



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 2 November 2021

Session 6



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LOCAL GOVERNMENT, HOUSING AND PLANNING COMMITTEE
9th Meeting 2021, Session 6

CONVENER

*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

*Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con)

*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Simon Cameron (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Councillor Alison Evison (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Debbie Herron (Forres Area Community Trust)

Rona Mackay (Benbecula Community Council)

Alison Macleod (Midsteeple Quarter)

Philip Revell (Sustaining Dunbar)

Pauline Smith (Connect Community Trust)

John Swinney (Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Euan Donald

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 2 November 2021

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:04]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Ariane Burgess): Good morning and welcome to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee's ninth meeting in 2021. We have received apologies from Willie Coffey. I ask all members and witnesses to ensure that their mobile phones are on silent and that all other notifications are turned off.

Under the first agenda item, do we agree to take items 4 and 5 in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Local Governance Review

09:05

The Convener: Item 2 is to take evidence as part of the committee's consideration of the Scottish Government's local governance review. We will have three panels before us. I welcome to the committee Rona Mackay, who is a member of Benbecula community council; Alison Macleod, who is society secretary of Midsteeple Quarter; Debbie Herron, who is development manager at Forres Area Community Trust; Pauline Smith, who is chief executive of Connect Community Trust; and Philip Revell, who is a community board member of Sustaining Dunbar.

We will move straight to questions. If the witnesses wish to respond or contribute to the discussion, please type an R in the chat box to indicate that. Some questions might not necessarily be relevant to your experience. Initially, we will direct questions to one or two people, but if other witnesses want to respond, they are welcome to do so.

We are in the privileged position of overseeing the conclusion of the local governance review, which was launched in 2017, and ensuring that its findings shape the coming local democracy bill and community wealth building bill. My first question is a general one for everyone. We would like to understand what is going on in your communities. What are the challenges, strengths and roles of each organisation in improving the outcomes for the local governance review?

I say for the record that I know Debbie Herron. We live in the same town and recently worked together on the response to Covid-19. It is great to have you here, Debbie. We will begin with Rona Mackay, followed by Alison Macleod, Debbie Herron, Pauline Smith and Phil Revell.

We cannot hear you, Rona.

Rona Mackay (Benbecula Community Council): Hello.

The Convener: Hello and welcome.

Rona Mackay: I live in Benbecula and the chain of islands known as Uist. We face huge challenges. We are one of the first communities that will be affected by climate change, because of rising sea levels—our islands are connected by causeways, so any rise in sea levels will affect us. That already affects people going to work, school and other facilities during stormy weather.

We are tackling the issue. Our communities are doing their best to think their way around it, but it is a huge challenge. It is also a challenge to get our voice heard and to get anyone to take an

interest in and help us with that, because of how remote we are from decision-making areas.

We face other challenges, too. There are critical issues to do with mental health services in Uist. We have huge problems, including problems with suicide and alcoholism. We do not really have services to tackle those issues ourselves, so we are looking at ways in which we can tackle isolation and what we as a community can do about the poor mental health in the area.

Housing is another problem. A lot of our houses are being bought as second homes, and we worry that we will end up like the Isle of Skye. It is mainly full of second homes, which leads to local people being pushed out.

We know that our young people want to live, set up home and have families in Uist. The majority of our population is elderly, which is a huge problem. That is being exacerbated by young people not being able to find homes. That is another issue that we as a community are trying to tackle.

Fuel poverty is a huge issue. We have known that it is an issue for years, and we have done research on it and on what needs to be done to tackle hard-to-treat housing, but change is not happening.

We have a small population of a few thousand people, so it is very difficult to tackle all those huge issues on our own. I do not think that the work can be led only by statutory services; we need support to grow, to lead on the issues and to decide what needs to be done.

The Convener: Thank you very much. You did really well, because I have just had a message to say that my question was cut off, so I will repeat it. The committee would like to get a sense of your community, what the challenges are, what the strengths are and what the role of your organisation is in improving outcomes.

Alison Macleod (Midsteeples Quarter): Midsteeples Quarter is based in Dumfries and arose following extensive consultation work that was carried out by our sister organisation, the Stove Network. Over many years, it provided a space in which it was safe to speak, and it spent a lot of time looking at the big picture. Dumfries is our town, so the question was what we do about it. There was a mixture of big-picture thinking and discussion and hands-on work, such as volunteering work, which brought in a lot of people and got them engaged in conversations that otherwise would not have happened.

An issue that Dumfries faces is that the town centre is pretty empty—nothing much is happening. In the past, all the buildings were occupied by shops on the ground floor. Even longer ago, a substantial population lived in the

town centre, but now almost nobody lives there. Lots of buildings and shops have been empty for decades—not just recently. The High Street is particularly quiet. It has not been an attractive place for new businesses to set up and, since the pandemic, the situation has got worse, with large chains closing their shops.

Discussions at the Stove created a sense of ownership and empowerment. It was decided that, given that nobody else was going to do anything about the town centre, it was up to local people to do something about it. Out of those discussions came Midsteeples Quarter, which is a separate organisation.

We have been working hard over the past four years. We have identified a block of eight very large and deep buildings that still have a medieval layout. They all include shops on the ground floor and what has been accommodation on the two or three floors above.

We are just about to start rebuilding the first building, which we got ownership of through a transfer from the council. The idea is to build a community there. A substantial number of homes will be built, so people will live there. Things will go on in the evenings, and that will bring the area to life. At the moment, the town centre completely shuts at 5 o'clock and is then like a ghost town.

09:15

On the ground floor, instead of straightforward businesses, we will have more community-based social enterprises. Our first tenants are engaged in restoring the building so that it is fit for use. They are from a community interest company, which involves a large number of small creative businesses that cannot afford their own properties and have been selling online or at markets. Those businesses will have a permanent place where they can sell their produce and the things that they make.

The building that we are rebuilding will provide a great deal of support and opportunities to local small businesses. There will be a co-working space, meeting spaces and a retail space. It will be a flexible building with all sorts of opportunities for support for networking for small local businesses that are currently based in people's homes or in premises that are not suitable for them.

The approach is all about enabling that sort of enterprise to do such things. We are not talking about the kind of enterprises that have been on the High Street in the past, which were owned by companies that have no connection with Dumfries and do not feel responsible for the community. The project is all about benefit for the community in general as well as for the small businesses.

The Convener: It is great to hear some detail on Midsteeple Quarter, but we are looking at the challenges and strengths in relation to the governance review, so we would like to hear about the blocks to you doing what you want to do in your community. We want to hear a little about the community, the challenges in the community and the strengths and role of the organisation. I say that because we have nine more questions and we will tease out a lot more as we go through them.

Debbie Herron (Forres Area Community Trust): I am sorry—I lost the last few minutes of the meeting because my connection cut out.

The Convener: I was saying that we have about nine or 10 questions to go through—

Debbie Herron: I cannot hear anything. Can you hear me?

The Convener: Yes—we can hear you.

There are problems for various people who are using BlueJeans. We will suspend briefly to carry out a technical check.

09:17

Meeting suspended.

09:21

On resuming—

The Convener: We will now hear from Debbie Herron of Forres Area Community Trust. Will you give us an overview of your community, highlight the challenges that it faces and outline the trust's strengths and its role in overcoming those challenges and improving outcomes?

Debbie Herron: You have gone again, convener, but I think that I know what you want me to talk about, so I will respond.

The Convener: Give it a go—I am sure that it will be fine.

Debbie Herron: As a development trust, Forres Area Community Trust is part of the Development Trusts Association Scotland network. As the anchor organisation in the Forres area, we work in partnership with a range of organisations such as other development trusts and public agencies. Our aim is to make Forres a better place to live in, work in and visit and to do so in partnership with others as much as we can.

We echo some of the comments that have been made, but I add that part of the problem that we face is connectivity not just in the Forres area but across Moray. The towns of Elgin and Forres are relatively well serviced with broadband and information technology, but it can be extremely

challenging to get connected a mile or two out of town. That is the main challenge that we face with our Forres online outreach programme; the feedback that we get from people is that they cannot get online in any way, shape or form, whether it be through a dongle or the land-line.

Another challenge is the centralisation of national health service services. I know that things will happen in Elgin or even Aberdeen for economies of scale, but that raises access issues for some people, because public transport is not that great or because those people do not live near a bus route and cannot afford to run a car. Connectivity with health services and healthcare is a challenge.

An issue that arises in that respect is communication. There can be a disconnect when, say, a local flu vaccination programme is run for children. People used to get appointment letters from their general practitioners and go along to get their jab—that was fine. Because things are now done centrally, people are getting appointments for dates when clinics are not running. That has happened quite a lot lately, and it is causing confusion for individuals. It is important that services that people need locally are provided locally, but that is not necessarily happening as well as it could.

Resources are tight. Moray Council has released a lot of facilities, venues and buildings into community use—for example, we had a successful community asset transfer of Forres town hall, which was great. However, there is a disconnect in communication from the local authority. It wants resources to be released into the community, which has happened, but there has also been a proposal to charge us for venues. As a result, on top of communities having to pick up the shortfall or gaps in provision, they are also being expected to pay charges in some cases.

To be totally blunt, communities do not have the resources to cover such payments. Joined-up thinking is needed so that groups are connected and organisations are given support in order that we can better work collectively and in partnership.

I could mention lots of other things, but that will do for a start.

The Convener: Thank you. I am sure that committee members' questions will bring out more issues. Pauline, will you tell us about your community?

Pauline Smith (Connect Community Trust): I am the chief executive of Connect Community Trust, which is based in greater Easterhouse in Glasgow. I am also a trustee on the board of the Development Trusts Association Scotland. We are one of its 300-plus members across Scotland.

Connect Community Trust runs 80-odd services per week in greater Easterhouse, and 90 per cent of them are run by local people who are employed, who volunteer or who are on the board. The services include youth clubs, employment advice, training, educational skills workshops, allotments, family clubs and income advice—the list goes on. All our services are run and empowered by local people. Our strengths relate to local people being in control of the services and shaping and developing them from the ground up to fruition.

