OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Local Government and Communities Committee

Wednesday 18 January 2017

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 18 January 2017

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE
2nd Meeting 2017, Session 5

CONVENER

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

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
*Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con)
*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Roddy Angus (Scottish Government)
Alan Armstrong (Education Scotland)
Joe FitzPatrick (Minister for Parliamentary Business)
Chris Highcock (Electoral Management Board for Scotland)
Ian Milton (Scottish Assessors Association)
Andy O'Neill (Electoral Commission)
Mary Pitcaithly (Electoral Management Board for Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Clare Hawthorne

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government and Communities Committee

Wednesday 18 January 2017

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:46]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Bob Doris): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the second meeting of the Local Government and Communities Committee in 2017. I remind everyone to turn off their mobile phones. Committee papers are provided in digital format, so members may been seen using tablet devices during the meeting. We have received no apologies.

Agenda item 1 is to make a decision on taking business in private. Do members agree to take in private agenda item 4, which is consideration of a draft report on payments to returning officers, and agenda item 7, which is on draft letters that relate to the committee's European Union scrutiny?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Scottish Local Government Elections (Voting)

09:47

The Convener: Under agenda item 2, the committee will hold two evidence sessions on Scottish local government elections and voting. The first involves stakeholders who have a role in the electoral process. That will be followed by a session with the Minister for Parliamentary Business. This follows our evidence taking on 2 November 2016, when we heard from academia, the Electoral Reform Society Scotland, the Modern Studies Association, Unison Scotland, Shelter Scotland, the Minority Ethnic Carers of People Project, and Enable Scotland.

I welcome Andy O'Neill, head of office for the Electoral Commission in Scotland; Alan Armstrong, strategic director of Education Scotland; Mary Pitcaithly, convener of the Electoral Management Board for Scotland; Chris Highcock, secretary of the EMBS; and Ian Milton, Grampian electoral registration officer and chair of the electoral registration committee of the Scottish Assessors Association. I thank everyone for coming to the meeting.

No one has indicated that they wish to make an opening statement, so we will move to questions.

The committee is keen to work in partnership to maximise voter turnout in the elections this May. How we incentivise, encourage and motivate individuals to register for and vote in council elections in particular has been a perennial problem, and the committee will do what we can to assist in that process. I hope that this scrutiny session will be part of that.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Many individuals see voting as a "must do", but they seem to be from an older generation that is highly motivated to get out. There was high motivation across the piece in the referendum, but when it comes to local government elections, we find ourselves slipping back, normally. My question is the perennial one about younger voters and how we tackle them. Is awareness provided at colleges, universities and workplaces to try to encourage younger people to become more actively involved in the voting process?

The Convener: Who would like to deal with that question?

Do not all fight each other to answer at once.

Andy O'Neill (Electoral Commission): I will jump in first; I think that I got the main point of the question.

Alexander Stewart is probably right—the older the person is, the more likely they are to vote. The converse is that the younger a person is, the less likely they are to vote. Obviously it is very important to engage people in the democratic process, so we spend a lot of time doing so.

With regard to how we tackle voters, we have a duty under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, which set up the Electoral Commission, and under the Local Electoral Administration (Scotland) Act 2011, to make people aware of current forms of Government and the electoral system, and that is what we do. It is down to you guys, as politicians, to incentivise people to go and vote for you.

In general, it is a truism that, if people think that something is important, they will vote. There was turnout of 84 or 85 per cent in the independence referendum in 2014, but turnout of only 39.8 per cent in the most recent local government elections because people viewed them as being not so important—even although they are, of course, important.

We make sure that people can access information easily and that they understand how to register to vote and fill in ballot papers, which in itself helps turnout.

In the coming election, 16 and 17-year-olds will vote for the first time in an election. We have worked with educationists and other colleagues—who will, I presume, talk about their work today—and we have provided resources. We on the Electoral Commission are not educationists and have no role in formal education, but we have a lot of expertise around elections, so we have been working in partnership with colleagues who are sitting to my left to develop a campaign. It includes the "#readytovote" toolkit, which we used in Scottish Parliament elections, and through which we finished up with about 78 per cent of all high schools throughout Scotland running registration drives.

We have revised and—I think—improved the campaign for this year. It will involve talking about registration and how to vote, but it also covers what councils do. There are little exercises that people can use in class, for example, but it is not just for formal education—it is for other places too.

Alan Armstrong (Education Scotland): Alexander Stewart's question was on colleges and universities, but it could extend to schools and other settings.

Alexander Stewart: Certainly.

Alan Armstrong: I will start by talking about the move through education. The curriculum for excellence sets out two broad areas: the broad general education from age three to 15 and the senior phase, with qualifications. Within those areas, there are two distinct elements that promote political literacy and help to provide the context for the kind of activities and the sharing of learning materials that Andy O'Neill described.

We expect Scottish pupils, all the way from three to 18, to develop in four major capacities: to be successful learners and confident individuals, but also to be effective contributors and responsible citizens. Within that, there is the entitlement for all young people to learn the skills of political literacy. Those include how to debate, how to understand and have empathy with others, how to listen to decisions that are going on around them and how to take part in those decisions and use their own voice. That gives teachers the opportunity to run mock elections or elections for prefects, and to let young people in primary schools take on responsibilities in the playground or at lunch time and so on. That should be—and is—embedded in the curriculum all the way from three to 18.

There is also the distinct curriculum area of social studies, which is set for all children between the ages of three and 15. In social studies, there are particular outcomes for children that help them to understand their society and their place in the environment, and to understand how decisions are made in areas such as the economy and business in communities and around the world. Children learn progressively through that.

In the qualifications phase, that aspect is naturally embedded in history, geography and modern studies. For young people who are not studying those subjects, generic opportunities are still available in secondary schools for them to develop their capacities. That allows senior pupils to help younger pupils in primary and secondary schools.

Colleges have student councils, which I know first-hand often promote mock elections—either for their own theme or when national elections come along. I expect—although I do not know—that universities do something similar.

Mary Pitcaithly (Electoral Management Board for Scotland): Yes. We perhaps stepped up our game a bit at the time of planning for the independence referendum. That was the first time that 16 and 17-year-olds had the vote, and we—the local authorities—recognised that we had a captive audience, if you like. We could reach our 15, 16 and 17-year-olds fairly easily, so we were quite happy at that stage to take on the responsibility of trying to encourage them to register and then to vote. There is a whole issue about their having to understand the importance of registration before they can think about for whom or what they might vote.

It is probably fair to say that, a few years ago, pupils would find out about democracy and voting systems mainly through modern studies. The situation is significantly different these days: it is seen as a whole-school effort and something that would be covered for all pupils rather than just those who take modern studies as a subject choice. It starts very early: it starts in primary schools and it goes right through the secondary sector as well, as Alan Armstrong said.

There are particular events that help to focus everybody's attention: for example, there is a registration day on 1 March. One of the things that I have been asking my colleagues—as chief executives, rather than as returning officers—to do is to go back to their councils and contact all their secondary headteachers directly, to encourage them to take part in that day on 1 March to encourage registration. Times when pupils are not entirely focused on issues around exams, for example, are good times to do something like that. Getting the pupils registered is that most important first step towards encouraging them actually to go out and vote.

Chris Highcock (Electoral Management Board for Scotland): In the written evidence that the EMBS has submitted, we give a sample of various activities that are undertaken across Scotland—particularly around young people. I point out that there is no uniform group of people—we have only to think of young people to understand that.

There are particular initiatives. For example, in Mary Pitcaithly's council, looked-after children form a particularly hard-to-reach sector of the community that needs to be focused on. I point to examples in our evidence—mock elections and direct work with schools, and with looked-after children and others with whom social work services are in touch. I could also mention the schools lists that are taken by the electoral registration officers, who write directly to pupils.

Ian Milton (Scottish Assessors Association): Absolutely. Mary Pitcaithly used the term "captive audience". The reduction in the franchise age gave EROs a superb opportunity in that it meant that we could start to engage with young citizens aged 14 upwards, before they move into that slightly more mobile and dynamic stage in their lives when they leave secondary education and move on into employment or other education, take a year out or whatever. Capturing the captive audience while they are still in a relatively stable residence situation and attending education in secondary schools was an ideal opportunity—and one that we were not slow to pick up on. For example, registration officers take lists of students from all schools, colleges and universities, and we work through those.

On the process of registering to vote, members will be aware that we now have an individual electoral registration programme. That means that there is identity verification that relies on date of birth and national insurance number. Under-16s have no national insurance number, but the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Act 2015 allowed registration officers to use education records for Scottish elections. That gave us a great opportunity to get that information in and use it. We take the school lists and check them against who has already registered in order to make sure that we do not approach people who have already registered. If the student has not registered, we will write to them and invite them to register. Not all want to register, but they get the opportunity to do so, and they get it when they are 15 years old, or thereabouts.

Mary Pitcaithly made the point about the chief executives writing to schools; that letter went out at the end of the year. To tie in with that and as a "heads up" for the work that we will do in March, registration officers are approaching education services and schools to offer training to principal teachers to ensure that the teachers—the experts at teaching—have the material and can use it to make sure that the message is out there.

10:00

Alexander Stewart: I am very encouraged by your responses, which show that you are focusing in, broadening the horizons and capturing that market. We need to try to engage with people. As you said, if they are interested and active, they will become much more participative, which is what we want.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I welcome the evidence on the different things that are going on and I recognise some of the work that was done in North Ayrshire by schools, youth workers and Ayrshire College. Can we learn any lessons from that proactive work and different initiatives in relation to other communities or groups of voters who might not be particularly enfranchised? We have heard that folk in the private rented sector, homeless people and certain ethnic communities are quite hard to reach. Are there any lessons that can be learned from the things that we are doing well with young people?

