. Since then, folks in those islands have taken part in a participatory budgeting scheme. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar—I apologise to the Gaelic speakers out there for what is probably my mispronunciation—was quite brave in allowing the community there to take part in a budgeting process for transport involving £500,000-worth of contracts. I understand that the community helped to shape the new transport systems there and reduced the number of contracts from 14 to four. That happened in recent times, and I think that it will be an idea for us to go and analyse the benefits of that kind of community involvement.

That is the kind of thing that I would like to see happen. I am not particularly bothered about lines on maps; I am interested in what communities want, need and desire.

The Convener: Thank you for that, minister. I will bring in Alexander Stewart, who has been very patient.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Thank you convener. I declare an interest as a serving member of Perth and Kinross Council.

I look forward, minister, to the challenges of the next year or so. My question follows on from what you have said. I thank you for giving us some

indication that you will be dealing with the structures and timescales of reform as we move forward. Obviously, any reform has an impact on a community and could have consequences for jobs in a locale. A number of councils across Scotland are working collaboratively or in partnership with one another, sharing some services and continuing to make economies of scale. That has worked quite well in some areas, but other areas have found it quite challenging, so there is a slight difference of opinion as to how that work will progress.

It is important to get a flavour of the views that the Government is proposing and what it will attempt to do. Local government has a number of functions at the moment but probably the biggest one is education. I know that other ministers are undertaking a review of education, but it would be useful to get a flavour of the Government's views on what impact that might have on education within local authorities, because I think that it could have a huge impact on the current system and could show us a very different organisation in future.

The Convener: Is your question about education? I am not sure whether it is about shared services or local government boundaries. Is it specifically about education reform?

10:45

Alexander Stewart: It is about the whole idea of sharing services. At present, as I said, that is working quite well, but I want to know whether there are any opinions and views about education, because it is one of the biggest things that local government has to manage. The Government might have some views on that, or it might not. I am just testing the water to see whether there are any views.

The Convener: Minister, what are your views on education?

Kevin Stewart: Education does not fall into my portfolio—

Alexander Stewart: I appreciate that.

Kevin Stewart: Many local authorities have worked very well in partnership to share services. In many cases, it has led to savings, which has meant that money could be put back into front-line services, and that is beneficial to people. There are some very good examples across the country of where that has worked. The Aberdeen city and shire joint procurement unit is one of the best examples that I can give. I do not know how much money it has saved over the course, but it has ensured that money has been diverted back into front-line services.

Unfortunately, a number of local authorities have not moved towards that co-operative, sharing scenario, and I encourage them to do so. I am immensely keen to ensure that best practice is exported throughout the country. The committee will probably find that it hears about a number of very good things that are going on at a local level, but when it asks folk who they have shared them with and whether they are being replicated elsewhere, it will get a blank.

The Convener: The question eventually ended up being on education. That is not within your remit but, as the Minister for Local Government and Housing, where do you see your role in relation to any impact that any education reforms may have on local authorities? That may be what Mr Stewart was getting at.

Alexander Stewart: That is what I was trying to get at.

The Convener: I am sure that there is wonderful practice in communities across Scotland. The committee will go and look at that for ourselves, but where do you see your role as Minister for Local Government and Housing in relation to any education reforms?

Kevin Stewart: The First Minister stated in her first speech to Parliament in the current session that this would be a cross-cutting Government. There will be discussions between me and the Deputy First Minister as both the cabinet secretary for education and the lead for public sector reform.

As I have made clear, there will be consultation on all these matters before the Government embarks on that journey, and I hope that the people and stakeholders will feed into that.

I assure the committee that the Government will work on a cross-cutting basis and that the discussions will be held across Government but, more important, that we will, as always, consult before there are moves to change things.

The Convener: Okay. Elaine Smith wants to follow up on that.

Elaine Smith: Minister, are there any plans to look at removing schools from local authority control? If so, would your remit as a minister give you an interest in that?

Kevin Stewart: My remit as a minister gives me an interest in many things. It has been a bit of an eye-opener for me to see how much information is shared across Government and how often I am asked for my opinion. I think that that is a particularly good thing. At this time, I am working in co-operation with numerous cabinet secretaries and ministers on many issues. If any decisions are made, I will obviously catch sight of them. My opinion will, no doubt, be asked for and I will give that opinion.