On the pressures and problems that we face, there is a lot of unemployment in greater Easterhouse and a lot of people are on low incomes. Health issues have had to be overcome over the years. Those pressures have all been accentuated by the Covid issues that we have all faced. We definitely have issues relating to education, employment, mental health and low incomes. For our organisation, it is about sustainability. All the services that we provided previously are now needed even more, so there is added pressure on our organisation and on local people to support one another.

We will probably come on to discuss Covid later, but it is worth noting the power of local people in supporting one another throughout this period, and that they want to do more. The problem that we face is that we need support to be able to do the hundreds of things that we want to do. We want to move quickly and efficiently and to listen to what people say.

Our strength is definitely the people power behind us—the power of local people having their say. Another strength of our organisation is that, when people say that they need something, we help them to get it; we help them along to make things the reality in their communities. We want to do more of that. That is definitely one of our strengths, but there are also challenges.

The local governance review has been powerful in the sense that it has allowed us to have conversations with people, but we do not want to be given false promises. We do not want to be told, “We want you to have your say” and asked what we want control of, but then not be able to take that forward. The strength of all our organisations in the third sector is that we make things the reality. We listen to people and put them in charge of leading the developments that they want to happen. Our 100-odd volunteers, staff and people on placements are all local people, and the strength of our organisation is that we can bring their voices to the table. It is a challenge when decisions are made without their say.

I could go through the 80-odd different services and the community control that we provide, but I will just note that the strengths and challenges that we face relate to sustainability and the financial

implications and pressures as a result of Covid. We had the pressures prior to Covid, but they have been accentuated with more people needing more support and help.

The Convener: Thank you.

Philip, will you tell us about your organisation and the strengths of and challenges for your community?

09:30

Philip Revell (Sustaining Dunbar): I will do my best. I am on the board of Sustaining Dunbar, which is a community development trust. I am also convener of the Scottish Communities Climate Action Network, which is a network of more than 200 groups across Scotland.

Sustaining Dunbar is part of a vibrant network of community-led organisations in Dunbar. We have a particular focus on how we can face up to the nature and climate emergencies and use them as an opportunity to transform our locality to ensure wellbeing for all in a flourishing environment.

Among the key challenges that we face—not just locally, obviously, but globally—are the climate and nature emergencies. We are coming into an unprecedented situation and, in order to face up to that, we need to be able to tap into everybody's collective intelligence and local knowledge in order to come up with local solutions. The key challenge at the moment is that there are no local well-facilitated forums in which we can tap into people's local knowledge, ideas and imagination in a creative way. We do not have any functional local democratic spaces in which that can happen.

On more specific challenges locally, we are facing a housing crisis. Local house prices are ridiculous and there are very few houses on the market. Even finding rented accommodation is extremely difficult, and rents are going through the roof. That is connected with a planning system that disempowers people locally. There is huge pressure from housing developers in our area, who have options on local land to build lots of new housing. At the same time, no local people can access any land. Lots of people would like to be able to access land—for example, to set up their own housing co-ops or co-housing schemes, or to self-build—but there is no chance of getting any land. That also relates to a lack of funding and resources.

We have met throughout the Covid crisis and we worked with 30 other local organisations to think through what sort of future we want to work towards and create a joint Covid recovery plan. We have created a “What Next?” action plan, but we have no funding to implement it. That is a huge

frustration. Lots of different local organisations try to chase different pots of funding, which is a huge waste of time and resources. When we get funding, we lose a huge amount of expertise and knowledge when projects and funding come to an end.

In addition, because of the way in which funding to local authorities has been cut over recent years, there is very little support from the local authority. The community development workers that we used to get a lot of support from and work closely with are grossly underresourced, and very little community development work is funded by the local authority.

That is probably enough for now.

The Convener: Thank you. I will go round everyone again with a second question. Answers can be fairly brief, again, because we have more questions and we do not have a lot of time—I wish that we had a whole day in which to speak to you. We have tried to select organisations that represent experience from across Scotland so that we include everyone. Rona Mackay is in Benbecula and Pauline Smith is in Easterhouse. It is great to hear the range of experiences.

I want to understand what level of involvement you had in the local governance review, your expectations in participating and communicating with the organisers, and your understanding of the next steps. I will ask you to comment in the same order as before. You can be brief. I just want to understand whether you had engagement and how it went.

Rona Mackay: I heard most of that, convener, but the sound cut off at the end.

The Convener: If you heard most of the question, please just go ahead.

Rona Mackay: Before today's meeting, I canvassed as many people as possible who are involved in the third sector in Uist. Uist won the accolade of third sector place this year, which was due to the huge number of people who are involved in the third sector here. Most people said that they had not heard of the local governance review, had not been involved and were not sure what it was, but they all wanted to contribute their opinions as they felt that they had not had an opportunity to do so.

It is difficult to answer your question other than to say that I am not sure that many people in the islands were aware that the local governance review was happening or that they were able to contribute to it, but many people want to contribute and give their views. They gave me their views to put across on their behalf today.

The Convener: It is helpful for the committee to hear that people do not even know what the local governance review is.

I will ask my question again, because I hear that my microphone may not have been working and I was not clear. We would like to hear about your involvement in the local governance review, your expectations for your participation, communication with the organisers, and your understanding of the next steps.

Alison Macleod: As I understand it, Midsteeple Quarter was not directly involved in the local governance review. We are a young organisation. I understand that the Stove was involved, which is the ideal place for such a discussion to be had, because it engages so effectively. However, I was not involved in that, so I cannot comment on how it went.

Debbie Herron: [*Inaudible.*]—democracy matters consultation process. We promoted it, but my understanding is that not many people engaged with it. When I have asked around, I have not had much response.

Pauline Smith: My experience is a wee bit different. I have known about the review and been involved in it through the Development Trusts Association Scotland board and locally in our community. When the process started, we made the democracy matters conversation part of our usual gala days—for example, we had questionnaires available at all the events and activities. We had meetings with boards and volunteers and we met housing and other community organisations locally to talk about the democracy matters events. Those organisations in greater Easterhouse produced submissions individually and as a partnership that fed into the wider conversation—we all submitted papers to that process. Alasdair McKinley and Brian Logan met our local community groups and there were events associated with that as well.

From a wider development trust point of view, there was also a submission from DTAS on behalf of the members. I perhaps have a different view, because we have been heavily involved and we attended some of the roadshow events that the Government and the department ran.

You asked about next steps. The only thing that has been disappointing is that things have stalled, but we are aware that Covid has had a lot to do with that. We as a community and other organisations and the partnership in Easterhouse were very much on board with where things could go and what we could do, because of all those conversations about control and power, for example. We were quite excited about it. It has fallen flat at the moment, but that has a lot to do with Covid.

We want the next step to be taken in order to put in place what has been talked about in all the conversations with and feedback from communities. My understanding is that that is part of the programme for government for the next year and that pushing it forward has been put on the table. I hope that that is what we are talking about today. We are keen for it to move forward quickly, if possible.

Philip Revell: SCCAN ran an event for our members—almost exactly three years ago, I think—as part of the democracy matters consultation. Our members got very excited by it at the time and they came forward with lots of proposals for how democracy can be much more local, with many more resources and powers at the local level. Since then, I have been kept slightly abreast of where things are through my involvement with the Scottish Community Alliance. However, if you asked anybody locally in Dunbar about the review, they would not have a clue what you were talking about.

The Convener: Thank you. It is very interesting to get those perspectives from you all. The subject of my questions will be picked up by Paul McLennan.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I refer everyone to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am still a councillor at East Lothian Council. I also declare that I know Philip Revell and was previously involved with Sustaining Dunbar. It is good to see him and our other witnesses.

Expanding on the questions that the convener asked, I ask you to talk about your communities' experiences of working with local authorities and other local bodies, and about how relationships can be improved. I will take the initiative and ask Philip to respond first.

Philip Revell: It is a mixed bag. We have had some very good relationships with East Lothian Council, and a lot of support with particular projects. However, a lot depends on developing a relationship with a particular officer. There is a challenge when officers move on—for example, though reorganisation—and relationships have to be re-established from scratch. We had a lot of support when we were setting up the zero waste reuse hub, which intercepts waste and prevents it from going to landfill. On other projects, we have had much less support—for example, with finding local premises for a co-working space. There is a real issue with the lack of resource that is going into local community development work.

Paul McLennan: I have a supplementary question, which I will also put to everybody else. Do you believe that local people want to be more involved in decisions that impact on their

communities? Is there evidence for that? Has Covid changed that in any way?

Philip Revell: There is no doubt that people would like to be more involved. In a way, however, it is difficult to answer that question because people have felt so disconnected and disempowered for so long that it is going to be quite a challenge for them to develop a sense of agency. That is particularly the case in relation to the planning system. People feel that the system is rigged in favour of large developers and they do not feel that they have any agency to affect decisions. Community councils often expend a huge amount of effort in commenting on planning applications and then feel ignored.

Paul McLennan: Thank you for that, Philip. I put the same questions to Pauline Smith.

09:45

Pauline Smith: Everyone probably has mixed relationships with their council, but we have some really good and active local councillors who, when we need action, listen and get things done. Throughout the process, we have always said that it is about helping councillors and the council; it is not about taking power away from individuals. Through the power of our people, we can help to improve the area day to day and, eventually, save the council money.

On our relationships, I note that the north-east sector has one representative for the voluntary sector. They are supposed to be the voice for the whole voluntary sector, but it is impossible for them to represent the 200-odd organisations in the area. The documents are called community plans, but the voluntary sector is not represented heavily enough in the council's current structures to allow the voices to get through.

Local people absolutely want to be involved. The proof of that is that all our services are run by local people. They want to be involved in delivery and to have a say in what happens to them and their community. Again, however, we need the local powers and structures for people to be able to do that. We always use the example of community litter picks. We had to apply for funding from the council to get the money for equipment for litter picks. If there were local budgets and control, we could do such things quickly and efficiently.

There is a desire for involvement, but there does not necessarily need to be a formal structure all the time. If you asked local people whether they know what community planning is, they would probably say no, but they know about the youth group, Connect, the housing association and all the other structures and people with whom they

engage. That is where we need to strengthen things locally. Does that answer the question?