Mary Pitcaithly: We have reflected on trying to speak to people at an appropriate time for them. As I mentioned before, it is helpful to avoid exam time. You cannot shift the date of elections—an election in May will be around the same time as exams for senior pupils and university or college students. However, they have to get the important bits, like registration, out of the way first.

It is about relative priorities, and it would be exactly the same for those other hard-to-reach groups. They have to make a decision for themselves that it is a priority—with all the other issues that they may be struggling with, such as housing, jobs or surviving financially—that they register and make time on the day to go and vote or get a postal vote.

We have to recognise that although it is a priority for us because we are steeped in it, it does not have the same priority for some other groups. We try to speak to them about why it is important and how easy it can be to vote—sometimes people have misunderstandings about how difficult it is to vote and think that they require identification cards and so on. There can be issues that make them disinclined even to engage in a discussion about it. The people in those groups have to think that voting is an important thing for them to engage with.

Chris Highcock: As well as picking appropriate channels of communication, which will not always be the same for the different and distinct communities, we work closely with schools, directly with teachers and through the curriculum, but also through social media, which can be appropriate at a much broader level. One group that is often underrepresented is home movers and people who live in the private rented sector. Some EROs work directly on websites that advertise rented accommodation so that, prior to registration, when people are looking for houses on the website, an advert showing the key registration dates will come up. Some EROs write to home movers; for people who register new addresses, the EROs get a list of people who have moved and can write directly to them.

Ian Milton: Timing is a key issue now. We have moved from an era in which the electoral register was drawn up once a year to a very dynamic situation. Registers change dramatically throughout the year through online registration. Many of us now live a very last-minute or just-in-time existence—the electorate is no different. For some hard-to-reach groups it is only at the point when the election is called that they start to think about wanting to vote and registering to vote.

We are doing some work with tenancy deposit scheme operators, because they give us a good way into the private rented market. We are doing some research into whether we can use their information to identify potential electors. As a registration officer, I believe that the more data we can use to identify people who are not registered, but could be, to approach them directly, the more likely we are to be successful, in contrast to the broad-brush annual canvas approach. We are also looking at using the tenancy deposit scheme operators' media and contact with new tenants—

their contact will be when a tenant has just moved in—to highlight how people can register to vote. That is a two-pronged approach. I see registration developing along those lines.

Andy O'Neill: The lesson from the education campaign concerns learning to work with partners in an appropriate way. We spend a lot of time dealing with partners. We do high-level things—TV and radio adverts and leaflets through doors—but over the years we have found that the connections through various community groups are very successful for us. We spend a number of hours every autumn engaging with potential partners with whom we can work in the lead-up to the election. We go out and talk to them and find out what they want and how they want it, because giving them dusty, dry information about electoral registration and how to fill out a ballot paper might be fine for someone like me, but not for different clients or customers. We try to source and write the information in the right way.

Next week, we will produce a resources pack for our partners, which will have appropriate information, posters, pop-up banners for websites, suggested social media informatics and tweets. We will do some public relations work with them. We work with partners across all the sectors that you can think of—young people, care organisations, black and ethnic minority groups, disability groups and renters and movers. In the past, to reach homeless people, we have worked with Shelter and provided information and PR assistance. We also work with the Scottish Association of Landlords to get into the private rented sector, because we know that lots of people in that sector are not registered and do not take part in democracy.

Alan Armstrong: At the national level, we recognise the strength of community learning and development practitioners in engaging daily with people who are on the margins of society. We have worked with the University of Edinburgh and Learning Link Scotland, which is the umbrella organisation for all voluntary organisations working with vulnerable adults in Scotland, to develop some support materials for practitioners in their direct engagement work with vulnerable adults. We have helped to develop materials for their national website hub.

Mirroring that work, we have also worked with Young Scot and YouthLink, from the youth sector in order to reach as many young people as we can.

Ruth Maguire: Thank you for those answers. Mr O'Neill, will the packs of material that you are talking about producing be provided in different languages and accessible formats?

Andy O'Neill: Yes.

Ruth Maguire: Good.

The Convener: I was very interested to hear Ian Milton talk about working with landlords. One of the key things that, by law, every registered landlord has to do is to provide a tenant information pack. Is the relevant voter registration form required to be in that tenant information pack?

Ian Milton: We could put a voter registration form into that information pack, but we would be more inclined to give the web address—www.gov.uk/register-to-vote—because the majority of people now interact with us online. However, we can also provide contact details. That is what we are considering with the tenancy deposit scheme operators—making sure that such signposts are in place. The question is whether the new tenant who has just moved into their new house and is keen to get their utilities and broadband sorted out will see registering to vote as another important task, or whether the timing will kick in and they will turn to that task only when an electoral event is approaching.

The Convener: Let us take all that as a given. You have made some good points, Mr Milton. I am making the point that the tenant information pack tells tenants where their deposit is held, tells them about electrical and gas safety and gives them an inventory of all the cups, saucers and whatever in the house if it is furnished, so it could include a piece of paper that signposts them to social media or a council website.

Ian Milton: Yes.

The Convener: I think that I asked about this in a previous committee, but how prescribed is that pack? Is it in the gift of local authorities to decide what landlords should be obliged to put in it or does that have to be prescribed in guidance from ministers?

Ian Milton: I could not say what the rules are on local authorities dictating what goes into a tenant information pack but, from a registration officer viewpoint, there is no prescription, as such. We will work with as many partner bodies as we can to get the message across that people should go to the www.gov.uk/register-to-vote website if they are online or go to their local ERO if they are not.

The Convener: That is helpful. That is perhaps an issue to follow up.

Andy O'Neill mentioned to Ruth Maguire the partners that you work with and the resources that are produced. Alexander Stewart's initial question related to schools and young people. The written evidence seems to be top-heavy on schools. I get that; they are key partners in relation to young people. However, the young people in my constituency who are least likely to vote or whose parents are least likely to vote are also the least likely to engage with all that stuff in school. They are more likely to engage with the local dance class instructor, judo instructor or football coach—we can go through the list.

How co-ordinated an initiative is there across the places where young people want to hang out and where they might—I say this as a former teacher—give credence and validity to an adult peer who tells them that it is important to register to vote? What structured work goes on with the amazing youth groups that exist throughout the country?

Mary Pitcaithly: A lot of that work would be led by colleagues in community learning and development across councils. They take that responsibility seriously, from what I can see, and co-ordinate their efforts in youth clubs, for example, to try to ensure that young people have an understanding of what is required to be active citizens. However, in a youth club, there might not be much time to register because, for example, people might not know their national insurance numbers off hand. Therefore, in many schools, we have a desk with somebody from the ERO—it is usually just outside the dinner hall, which is where we capture most pupils—where, on a certain day or week, pupils are able to register.

It is one thing to engage pupils in an out-of-school sports club, but it requires them to take some positive steps to turn that into a positive decision to register and, further down the line, to vote—they have to get their NI numbers and complete the forms. That requires a combination of effort. It is about raising awareness in some places and then turning it into positive action to register and then vote.

The Convener: I agree that school is the most obvious place to get young people to register. You have skilled staff with lots of experience there and your client group is there, so there are lots of opportunities to work with them. The issue is how we get to the ones who are hardest to reach, even after they are registered to vote. How do we use our youth sector to do some of that work? Is there a structured or informal approach to that? Perhaps Andy O'Neill could help.

Andy O'Neill: I will outline how we tackle the matter. Obviously, we work with the councils and provide information. I mentioned earlier our partnership attempts to engage with people. Over the years, we have worked with organisations such as the Boys Brigade and the Scout Association. We also work with Young Scot, YouthLink Scotland and the Scottish Youth Parliament and provide information that they can use in social media campaigns. In that sense, we engage through social media with people who may be disengaged.

10:15

The Convener: Some tremendous work is being done. We are not criticising the existing work; we are trying to ensure added value so that more people register and vote.

I will continue with the questioning, but I will then let my colleagues in. I will move away slightly from the issue of young people, and turn to voter turnout. I looked at the figures for the 2012 council elections in Glasgow, and I could see that, in parts of my constituency, about 27 per cent of people had voted. In Garscadden or Scotstoun, the figure was 39 per cent. That is still quite a poor turnout, but it is significantly higher than in the area that I represent.

There were eye-watering turnout levels in the Scottish independence referendum, but whereas the turnout figures for East Renfrewshire and East Dunbartonshire were 90 per cent to 91 per cent, the level was 75 per cent in Glasgow. Although that turnout seems fantastic for Glasgow, it is way behind what those other local authorities were achieving.

If we consider the Brexit referendum, the pattern continues. The figures were 76 per cent for East Renfrewshire, 75 per cent for East Dunbartonshire and 56.3 per cent for Glasgow.

What I am driving at is that, extending it from young people, voting becomes a habit, a culture and a pattern for individuals and families. There are certain parts of the country where that happens a lot less. There is geographical inequality. I ask all the partners represented around the table whether, as part of their work, they drill down into that geographical inequality. Do you target resources at the schools and the various groups in those areas? Do you set any targets to address that inequality? For instance, in 10 years' time, will we or you have failed if we have not narrowed that inequality? How do we deal with and tackle that issue?