However, the key thing in all this—and I cannot emphasise this enough—is that, in the reform that we bring forward, we listen to the public in particular and see what their needs and desires are. As a Government, we have a fairly good record of doing that. That is one of the reasons why we passed the flagship Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 in the previous parliamentary session.

The Convener: Elaine, I know that was a supplementary question, but do you want to come back in on that?

Elaine Smith: No, I think that the minister has answered my question as much as he can at the moment.

Kevin Stewart: I must say that I cannot answer about every single aspect of education because that is not within my remit.

The Convener: I think that we were more driving towards the point that if the reforms in education were to have a direct impact on the wider local government remit, you would be in the room making those decisions rather than finding out the consequences of those decisions.

Kevin Stewart: As I said, the Government works in a cross-cutting way. I would be notified and given the information and I am sure that my responses would be taken into account. However, the key thing for me—as I have said throughout this meeting and will continue to say throughout this parliamentary session—is getting this right for the people of Scotland.

The Convener: The minister is not here to talk about education policy, of course; his remit is local government, communities and housing. Is your question on education, Graham?

Graham Simpson: Yes, it is.

The Convener: Keep it focused.

Graham Simpson: It is very focused and it is very quick. Education is, as you know, a massive part of local government. I have a straight question, minister. Is it the Government's intention to review the education funding formula?

Kevin Stewart: The Government's intention is to review the education funding formula. We will establish a new, fair and transparent funding formula so that schools have clarity about the level of funding that they will receive, which will enable them to plan for the future. The Government intends to ensure that funding goes directly to headteachers.

The Convener: Mr Gibson, is your supplementary also on education?

Kenneth Gibson: It is not a supplementary; it is about local government reform.

The Convener: We will take Elaine Smith first and then come back to you.

Elaine Smith: Thanks very much, convener. Specifically on the review of education funding, I understand that £100 million of the attainment fund would be found from council tax, while the rest would be from the Government. However, I have to ask, how would that work? Would the Government then be asking councils that get more council tax—for example, areas with bigger houses—to perhaps pay more? Would that then be spread out to areas where the attainment fund was more needed? How exactly would you envisage that working? Also, how would that play out in relation to councils' rights, if you like, to raise their own council tax and spend it?

The Convener: I am not sure that that is a supplementary but it is a very valid question.

Kevin Stewart: And one that probably does not fall into my portfolio, convener. As I said, it is the Government's intention to review the formula. As part of that review, such details will be teased out, I am sure. I do not have the details. That does not fall into my remit.

The Convener: That is fine, minister.

I think that we have the most patient member of the committee in Mairi Evans. I will now let her in.

Mairi Evans (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): Thank you. My question relates to some of the other things that the minister has mentioned today. He talked about participatory budgeting and the charrette process. I know from my own local authority that we rolled out the charrette process in most of the towns in the Angus Council area. It has been a positive process on the whole, and a good way to get people involved, because it looks at external organisations and is not necessarily run by the council, as some events tend to be.

We have already discussed the main issue, which is that we get a lot of interested people at the start but what happens afterwards turns out to be very frustrating. I know that that is down to local authorities and that performance varies from local authority to local authority, but their inability to act on what comes out of the charrette process has been frustrating for communities.

We have talked about local development plans, and the convener made the point that a lot of people would buy into the process but cannot if they do not know that it is happening in the first place. Again, that communication aspect varies from local authority to local authority. Community planning partnerships have a central role. Their performance probably varies too, but in some areas they still have a top-down approach rather than the bottom-up approach that they were designed to have. I would like to tease out your

thoughts on that and on how the process can be developed and improved. Lots of communities are desperate to buy into these things but do not know what is going on or how the decisions are made.

Kevin Stewart: I thank Ms Evans for her questions—there were a lot of them. I will start with the charrette process. A number of years ago, when I was a councillor, I went along to a charrette. I felt a little bit cynical about it, I have to say, but I came out feeling very enthused indeed, as did the other folks who attended the event. People felt that they were part of the process. It was extremely exciting for many folk—it was the first time that they had felt part of the process. I hope that we can continue to use charrettes and other community engagement tools in the planning process in many areas to ensure that we do the right things.

For me, participatory budgeting is also very exciting. I talked about Comhairle nan Eilean Siar in that regard. Information about a number of schemes that have already happened—they came from the last lot of community choices fund money—crossed my desk recently. Although many of those schemes have not been fully analysed yet, it seems that people have felt really empowered by being involved in them. I think that that is really beneficial for everyone.