Paul McLennan: Yes—thank you. I put the same questions to Debbie Herron.

Debbie Herron: Could you repeat the question quickly, if you do not mind?

Paul McLennan: What is your community group's experience of working with local authorities and other public bodies? Does your local community have an appetite for more empowerment and more involvement in decisions? Has that changed since Covid?

Debbie Herron: Our community definitely wants to be involved in decision making. We have a vibrant community with more than 200 local groups of different sizes. When the Covid pandemic hit, we worked well together and, collectively, we were quick to respond. A lot of volunteers got out there and did things. The local authority was slower because, obviously, it is bigger and has bureaucracy to deal with.

As others have said, there is a mixed picture. We have had excellent support from and relationships with some offices and departments, such as the community support unit. That might not have been so much the case with other departments. There is an issue about communication between departments in the local authority. One department might be doing something directly opposite to what another department is doing. There is a mixed picture, but we and other local organisations are keen to work more in partnership.

People feel disenfranchised from the local authority. They feel that they are not heard and that, no matter what they want, they do not get it. They feel that they do not see change or improvement. That might be fair in some ways, but not necessarily in others.

There is an appetite to work more closely together and to do more. As I said, there is an element about communication and people understanding why decisions have been made. Decisions should be made more collectively, because that is not happening at the moment.

Paul McLennan: Thank you. I put the same question to Alison Macleod.

Alison Macleod: We have been dealing with buildings rather than running events and so on, because our buildings are only just coming into use. Our work with the council has therefore been fairly straightforward—a lot of it involved getting planning permission and such things. Our chief executive is a planning professional, so he already had links from his previous work.

The first building that Midsteeple Quarter owned was an asset transfer from the council. These things never happen quickly, but there were not any major problems with that. We have had some funding for rebuilding work. Our connections are mainly with council employees; we have not had much interest from our local councillors—we do not hear a lot from them. We do not hear anything negative from them, but we do not have strong connections with them.

There is an aquifer under Dumfries town centre, which we would like to access to provide the heat for a district heating scheme for our buildings and other buildings. We have progressed to the point where we have funding in place to drill a bore hole to investigate the potential. It has taken some time to get to that point. The council explored the issue in the past, although not to that stage—it progressed to an earlier stage and then did nothing more about it. This might just be a coincidence but, now that we are actively exploring the issue, the council is looking at it again. I do not know how that will work out. It has recently come to light that the council is also considering the idea of using the aquifer for heat for town centre buildings. We need to have a discussion with the council about how that will work out.

Paul McLennan: I invite Rona Mackay to respond.

Rona Mackay: It is a mixed bag for us, too. I think that a lot of people find the local councillors really easy to access and to talk to. They are well known in the community. One of them set up and ran Resilient Uist, which was a driving force in keeping our community going during the pandemic.

However, as I said, it is a mixed bag. Many major decisions are made in Stornoway, which is a long way from where we live. The council's building in Stornoway is a ferry ride away from us and, for people from Barra, it is two ferry rides away. Decisions can be made there without any consultation with communities on the other islands.

For example, a decision was taken to knock down some buildings on Barra that the community was using and to set up an entirely new hub. The community was very vocal in its opposition to some of the plans. One woman told me that she could not get to speak to anybody who made the decisions in Stornoway. She said that the only way that she would be able to speak to them would be to drive all the way up there, which would involve taking two ferries and travelling for an entire day. That was what she felt she would have to do to make her point.

On the other hand, our councillors are very easy to get hold of. That said, a major problem is the fact that our councillors are 100 per cent male. Across Scotland, 29 per cent of councillors are women. That affects women's representation and their ability to get their voice heard in the Western Isles. We provide most of the care and so on at home, but we have very little voice on childcare and nothing ever happens on that, which I guess is because we have 100 per cent male councillors. Women do not feel that they have access to power and decision making.

The Convener: We move on to questions from Meghan Gallacher.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): As Paul McLennan did, I declare an interest as a serving councillor—I am a councillor on North Lanarkshire Council.

My question relates to the findings of the 2019 Scottish household survey, which found that only 18 per cent of people in Scotland believe that they can influence decisions that affect their local area. That relates to what Rona Mackay was talking about.

Why do you think that the figure is so low? What are the barriers to people being able to have an influence? Do you think that participatory budgeting is the key to getting more people involved in decisions that affect their community?

I would like to start with Rona Mackay.

Rona Mackay: Our local paper recently talked to women across Uist about why they did not go for the position of councillor, and why they did not, or did not feel that they should, take part in the decision-making process. A lot of it came down to distance—they felt that they could not spend time travelling to Stornoway for meetings and so on while they were looking after their children. However, that cannot be the only issue, as there are no female Stornoway councillors either, so there must be other issues.

Another issue concerns evening meetings—a lot of councillors have to commit to huge numbers of such meetings, which is not good for those who have children or parents to care for. Women also said that they felt that they could not go into a room full of male people who were making decisions and have their voice heard. They felt that they did not have the confidence to say what they thought, and worried about whether they would be taken seriously.

That is also a problem for young people. Recently, we started a project to produce a local energy plan for Uist, and we are trying to make it as inclusive as possible. We talked to one young person about how to include young people in the project, because at every meeting that he

attended, he stayed completely silent. He said that he felt that the meetings were not inclusive because, for him, they were quite scary. It can be terrifying at times to say what you think and have your voice heard, when you do not know whether other people will laugh at you or take you seriously.

The decision-making process is, therefore, not really inclusive for young people either. Much more has to be done to look at the mechanisms and structures, and the way in which decisions are made, so that the process does not always involve a formal format in which people might not feel comfortable giving their minority view.

Meghan Gallacher: I am conscious of time, so I will go to Pauline Smith and then see whether there are any other comments.

Pauline Smith: I agree with what Rona Mackay said about people feeling intimidated by the process. In Glasgow, all the meetings take place in the city chambers, so people have to make an effort to go into the chambers. The building itself is intimidating even to walk into, so it does not feel inclusive in that sense, and it does not necessarily feel as if your voice will be heard there.

I have not seen the survey results that you referred to, but in Connect and various other development trusts, when we ask locally whether people have control of their services and whether they are being heard, they tend to say yes. Again, it is about how the question is structured. If people are asked whether they feel that they have local decision-making powers or control over what they do, I think that they would say yes.

Within the local structures that we have in Connect and in the local area, we have mini sub-groups for youth and the elderly, if people are interested in those aspects. We also have a discrete group for disability services, and a food growing group. We have all those little sub-groups that people will dip in and out of because they are not formal structures, and they are about things that people are interested in. Sometimes, a big meeting will have an agenda of 50 items, and people may not be interested in all those things—they are interested in one particular aspect because they have a kid or a granny, or something. That is why local structures work well and are very powerful in that sense.

I do not have any experience of PB, so Meghan Gallacher might need to go to someone else on that.

The Convener: Philip Revell and Debbie Herron would like to come in on Meghan Gallacher's question.

Philip Revell: We urgently need to create different sorts of spaces where we can have

properly deliberative conversations in which we bring in different perspectives and potentially conflicting opinions and consider them in a meaningful and creative way. We also need the skills to convene and facilitate discussions in such spaces so that everybody's voice can be heard. That seems to be crucial. We also potentially need to be prepared to pay people for their time to enable them to participate in those spaces. At present, those who participate are a self-selecting group who can spare the time to do so.

I have no direct experience of participatory budgeting, but we urgently need to be able to put in resources at grass-roots level. If we had meaningful resource and investment coming in at that level, and developed good participatory budgeting ways of allocating that funding, that could be a really good way to engage many more people in conversations about local priorities.

10:00

Debbie Herron: On engaging with meetings, things can sometimes be regarded as a tick-box exercise, so subjects are dealt with so quickly. Obviously, people have limited time, but there is no opportunity for anyone to have a say because things are voted on very quickly. There is no opportunity to ask questions or to get clarity before decisions are made.

Local authorities should go where the people are, rather than expecting people to come to them. Our civic centre is Elgin, which is great, but not everybody can get there. Local authorities need to go out to communities and maybe circulate meetings, rather than bringing people in. Zoom is good. Working online gives people more opportunity to participate, if their internet is good.

I have a little experience of participatory budgeting. We have had three or four PB sessions across Moray. One of them involved Money for Moray, which is a voluntary panel that secured funding from Moray Council and the Scottish Government to do some participatory budgeting. That worked well. The process was transparent and was explained extremely clearly, and everybody voted. However, it takes a lot of time and resources to get people to understand the process.

Several other PB activities have happened in Moray, although they have not been as well communicated. The way that PB works can get lost in translation. It is a particular system and it works, but if people do not understand it they will move it towards their agenda. That has happened in the past and it creates frustration, which people do not like. If participatory budgeting is transparent and open, and if people have been trained in how to do it, it works.

Alison Macleod: We have not had much to do with councillors, and I am not sure why that is. It may be because we are at the acquisition and rebuilding stage, rather than running activities in our buildings. We have good relationships with some MSPs and a close and important relationship with the community council that serves the centre of the town. We have representatives of that community council on our board, which is important for building a sense of community. We put a lot of effort into communicating well with the community council.

We have not been involved in participatory budgeting. We are not delivering services at the moment, so that would not apply to Midsteepie Quarter. Also, we are looking for large sums of money, rather than small pots.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Before I ask my question, I will declare an interest: I am still a serving councillor on East Ayrshire Council.

In my council area, communities are supported to create their own community-led action plans. They need to get at least a 40 per cent return from households in their community for their plan to be a sovereign document, which is then represented in community planning and is the basis for local place plans.

How do your organisations ensure that all voices are heard within communities, not just the voices of those who have the confidence, experience or resources to come forward? We can sometimes see the usual faces around the same tables.

Pauline Smith: I probably pre-empted the question in my previous answers. To ensure that voices are heard, we want people to be physically involved in the delivery of services and to walk through the door and voice their opinion. We have lots of sub-groups, which I touched on in a previous answer. The people on our boards all have specific interests. They might have become involved because of young people or care, because they have a child with a disability or because of employment. They all have their reasons for getting involved.