Ian Milton: The first step for a registration officer is to ensure that everybody who can possibly be registered is registered. If we are more successful at registering in a given place, the turnout might go down there, arguably, when it comes to how the figures look.

On the targeting of resources, we were looking into education authorities last year, considering in particular the schools that were signing up to the Electoral Commission campaign. EROs were feeding back information to the local schools about whether their level of registration was high or low, so that we could step up resources in areas where there was not the same level of response to a campaign as elsewhere. That was one way in which resource allocation could be fine-tuned.

The Convener: Let me check something about the allocation of resources. Will your organisation and partner organisations use recent voter turnout and voter registration patterns to target parts of the country that need more assistance? Will they get additional resources?

Ian Milton: As a registration officer, I am employed by Moray, Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City Councils, so my resources are based in the north-east. I will identify areas where the registration levels are not as high as they should be, and I will either add canvass material or, if one or two schools are not signing up to the Electoral Commission campaign, for instance, I will be aware of that and I can speak to the education service, the heads and the principal teachers to try and redress that and to ensure that we have as high a level of registration as possible across the Grampian area as a whole.

The Convener: I would like other witnesses to comment, but I do not want to ask another question after this myself—I want my colleagues to come in. I will therefore make a final point about additional resources. I mean no harm to my colleagues who represent East Renfrewshire and East Dunbartonshire, who are of course calling for resources in their areas, but a youth worker in a school or a stakeholder organisation in those areas might see that they had 91 per cent of people voting in the independence referendum there, whereas others, in Glasgow and other parts of the west of Scotland, will see that they had just 75 per cent and might ask what is being done to address that inequality. I suppose that is the question: what is being done to address the inequalities?

Mary Pitcaithly: Most of us within the system have a geographical base as well. Like Ian Milton, I can operate only within my council area. That is the area that I am interested in and is where I would look for evidence of a particular school not being engaged or a particular area not having an active youth sector, where more effort could be made. There are no resources to pull off the shelf. There is nothing that we can add to what we have. It is about allocating the resources that we have as fairly as possible and trying to address any gaps.

The organisations that operate at the national level might be better placed to answer. What I can say is that there are relative priorities in each area and many factors that make a difference to whether people choose to register and then choose to vote.

I know that in Glasgow a tremendous effort was made to get as many people as possible over a natural cynicism about the issue of registration. There are concerns even now about whether registering makes people more likely to be chased up for debts. That is a legacy issue from way back

in the days of the poll tax, and it had to be overcome.

Every time I go into a Glasgow City Council building, I see a sign somewhere, usually next to the lift, which says not to be worried about registration and that it is not about chasing people. The council addressed that head on, which was fantastic because it dealt with people's unspoken concerns. It was a tremendous effort to get the figures in Glasgow up to 75 per cent. The figure is not as good as the figure in East Renfrewshire, but for Glasgow it was a really healthy figure.

Keeping the figures at that level is the challenge, and that takes us back to the issue of whether people think that the council election is as important as the independence referendum. Clearly they do not, but that is not just an issue for those areas; it is an issue across the country.

Andy O'Neill: A lot of what we do with our resources is for all voters: the national TV campaign, the household leaflet which everyone gets and so on. We can, to a degree, target resources to certain sectors. For example, we can place radio advertisements on channels that are listened to by black and minority ethnic groups or by young people. We also try to target by providing resources to others to use. We work through the partnership programme to do that rather than doing it ourselves.

Alan Armstrong: To finish off, I would reinforce the importance of connectivity across the national organisations. Sharing of information is important with regard to seeing where registration is picking up well and where it is not. Chief executives do that on a geographical basis. Education Scotland can also do that through the connections that we have with local authorities. The drive to encourage everybody to pick up the registration form for voting is strong across the national partners.

Mary Pitcaithly: We do not just write to the headteachers about this. I spoke to community learning and development about it in my area and I spoke to social work, because children and families social work teams have the most contact with, for example, looked-after children. They prioritised the issue and made it the focus of a couple of the sessions that they had with looked-after children. I was really grateful for that. There are lots of issues that the teams want to focus on, and it was great that a couple of sessions were very specifically about trying to encourage young people to get into the habit of registering to vote and voting.

The Convener: That is really helpful. We will move on from that subject. I thank my colleagues for their patience as we explored that line of questioning.

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): My colleagues have explored some of the issues that I was keen to cover. You have addressed those, particularly through Mr O'Neill letting us know that you do engage with the Girls Brigade, Boys Brigade, Scouts, Guides and so on. It is important to get outside the formal school setting as well as to be in there.

I want to pick up specifically something that Mary Pitcaithly touched on: national insurance numbers for young people. When national insurance numbers are issued, is there any way of issuing voter registration papers? Is that or could that be done?

Mary Pitcaithly: I do not know, but I do not think that it is being done based on my own experience of a youngster receiving their national insurance number. They get that only from whoever in government issues national insurance numbers.

Ian Milton: I think that the Department for Work and Pensions issues national insurance numbers. They are issued at age 15 and three quarters or thereabouts, and it is a United Kingdom Government responsibility as I understand it. Electoral registration officers across Scotland and the rest of Great Britain are working with the Government Digital Service to ensure that the GDS, which hosts the registration website, is properly signposted. We are looking at that messaging going out on national documentation across Great Britain but not to Northern Ireland, which is dealt with separately. I cannot say when that will happen or how it will be delivered, but a line is definitely being developed.

Elaine Smith: Young people are interested in getting their national insurance numbers, and I thought that that may have been an opportunity.

I have listened to the evidence from today and previously. The crux of the matter seems to be that people will not vote if they do not understand why it is important for them to do so and how the outcome will affect their lives. How do you feel about different ways of electronic voting? What about compulsory voting?

Mary Pitcaithly: Electronic voting is inevitable, but there are many issues around integrity and security that must be ironed out before everybody, including the older generation, would be confident about it. Undoubtedly, younger people are much more used to doing everything electronically. Indeed, they find it quite difficult to understand why they can use their smartphones to vote for so many things, such as "X Factor" contestants or whatever, but they cannot vote for their local councillor.

There will be increasing pressure from people who do not see what the problem is. The

challenge for us all—the Electoral Commission is heavily involved in discussing this with the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission and yourselves—is in how people can become comfortable with voting electronically to elect representatives in such a way that there are no concerns about integrity and security. What happens around the world influences what we think about such issues, and the current hacking of voting and counting systems gives us all concern.

Chris Highcock: There are ways to vote other than by turning up at a polling station: people can vote by post or they can appoint a proxy to vote on their behalf. There are lessons to learn not only about the accessibility that that brings but about the integrity challenges that go along with it.

Elaine Smith: Can I raise a specific point on that issue now rather than later, convener?

The Convener: Yes. Andy O'Neill wants to respond to your initial question We will then take your new point.

Andy O'Neill: Over the years, we have looked at various ways of voting. The commission has always supported a suite of mechanisms whereby people can vote in a way that reflects modern society and people's lives, and we have been looking at how to make it easier for them to do so. As Chris Highcock said, postal voting is popular, with 18 per cent of people in Scotland registered to vote in that way. The percentage of people who are registered to vote by proxy is lower.

The commission is going through a strategic review. We are looking at the issue of e-voting and what would need to be put in place in order to have that system. There are other areas that you could look at, such as early voting. We have just been through the US presidential election, in which 35 states voted early. In several places, polling stations are open for weeks on end; others are open just a few days before the vote. There are matters to look at for the long term, but there are things that you could do quite quickly, which the committee could look at.

Ian Milton: I want to pick up on the last part of Elaine Smith's question, which was about compulsory voting. That would be a sea change in the relationship between citizen and state. As a registration officer, I would say that that might have a negative impact on my relationship. We are trying to ensure that we maximise registration, and we might find that a larger group of citizens did not want to engage in order to avoid potential fines or whatever.

Elaine Smith: That is interesting. We should be opening up that debate and listening to your views on the issues.

I want to ask about proxy voting, which is probably less popular and less necessary, given that people can apply for postal voting. However, voting in person matters to some people, particularly those in the older group that Alexander Stewart mentioned, who think that it is their duty to vote and who like to go and cast their vote at a polling station. If such a person is taken ill and has to get an emergency proxy vote, they can face difficulty in doing so—that might be an issue for Mr O'Neill's review. I know of situations in which doctors have been loth to sign papers, with the result that people have been disenfranchised, and in which they have charged, as they do with passport applications, to give people the information that they need to get an emergency proxy vote when they have been taken ill. That needs to be addressed. If people are being disenfranchised because of a general practitioner not wishing to sign a form or seeking payment for doing so, that is quite a serious matter.

10:30

The Convener: I will let Ian Milton go first.

Ian Milton: Andy O'Neill can pick up the bits that I miss out.

You are correct in saying that proxy voting is not as popular as postal voting. Postal voting on demand started in 2000. Since I became an ERO in 2009, the number of postal voters in Grampian has risen from 45,000 to 92,000 out of an electorate of 442,000. In other words, postal voters make up just over 20 per cent of the electorate in Grampian. By contrast, there are currently fewer than 1,000 standing-list proxy voters in Grampian, which represents less than 1 per cent of the electorate. One of the reasons why proxy voting is less popular than postal voting is that people lose the secrecy element of the ballot, as they have to advise their proxy how to vote on their behalf.

People who find, after the sixth day before an election, that they cannot get to the polling station—we are talking about not just elderly people, but people who find themselves in an emergency situation—which means that they have missed the opportunity to apply for a postal vote as well as the opportunity to apply for a normal proxy vote, will have to try to obtain a supported proxy vote. As you said, an application for an emergency proxy must be attested by a health professional, although it need not be a GP who does that—there is list of people who can attest an application, which includes care managers. If someone is admitted to a care home at short notice because of a disability that means that they cannot go to the polling station, the care home manager is qualified to support their application.