Just last week, the new £2 million community choices fund was launched. It is targeted at work in deprived areas and aims to build on the support for participatory budgeting that has been provided by the Scottish Government since 2014. It will open up opportunities for other public authorities, community organisations and community councils. I ask all committee members and, indeed, all members of the Parliament to advertise the fund. We can circulate details about it to members. I want to see communities the length and breadth of Scotland bidding to become part of the process.

Beyond that, my aim is to ensure that councils set the minimum 1 per cent target. I think that everybody will gain from the process. My experience in my past life as a councillor is that when the community is involved in shaping services and deciding how money is spent—when it is given the ability to make decisions—the outcome is normally very good, in that we end up with a much better service because the people know what they want. I think that following the public pound is often best done by the public. To ensure that a community's priorities are met, people from that community will scrutinise to the nth degree.

I have probably rabbited on too much—I have forgotten the last part of Ms Evans's question.

Mairi Evans: It was about community planning partnerships.

11:00

Kevin Stewart: The committee will have seen from the previous committee's legacy paper that we did a large amount of work on community planning partnerships. There are areas where they work extremely well. I am sure that the committee will find out that those are areas that take a bottom-up approach and where communities have a real say in what is happening in their area—where they influence not only the local authority but the health board, the police and other agencies. There are lessons to be learned from that. The community planning partnerships that are doing less well and are still taking the top-down approach should look at their compatriots who have taken the other route and are now working much better. I hope that we get to a point where exporting best practice—the bottom-up-from-communities approach—happens everywhere, as that will be beneficial to all. It is not for me to tell the committee what to do, but I hope that members will look at the legacy paper and possibly do some follow up on the work on community planning partnerships. However, as I say, that is a matter for the committee and not for me.

The Convener: Do you want to come back in, Mairi?

Mairi Evans: It is not so much a supplementary as a different question.

The Convener: You will get a different question in a moment.

Minister, you mentioned that some community planning partnerships are performing well and some are doing fairly poorly, and that the ones that perform well have a bottom-up approach.

Kevin Stewart: I said “less well”, not “poorly”, I think.

The Convener: We can agree that some should be doing far better than they are doing. You mentioned that community planning partnerships that perform less well should be learning from the ones that are doing well. As Minister for Local Government and Housing, do you have a role in ensuring that best practice is shared? How do you intend to take that forward?

Kevin Stewart: I will always encourage best practice to be exported, and I will do all that I can to ensure that information is shared. In the next couple of days, I will write to all community planning partnerships about an issue that arose at a round-table meeting that I attended yesterday. When we find best practice—when I say “we”, I mean not only me, as a minister, and the Government, but the committee—we have an obligation to ensure that it is exported and shared across the board. I urge the committee not to rely

just on the Government to export best practice, but to look at the previous committee's work on benchmarking in community planning partnerships to ensure that best practice goes right across community planning partnerships and right across local authorities.

The Convener: The committee will do that, but we have a responsibility to scrutinise the Scottish Government minister responsible for ensuring that that happens, and that minister is you.

Kevin Stewart: And you have—[*Interruption.*]

The Convener: One moment, minister. It is great that you had that round-table event. However, are you prepared to review the guidance on and structures of community planning partnerships, if there is a need to do so? Will you come to the committee and give us more information on how you will ensure that best practice is shared?

Kevin Stewart: As you will be aware, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 included a number of bits and pieces that deal with community planning partnerships. As I said, the guidance on that is currently being consulted on and worked up. If I think that something else needs to be done to share information and export best practice, I will ensure that that is done. When I was sat where you are sitting, convener, that was one of the things at the top of the pile, as far as I was concerned. In certain cases, there has been an inability to share best practice across the public sector. I intend to ensure that best practice is shared and, from my answer, you have that assurance.

The Convener: We have an assurance that, if structures have to change or statutory guidance has to be given to ensure that best practice is shared, those things will happen.

Kevin Stewart: As I said, I am not particularly interested in structures and lines. However, guidance is often good when it deals with such things. Guidance under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 is still being worked up. If there needs to be any change to ensure that best practice is shared and exported, I will certainly consider that.

The Convener: It would be helpful if you could write to the committee to give us some examples of best practice and say how the Scottish Government is ensuring that it is shared. That would give the committee a starting point from which we can look at the issue further.