The people who come on to the board therefore bring a wide array of skills, knowledge and personal experience. They are local people—in fact, one of our board members is the local lollipop woman—so they are continually talking to others about what their needs might be.

Although we have formal structures with sub-groups and so on, we also have informal chats through our community brunches, lunches and dinners, which have the associated social aspect of people getting together to find out what the issues are. We also have formal volunteer

programmes, and all those voices are constantly being heard through the day-to-day activities and services that we run.

We try to make sure that it is not the same old faces, but the fact is that with, say, a community planning board meeting in Glasgow city chambers, we sometimes need those same old faces, because they have the confidence to deal with such situations. However, we are trying to ensure that we have the structures in-house and at a local level to allow as wide an array of voices as possible to be heard. All that comes through our day-to-day service delivery—it does not always have to be formally structured.

Elena Whitham: I am aware that some people might not have heard my question, so I will repeat the last bit of it. Can Rona Mackay tell us how the community council in her area ensures that all the voices in the community are being heard and that it is not the same people around the table all the time? I suppose that the question is about how you ensure wider recognition of every voice in your community.

Rona Mackay: The Uist local energy plan that, as I have said, we are putting together is not really being done through the community council; instead, it is a wider community thing involving several third sector organisations. We will have the usual workshops, which will be open to anyone who wants to attend, and we will spread them out geographically across Uist. We are very aware that we will hear the same enthusiastic voices and see the same people who attend most consultations, but we still want to hear what they think and about the changes that they would like to see in energy on Uist.

However, we will also be holding a number of very different workshops, one of which will be aimed at young people, another at vulnerable people and a third at the elderly and people with dementia or learning difficulties. The idea is to find groups that we have never managed to consult in the past and look at different ways of consulting them. We have had some feedback that there are people who do not like meetings or having their voice heard and who would rather work in a different way through, say, more arts-based activity or conversations in small groups.

We will be as flexible as we can to allow people to contribute in any way that makes them feel comfortable, and we will see how it goes and whether we get different opinions instead of the usual enthusiastic—and retired—voices that we hear from so often.

Elena Whitham: Has anyone else put an R in the chat box, convener?

The Convener: I see that Debbie Herron and Alison Macleod would like to respond.

Debbie Herron: We have local community councils, development trusts and the area forum. Before Covid, we put on collaborative events to allow us to share information and to which we invited as many people as possible, and we are looking at putting on such events again. They are usually very popular—*[Interruption.]*

The Convener: I am sorry, but we have lost Debbie Herron's audio. She probably cannot hear me, either.

Debbie Herron: We actively go out to schools, day care centres and so on to have chats and ask questions, and we are also open to people coming in and having a chat with us. We have found that online surveys work really well, and we have had incredibly good returns from them. We also try to capture more detailed information from individuals through self-selecting focus groups. We are getting out as much as we can in order to get information.

Alison Macleod: We make community engagement a high priority, partly because we are in a town and we cover a big population—there are about 40,000 people in the area. It is not easy to engage with a population of that size. We have a community engagement officer who works with us for three days a week and spends two days a week on communications and social media. That is a big part of our resource; we have a small staff team and about 30 per cent of our staff work in communications. We communicate in whatever way that we can.

It is difficult, because we are at the empty buildings stage. We own five buildings, one of which we have demolished, and we are only just getting activity under way—tenants' activity rather than ours—in a couple of the other buildings. We are using other buildings for what we call meantime use, which means that we make them available to all sorts of people, as well as using them ourselves. That allows people to go into buildings, see what is going on and have discussions. During non-Covid times, we regularly hold in-person events where we provide information, speak to people about what we are doing and what our plans are and listen to what they have to say about that.

We have had a good start in ensuring that all voices are heard because of the Stove's good groundwork in setting up the organisation. It designed and planned the work as the answer to the problem in Dumfries town centre, and there is a wide range of ways in which people can get involved. For example, people can volunteer in a practical way by tidying up the town centre and cleaning buildings, which has recently started again. Behind one of our buildings, we have been working on a small plot of land that will be turned

into a green space that people who live in and use the building will be able to access.

We encourage people to come into the buildings and talk to us. Our chief executive officer is now based there and is available to meet anybody who wants to meet them.

The Convener: Thank you. We will move on to questions from Miles Briggs.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Good morning, everyone. What is your understanding of community wealth building? What are your views on the roles of what are being called anchor organisations, such as local housing associations, hospitals, colleges and universities? Let us start with Alison Macleod, because she outlined how her organisation benefited early on from other organisations supporting its establishment. If anyone else wants to speak, please put an R in the chat.

Alison Macleod: I suppose that the work on our buildings does relate to community wealth building, because we are building a community that is not there at the moment. We have not talked about it as being wealth building, but I suppose that it is. It is about local wealth; it is not like Debenhams or Marks and Spencer, with profits going to shareholders who do not live in Dumfries. It is about making the most of what is available locally. Dumfries and Galloway has a lot of attributes that we do not make as much of as we should. It is an intensely creative place and there is so much going on, but there is not really an opportunity for people to make a proper living from that. That is what we want to grow. There is also good local food and drink.

We need to be allowed to make best use of the area's assets by providing the buildings for small businesses and entrepreneurs who are working on growing, making, designing and using all their skills. They will be sharing buildings or perhaps visiting to work part time, so that will allow networks to build up in which small businesses work together, and that will be a strength from which they and the town will benefit. It is also about building the community that will live in the buildings.

10:15

We are talking to the university that is partially based on the Crichton campus. It does not have any student accommodation, so it is interested in using some of the upper stories of our building for student flats, which will bring young life to the town centre. We are also talking about potential housing that will be suitable for elderly people. We might have something along the lines of the model that is used in Holland and other places, in which younger people can earn part of their

accommodation costs by helping to provide care for elderly tenants. That can create a really good healthy relationship between the two age groups.

We are open to all sorts of innovative and inclusive ideas that will build a community where there really has not been one for 40 years, and that means having a much more local economy in which we make the most of all the many human resources and abilities and the natural resources that we have in the area.

Miles Briggs: From what we have heard this morning, it sounds as though a lot of the work that is being undertaken is quite organic, so I want to ask about the specific role of community councils. What should be improved about their role, and how could their role be strengthened or changed? I suppose that I should start with Rona Mackay, as you are on the community council.

Rona Mackay: I lost quite a bit of that question. It was cut off at the beginning.

Miles Briggs: I was asking how the role of community councils could be improved or changed—

Rona Mackay: I cannot hear at all.

The Convener: We can put those questions in a letter.

I do not know whether the witnesses can hear me, but we have come to the end of our time. We have a few more questions, and some of you might have missed out on answering because of the technology, so we will put those questions in a letter to you and you can respond to that. You can also use it as an opportunity to let the committee know anything else that we might not have been able to cover this morning.

Thank you very much for being with us. It was good to hear a range of perspectives from an urban context to a rural and island context, and how some of the issues are the same. It has been good to get a sense of how the local governance review is going.

I will suspend the meeting to allow for a change of witnesses and a wee break.

10:18

Meeting suspended.

10:25

On resuming—

The Convener: We will continue our consideration of the Scottish Government's local governance review by taking evidence from representatives of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, who are joining us virtually. I

welcome Councillor Alison Evison, the president, and Simon Cameron, the chief officer of the employers team. We will move straight to questions. If you wish to respond or contribute to the discussion and we have not called you to speak, you can put an R in the chat box. Some of my committee colleagues are joining us virtually, too.

I will get us started. I am interested in getting an update on the progress of the governance review since May's elections. The committee has previously heard from COSLA about the principles that it would like to shape the new fiscal framework, but can you now describe how that would work in practice?

Councillor Alison Evison (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): Good morning, and thank you for inviting us along to speak today—

The Convener: Hang on a minute, Alison—your volume is quite low at our end. Let us try again.

Councillor Evison: Thank you very much for inviting us to talk to the committee. I am really glad that you spoke about the local “governance” review, because I was quite concerned when the word “government” was being brought into the discussion earlier. The local governance review is about the reform of the whole of the public sector to improve outcomes for people across our communities, so the word “governance” is a really important part of that.

Before the election, there was close working between the Scottish Government and local government, which are the joint owners of the local governance review and share the governance of it. That work focused on three empowerments that need to be taken forward concurrently: fiscal empowerment, as you mentioned, functional empowerment and community empowerment. We got to the stage of agreeing that those aspects will be taken forward because, by doing so, we will be able to improve outcomes for citizens across our communities.

During the months of Covid, everybody's attention was necessarily elsewhere, and it was agreed that the local governance review would not be progressed. During Covid, we have seen many examples in communities across Scotland of what outcomes could be achieved if the local governance review principles were put into practice and people locally were empowered and trusted to deliver for their local communities. Therefore, even though the review had been paused, Covid has shown us what could happen.

Since May's election, the development of the local governance review has still been on hold. Various councils stand ready with their community partners, supported by COSLA, to work on pilots that have been written up and that are ready to go.

Those need to be given the final go-ahead so that they can demonstrate how a collaborative partnership-based approach could really make a difference by improving outcomes for everybody across communities.

As I said, the pilots stand ready. It was clear from the witnesses on the previous panel that the really important thing is getting the resources to make things happen. Things cannot happen unless they are resourced. Obviously, we need the go-ahead for the pilots so that they can be progressed and so that we can see the difference that they can make across communities. We stand ready to support the partners that are involved in moving ahead with those projects.

10:30

You also asked about the fiscal framework. We have talked before about the importance of that for local government. Many of the witnesses on the first panel talked about areas in which they feel the councils are not working at the moment. I would argue strongly that the reason why councils are not working in some of the areas in which the contributors want them to work is because they are not fiscally empowered to do so.

That fiscal empowerment has not been put into operation, so councils have little control of their funding. Too much money is ring fenced, too much money comes in small pots throughout the year and too much money comes with increasingly difficult and onerous administrative and reporting requirements, which make it difficult to do work as well. Within all that, the local element has had to give.

Moving forward, the fiscal framework needs to be able to respond to local councils, local areas, local democracy and local empowerment so that work can be done at the local level to ensure that multiyear funding is available, that councils and their partners can raise their own money and that things such as participatory budgeting can be considered in a positive way. Our priorities for the fiscal framework remain the same and we continue to seek your support as a committee that the fiscal framework and the fiscal empowerment that that would bring are delivered, in order to improve the outcomes.