I cannot speak about charging but, as a registration officer, I can say that the issue has not been raised with me by proxy voters or by people wishing to vote by proxy in any election that I have been involved in.

Andy O'Neill: Charging is an issue that has come up periodically. It is our understanding that the contracts for GPs in surgeries and doctors who are employed through health boards do not allow them to charge for signing an application for an emergency proxy vote. If anyone is doing that, they should not be, because they cannot do that under their contract and their terms and conditions of service.

Elaine Smith: Perhaps we could get some more information on that issue. Do people such as care managers who can sign such applications know that they can do so and that they should not be charging for it? The issue might not affect a lot of people, but it is an important one for those whom it affects.

Ian Milton: Following discussions with registration officers and other stakeholders, the Care Inspectorate has included in its performance regime for the management of care establishments a requirement for care managers to support registration and participation in elections.

Elderly people, in particular, might find themselves in a situation in which they do not have a proxy who stays nearby, because their family has moved to another part of Scotland, elsewhere in Britain or overseas. We are trying to promote the fact that a family member can be appointed as a proxy and that a proxy can vote by post. That cannot happen in an emergency situation, but it can happen in situations in which it has already been established that somebody is unable to go to the polling station.

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): You can take a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink. One of our concerns is turnout. We are aware that you are responsible primarily for awareness, registration and so on. At any one time, X people are eligible to be on the electoral roll and Y people are actually on it. Do you have any sense of whether the proportion of the total potential electorate who are registered is rising? Are they staying on the electoral roll for longer?

Ian Milton: The electorate in Grampian is rising year on year, but that could be due to the movement of people. There is no acid test to determine on a particular date how many people who are resident in Grampian are entitled to be registered—not everyone is entitled—compared with the register as it stands. The most complete audit is the canvass that we do in the autumn of each year. That is used to inform national records

and produce population estimates, which are then compared with the registers, so it is a bit of a circular route.

We take council tax payer information from the three local authorities that we work with and check it against the register. If we find that a particular council tax payer is not registered to vote, we will approach them by writing to them. Currently, we are writing to about 15,000 potential electors whom we have identified. That is part of the churn of the system. We will always be writing to that sort of number of people and encouraging them to register to vote, particularly at the end of a household canvass when there has been a refresh of the householder occupancy information on our system.

Andy O'Neill: In general, the electorate in Scotland is rising. The figures that I have show that, in 2010, we had about 3.8 million people on the register and that, at the most recent Scottish Parliament election, we had 4.1 million people on the register. We had a high point of 4.2 million people on the register at the Scottish independence referendum.

It is difficult to come up with an accurate figure for the number of people who are not on the register at any one time. In fact, it is impossible. We think that the percentage varies between 8 and 15 per cent throughout the year depending on who has moved house, who has died and suchlike. When people move house, they tend to wait until the canvass period before they go back on to the register, even with online registration. We used to talk about a 1 per cent derogation of the register every month. It is difficult, but we estimate that a maximum of 15 per cent of people will not be on the register.

Andy Wightman: Do you see it as your obligation to get 100 per cent electoral registration if you can?

Ian Milton: Yes. We are obliged to identify potential electors and engage with them, so that is what we do. Whether they will engage with us is, of course, a moot point.

Andy Wightman: Okay. I realise that, strictly speaking, this is not your responsibility but, as you are engaged in the job of electoral administration, do you have any observations on why turnout for local elections, at 39.8 per cent, is at its lowest level since 1974?

Mary Pitcaithly: Some of the academic research suggests that it is about the extent to which voters believe that their vote matters—that the institution they are voting for matters and that their vote for it will matter and will make a difference—or that it is all pretty pointless. For example, some of the research shows that people asked what the point was of voting for local

authorities if they had no powers to increase council tax. I do not know exactly what impact that has had on turnout, but there seems to be a suggestion that there has been some impact. Will the restoration of those powers make a difference to the turnout in May? We will have to wait and see.

There are many factors that apply. As a returning officer, I am always incredibly aware of the difference that the weather on polling day can make, particularly for by-elections. If it is absolutely chucking it down or it is a horribly cold day, that can have a huge impact on the turnout among the 80 per cent of people who have not chosen to vote by post.

Another factor is the responsibility that prospective candidates and candidates have to engage with the electorate. This is anecdotal, but I have often heard people say—maybe it is the same for you—"I never even got a leaflet this time round, so why should I bother?" I am sure that there is some interesting research to be done on why people decide on the day not to bother voting or, conversely, on why they do go out and vote.

The Convener: Does anyone else have any views on voter turnout and the pattern in recent years?

Andy O'Neill: I think that Mary Pitcaithly is right. There is a huge number of reasons why people do not engage, one of which is the question whether it matters. Obviously, everyone felt that it mattered in the independence referendum, but some people do not think that it does as far as local government elections are concerned. As politicians, you will probably know that tight elections always create a higher turnout, and I hope that the fact that a number of places throughout Scotland are going to be very hotly contested will help.

From the commission's point of view, one barrier that stops people voting is lack of knowledge of what happens in the polling place— literally, the voting process. The question of how to vote is important, particularly with the single transferable vote system, and we are spending a lot of time ensuring that people understand how to rank their choices. Back in 2007, the Electoral Reform Society carried out a number of academic studies that showed that 20 per cent of the electorate expressed only a single preference. The figure went down to 13 per cent in 2012 according to a study that was carried out by John Curtice. Because we are in the count centres, we see—I assume that you do, too—a lot of single Xs on ballot papers, and I presume that that is because people do not understand that they have to use numbers and can rank more than one preference.

That is why we think that, over the coming months, the question of how to vote will be important. If people understand how to vote with confidence, that particular barrier is gone and they might then engage with the system and vote.

The Convener: Do you have another question, Mr Wightman?

Andy Wightman: I will leave it there, convener.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): My question follows on from what we have just been discussing. Mary Pitcaithly has already touched on this, but the fact is that if people feel that there is little point in voting in council elections, they will simply not vote. However, she will know very well how important councils are and the range of jobs that they do. Is there any general education for voters—not just young people but voters in general—about the importance of councils and the importance of voting in those elections?

Mary Pitcaithly: I can point to the work of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to raise awareness of what councils do, the importance of councils and their place in the governance of Scotland. I think that some of that work is very impressive and will, I hope, bear fruit. Individual councils will engage with local media on what they do, what the issues are and why some of them are very important to individuals and communities. It is a combination of the effort of individual councils, what COSLA might do and how the media choose to highlight some of these issues that will encourage people to see these elections as important.

Chris Highcock: The electoral community in Scotland comes together several times a year to plan out activities. Last week, for example, we had a seminar in Glasgow that brought returning officers and electoral registration officers together in one room to look at a lot of the issues around the delivery of this year's elections. We had a very helpful presentation from the Electoral Commission on the public awareness activity that it is undertaking and on which we are working in partnership with it. One of the things that we took back to our own councils from that was the on your doorstep campaign that the commission is planning to lead on and which is about getting people to understand the role that councils play in their lives and, as much as anything, building on and developing that appreciation.

Mary Pitcaithly: We have shared with everyone a link to the joint work that the Improvement Service and COSLA have done to provide online materials. Some of that is targeted at helping with the induction of new councillors after the election, but it is also very important that we use as much of it as possible to broaden public awareness and even, perhaps, to encourage people to stand as

local councillors. There is quite a lot of material out there; we just need to make sure that we use it.

Graham Simpson: I have another quick but quite technical question. I think that Ian Milton said that he cross-checks voter registrations with council tax records. Is it technically possible for someone to be registered in two places at the same time? I am thinking, for example, of a student who might have their parents' address but who might also have moved into another council area or of a person who might be paying council tax in two council areas. It might not be legal, but is it technically possible? Can it be done?

10:45

Ian Milton: Yes. It is not only possible; it is legal, depending on the circumstances. You mentioned students in particular. They are among a fairly unique citizenship group who are legally entitled to be registered in two locations if they are still resident in their family home when they are not at their term-time address, which might be a hall of residence. However, they are entitled to vote only once in any election.

It is interesting that the issue of student registration has cropped up with the introduction of individual electoral registration. There has been a perception that a lot of students have not registered to vote. It is correct that, now that it is an individual responsibility to register to vote, a lot of students have not registered to vote at their term-time address, but if we visit universities and colleges, as I have done, and ask them why they are not registered—we take a secure laptop and check whether they are registered—they will say that they do not want to register at their term-time address, that they are registered at home, and that they intend to vote with that registration by postal or proxy voting or by attending. It seems to me that a large number of students—I am not saying a majority of them—prefer to vote using their home address and not their term-time address.

People can have two registrations, but a person's registration depends on their residence. They must be resident. Technically speaking, if a person is resident in two locations, they can be registered in two locations.

Graham Simpson: That is very interesting. I did not realise that. If a person can have two voting papers in two different areas, what checks are done to ensure that a person does not use both papers?

Mary Pitcaithly: It is the voter's responsibility not to use more than one vote and not to vote more than once.

Graham Simpson: But what checks are done? Are there any checks in the system?

Mary Pitcaithly: If we received evidence that somebody had voted twice, we would pass it to the police.

The Convener: That seems to have inspired a supplementary question from MSPs.