Kevin Stewart: That is not a problem.

Kenneth Gibson: I would make the quick point that getting the local print media to cover your £2 million fund is a lot easier said than done.

On community choices and participation, the figure of 1 per cent is significant. In my relatively small local authority area, 1 per cent would be more than £3.5 million a year. When would you like that to be fully rolled out?

Kevin Stewart: I would like local authorities to move on the issue as soon as possible. It would be advantageous for them to do so sooner rather than later. As I said, I have a strong belief that, when the public is allowed to shape services, we end up with better services, normally at much less cost, which means that money can be invested in other front-line services.

I encourage local authorities and other public sector bodies to move to participatory budgeting as soon as possible.

The Convener: Before we move on to local government funding, Mairi Evans wants to raise another theme with the minister.

Mairi Evans: The impact of the referendum on structural funds and transnational programmes is extremely important and of huge concern to local authorities. With regard to, for example, the distribution of funds from the LEADER programme and the rural development programme, is it just a case of business as usual at the moment? Can you offer local government any reassurances in that regard?

I believe that, over the last funding period, your constituency was the biggest beneficiary in the UK from the transnational programmes, which bring in hundreds of millions of pounds to our local economies and are largely dealt with by local government. I note that a lot of bids for transnational programmes, such as the Interreg programmes, are in the middle of the process. What is your thinking on that?

Kevin Stewart: The impact of the referendum result has not filtered all the way through yet. I wish the First Minister well in Europe today and hope that we will reach a position in which Scotland can remain in the European Union and that, as a consequence, we do not have to worry too much about these things.

Local government was allocated up to one third of the £1.3 billion EU structural funds that were allocated to Scotland between 2014 and 2020. The total direct local government funding was somewhere in the region of €293 million, or £230 million. That included funding of some €40 million to invest in local and regional businesses with growth potential through the business gateway; €15 million for the seven smart cities in the Scottish cities alliance; and €138 million for employability work. As Ms Evans alluded to, there is also the European offshore wind development money that came to Aberdeen.

I am unable to give in-depth answers to Ms Evans's questions at the moment. I will write to the committee with all the detail of all the funding that might be at risk. Beyond that, we will keep the committee updated as things become more apparent in that sphere. However, I reiterate that I hope that Scotland can remain within the European Union so that none of that funding is put at risk.

Andy Wightman: I want to ask a question about fuel poverty and energy efficiency, so it is on a new topic.

The Convener: I was letting you in to start a new topic.

Andy Wightman: Thank you, convener. The upcoming November 2016 statutory deadline for meeting the objective of eradicating fuel poverty that was set in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 is not likely to be met, which will obviously focus attention back on this very important topic. What plans do you have to ensure that we do not in the future set a target that will not be met, and to inject some urgency into the question of fuel poverty?

Kevin Stewart: This Government is committed to tackling fuel poverty and to ensuring that everyone in Scotland lives in a warm home that is affordable to heat. We will continue to work with stakeholders as we take forward our commitment to introducing a warm homes bill, in addition to considering the recommendation on regulation from the special working group of the expert commission on district heating. It would also be helpful for us to consider the recommendations from the Scottish rural fuel poverty task force and the Scottish fuel poverty strategic working group, which are both expected to report on their findings by the end of the calendar year.

Andy Wightman: Thank you. The target has not been met; we still have high levels of fuel poverty. I was asking about the level of urgency with which you intend to tackle the issue. It is a cross-cutting issue across your portfolio, the energy portfolio, climate change and so on. Do you have any idea about by when you now wish to eradicate fuel poverty?

Kevin Stewart: Just yesterday afternoon, I met David Sigsworth, who is the chair of the Scottish fuel poverty strategic working group. It is that group's view that, despite the Scottish Government's significant investment of over £0.5 billion since 2009 in our fuel poverty and energy efficiency programme, the ambitious target to eradicate fuel poverty by November will not be met, as Mr Wightman said. Therefore, based on the advice that we have received from experts across the sector, we must accept that fuel poverty will not be eradicated this year. We are, however, committed to continuing our efforts in the

area. I will continue to work with stakeholders to review the fuel poverty action plan, including the fuel poverty eradication target. As I said earlier, that will include the recommendations from the Scottish rural fuel poverty task force and the fuel poverty strategic working group, which are both due to issue final reports on their findings by the end of the calendar year.