The Convener: Mark Griffin, who is joining us virtually, will ask the next question.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Previously, we have heard from Councillor Evison and COSLA about the principles that you think should shape the new fiscal framework. Are you now in a position to describe how that would work in practice?

Councillor Evison: The points that I briefly outlined in my previous answer are relevant to that question, too. The fiscal framework needs to be based on a parity of esteem, a sense of working together and an understanding of the shared outcomes that are required from it. As we look at recovery and move forwards with various kinds of economic and social renewal, it is essential that local government and the Scottish Government work together on that and that we are able to collaborate with other parts of the public sector at a local level where it is appropriate to do so.

The fiscal framework has to underpin that. Work is still being done on how we can move forward, but multiyear funding is a crucial aspect of that. Councils need to be free to raise their income in ways that are appropriate to their localities and communities. We have heard examples of and talked about various forms of discretionary local taxation, but we need to let councils fly with what is appropriate for their areas, too.

We need to have certainty on the financial settlement as well, so that there can be long-term strategic planning. There is agreement across the piece that preventative work is essential. Recently, we have seen many pressures on health and social care services, for example. A lot of that could be addressed through preventative work across our communities, with everybody working together—the public sector, the third sector and the councils. However, that requires the certainty of strategic planning and, financially, it requires certainty about the money coming in. All that needs to happen without ring fencing, which increases the sectoralisation without increasing the crucial principle of subsidiarity.

Any fiscal framework that is developed must have the element of trust in it. If we are all working to the same outcomes, and we all want to deliver the same things for communities and we are really engaged in supporting the local, that element of trust should come into it, so that councils can use the fiscal framework to deliver with their local communities for their local communities.

Mark Griffin: That certainty of funding is critical. The United Kingdom Government has recently published a multiyear spending review. I know that COSLA wants the Scottish Government to deliver that, too. Early as it might be, following on from the UK Government's announcement, what discussions have you had with the Scottish Government on confirming whether local authorities will receive multiyear settlements to give them that certainty and ability to plan?

Councillor Evison: Discussions are on-going. We had a commitment—that was a long time ago—for a fiscal framework to be developed in Scotland but that has not yet happened. We want that to be developed as quickly as possible. We

would appreciate the committee's support to ensure that the work is done on a timely basis and that the principles that I have outlined are developed—in particular that of multiyear funding to allow strategic planning and preventative work, which is on everyone's agenda—in collaboration with local communities. Obviously, although the work is on-going, anything that the committee could do to help us hasten its outcome would be welcome.

The Convener: How confident are you that councils will receive multiyear settlements from the Scottish Government from now on?

Councillor Evison: At the moment, all that I can say is that the work is on-going and that we want that approach to be developed. As Mark Griffin implied, what happens depends on the UK Government and the funding that the Scottish Government receives. There is a cycle that must be developed.

If we share the desire to achieve the outcomes of recovery, and if we want to see social and economic renewal—I believe that we do—there must be an understanding that we need to put the money in the right places to make that happen. Again, that comes back to the comment that I made on trust. That money has not yet been promised to us, but we must continue to work together on the processes, because it is important that that is delivered. Again, it would be helpful if the committee could add its voice to that call.

Miles Briggs: What is COSLA's understanding of the timetable for the future local governance review work? Do you think that that will be impacted by next year's local government elections?

Councillor Evison: We have pilot projects that are ready to be delivered across our communities. They involve a far greater range of people than our councils—that is the point, of course: that partnership work and the functional empowerment that comes from involving other people. If those projects get started, they should be able to continue.

The important issue is the resourcing for those projects. As we have heard from others, things do not happen without resources. Community empowerment will not happen because we sit here and say that we believe that community empowerment and functional empowerment are essential. Those aspects must be resourced and supported to develop.

Simon Cameron can comment on the detail of how the work is progressing.

Simon Cameron (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): With regard to the timeframes, we are working proactively with our

colleagues in the Scottish Government to re-establish the joint political oversight of the local governance review. Clearly, the elections next May loom large, but that does not stop us continuing to pursue the excellent work that we can do locally.

As Councillor Evison has said, there is a strong commitment from COSLA and the Government to continue the local governance review and work towards a local democracy bill that strengthens democracy and takes an asymmetric approach across the country.

With regard to the fiscal empowerment that Councillor Evison outlined, we have a special interest group working on that, and it is engaging with colleagues in the Government's local governance finance section. We can progress that work at pace. Obviously, that must be aligned with the recovery work that is going on. We want to see those elements intertwined, and we welcome the opportunity to put in place a firm timescale for progressing that work.

Miles Briggs: In its programme for government, the Government set out two key bills—a local democracy bill and a community wealth building bill. What would COSLA like to see in those bills, and what discussions have you had on them so far?

During the passage of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill, for example, we discussed the need for recognition of the role of local government. With regard to the views that COSLA has expressed on the proposed national care service, do you think that such a service might, by centralising some aspects of care, undermine the opportunity to give more powers to local democracy?

Councillor Evison: Again, that is a very big question that involves a lot of different aspects. On your first question, on the Government bills, it is important to recognise that there is huge diversity across Scotland. One size will not fit everywhere; what works in one area will not necessarily work in another. The key has to be local empowerment and appreciation, and putting power in the local community.

We have seen what happens when people become disillusioned because they do not feel involved—there was a hint of that in the previous session this morning. We need to encourage a renewed sense among people of why they should participate in local democracy and emphasise the benefits of that to the community. Localism and diversity across Scotland has to be a key part of that.

For a long time, we have been mentioning the principle of subsidiarity, which must be a clear focus in anything that we do. We need to ensure

that decisions are made by the people who are affected by them and that there is democratic accountability in the local area for decisions that are made.

You also mentioned community wealth building, which offers huge potential to support local areas and facilitate social and economic renewal. The development of local work and jobs on a fair basis, with people being rewarded for the work that they do, has a huge part to play in tackling poverty and inequality. Community wealth building has a lot to offer in that regard through supporting the creation and use of wealth in the local area for the benefit of local people, including the creation of local jobs and supporting local businesses. That can ensure that every penny that is spent in an area brings back something to support the people who live there.

We would very much support community wealth building being taken forward. Each of our councils will be one of the anchor organisations in their local community, given the procurement powers that local government has. In addition, councils have assets at their disposal to use for community asset transfer or other schemes. Councils can also make a difference through employment—they are one of the largest employers in many areas across Scotland, and they can play a leadership role and set an example in that regard. Overall, local government employs around 240,000 people, so there is huge power in that respect. We would very much support community wealth building, recognising the local aspects and creating the conditions in which the model can be developed.

In your other question, you moved on to the small topic of the national care consultation. Our views on that are very clear: the local voice has to shine through in the way in which care is delivered. Supporting people in our communities is essential. However, we do not consider long-term structural change as the way to secure what we need to deliver social care and health outcomes, to improve wellbeing, and, through that, to tackle inequalities and develop a human rights approach.

That does not need structural change—it requires resource and empowerment, and it needs to be part of the fiscal, functional and community empowerment that we talked about earlier. Many of the things that we need to do to improve care are allied with one another. We will not be able to improve care unless we improve the experience of living in communities, and we will not be able to do that unless we improve our leisure and cultural services locally, and unless staff are employed on a fair basis. There is a lot in there that will not be answered through structural change, but it could be answered now through crucial democratic accountability.

Our lines on that are clear, and our submission has been written and agreed. I know that many councils have agreed their submissions, too. I see that the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers—SOLACE—has put forward a similar view today. Those submissions are in, and our view is clear: democratic local accountability remains key. Structural change will not bring about the changes that we need, but working with our communities at the local level and strengthening local democratic accountability can bring about that change.

10:45

Paul McLennan: Across Scotland, only 18 per cent of people feel that they can influence decisions affecting their local area. Why do you think that is, and what are the barriers? I know that you have touched on that, but do you wish to add anything in that regard?

Councillor Evison: It was interesting to hear, in the previous evidence session, about the people who felt that they had been involved in the local governance review consultations and those who felt that they had not been involved. An awful lot of effort was made to spread the democracy matters work across Scotland. We communicated with and held events in communities of place and in communities of interest. That distinction is important.

As we heard, however, some people did not feel that they were involved, and they did not know much about it. There is a huge task for us in local government to support people to feel more involved and engaged in their communities. A big part of that work concerns whether people are feeling empowered. If people feel that they can play a part in decisions that affect them regarding outcomes in their local area, they will be more willing to get involved. At the moment, with increasing centralisation and ring-fenced money, councils are not in a position to say, “Yes, we will support that local project,” because they do not have the resources to do it. Even if people come up with a good solution democratically, it might not be possible to develop it, for reasons of lacking fiscal empowerment locally.

Perhaps we can get over that and make localism more than a word. Many people are talking about localism, 20-minute neighbourhoods and place planning. Those things are all important and valuable to our communities, but we need to resource them to make them work. They will not happen without people being involved.

Voices across our community need to be heard. Rona Mackay was speaking earlier about why people are not getting involved. That is something else that we are working hard to address at

COSLA. We are trying hard to address the diversity of people standing for elected office as councillors.

As regards many of the things that are currently seen as barriers in our councils, such as the times and organisation of meetings, the more voices there are around the table asking for those things to be changed, the more they can be changed. Those things themselves go through a process of governance, and they can be altered by voices around the table. There is already willingness from people around the table to reach out a hand and support people from diverse groups. The Improvement Service is running mentoring sessions to encourage people to—*[Inaudible.]*—already in place to encourage others to get involved.

Diversity of voices is important, as is giving the voice of lived experience a sense that it makes a difference. We are working on those things, and we would urge colleagues on the committee to support us and work with us on that.

Paul McLennan: Thank you for that, Alison.

The next question moves away from that, and involves procurement. The percentages of procurement spend on local and social enterprises varies. What are your thoughts on that? What more can be done to increase the proportion of procurement spend on local business and on local and social enterprises?