Ruth Maguire: Obviously, the registers are marked in the different places, but unless somebody reported it, there would be no way of knowing. Is that what you are saying?

Mary Pitcaithly: I would not know whether the Ruth Maguire who was on my register was the same Ruth Maguire who was on the register in Grampian, for example.

The Convener: Do you want to check that just to make sure? [*Laughter.*]

Mary Pitcaithly: I will definitely do that when I get back.

The Convener: Shall we leave that line of questioning hanging, or do members want to follow up on any of that?

Ruth Maguire: Is there any way of checking, or is the process very cumbersome? I probably know the answer to that. Obviously, it is all done manually.

Andy O'Neill: Obviously, marked registers are available to view after the event, so people would know that someone lived in two places and had two votes. It depends on the election that the person was voting in. A person could vote in two council elections, but they could not vote twice in a Scottish Parliament election; they could vote only once in it. I know of at least one instance where that happens.

I do not know whether Ian Milton wants to talk about what happens when people move from one area to another. Colleague EROs have a conversation, so there are checks, which I do not think that Ian Milton would want to go into too much, to ensure that integrity issues do not arise. However, there is very little evidence of electoral fraud in Scotland. Where it happens, it does so in literally individual instances. There have been no cases of organised electoral fraud in Scotland in the recent past.

Ian Milton: The law in Scotland is to do with substantive residence. Apart from students, people are not very often substantively resident in two locations. When people apply to register to vote, they are required to give their former address, and the ERO who has a notice that somebody has applied to register in their area will advise the ERO of the person's former area that the person has applied and that they should be removed from their register. Therefore, the process is quite straightforward.

Each register is updated monthly outside the canvass period, so there can be a lag of a month, but we certainly ensure that we are advised of any registrations that have happened because of people moving in and out of an area. There is an awful lot of churn in registers. As I said, it is a very dynamic situation these days.

The Convener: There are a couple of brief supplementary questions before we close the evidence session.

The first one is from me—I am indulging myself. It is on marked-up registers and it goes back to my initial line of questioning about targeting. We know which households vote and which do not. Politicians frequently use the marked-up register. For those who do not know what the marked-up register is, it identifies which households have voted in the past five or six elections and which have never voted. Unfortunately, most politicians will make a judgment call that the habitual non-voters probably will not vote in the following election, so those people might be less likely to get a knock at their door from someone representing a political party. The politicians think that, even if those people say that they are likely to vote for them, they probably will not vote. Unfortunately, that is the science of politics.

We know which households habitually do not vote, which is of course their right, but you could use that to target households in a positive, constructive and motivational way. When we chap on their door, we just want their vote, whereas you just want them to vote, irrespective of who they cast their vote for. Is that information on the marked-up register ever used to target and encourage such households? We have so much information out there, but I am not sure that we are using it to increase voter turnout. Does that happen?

Mary Pitcaithly: It would be a question of resources. I would not have the resources to do that. I draw people in from across the council to work on an election and, as soon as the election is over, they go back to the day job. I would not have sufficient resources to carry out any scientific exercise to try to identify that, and I have not previously done that.

Chris Highcock: There is a suspicion among people in general about that. People who I talk to are wary about the existence of a marked register in any case. They feel that the fact that someone can follow up on whether they voted almost infringes the secrecy of the ballot. People do not want anyone to know not only how they voted but whether they voted.

Mary Pitcaithly: People expect the marked register to be kept confidential and used only for

the purpose that it is there for, which is to check that there has not been any fraud.

The Convener: But there is a transparency issue. Everyone should know that everyone in Scotland can work out whether someone else voted. That is all public information. It is important that people know that.

Mary Pitcaithly: Yes, but people are wary about that and they think that knowledge about whether they voted can somehow lead to knowledge of how they voted. We got an awful lot of feedback about that after the referendum. People were nervous because they were being told, "We know you voted," or, "We know you didn't vote," which led them to think that officials and politicians also knew how they voted. That is not at all the case, but there were deeply held suspicions about that, so we would be wary about using that. I would find it difficult to justify using the resource that would be required to do that exercise of trawling through the marked registers and then turning up at people's doors and saying, "We know that you haven't been voting—why haven't you been voting?" That would be potentially—

The Convener: I am not suggesting that that is how the information would be used, but we can all identify wards where, in huge swathes, the turnout could be 75 per cent but in one part it is 10 or 15 per cent. That information is held and it could be used to target more effectively to motivate turnout in different areas.

Mary Pitcaithly: That information is available from ballot box returns—the ballot paper accounts—rather than from trawling through the marked registers. We might know that one part of a town has very low turnout and we could do something about that, but it is—

The Convener: Sorry to interrupt, but do you do something about that?

Mary Pitcaithly: I suppose that we might make more effort to use posters and other ways of encouraging people to vote. The experience in my area is that turnout is pretty even across the council area. There are not huge discrepancies, disparities or divergence but, in other areas, that might be more of an issue.

Andy O'Neill: We do not use the marked register to inform our campaign, largely because we do things at a national level. For example, the national leaflet goes to all 2.5 million households. Everyone gets one, irrespective of whether or not they have voted and are on the marked register. Over the years, colleagues who work at a local level have expressed a concern that they might be perceived as being biased towards one party or another if they concentrate on an area in which one party is thought to be stronger than the others.

Although I can see where you are coming from, there are inherent dangers for officials in going down that route.

The Convener: That is helpful.

Elaine Smith: On the issue of the marked register, it can often be a Pandora's box for politicians and can give us some nasty surprises that might even lead to fallings out—I will leave that there.

Mr O'Neill, you mentioned the mistakes that can happen with ballot papers, particularly when the voting method involves not marking an X in a box but using numbers. Do postal votes have fewer mistakes? Is that something that we know? If that is the case, does that indicate that mock-up ballot boxes should be put in places such as first stop shops or schools?

Mary Pitcaithly: We would not know whether there are more mistakes with postal votes, because we do not look at the ballot papers that are sent in by postal voters. They are kept face down all the time and we do not examine them at all. They are looked at only at the count, and, at that time, we would not be able to tell which were postal votes and which were not.

We know roughly the number of voters who make a mistake in their postal vote identifier statement, and that has fallen dramatically to a small percentage figure. If people can get that form right, we would anticipate that they would not have a problem with the ballot paper. However, we have no research on that, because we are unable to look at the postal vote ballot papers.

Andy O'Neill: We want to provide good information to help someone to fill in the ballot paper when they have got it. There is good information in the postal vote packs. Under a new rule in the local government rules this time round, there must be an information poster in the booth. We have been doing that for a number of years, but it is now compulsory. The issue is about someone having information at the point at which they are filling in the ballot paper. In both instances, we think that that information exists.

Mary Pitcaithly: The pictorial information changes depending on what the election is. The pictorial information on the single-piece mailer that we use for postal ballots will be different for the coming elections from how it was for last year's elections. Last year, it showed someone marking an X; this year, it will show someone using numbers.

Elaine Smith: I appreciate why we would not have the information about mistakes in postal votes, but it would be interesting to know whether more people get it right when they have more time to fill out the ballot paper.

Part of the reason why I asked about mock-up ballot boxes was that, when I was at an educational event in Summerlee heritage park in Coatbridge at which people from various parties talked about the importance of voting, I saw a mock-up ballot box and ballot papers that enabled the young people to see what they looked like.

Mary Pitcaithly: A few weeks before any electoral event, when we come to make up our ballot boxes, I have to do a trawl for ballot boxes that have been borrowed by schools—we always send out a message to schools saying, "Can we have our ballot boxes back, please?" They make good use of them, and younger children in particular use them to vote for their school captain, prefects or whatever. Those elections are conducted quite formally in schools, so the young people get used to using a ballot box.

Elaine Smith: Are they used in a wider context?

Mary Pitcaithly: Yes. Over the years, I have been more than happy to provide ballot boxes to organisations that want to borrow them. We lend them out all the time.

The Convener: I know that we have overrun our time for this item, but I wanted to let the questions come to a natural conclusion.

This discussion is just part of our work on voter turnout across all elections; it is not just to do with the elections this May. It is important that a committee of the Scottish Parliament—not necessarily this one—keeps a watchful eye on the issue and can work in partnership with the relevant organisations, some of which are represented here today. We want to add value to those organisations and assist them when we can.

I thank our witnesses for their evidence. We will stay in touch with you.

We will briefly suspend the meeting while we prepare for our next witnesses.

10:59

Meeting suspended.

11:02

On resuming—

The Convener: We will now continue with our evidence session. We welcome Joe FitzPatrick, the Minister for Parliamentary Business, who is accompanied by Roddy Angus, elections policy adviser in the Scottish Government. Thank you for coming. Minister, would you like to make an opening statement?

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Joe FitzPatrick): Yes. Thank you for the opportunity to take part in this session.

As you know, Governments do not tend to get directly involved in promoting voter registration or voting at elections, as that could easily be misinterpreted as electioneering. However, the Government has an important role in ensuring that the right environment and structures are in place to support the activities of others in those areas.

I listened to some of the earlier evidence session this morning, when you heard from the folk at the front line: the Electoral Commission, the Electoral Management Board, Education Scotland and electoral registration officers. As you have heard, those organisations and people undertake a wide range of activities to encourage voter registration, voter engagement and voter participation. Differences in voter engagement, registration and turnout are important. It is crucial that we understand which groups are affected, so that those organisations can direct support most effectively. I heard your questioning of the previous panel on that matter.