The target was challenging. We would have been near meeting it if it had not been for the huge increases in fuel bills. However, as I said, I will continue to work with stakeholders to review matters. It is a priority for this Government to continue to try to eradicate fuel poverty.

Elaine Smith: I want to take you back slightly, to a housing issue. I am sure that we have all in recent years noticed an increase in people sleeping rough, and not just in our cities, but in other areas. In my community I have noticed an increase; previously there may not have been so much rough sleeping. I take on board everything that you have said about housing—it is very important—but what about the lack of accommodation for people who are sleeping rough? It has meant, for example, that church groups have opened church halls to help people. Do you have any plans to look at the issue to see whether accommodation for people who are sleeping rough can be increased?

11:15

Kevin Stewart: Scotland has some of the most progressive homelessness legislation in the world and, since 2012, all those who are assessed as being homeless through no fault of their own are entitled to settled accommodation. That does not happen anywhere else in the UK. The Scottish Government has promoted its housing options approach, which focuses on preventing homelessness in the first place. To promote the approach, five local authority-led housing options hubs were created, which enabled all 32 local authorities to share learning and practice. The hubs have received £1 million of funding since 2010-11 and we are providing £150,000 of on-going support for 2016-17.

I take the deputy convener's point about rough sleepers. One of the first meetings that I had as minister was on homelessness—Ms Dicks was at that meeting, if I remember rightly. I am keen to ensure that the best possible actions are taken in order that we do our very best for people. One frustration for me is that local authority boundaries are often seen as a barrier to finding solutions and good outcomes for folk, so I am keen to have a cross-cutting approach to deal with homelessness as a whole. Maybe Ms Dicks could add a bit more meat to the bone.

The Convener: I apologise, Ms Dicks—I will let you in in a second. Elaine Smith has a very specific follow-up on that.

Elaine Smith: I feel that it would be better for me to follow up—then, maybe, Ms Dicks can come in and answer on it all.

I was a member of Parliament when the excellent homelessness legislation was passed and, as a former homelessness officer, I very much welcomed the legislation at that time. I am really pleased to hear of the minister's commitment, but the problem is that, although people have legal rights, it is very difficult for people who are sleeping rough to get a lawyer—there are not enough legal centres to help them. If people can get a letter from, for example, a law centre and take that to the council, they might be accommodated, but a lot of councils do not seem to have the accommodation, which is a big problem. I wanted to add that before Caroline Dicks comes in.

Kevin Stewart: There are two main points. There is on-going discussion about people who sleep rough and who, as has been pointed out, often have multiple and complex needs. It is generally accepted that in order to meet their needs, a range of services need to work together, including health, homelessness and social work. I am keen to ensure that that happens across the board.

Elaine Smith mentioned supported accommodation. It is worrying that the UK Government is currently reviewing its funding; there is a major threat to some provision. We as a Government will continue to press the UK Government to ensure that supported accommodation is exempt from changes. A review of supported accommodation that was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Communities and Local Government is due to be published. The UK Government will announce some mitigation measures to be used in the short term; longer-term approaches will be subject to a formal consultation. Ms Dicks will add to my comments.

Caroline Dicks: Homelessness is not in my area of direct responsibility, but we work closely with colleagues to look at the supply of more homes across all local authority areas and at the processes for making links between housing associations and councils to ensure that homelessness applicants get access to new homes. As the minister said, agencies are working together to consider what is happening on rough sleeping; we can update the committee on the discussions.

Kevin Stewart: I am happy to write to update the committee on the on-going work, if the convener is happy with that.

The Convener: That would be helpful. I will be disciplined and not ask a supplementary question, which would have been on housing allocation policy. I will ask a question about that in the chamber this afternoon, so I will leave it until then.

Kevin Stewart: I will answer the question this afternoon.

The Convener: Time is almost upon us. I say to Mr Wightman that I am moving on to our final area, which is planning—a couple of members have questions on that. Does Graham Simpson want to ask a question?

Graham Simpson: That is fine.

The Convener: You had a blank look of horror on your face.

Graham Simpson: I was going to ask about something else, but I will go for planning.

The Convener: You said that you had questions on planning.

Kenneth Gibson: Convener—I thought that we were going to discuss local government reform, which is a reasonably important topic for the committee.

The Convener: The topic is important and members have had lots of opportunities to raise it. It is now 11.21 and members have not raised it.