Councillor Evison: It is an aim across Scotland to use procurement positively to support local communities. Local government spending power is important for making a difference locally.

I will pass to Simon Cameron for a more detailed answer.

Simon Cameron: Thank you, Councillor Evison. Apologies, Mr McLennan, but could you repeat the question? My sound dipped out there.

Paul McLennan: I was asking for your thoughts on the variation and percentage of procurement spending by local authorities on local businesses and social enterprises. What are your views on what more could be done to support that? Should there be more procurement spending on local or social enterprises and on local business?

Simon Cameron: Procurement is an area where we can continue to seek to make improvements and to support local enterprise. I refer to the work that is being done on participatory budgeting. The outcomes that we have seen from that work show that, by working with social enterprises, we can engage more effectively and meaningfully and get better levels of services. The levels of trust that Councillor Evison referred to have been growing throughout the period of Covid. Through that trust building at

local level, we can start to make headway on developing work locally on procurement rules and regulations. As I say, it comes down to partnership working and the confidence that we have to work together in that space. It is about making sure that there are clear outcomes that are shared at local level. It comes back to understanding the local aspect as opposed to the national aspect.

The Convener: We have a question from Meghan Gallacher, who is joining us virtually.

Meghan Gallacher: Should the role of community councils be strengthened or changed and, if so, how? Some community councils flourished during the pandemic but, unfortunately, others have not been able to meet. What role will community councils be able to play as we head out of the pandemic?

Councillor Evison: Community councils have a crucial role. As a local councillor, I regularly attend the three community councils in my ward, because it is important to have engagement between elected councillors and community councils. Many community councils have struggled during the pandemic, although others have thrived. I suppose that that again shows the diversity across Scotland and the role that councils must have in supporting and encouraging community councils when there are issues.

The question relates to the comments that I have just made about empowerment and people feeling that they can make a difference in their communities. The more that people feel they can make a difference, the more active our community councils can be. We might need to review the organisation of some of our community councils and focus on their representation element. We need to look at how people become part of community councils and how community councils work across their local communities to gather voices.

We always need to be conscious of equalities and the need to support our community councils to have that equalities agenda and to look right across everyone in their communities. There is sometimes a tension between the community of place and the community of interest. Our role in democratically elected local government is to support that work, so that that everyone in community has their voice heard and community councils are part of the human rights and equalities agenda.

There is general work to do on that representative and participative democracy. We need to work together on that. Community councils have a huge role to play as we move forward with locality planning and empowerment. Again, the fiscal element is crucial in what we are doing.

I very much see a role for community councils, which are a central part of our system throughout Scotland, especially in local areas. We need to work with them to promote equalities and give a sense of empowerment so that people feel that they can make a difference.

The Convener: We will move on to a couple of questions from Elena Whitham. Witnesses might be glad to hear that they are our final questions. Thank you so much for the in-depth answers that you have given so far.

Elena Whitham: I thank our witnesses for making the time to come and speak to us today. As you know, a big part of community fiscal empowerment is participatory budgeting, which has been greatly interrupted by the Covid pandemic. Will you give a temperature check on the commitment that 1 per cent of council budgets will be given over to communities for fiscal empowerment on decisions? Does progress stand out in some areas? Do other areas need more support?

Councillor Evison: It is good to see you again, Elena. There is diversity across Scotland, because each council has a different starting point for the work. COSLA is ready to give support when it is asked for and where it is needed, because that is clearly part of our role as an organisation that covers the whole of Scotland.

The commitment to participatory budgeting is there, but I touch again on resources, because it is important to acknowledge that such things cannot happen without the people to make them happen. Throughout the Covid pandemic, the pressure on council staff to help with resilience and support recovery was intense, but the finance that has come to councils has not been as intense—I think that that is how to put it.

The will is there. As we look ahead, and with the support that is available from COSLA and Scottish Parliament colleagues, things can move forward. However, we must not underestimate the work that is required to support participatory budgeting and the resource that is needed to make it happen properly.

It was interesting to hear community groups make a similar comment. They cannot take part in participatory budgeting unless resources are available and people have the skills, knowledge and experience to drive it forward.

There is work to do, and we need to be committed—as we are—to that work in order to develop participatory budgeting. I pass over to Simon Cameron, who has been directly involved in the matter.

Simon Cameron: Across Scotland, we absolutely see an affirmation of the commitment to

participatory budgeting. There has been a Covid delay, but an awful lot of work has continued on things such as the CONSUL system, which provides a way of engaging online with communities. Such work has spread across virtually all 32 councils, which are starting to engage in different ways with the platform.

We remain committed not only to 1 per cent of budgets being subject to participatory budgeting but to defining for ourselves in Scotland what we mean by mainstream participatory budgeting, so that we get into a space where people feel that they can engage in a manner that suits them best and that affects the decisions made about their daily lives on a small local scale or across wider areas.

We have very much seen from council leaders, who recently recommitted to the 1 per cent, and from elected members across Scotland, a willingness and an eagerness to develop local democracy through participatory budgeting. The affirmation from wider public sector partners would build on that.

From the local authority perspective, we are always clear that we have our budgets. As Councillor Evison was right to point out, a resource issue is always tied to the engagement process that we go through. However, if we build on that with our partners and if, like us, they are committed to engaging and working with communities to make decisions in such a way, that will continue to develop and promote this form of participatory democracy.

Elena Whitham: I will make a wee change of direction. Stretched resources have meant that we all need to work towards efficient government, in all spheres of governance. Do councils have the desire and the scope to work more collectively over regions to deliver services? If so, what needs to change for that to happen?

Councillor Evison: The question relates very much to the functional empowerment element of our three empowerments.

We have been consistent throughout. Before the election, it was agreed with the Scottish Government that fiscal, community and functional empowerment need to work together and that being able to collaborate—where it is appropriate to do so—is an important part of that functional empowerment.

11:00

As you know, in some areas, there is already some coming together and working across council borders on economic development, education and deals that have been done at a regional level. The key is that councils must be given functional

empowerment to come together with other bodies when it is appropriate to do so. That might mean working with other councils across a wider area, because it makes sense in that local area to do so, but functional empowerment might be better delivered by enabling the council to work at a closer level with the NHS or police in order to deliver local programmes with a preventative and social and economic renewal agenda. The key to functional empowerment is that, when it is appropriate to do so, councils, public sector partners and the third sector can work together with the shared objectives of better outcomes for their communities and, throughout, with that human rights and person-centred approach.

There have already been various proposals across Scotland along those lines, and Orkney Council has had the single public service model as part of its aspirations for a long time. The pilot projects that stand ready for the local governance review involve people working together, and there is a proposal from the Ayrshire councils about working with Inverclyde Council on community advice services for members of the community who need that kind of advice.

It is important that functional empowerment is one of the three empowerments, and we need to take that forward. We need to allow what is best for a local area to happen in that local area but, again, we need that to happen across the public sector. It is not just about councils co-operating with other councils; other parts of the public sector must be able to work together with a local, place-based focus, to do what is best for a local community.

Elena Whitham: Thank you.

The Convener: That was the last of our questions. I thank Alison Evison and Simon Cameron for joining us this morning; it has been good to hear COSLA's perspective. Before we conclude the meeting, if there is anything else that you want to make sure that we hear or that you want to underscore, you have a moment to do so.

Councillor Evison: I will underscore the fact that it is the local governance review, so it is important that all aspects of the public sector work together on that, because local government cannot do the work on our own. It is about improving outcomes for our communities, so we need to work from a position of trust to deliver and achieve the outcomes that we all share in relation to social and economic recovery. We want to encourage the position of trust that we have seen during the pandemic, and functional, community and fiscal empowerment must be taken forward equally.

The Convener: Thank you.

11:03

Meeting suspended.

11:11

On resuming—

The Convener: Our third panel of witnesses to discuss the local governance review this morning joins us in person. I welcome John Swinney, the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery; and, from the Scottish Government, Brian Logan, who is the local governance review policy manager, and Robin Haynes, who is head of the council tax unit.

I will start the questions. First, what is the Scottish Government's understanding of how the local governance review has progressed since May's election? When will the review conclude?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): Good morning, convener. I am happy to address those issues with the committee this morning. The local governance review started prior to the election. We have engaged substantively with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the review's development, and with wider stakeholders across the country to gather input on and consideration of the response to the review.

There are two substantive elements of feedback from that. First, there is what I would describe as the general responses of the public and community organisations, which reflect on the accomplishments of communities, particularly during, but not limited to, the pandemic. The committee heard this morning from a range of community organisations, so it will have heard some of those responses.

Secondly, a range of propositions have emerged from local authorities and community planning partners about how the aspirations of the local governance review could be put into practice. The Government is considering some of those proposals and will respond to each of them with our feedback on the issues and aspirations that they raise. That is essentially what we are focusing on in the aftermath of the review. That forms part of the agenda that will play into the introduction of a local democracy bill in this parliamentary session, to which the Government is committed.

The Convener: Local government has long been calling for a fiscal framework that could bring greater clarity, certainty and transparency to local government finance. It has been very encouraging that a fiscal framework is being developed by the Scottish Government and COSLA, but the notice of potential strike action by up to 200,000 council workers across Scotland emphasises that change

is needed urgently. I ask the Deputy First Minister and Mr Haynes for a progress update on the fiscal framework. I would also welcome a reassurance that the framework will deliver new or enhanced revenue-raising powers for councils.

11:15

John Swinney: The Government gives ongoing consideration to those issues through our dialogue with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. I cannot give you a definitive assurance because the issues are still the subject of consideration. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy is leading the work on the development of a rules-based fiscal framework, which is being discussed with local government. That work will conclude when those discussions are completed. The finance secretary will be able to update the committee and Parliament on the development of the fiscal framework once that work has been undertaken.

It is important to recognise that, for many years, significant flexibilities have been available to local authorities for their financial management. Back in 2007, when I was the finance secretary, the Scottish Government substantively relaxed ring fencing, which was a key request of local authorities, to enable them to have a range of flexibilities at their disposal. That in itself provided local government with much greater fiscal discretion in order to address issues.

I am not sure that I would establish a connection between proposed industrial action in local authorities and a fiscal framework for local government. Those are two distinct issues. It is, of course, a matter for local authorities to conduct their employee relationships and negotiations—where it is appropriate for them to do so. Local authorities deal with those for the majority of their employees. Teachers are a somewhat different case, because a tripartite negotiating framework is in place. However, fundamentally, it is for local authorities, as employers, to take forward the relationship. I do not think that industrial action necessarily relates directly to any fiscal framework.

Miles Briggs: I want to ask a few questions about the national care service. In several sessions, we heard concerns about the impact that the service would have on local governance. What impact have the Scottish Government's proposals for a national care service had on the local governance review? COSLA has expressed concerns about the review's wide proposals and the impact on local democracy.

John Swinney: A national care service is currently the subject of consultation. One of the key points that the Government has made

throughout is the importance of ensuring that appropriate local voices are heard when considering the approach to a national care service. It is vital that we hear from and engage with local communities on the delivery of care services, because they matter to local communities. The situation will be different in different parts of the country, so there must be variation and variety in how the service is delivered. It is critical that we hear the voices of local communities during the development of the national care service. That is a fundamental point.

I accept that local government has particular observations about the proposals, and it is important that we hear the voices of individuals who are pressing the Government—as was evident in the independent review—on issues such as the consistency of service performance and delivery in different parts of the country, and the standards that citizens can expect in all parts of the country. Those two fundamental questions have to be wrestled with during the discussions on a national care service.

Miles Briggs: The committee welcomes the fact that you have put on the record that the Government intends to introduce a local democracy bill. I hear what you say with regard to people knowing that their voices have been heard. However, one of the fundamental things that we have heard is that there are many concerns about where powers will actually reside. The Parliament voted for the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill, which looks to ensure that local government powers are respected.

It is difficult for the committee to understand the Government's approach, given that there seems to be a fundamental contradiction between a national care service and those other workstreams that look to the protection of local government's powers. Do you have any view on that contradiction?

John Swinney: Fundamentally, I come at my politics with the view that decisions are best taken as close to people as possible, which is why I believe in Scottish independence. It is important that people can influence and shape the decisions that affect their lives. Ultimately, a discussion needs to be had about the proper arrangements that are necessary for the exercise of democratic governance.

We have a national health service, for example. I do not hear any argument that suggests that the NHS should be changed in some way from its current composition to having more localised governance. Ministers are accountable to the Scottish Parliament for the delivery of NHS functions, as provided for in statute. Decisions will be taken about where the responsibility for those

functions is best exercised—it is not solely for the Government to take those decisions, but for Parliament as well.

A substantive issue that the committee must consider in its work on local governance relates to the Parliament's view on questions of accountability. I frequently hear members of Parliament pressing the Government to be responsible or to account for certain things that have happened that are not exclusively the responsibility of the Government, but are responsibilities of local authorities or other bodies. Indeed, I regularly answer questions from members on that theme.

Parliament acts in a fashion that essentially wants the Government to be accountable for some of those responsibilities. However, the question on those points is not just for the Government to answer. Parliament must also be clear in its mind about where that accountability should rest and how it should be exercised.

The Convener: The next question is from Meghan Gallacher, who is attending the committee online.

Meghan Gallacher: Good morning, Deputy First Minister. What are your views on the balance between those local authority budgets that are ring fenced and those that are not? You touched on that point earlier. In addition, do you have comments on the combination of a reduced budget settlement and ring fencing, and the impact that that combination could have on the ability of councils to make local decisions that benefit their communities?

John Swinney: I would not suggest that ring fencing is a precise science; rather, it is a question of judgment.

As I indicated in my earlier responses to the convener, in 2007, the Government substantively relaxed ring fencing in local authorities. I used to know the numbers off the top of my head, but I am a little rusty nowadays. I think that we reduced ring fencing to about 15 per cent of the local authority budgets, when it had previously been as high as around 70 or 75 per cent. We reduced it because local authorities argued that they would be better able to meet the needs of their local communities in their financial decision making by having that greater degree of flexibility.

That point lies at the heart of Ms Gallacher's question. Local authorities have that flexibility to meet the different and distinctive needs in their localities because the demand that one local authority needs to meet will be different from that of another. We have tried to address that as far as possible.

When the Parliament wants the Government to ensure that particular outcomes are achieved—the Government might wish to do that, too—the tendency is to introduce ring-fenced funding so that we can be certain that resources are released in expectation of those outcomes. That relates to some of the questions that Mr Briggs put to me and it is often the judgment that is involved in deciding whether resources should be ring fenced or put into local authorities' general funds.

On Ms Gallacher's point about the budgets that are available for local authorities, the Government has wrestled with many financial challenges over the past 10 years. As we wrestled with the challenges of austerity, we tried to provide the best and strongest settlements that we possibly could for local authorities.

The Parliament, of course, must agree budget provisions and political parties always have the opportunity to shape the Government's budget proposals by exerting influence over them. That will be the subject of debate in the forthcoming budget. One thing that strengthens local authorities' ability to meet the needs in their communities is the degree of flexibility that the Government has provided for them by relaxing ring fencing.

The Convener: Speaking about ring fencing, Councillor Evison said that her approach would be to try to agree outcomes, achieve a level of trust and move away from ring fencing. Will you comment on that?

John Swinney: There is undoubtedly a discussion to be had on that, but I would have to inject the word "performance" into that discussion as well. Part of the reason why we have to introduce ring fencing is that we see too great a variation in performance among local authorities in Scotland. Some local authorities might be good at delivering outcomes in certain areas while others are poor at doing so. The Parliament—understandably, I think—pressures the Government to ensure that performance is at a higher level.

We have tried to address that in different ways. As part of the concordat with local authorities, in 2007, I introduced the concept of single outcome agreements. We tried to reduce the reporting burden on local authorities by putting in place agreements with them about what outcomes we could expect them to achieve if we relaxed ring fencing. I have to say that the response to that and the achievement of outcomes was highly variable around the country. The evidence supports that.

I am not in any way closed to what Councillor Evison proposes, but there would have to be an honest reflection of the fact that performance among local authorities is too variable around the

country for us to be able to move confidently into that territory at this stage.

The Convener: I am curious. Do we have any evidence about why performance is variable?

John Swinney: Evidence is available from the Accounts Commission's scrutiny of the way in which individual services are delivered. The Improvement Service also does a lot of good work on charting the relative performance of local authorities. The range of differences in individual service areas can be quite difficult to justify.

The Improvement Service is there to help local authorities to deliver their improvements, and I very much applaud it for its work, because it is prepared to confront the variation in performance amongst local authorities. If we are to have an honest conversation about this, that point has to be addressed, and the reports from the Accounts Commission and the Improvement Service tend to give an insight on a service-by-service basis into where some of the differences lie.

11:30

The Convener: We move on to questions from Paul McLennan.

Paul McLennan: In evidence that we have taken over the past few weeks and today, we have heard from local government and local services about the desire for multiyear spending commitments. Will the publication of the UK Government's multiyear spending review enable the Scottish Government to publish multiyear settlements for local government?

John Swinney: Mr McLennan is tempting me on to territory that is the proper preserve of the finance secretary, and I will refrain from getting myself into difficulty with her at this time in the budget cycle. It is never a good idea for a cabinet secretary to get into trouble with the finance secretary, so I will leave it to Ms Forbes to update the committee on the substance of the point.

However, as a general observation, I would say that in recent years and for certain wholly understandable reasons, given Covid, Brexit and other factors—you name it—the UK Government has been unable to offer longer-term financial information. However, we now have much greater line of sight in the forthcoming period than we have had, which is very welcome. As for how the finance secretary handles that situation, I shall leave that for Ms Forbes to share with the committee.

Paul McLennan: I have another question that, again, I might be tempting you rather than Ms Forbes to answer. COSLA's "Blueprint for Local Government" talks about local authorities having more powers and discretion to set and raise taxes.

I know that that falls into the finance secretary's territory, too, but do you have any views on the matter?

John Swinney: We are taking forward practical discussions on that subject with local authorities, with discussions under way on, for example, proposals for tourism taxes—I cannot remember their formal title. There is an appetite for such a discussion with local authorities, if they wish to have it.

The Convener: We now have a question from Mark Griffin, who is joining us online.

Mark Griffin: According to the 2019 Scottish household survey, only 18 per cent of people feel that they can influence decisions affecting their local area, which seems to be a significant reduction since the passing of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. Why has that happened? What are the barriers to people influencing decisions, and how will the local governance review address them?

John Swinney: Mr Griffin has raised a very serious point. It brings us back to the question of the outcomes that we are interested in achieving with all of this activity, which, in this case, must be that individuals feel that they are able to shape the direction of their community and the place that their lives have within it. As a result, the statistics that Mr Griffin has put to me, which might well show a decline, are concerning.

Interestingly, I thought that, in extremis, during the pandemic, the degree of community leadership, interaction, decision making and adaptation was higher than I had seen it in my many years of experience. That tells us that it is perfectly possible for communities to be much more closely involved in shaping their agenda and direction as a consequence of their interventions.

We must ensure, however, that communities are not disengaged from that process, and that they do not find the process much more difficult to participate in because of the way in which we structure such processes. It is up to local authorities to ensure that they are putting out—as I think they did during the pandemic—a welcoming invitation to communities to shape the nature of the response that is pursued in individual communities. We must ensure that that happens not just in a pandemic but all the time. That is one of the fundamental points of the Covid recovery strategy that I put to Parliament before the October recess: it is about trying to capture and continuing to mobilise that sense of community discretion and influence, which has been such an asset to us during the pandemic.

The Convener: We will move on to a different subject, with questions from Elena Whitham.

Elena Whitham: Deputy First Minister, you will be aware of the recently published international review that was conducted by the local governance review team. Quebec, where I grew up, is the location of one of the case studies. Despite the gradual growth in municipal powers over the past decade, with nearly all local budgets being raised through local taxation, there has not yet been a significant increase in citizen participation. Which countries and examples from the review are getting the relationships and resource allocations between the different spheres of government right?

John Swinney: It is difficult to make a judgment about individual systems. The international review can help to inform our deliberations here about what the right factors and considerations are.

Fundamentally, the processes that appear to me, through the international review, to be having the greatest effect are the ones that provide sufficient opportunity and scope for communities to shape their contributions to how their priorities are determined. That would best be described as a more permissive approach to the scope and influence of local communities.

A second dimension concerns fiscal decision making. Some of the examples that have been cited have reflected the choices that are made by individual local communities as being of a character that can enable them to take much more responsibility in making fiscal decisions about their wellbeing. I will not suggest that that is easily replicable in this country. Essentially, it comes down to the degree of tolerance of difference in levels of local taxation and local responsibility between areas. I am not sure that we would be able to sustain the argument, or that that argument would be as well received in Scotland as it perhaps is in other places that have provided examples in the international review.

Elena Whitham: As we have just heard from the COSLA president, functional empowerment is a key aspect of the local governance review. Considering that efficient government is within your remit, is it a Scottish Government commitment to have more regional and collaborative approaches to service delivery?

John Swinney: I am interested, throughout the process, in the right level at which decision making should be undertaken and discretion should be exercised. To come back to the argument that I put in response to Meghan Gallacher, I do not think that there is a precise-science answer. I worry about individual communities feeling a sense of loss of control over what happens in their individual localities.

If I think about the communities that I represent—Elena Whitham represents an area

with a similar population composition—there are towns in my constituency where, in the past, significant civic discretion was exercised. That created a sense of focus in those communities, which was reactivated during the pandemic. Most, though not all, of the really successful and impactful developments that took place during the pandemic happened in those communities. In substantial towns, people came together and could put in place fixes to ensure that everybody was looked after. Colleagues who represent similar areas to mine will know exactly what I am talking about.

A lot of that has been eroded over many years, probably since local government reorganisation in the 1970s, and there is a sense of loss in communities about that. However, over the years, there have been many good examples of how that sense of loss has been addressed by good community endeavour.

When we move away from those functions, which are fundamentally about locality, a sense of community and pride in the community, we come to the more sophisticated delivery of public services, which Parliament legislates for. The delivery of those public services can often carry significantly onerous burdens. That particularly applies to the quality of public services in areas such as adult and child protection. I worry about the delivery of those services across 32 local authority areas, given that, although the population base in some areas is dramatically smaller than others, the burdens are the same. The burdens that Parliament applies to the delivery of the child protection service in the city of Glasgow is exactly the same as those that it applies for Clackmannanshire Council. We expect assurances to be offered on the same basis. However, because of the difference in size, cases will be handled more frequently in the city of Glasgow than in Clackmannanshire.

I took a number of steps as education secretary, and encouraging collaboration among local authorities was a particular priority. In the area that I represent, there has been a great deal of collaboration between three authorities—Dundee, Angus and Perth and Kinross—on the delivery and improvement of education services and child wellbeing services across those three council areas, and I see significant improvements arising as a consequence of that. It is really welcome when councils collaborate at a multi-authority level.

That should not be interpreted as a Government commitment to force that upon people, because that is not a particularly good way to proceed. In 2016, when I was education secretary, I advanced the concept of regional improvement collaboratives, and the idea was met by a fair

amount of hostility and resistance. However, as Ms Whitham will have experienced in Ayrshire among the three local authority areas there, once people got into a room and started talking about their challenges and the common themes, the collaboration that came from that was pretty beneficial for children and young people in Scotland.

Indeed, one of the pillars of the educational response to the pandemic was the west of Scotland improvement collaborative. The collaborative did a huge amount of excellent work to record online learning, which was then made available on a choice basis to school pupils, families, teachers and local communities right across the country through the common platform that we created in the e-Sgoil. The collaborative was a fundamental source of thousands of the lessons that were recorded. I pay warm tribute to everybody who was involved in that, because it was a sterling piece of work that helped in the delivery of education.

Therefore, there very much is a space for collaboration among local authorities. What was achieved in education between 2016 and 2021, against a background of a lot of hostility to and scepticism about the concept, helped us enormously in delivering sustainable education during the pandemic.

11:45

Elena Whitham: You made a key point when you talked about the reorganisation of local government in the 1970s. We still see the effects of that now. If we listen to people who do not feel empowered in communities, we find that they hark back to the days of their burgh council or town council, when they had a set of people who met locally in the area and one councillor who went to a wider national body. Given that people still hark back to those days, how do we make sure that the local governance review delivers the community empowerment and the functional and devolved power to local communities that we need?

John Swinney: We have to do that by creating the space to enable communities to advance the agenda, although I do not think that there is merit in replicating the burgh council model that was in place prior to the 1975 local government reorganisation.

One of the great privileges of my office is that I can see at first hand good innovations. In communities that I represent and in other communities around the country, I have seen developments emerge—through development trusts, for example—through which community capacity has been built up year after year by communities committing to that.

The concept of a development trust—that is an example and I am not prescribing it as a route; a Scottish charitable incorporated organisation or something else might be used—brings together community industry, which enables developments to take place. Other propositions grow from that, and communities can then exercise much greater and more distinctive delivery of services and purpose. Then, a positively engaged local authority will recognise that that is happening and seek to engage with the community to ensure that more functions are deployed in the locality in a way that has the impact that we all seek. That might well address some of the points that Mr Griffin put to me about the extent to which people feel that they can shape their local community agenda.

There are very good practices around the country under which local authorities enable much greater discretion to be exercised at local level. If that were to be done in partnership with the development of development trusts or SCIOs, or through wider community engagement activities, that could address the fundamental point that Elena Whitham puts to me and which I recognise—that, in some communities, people feel a sense of remoteness from public authority and are anxious to shape their community's future better.

Miles Briggs: I am interested in the responses that the cabinet secretary has given. We need to look at the cost of delivering services. I see through the eyes of an Edinburgh MSP, so I know the challenges that exist and the cost of living here in the capital. Per head of population, City of Edinburgh Council is the lowest-funded council and NHS Lothian is the lowest-funded health board.

Has there been any consideration of the cost of delivering services and of, for example, delivering an Edinburgh weighting? The council and the health board constantly report that delivering the workforce and providing services are fundamentally more expensive here in the capital, because of the cost of buying land and things such as that. Has the Government pursued any work on that?

John Swinney: I recall some discussion of those points. To be on the safe side, I had better write to the committee about any specific work that has been undertaken.

To go back to the issues of local government finance, two points are relevant. First, the formula to distribute funding among local authorities is a matter of dialogue and agreement with local authorities. If there was to be any proposition to change the distribution of funding for them, that would obviously have to be agreed by them. I think that there is a reluctance in local authorities to

discuss the distribution formula at present, and that has generally been the case.

Secondly, in previous budgets, we agreed a supplement for the City of Edinburgh. I negotiated that point with the late Margo MacDonald in the 2007 to 2011 session of Parliament, and that will still be factored into the budget arrangements that we have in place.

There are ways of discussing such issues. Health board funding is determined by the NHS Scotland resource allocation committee, and steps have been taken over time to address exactly the issue that Mr Briggs has put to me.

The Convener: I will move on to another area. In the context of the recovery from Covid and—fittingly—of the climate and nature emergencies, we have been talking about how communities can be empowered at local level to make the responses for localism, which Alison Evison talked about, and how we can make that real. We heard from one witness on the community panel that there is a need for spaces for meetings and for the skills to convene and facilitate and that people need to be paid for their time. Is the Scottish Government considering that? I imagine that the issue might present itself in the local democracy bill and the community wealth building bill.

John Swinney: Those issues are fundamentally about addressing the points that I discussed with Elena Whitham about how to build capacity in communities so that they can exercise those influences. If we were to pitch up in communities and say, "Here's a couple of hundred thousand pounds to do things," some communities would be able to handle that without any difficulty whatever, because they have capacity that has probably been built up through the establishment of a development trust. There might be proceeds from wider revenue sources—for example, communities in my constituency benefit from the proceeds from renewable energy projects, so they have resources that can enable them to build up capacity.

However it happens, there has to be capacity in a community to handle things. We cannot just pitch up in a community and say to a group of volunteers, "Here you are. On you go, and good luck." There has to be capacity, which has to be actively built up. We have a proper opportunity for local authorities to work with local communities to do that and to activate other sources of funding, whether it is through common good funds, sources such as renewable energy funds or other vehicles.

The Government and I are very supportive of the building up of that capacity. It enables communities to choose where they can exercise the greatest influence and deliver the greatest impact.

If I again think of my community, we had a day of biblical weather in my constituency on Sunday. In Alyth, which is a town that has been blighted by flooding, there is a real activation of community activity and engagement on a variety of issues but specifically on flooding. As the situation became severe on Sunday, the community activated itself. Volunteers undertook work to support and protect others and to put infrastructure in place. Through partnership with the local authority, the community has procured sandbag supplies, which are available for temporary deployment to deal with circumstances as they arise. On Sunday, volunteers were making all that happen.

The community has temporary flood defences—the ones that start off looking like pillows but end up weighing a ton once they are wet—which it deployed. Some good outcomes were delivered. That is because there is capacity to make that happen, which then engages the community. All that is done through capacity at the community level, through social media and by having a really engaged community. It is a perfect example of what I am talking about, albeit in an extreme situation. We all have communities that operate on that basis.

The challenge is how we make that a reliable, dependable and on-going feature in our delivery of public services. The Government cannot prescribe that from St Andrew's house—it would be folly for us to do that. Having good dialogue and discussion with local authorities is essential, as is local authorities having the right outlook. If local authorities were to enter into the conversation thinking, "We must control everything; we must run everything," they would put off local engagement. However, if there is a welcoming spirit to embrace what might be possible for a community to handle, we will see an awful lot more thriving as a consequence.

The Convener: That concludes our questions. I thank the cabinet secretary, Robin Haynes and Brian Logan for joining us.

11:57

Meeting suspended.

12:00

On resuming—

Subordinate Legislation

Town and Country Planning (Local Place Plans) (Scotland) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/353)

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is consideration of the regulations. As no member wishes to comment, does the committee agree that it does not wish to make any recommendations on the instrument?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: The committee will now move into private session, as agreed earlier.

12:01

Meeting continued in private until 12:39.

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