As set out in the programme for government, I will launch a consultation on electoral reform later this year. Putting the voters first is one of the key principles of our approach to electoral reform. The committee's inquiry is incredibly timely, as I am sure that voter engagement will feature in that consultation. I can assure the committee that, when we are preparing the consultation, we will look carefully at the evidence that you have received and at any recommendations and conclusions that you have.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here today.

The Convener: That is helpful. We will move to questions.

Elaine Smith: Thank you for joining us, minister. I appreciate that you have told us just now and in writing that the Government has to be wary in it approach to the issue. However, do you have any general views on how voter turnout in elections—particularly local elections, which tend to have lower turnout—could be improved?

Joe FitzPatrick: We have a team of folk, who you heard from on the previous panel, who are working in partnership to look at those issues. However, I think that we all have a large responsibility as politicians to make the election relevant. The biggest reasons that people give for not voting are, "You are all the same," and, "It makes no difference if I vote." Taking off our MSP hats and putting on our party hats, I guess that we all have a role to ensure that people understand that that is not the case and that, whether it is a local, Scottish or UK election or a referendum, it matters that they vote. It is our responsibility to try to make sure that people understand those differences.

I think that politicians in Scotland have started to look at new ways to engage with voters, which we can only hope will help to improve turnout.

Elaine Smith: We discussed that with the previous panel. The crux of the issue is that, if people do not know why it matters to them, they will not vote.

What about things that you might have an influence on, such as using different places to vote, such as shopping centres, or e-voting to widen it out a bit?

Joe FitzPatrick: The returning officers decide which locations are appropriate, and we have quite a good mixture of locations. I guess that local knowledge is best for deciding on the best place— that is, the place that will make it easiest for people to vote.

It would not be right for us to say that they should always do it in a shopping centre or a school. There has been a drift away from schools where possible, because of the impact of elections on the school day and because a school is not a place where some people tend to go. We have more polling places in community centres and shopping centres—not supermarkets, but shopping centres—where more people are able to go in to vote.

I do not know whether we will ever get to the point where people can select where they will vote—so rather than saying, "This is your polling place", we will say, "There is the opportunity to vote here, here or here". That is a challenge. Clearly, if we were going to go down that road, we would need to have absolute confidence in whatever the system was to ensure that people did not vote more than once. It would almost certainly have to be some sort of electronic registration system, which was backed up. We would need to be very confident that any changes in that regard had the confidence of the electorate. One of the most important things is to maintain the integrity of the vote.

That brings me to other forms of voting. Over the years, we have seen a massive increase in postal voting and, in the main, confidence in that has improved. There are still some people who just do not trust the idea of casting their vote and putting it in a post box. They will always want to go to a ballot station and, if they cannot do that, to ask a proxy, because they have more confidence in that system. It is important that we allow that.

I am open to the idea of looking at other options, including e-voting by email or other electronic means, but I think that we are some way off having confidence in such a system. I think that only one jurisdiction in the world uses e-voting exclusively, and that is Lithuania. Its system relies on voters having an ID card, which we do not

have. We need to make sure that any changes that we make do not have unintended consequences. However, times move on, so we should be prepared to look at other options that might encourage and make it easier for people to vote.

Elaine Smith: Perhaps it would be possible to look at where e-voting does take place. I do not mean "The X Factor"; I mean voting by political parties or trade unions. We do not have to look abroad, because there is evidence here to be looked at from where that kind of voting takes place. Those elections might not be for Government or local government, but they are still important and governed by rules. It might be worth looking at that to see whether there are any issues and what they are.

Joe FitzPatrick: I totally agree and we do that in partnership with our partners. Andy O'Neill talked about looking at some of those issues.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I want to focus on local government. You are absolutely right that the perceived importance of an election is significant in people deciding whether to vote. However, there are other factors. In 2012, we saw the first ever STV elections for local government that were not linked to the Scottish Parliament elections, and turnout was at a record low.

Do you consider the extent to which choice has an impact on whether people vote? I will give an example that I used at our party conference. In the days of first past the post, Largs in my constituency would have four wards and there would be four Scottish National Party, four Conservative and four Labour candidates, and possibly some others. In the STV election in 2012, because of the safety-first approach taken by all political parties of putting up the minimum number of candidates that it is thought will get elected, the SNP put up two, Labour put up one, and the Conservatives put up one. If an independent candidate had not stood, there would not have been an election. People are being faced with four people being elected out of five.

As the individual who proposed that STV should be our party's policy 20 years ago, I have been deeply disappointed by the fact that the original idea of STV, which is competition between candidates of each party as well as between parties, has not been realised. There is also an attitude among some elected members that they need only to come fourth in a ward to get elected so some of them are not exactly straining at the leash to represent their constituents as effectively as they could be. That is by no means the case for all, but there are one or two, although I hope that vetting and the voters will sort that out.

There is a real issue about choice in elections. Is it time for your review to look again at the electoral system? I realise that it is only 106 days until the next one, but is the system itself going to be looked at?

Joe FitzPatrick: I am a big supporter of STV. It is the right system. However, it is now approximately 10 years since it was introduced, so it is appropriate for us to look at how it is working in practice. There have been two STV elections and, although the turnout for the 2012 election was down significantly compared to when the elections were combined, compared to the previous local elections that were held on their own, turnout was down 5 per cent. There was still a 10 per cent reduction, but that is not quite as significant.

I am not sure that STV was part of the reason for that slight reduction. It is more about relevance. We see that STV does not work, perhaps, for some of the more remote and island communities, and we are looking at addressing that in the system. Sorry—I did not mean that STV does not work; I meant that we need to look back at the particular model of STV that was introduced in 2006.

I was part of the COSLA body that worked with the Scottish Executive at the time on how STV was to be introduced and I know that a large number of compromises were introduced at that time. The system might not be what Kenneth Gibson envisaged 20 years ago when he persuaded the SNP conference to adopt STV as its preferred system. It is therefore appropriate that we look at that. I would not be minded to change the system, but we can look at how it works in practice and where it is working for communities and the voters.

Kenneth Gibson: The number of candidates of all parties who will be standing in the upcoming elections will be significantly lower than it was under first past the post; that is accepted. It is hard to blood candidates now and get them experience because there is a much higher chance of their being elected, simply because fewer people are standing and because of the parties' safety-first attitude that I mentioned.

11:15

I want to ask about something that has been a bugbear of mine since the system came in, which is the randomisation of ballot papers. I do not understand why that has not already been implemented. Here we have Alexander Stewart, Graham Simpson and Ruth Maguire who, all things being equal, would all be less likely to be elected if they stood in an election than someone with my surname, simply because they would be

further down the ballot. In 92 per cent of wards in which two or more people from the same party stand, the person lower down the alphabet is disadvantaged. There are elaborate ways of trying to get round that, but surely it is time to randomise surnames—as the SNP does in its internal elections—so that there is no advantage to Alasdair Allan if he were to stand against Andy Wightman, for example.

Andy Wightman: No contest.

The Convener: Before you answer that, minister, I should point out that Bob Doris is fairly open minded about the issue. [*Laughter.*] It just depends on who else is standing.

If possible, please point your answer towards something that might increase voter turnout, which is the focus of today's evidence session.

Joe FitzPatrick: It would be quite difficult to answer Kenneth Gibson's question in the terms that you ask, convener, but it is a fair question—we are looking at it—and I agree that a problem exists.

Kenneth Gibson talked about "all things being equal" but, even if things are not equal, Mr Allan might find it easier to get elected than Mr Wightman, even if Mr Wightman is more popular and more people have actively voted for him. If they are in the same party, as long as a percentage of people just vote for the party and not for the person, someone with less personal popularity could get elected. Mr Doris made the point that folk further down the alphabet are more exercised about the issue than those whose surnames come earlier in the alphabet.

We cannot resolve the issue for the coming election because, if we were to make any changes to the ballot paper, that would have to be tested. We would have to ensure that there was voter confidence in what came out, as it is clear that voters understand A, B, C through to Z.

Kenneth Gibson: The reason that the issue reflects on turnout is that some people are dissuaded from standing. I know that it is an issue, because people have told me that certain female candidates decide whether to stand under their maiden name or their married name depending on its position in the alphabet.

Voter choice is reduced, because people think, "My name is Wilson and I would have to stand against Mr Brown in my own party. We're putting two people up, but we probably only have a chance of getting one elected, so is it even worth while putting my name in?" Anything that impacts on choice regarding the people who go forward for selection and go on the ballot for an election has some effect on turnout, even if it is only marginal, and it certainly has an impact on the quality of

representatives that we have if one of the major criteria is someone's surname rather than their ability to represent the community.

Joe FitzPatrick: There is nothing in any of the regulations that prevents parties from using selection processes that randomise surnames—that is a matter for political parties, not for Government. However, we are looking at the issue and, if we can find a way forward and we decide to go down that route in the future, the committee would no doubt want to look at it.

The most important thing is that the voters continue to have confidence in the system. We had an experiment in the Scottish Parliament election in 2007 in which the ballot papers were changed so that the list and constituency candidates were on the same ballot paper. The lesson from that was that we have to be very careful when we change things and that we have to test any changes so that they are properly understood.

The Convener: I want to get us back on the focus of the session, but Mr Gibson has raised a point in relation to the elections in May. Will the Scottish Government undertake to do an analysis of places with more restricted choice and compare turnout with places with a more expansive choice, taking into account social demographic issues? Is that the kind of thing that the Scottish Government would do?

Joe FitzPatrick: The Electoral Commission always does an analysis for the Scottish Government after local elections. I remember when I was sitting in your seat, convener, talking to Andy O'Neill—sitting in this seat—about the Electoral Commission's analysis of the previous local government elections.

The Convener: The Electoral Commission is independent, of course, but I am trying to work out whether it would be for the commission to say whether it wants to consider the point that I raise as part of its analysis or whether the Government or the committee would suggest that it be part of that analysis.

Joe FitzPatrick: There are a few options. That is work that the Electoral Commission would normally take on, so perhaps it is best that we discuss that with the commission. The committee has been clear that it thinks that such analysis should be done. Whether the Electoral Commission, the Scottish Parliament information centre or the Government pulls it together, it sounds as if it will be helpful for us to have it. Perhaps having the Electoral Commission behind such a document would give it the most veracity and inspire the most confidence in the findings.

Alexander Stewart: We have heard that turnout can be affected by the relevance of the election to

the public—how they feel that it affects them. As you say, we have had the STV system for 10 years, but there is still some confusion about ranking and putting crosses on the ballot papers. A number of ballot papers are spoiled because individuals are still confused, especially when they have to choose more than one candidate on the ballot paper by putting numbers rather than crosses on it. That differentiation still does not happen or people get confused and rank three candidates by putting three crosses rather than giving them 1, 2 and 3. In my experience, that creates a large number of spoiled papers, so there is still a need to educate the public about how they should engage in the process. We have heard about how we are attempting to address that but, in reality, how can we do that if we are still getting it wrong and individuals are still confused by the process?

Joe FitzPatrick: The first STV election was in 2007 and there was a high level of spoiled ballots. In 2012, the number was drastically reduced. One reason for that was that the Parliament decided that the local and Scottish Parliament elections should be separated. We all realised that that would have the knock-on effect that turnout would reduce for the local election but at least people would see the different systems and the different purposes of the elections. One of the challenges in 2007 and 1999, when the two elections were together, was that the local election was swamped by the national election. That does not do justice to our local government colleagues.

The separation was done for good reasons, but it gives us the additional challenge of how to drive up turnout. It means that voters have an election almost every year so there is a risk of voter fatigue, but that is worth it to ensure that the local election gets its proper place and that there is a proper focus on local issues. We need to keep trying hard. One thing that parties could do is to stop telling voters to put an X on the ballot paper. That happens particularly in by-elections when there is only one candidate and parties think that it is easier just to tell their voters to do that. We should just tell them to put a 1. If we all do that, people will get more into the habit of doing it.

There was certainly a reduction in spoiled ballots in 2012. I hope that the work that the commission is doing will mean that there will be a further reduction in future.

Andy Wightman: Thank you for coming, minister. I will ask you about the joint work that the three law commissions did on electoral law. In February last year, they published their interim report, which argued for the creation of a single UK framework for electoral law that the devolved Administrations should then be allowed to adapt as they saw fit, to bring more coherence to the 17

major statutes and 30 sets of regulations that exist. At the time, Lord Pentland, who is the chair of the Scottish Law Commission, said that he looked forward to discussing that further with the Scottish Government. Have you discussed that since February? What are your broad views on the law commissions' joint recommendations?

The Convener: And, of course, on the impact that they would have on voter turnout.

Joe FitzPatrick: We want to make the system as straightforward as possible for our EROs, our returning officers, the electorate and candidates in elections. On the face of it, streamlining sounds good but, given that we are just about to receive new powers, we should ensure that procedures in Scotland are consistent where possible. I am absolutely happy to work with partners in other parts of the UK to look at best practice and, if best practice in Wales or England works for us as best practice, too, we will end up having one system. However, I am keen to ensure that decisions in relation to the powers that we are about to get are made by this Parliament.

Andy Wightman: Absolutely, and that is the intention behind the Scottish Law Commission's review. Have you had any discussions with the commission about its recommendations?

Joe FitzPatrick: I personally have had no discussions.

Roddy Angus (Scottish Government): There have been discussions at official level.

Andy Wightman: On your point about creating harmony in Scotland with the new powers, I presume that that will be the focus of the elections bill that you talked about.

Joe FitzPatrick: So—

The Convener: Again, minister, I apologise for interrupting.

Joe FitzPatrick: I will frame my response however you want, convener.

The Convener: Just hang on a second—what I will say is for MSPs as much as it is for you, minister. The point is that we have council elections in May. Historically, the turnout for such elections has been absolutely appalling, and the clock is ticking. The work that the committee, the stakeholder organisations that we heard from in the previous session and the minister carry out might make half a point or one point of difference in turnout—actually, we have no idea whether it will make a blind bit of difference—but the purpose of this evidence-taking session is to tease some of that out. With that in mind, minister, will you respond to Mr Wightman's question?

Joe FitzPatrick: One of the things that we are doing is saying that there is no reason why rules

for postal or proxy votes in Scottish Parliament elections should be different from those in council elections—we should have the same system and the same rules. I hope that that commonality across elections will make it more straightforward for voters to cast their votes, which I hope will help turnout.

In the past, the system has been quite cluttered, with every election having different regulations and other different technical things, and I hope that, when the powers come to the Scottish Parliament, any order that we introduce in respect of postal votes will relate to all elections for which the Parliament is responsible. In that way, we will not need both a local elections order and a Scottish Parliament elections order in relation to postal or proxy votes. If we can streamline that technical stuff, it will—I hope—make elections more accessible and have a very small impact on turnout.

Andy Wightman: I hope that there will be a big impact on turnout in the medium and long term. I take the convener's point that we need to do what we can initially, but I asked the question because we do not want to have to return to the issue a year before every election.

The Convener: I know that you take my point, Mr Wightman, but my point was about the particular agenda item and the issues that we are asking the minister about.

Andy Wightman: Absolutely.

Graham Simpson: Minister, you said that you are going to consult on electoral reform. What might that consultation include? I also ask you to bear in mind what the convener just said.

Joe FitzPatrick: I certainly expect turnout to be part of that consultation. As I said in my opening remarks, we will look at the committee's conclusions and recommendations from the evidence that you have taken. Both sessions have been helpful; I managed to watch most of the previous session and the session with the stakeholders, and I thought that you got some really good evidence, which we will consider when we think about what we will include in the consultation. We are also speaking to the main stakeholders to ensure that we include everything that should be covered in the consultation, whether that be wider matters or the specific issue of how we drive up turnout and registration levels.

Graham Simpson: You obviously do not want to give the game away yet. I understand that.

11:30

Joe FitzPatrick: To be clear, there is genuinely still a significant opportunity for us to feed more into the consultation to make sure that it covers the areas that it should, and the work that the committee is doing can be fed into that process. We will look closely at this inquiry and the others that the committee is conducting.

Graham Simpson: So the committee could suggest areas that you might want to look at.

Joe FitzPatrick: We will certainly look at the inquiries that you have carried out and the work and evidence sessions that you have undertaken on this and other areas. We will look at all that.

Graham Simpson: What is your view on voters having to produce identification when they go to vote?

Joe FitzPatrick: I would be concerned about anything that we did that might be seen to be detrimental to certain sections of society being able to cast their vote. I understand that the UK Government will be carrying out a pilot at the English local government elections and we will of course look at that closely. I am not sure that there is huge evidence of significant voter fraud in Scotland.

I would be concerned about doing anything that might, even unintentionally, make it more difficult for certain sections of society to cast their votes. It is always easy for folk who have passports and driving licences to prove who they are, but I would be concerned about putting an additional barrier in place for others. Clearly, the UK Government is proposing pilots during the English local government elections this year—

Roddy Angus: In two years' time.

Joe FitzPatrick: In two years' time. It is appropriate that we look at that and see how that has worked, but we need to be careful about unintended consequences.

Ruth Maguire: I am interested to hear the minister's comments and reflections on the public awareness campaigns that we heard details of earlier. In the written evidence to the committee, which you may have seen, we got detailed feedback on what is happening in schools and colleges. Could any of those approaches be extended to increase turnout in other hard-to-reach communities or sections of our society that are not turning out to vote?

Joe FitzPatrick: The committee heard from the previous panel about the enthusiasm that there is from all the stakeholders to drive up voter registration numbers, get registration to areas where the registration level has been lower and encourage turnout. As a Government, we did not support the early introduction of the individual voter registration system, which we felt was rushed. Nevertheless, we know that our EROs across Scotland have worked hard to take that on board and to drive up turnout.

We heard that the turnout at the Scottish Parliament elections was almost as high as it was in the independence referendum, which was the high-water mark. I do not know about other areas, but certainly in Dundee people were queueing up to register for the first time to vote in that referendum. During that referendum campaign, people who had never before been engaged in the electoral system were engaged. At the Scottish Parliament election, the level of individual voter registration was almost as high by the time that the election came.

We are seeing a shift of the high-water mark, which used to be in September or October, when the Scottish household register had been done. That was the highest level that the register would reach; it would then fall off as its accuracy through the year went down. Now, it looks as if the high-water mark is at the election. It is really important that we make sure that the systems—particularly the online systems—that we have in place work properly so that people can use them.

Some interesting things are happening in reaching different areas. I know that a lot of work is being done with Youth Scotland and YouthLink Scotland to try to get to young people who, for whatever reason, we have not managed to engage with at school. However, we are hearing evidence that EROs are finding it easier to engage with young people because, at 16 or 17, a higher percentage of them are still at school, so the process is easier than it was when EROs were trying to engage with people for the first time when they were aged 18 to 24.

We need to continue to look at all the options, but there are good examples from the work on youth engagement in particular and from the work with some other minorities on making sure that we get people registered and that we understand the barriers to being able to vote and so on.

The Convener: In the previous evidence session, we heard from the Electoral Commission, Education Scotland, the Electoral Management Board for Scotland, and Ian Milton, who is an ERO and the chair of the electoral registration committee of the Scottish Assessors Association. Does any of those groups have a statutory duty to increase turnout? I am not referring to making sure that people can register to vote easily, that they understand the vote and that the process, the mechanics and the structures are all in place.

Joe FitzPatrick: The EMB's statutory duty is about assisting local authorities to do all that work for local elections, so it probably has the closest match to such a duty, but a lot of the functions are carried out by the Electoral Commission. The EMB has no statutory duty in relation to other elections in Scotland—it does not have a statutory role in Scottish Parliament elections, for instance.

However, it carries out its role, and one of the things that we need to look at is whether it should have such a statutory role for other elections.

The EMB has a power to direct in the local elections that it does not have for Scottish Parliament elections. As it turns out, that is generally okay, because the ERO and returning officer community works pretty well across Scotland. As it stands, there is no statutory duty for elections other than local elections.

The Convener: Is the existing duty a statutory duty to increase turnout or a statutory duty in relation to the mechanics of elections?

Joe FitzPatrick: It is about promoting elections rather than increasing turnout, but we can see how the two things are interlinked. The overall responsibility is shared by the partners that the committee just heard from. I think that the organisation that does the most to promote turnout is the Electoral Commission, with its advertising work, but it does that in partnership with the Electoral Management Board.

The Convener: That is helpful.

I used the following figures in the previous evidence session to illustrate a point. In 2012, there was a 27 per cent turnout in a ward in my constituency in the council elections, compared with a 39 per cent turnout in a neighbouring constituency, so the turnout in two Glasgow wards that are relatively close to each other was unequal.

If we look at the wonderful turnouts for the independence referendum, we see that the turnout was 90 to 91 per cent in East Renfrewshire and East Dunbartonshire. In Glasgow, it was 75 per cent or so, which was very high but was still way behind other local authority areas. Does any group or organisation have a responsibility to address those inequalities?

Joe FitzPatrick: I think that we all—that includes us as politicians—have a responsibility in relation to turnout.

The Convener: Absolutely—we have a moral responsibility and an ethical responsibility, but politicians have our own self-interest in relation to turnout. Does any statutory body or public body have a duty in relation to that?

Joe FitzPatrick: I do not think that there is a specific duty to increase voter turnout. We need to understand fully why that is; that is part of the challenge.

Roddy Angus: A duty to increase turnout could have adverse consequences. One way to increase turnout would be to knock off anybody on the register who did not vote at the previous election. Although that would increase turnout, it would

mean that fewer people were registered. As the size of the register increases, turnout will fall unless you get more voters out to vote.

The Convener: I agree with all those comments, Mr Angus, but I have a genuine concern. Yes, politicians have responsibilities, but we see a disparity across the country. There are social and economic reasons for much of that—I get that, too.

Who—separate from politicians, who want votes in order to win elections—sets the targets and outcomes that we can then scrutinise to see how effective Education Scotland, the Electoral Commission or the Electoral Management Board for Scotland have been in doing their jobs? Who has that duty? What consideration would you give to putting in place more formal structures that—while respecting the issue of independence—allow that work to be scrutinised?

Joe FitzPatrick: Scrutiny is always possible. You suggested that there should be an analysis of the outcome of the next council elections. That would probably be helpful to our understanding.

Registration officers want to get everybody on the register, and they appear to be doing a really good job in that regard. A new system was brought in that required registration to happen at a much faster speed than we or they had asked for. We asked for more transition time, because of the election timetables in Scotland. Although we did not get that, registration officers rose to the challenge, and more people are registering.

As we heard from the previous panel, it is difficult to know how many folk should be, but are not, registered for the different elections. We should always try to drive up the numbers, and we must always look at the work that the Electoral Commission is doing to drive up turnout. If there are ideas about how that could be done better, I am sure that the Electoral Commission would be keen to hear them. I am not sure that it would be helpful to say that if it does not get a turnout of X it has failed.

The Convener: To be fair, minister, I am not sure that that is what I said. These matters are usually challenging—

Joe FitzPatrick: Analysis is always helpful.

The Convener: We are just discussing what the system might look like going forward. It is the easiest thing in the world to pick 20,000 reasons why something cannot happen, rather than to look at how we can make something happen.

I have a final question. I am conscious that we have not mentioned individual groups. Given the disparity across Scotland in relation to turnout, do you expect the Electoral Commission, Education Scotland, electoral registration officers or the Electoral Management Board for Scotland to target existing resources at areas with poor turnout to address inequalities? Existing resources are obviously tight. If we are serious about tackling the issue, is there a case for additional resource specifically to target areas with poor electoral registration rates or voter turnout?

I sat on our predecessor committee—the Local Government and Communities Committee—in 2007, when we looked at and talked a lot about the fallout from previous elections. However, I am still not sure how we map out what real achievement looks like.

Joe FitzPatrick: The Electoral Commission, through its programme to increase turnout and registration for the local elections, is working with a number of partners, including in particular those groups where we know that, historically, there have been challenges. For example, it is working with NUS Scotland and students, young people, homeless groups, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities to make sure that we can get to places where mainstream media advertising or a booklet through the door does not work. It is about using the resources better to target the right people.

The resource allocated by the Government to the Electoral Commission for those tasks for the next election is just over £1.6 million, which is a significant sum of money. The commission is looking at how best to use that across the piece, and is specifically looking at areas where, historically, people have been harder to reach and turnout has been lower.

11:45

The Convener: We heard about some of those issues earlier. That is helpful.

Elaine Smith: I want to ask about the franchise. It has always intrigued me that Jennie Lee, who was an MP when she was in her early 20s, could not vote for herself because the franchise was 30. However, the situation will be different in the coming election. The franchise has been extended to 16 and 17-year-olds, although I understand that they cannot be candidates. I presume that you will be looking at the franchise from here on in. Will you look at that issue?

Joe FitzPatrick: The decision to extend the franchise in all elections that the Parliament has control over was taken in the previous session. The franchise for voting is 16 for Scottish Parliament elections and local elections, and I think that that is now universally agreed to be correct.

We should certainly look at whether the age at which people can stand for election should

continue to be differentiated, as it currently is. It would be interesting to hear arguments as to whether it should be. I have certainly heard the case put to me by young people that they quite like the idea that they get to vote for a couple of years and then they get to stand, but I have also heard other young people say that they think that they have something that they can put to the electorate and that they should be allowed to do that. It would then be up to the electorate to decide whether that person was too young and whether, irrespective of their age, they were the best candidate. There are arguments on that issue, so we certainly have to consider it.

At this stage, I am not certain whether that will be included in the consultation or the bill that we bring forward. We have to be careful because, under the new powers that are coming to Scotland, any changes to the franchise would require a supermajority. Potentially, the bill will mainly be about dealing with technical issues and tidying up and improving the electoral system, which does not require a supermajority. If we added the measure that Elaine Smith refers to, the whole bill would require a supermajority. We have to consider that. The Parliament has not yet come to a view as to what the processes should be around supermajority. However, it is reasonable for us to consider that issue.

Elaine Smith: I wonder whether, for the forthcoming election, maybe even just talking about that issue would help to raise awareness and to focus on the importance of local elections, representation and what councils do for people. Alternatively, to get a good turnout, perhaps we could start a rumour that only those who are on the marked register as having voted will get their bins collected in future.

Joe FitzPatrick: That is a novel approach.

Elaine Smith: Actually, it is a serious point. Maybe people are not aware that there is a marked register. We discussed that earlier, too.

The Convener: I saw Graham Simpson nodding his head when that suggestion was made, so I am not sure what will be in the Conservative manifesto in May.

Do you want to follow up on any of that, minister?

Joe FitzPatrick: No. My point is that this is all good stuff for discussion.

The Convener: As members have no more questions, I thank the minister for his evidence. We are very interested in the forthcoming elections bill and what may or may not be in it. As my colleagues have tried to tease out today, it will of course go way beyond voter turnout. We will discuss in private our reflections on the evidence

session, but I think that there is a feeling that, irrespective of the elections issue or the tier of government that the elections are for, one committee in the Scottish Parliament should be focused on and responsible for ensuring that there is good management across the board. I am sure that the committee would like to follow through on that, irrespective of which elections are involved, to give consistency and to highlight learning from best practice elsewhere. We are focused on May this year, and the committee's on-going work includes work that we are keen to do with Government and the stakeholders we heard from earlier. I thank the minister again for giving evidence.

I suspend the meeting briefly, so that we can get arranged for the next agenda item.

11:49

Meeting suspended.

11:53

On resuming—

Subordinate Legislation

Valuation for Rating (Decapitalisation Rate) (Scotland) Regulations 2016 (SSI 2016/402)

Community Empowerment (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2016 (SSI 2016/411)

Town and Country Planning (Miscellaneous Amendments and Transitional Saving Provision) (Scotland) Order 2016 (SSI 2016/421)

The Convener: We move to agenda item 3, under which the committee will consider three Scottish statutory instruments. The instruments are laid under the negative procedure, which means that their provisions will come into force unless the Parliament agrees to a motion to annul them. No motion to annul has been lodged for any of the instruments.

As no one has indicated that they want to make any comments, does the committee agree that we do not wish to make any recommendations in relation to the instruments?

Members *indicated agreement.*

11:54

Meeting continued in private until 13:06.

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