Kenneth Gibson: I do not think that we have had lots of opportunities.

The Convener: I have offered Mr Simpson the opportunity to ask a question; if he wishes to, he can ask about local government reform.

Graham Simpson: We can do anything, convener.

The Convener: You are the member I have called. You say that we can do anything.

Graham Simpson: We can go for local government reform.

The Convener: If Mr Simpson is not bothered, I will call Mr Gibson to ask a question.

Kenneth Gibson: Thank you. How open is the Scottish Government to a bold and radical transformation of local government? I asked a question at First Minister's question time about the timescale for a review and I understand that you are moving towards that at the end of the year.

The minister will be aware that I submitted a resolution to this year's Scottish National Party conference on the subject. Local government budgets are under severe pressure and are

declining year on year, and the funding pressure is likely to continue. Given that, how sustainable is it to have 32 local authorities and 14 health boards? Would it be more sensible to bring health boards under democratic control by merging local authorities and health boards, which would allow strategic decision making about economic development, social work and health? At the same time, responsibility for issues such as planning, street cleaning, museums and street lighting could be devolved to communities, which would give them the input that you want them to have. I am interested in your views.

There is a lot of bureaucracy in local government that people do not understand, such as community planning partnerships, and health and social care integration arrangements such as integration joint boards. Surely it would be a lot easier to look again at the entire issue.

The Convener: We might give the minister a little longer to answer that question.

Kevin Stewart: I am aware that time is pressing so, if the committee wants to write to me with questions that we do not reach today, I will respond accordingly.

As I have said, the public sector reform agenda sits in the Deputy First Minister's remit. The Government's aim is to transform our democratic landscape, to protect and renew public services and to refresh the relationship between citizens, communities, councils and other public bodies. We will work with local authorities to review their roles and responsibilities and to get more power into communities' hands. We will consult on and introduce a decentralisation bill.

A review of local government's roles and responsibilities is in line with public discussion that is well established, which includes arguments that were made by the 2014 Convention of Scottish Local Authorities commission on strengthening local democracy.

The Government has already recognised that the right solutions for people might differ across Scotland's diverse communities, and we will of course take that into account. However, the key thing in all this is the consultation with the people that I mentioned earlier.

Kenneth Gibson: One thing that you did not mention was whether health could be integrated with local government. For example, Fife Council and Fife NHS Board have coterminous boundaries, so surely it would make sense to have democratic control of integration through one structure rather than two.

Kevin Stewart: As I said, this area sits within Mr Swinney's remit, so I will pass on Mr Gibson's comments to the Deputy First Minister, although I

am quite sure that he is already aware of Mr Gibson's views.

The Convener: That is very helpful, but it raises an interesting point in that many things will have a direct impact on local government. Although some matters of reform will not be directly within your remit, reform will have a direct impact on and consequence for local government. I think that what Mr Gibson was just saying and what I was saying in previous questioning was about ensuring that a local government minister or the cabinet secretary is in the room co-producing the reforms, whatever they might look like, rather than just having to deal with the impact of them. That is the point.

Kevin Stewart: I reiterate what I have said a number of times in the meeting: the First Minister has said that this will be a cross-cutting Government and people will not work in isolation. I said already that it has been an eye-opener for me to see the amount of information that is shared and the joint decision making that is going on in the Scottish Government. I am sure that that will continue. It is of course the committee's right to call other ministers and cabinet secretaries to talk about their areas of responsibility.

The Convener: Absolutely. Mr Simpson, do you want to comment on this topic?

Graham Simpson: Yes. Obviously, we have tried to tease out some answers on local government reform. You are clearly not ready to give those answers yet, minister, but I understand that. However, you said earlier that you want to hand education funding directly to schools. If that is to happen, it could clearly have a knock-on effect on council budgets. Are you talking about taking schools out of council control and handing them to—in effect—yourself, if the Scottish Government is handing out the money? That would have an effect on council budgets.

Kevin Stewart: As I said when I was answering questions about education funding, these things will be consulted on and the education aspects of all this fall within the remit of the Deputy First Minister. Forgive me, convener, but I do not know the remit of the committee that has been decided by the Parliamentary Bureau. However, when it comes to the public sector reform agenda, I am sure that you can call the Deputy First Minister to talk about that, if you wish.

The Convener: I am sure that we will be cross-cutting in our approach.

Kenneth Gibson: Can I ask just a tiny question?

The Convener: No, unfortunately. Council tax reform and local government finance are a meaty

issue that Andy Wightman wishes to raise as a final theme this morning.

Andy Wightman: I will be brief because we will have future conversations on this topic. However, minister, you mentioned in your opening remarks that you do not have responsibility for local government finance, which sits with the finance secretary.

Kevin Stewart: Correct.

Andy Wightman: However, you have responsibility for tax reform.

Kevin Stewart: All aspects of local government finance sit with the finance secretary.

Andy Wightman: Are you therefore not in a position to give us any indication as to whether the Government's current proposals for council tax reform will be brought forward?

Kevin Stewart: The Government's proposals will be put forward, I am sure, by the finance secretary in the near future.

11:30

The Convener: Is there nothing more that members wish to ask on that theme? I see that Mr Gibson is quite keen to speak. I say to fellow committee members that, if ever they do not make eye contact with me to indicate that they want to ask a question, Mr Gibson will always fill that gap.

Kenneth Gibson: I have a very precise, and small, question. The issue—all the councillors at the table will have been exercised about it in the past—is randomised ballots at next year's local authority elections. If the minister and I were to stand in a completely new ward for the same party, assuming that nobody knew who we were and the voters just looked at the party labels then, all else being equal, I would be elected rather than him. In 2007, 92 per cent of people whose names were higher up the alphabet were selected over party colleagues whose names were lower down the alphabet. Surely the democratic way to do next year's election and to avoid all that nonsense would be to randomise the ballot papers, so that someone called Mr Simpson would have exactly the same chance as Mr Doris, assuming that they were standing for the same party in the same area.

The Convener: Not at all. Sorry—strike that from the record. Minister, would you answer that point?

Kevin Stewart: I have heard that argument before. Work that was done after the first single transferable vote election in 2007 showed that a person was more likely to be elected if their name was further up the alphabet. That was not so much the case in 2011, if I remember rightly.

Kenneth Gibson: Why does the SNP randomise its internal ballot papers then?

The Convener: Mr Gibson, we will let you away with that one, but maybe you could ask your questions through the convener in the future.

Kenneth Gibson: Sorry, convener.

The Convener: I also remind the minister that he is here to answer on behalf of the Government, not the Scottish National Party.

Kevin Stewart: I have no idea why the SNP chose to use the Robson rotation. I have to say that I have not looked in depth at any of that. As I said at the very beginning of the meeting—it sounds as though I am deflecting a lot today, but I am not trying to—all election matters come under Mr FitzPatrick's portfolio, as he is the Minister for Parliamentary Business. It might be best to address that question to him rather than to me, because he deals with all aspects of elections.

The Convener: My colleague Elaine Smith has a question, which I am sure you will not deflect and will be very keen to answer.

Elaine Smith: It is a supplementary to Mr Gibson's point. I note the minister's comment that Mr FitzPatrick is responsible for boundary issues. However, given that it affects his remit, with 10 months to go to local government elections, does he have any idea when the Scottish Government will announce the boundary changes as a result of the boundary review?

Kevin Stewart: I do not have an indication of the timescale, but I will ask Mr FitzPatrick to write to the committee about that.

Elaine Smith: Many thanks.

The Convener: Time is upon us. I thank the minister and his colleagues for giving evidence to the committee this morning.

Minister, we are very keen to work in partnership with you and your officials in the best interests of the electorate, who we all wish to do a job for. We will be considering our work programme through the summer, and I am sure that we will have you back in the very near future. Today was really about airing general themes and us getting to know you as minister and you getting to know us as a committee. I am sure that we will have a constructive relationship.

I am happy to give you time to make any final comments before we move into private.

Kevin Stewart: I do not have very much more to say other than to wish you all the very best on the committee. I enjoyed serving on the predecessor committee, and I hope that you enjoy your work and scrutiny as much as I did mine.

The Convener: Thank you very much, minister. For the benefit of members and anyone listening outwith this place, under standing order rule 12.6.2, the committee is required to appoint an EU reporter. The decision will be put to members after the summer recess. I say that just in case anyone outside watching is thinking that the committee has not appointed an EU reporter yet. We most definitely will do. It is crucial to continue with that role, and we will make the appointment after the summer recess.

As agreed at our meeting on 15 June, we move into private to discuss our work programme.

11:34

Meeting continued in private until 12:09.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba