



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 23 November 2021

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT, HOUSING AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

12th 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:

Louise Miller (Scottish Government)

Councillor Junaid Ashraf (Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Organisations Scotland)

Jessie Duncan (Engender)

Councillor Alison Evison (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Sarah Gadsden (Improvement Service)

Laura Hutchison (Equality and Human Rights Commission)

James Kelly (Scottish Labour Party)

Roslyn MacPherson

Councillor Louise McAllister (Aberdeenshire Council)

Alys Mumford (Women 50:50)

Councillor Kelly Parry (Scottish National Party)

Ash Regan (Minister for Community Safety)

Sheila Ritchie (Scottish Liberal Democrats)

Councillor Cameron Rose (City of Edinburgh Council)

Councillor Soryia Siddique (Elect Her)

Jim Wilson (Scottish Government)

Councillor Ethan Young (Inclusion Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Euan Donald

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 23 November 2021

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:01]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Ariane Burgess): Good morning, and welcome to the 12th meeting in 2021 of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. I ask all members and witnesses to ensure that their mobile phones are on silent and that all other notifications are turned off during the meeting.

Our first item is consideration of whether to take in private item 6, which will be an opportunity for members to reflect on the evidence that they will have heard earlier in the meeting on understanding barriers to elected office. Do members agree to take item 6 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Subordinate Legislation

Scottish Dog Control Database Order 2021 [Draft]

09:02

The Convener: The second agenda item is an evidence session on the draft Scottish Dog Control Database Order 2021. I welcome the Minister for Community Safety, Ash Regan; Jim Wilson, who is licensing team leader in the Scottish Government; and Louise Miller, who is a solicitor in the Scottish Government. We will take evidence from the minister before we move to a formal debate on the draft order. I invite the minister to make a short opening statement on the order.

The Minister for Community Safety (Ash Regan): Good morning. I thank the committee for inviting me to speak about the draft order that has been laid for Parliament's approval. I very much welcome the opportunity to give evidence. I also thank the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee for its consideration of the draft order earlier this month.

The Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010 introduced the dog control notice regime. Local authority dog wardens are able to issue a dog control notice to a dog owner who allows their dog to be out of control. The civil notice can contain a number of conditions, such as the need to muzzle the dog or to keep it on a lead whenever it is in a public place. Breach of a dog control notice is a criminal offence.

Section 8 of the 2010 act provides the Scottish ministers with an enabling power to make an order to establish a national database of dog control notices. The intention of the draft order is to provide for the establishment of such a database. Each local authority already has a statutory responsibility to monitor the effectiveness of every dog control notice that it has issued, but the national database will bring together the records of all local authorities in a centralised database that will be accessible to local authorities and Police Scotland. The database will be a valuable tool in improving the effectiveness of the 2010 act.

The information that will be held on the database will include the name of the person to whom the dog control notice applies, the address of that person, and information relating to the dog, such as whether it is microchipped and the name of the animal.

That is a brief overview of the draft order. I will be happy to answer any questions that the committee has about it.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. I will start the questions.

In response to the 2019 consultation on the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010, local authorities raised a number of issues, including the difficulty of working across all the different information technology systems that are used by the different local authorities, and questions about who would be responsible for maintaining and running the database and who would have access to it. How have you involved, or how do you intend to involve, local authorities in the design of the database? How have their concerns been addressed? Do you have a plan? Have you already involved other stakeholders in the design?

Ash Regan: Yes, we have. We have had quite a large amount of consultation with local authorities and others on the design and implementation of the database. I will ask Jim Wilson to give some of the detail of that.

Right at the beginning of the process, I initiated direct engagement with Councillor Kelly Parry, who is the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities spokesperson for community safety and wellbeing. That was to ensure that COSLA was sighted on what we were doing and to get its full involvement in the plan for initiating the design of the database and so on. I think that I have met her twice over the past year—I ask Jim Wilson to confirm whether that is right.

Jim Wilson (Scottish Government): Yes.

Ash Regan: I would say that that was in the past year and a half.

We have had quite a lot of engagement with local authorities and other stakeholders. The committee might be aware that the Scottish Government leads a working group on dog control and dangerous dogs, which covers the other part of the legislation—the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. That group has lots of members, including COSLA, the Scottish Community Safety Network, a victims' voice—we thought that it was important to have that—the National Dog Warden Association and Police Scotland.

I think that the convener asked about whether local authorities have raised issues and what we have done to work through those. I can think of a couple of things that came up.

There have been issues relating to the migration of data. The populations of local authority areas vary, so I guess that it makes sense that there is variation in that some give out very large numbers of DCNs and others give out quite tiny numbers of them. There was some concern about pressure on local authorities to migrate that data on to the database. We are working with them, as the Improvement Service is, to make sure that we are

not putting undue pressure on them but, equally, to ensure that we get the data on there so that we can start to use it. We think that we have sufficient time in the roll-out plan to make sure that that happens in a timely fashion.

The other issue was costs to do with developing the database—the set-up costs and the running costs. The Scottish Government has funded the set-up costs, and it has agreed to fund the running of the database for the first two years. We are in on-going discussions with stakeholders about what might be called a fair funding model and how that will go. Further discussions are under way on that.

I ask Jim Wilson to give a bit of the flavour of the engagement that we have done with local authorities.

Jim Wilson: Sure. Thank you, minister.

I will come on to the convener's point about engagement very shortly. First, I will add to the minister's helpful comments on migration.

We asked the Improvement Service to do some targeted engagement with the six local authorities that have served the highest number of dog control notices. A migration workshop was conducted on 18 November. There will be further discussions with all 32 local authorities about the timescales in which they will have to transfer across the data that will populate the database system.

It might be helpful to give the committee a flavour of the number of dog control notices that have been served across the country. The latest data that we have suggests that in the region of 1,465 live dog control notices will go on to the system.

I will touch on the engagement, which stems back to January. The Scottish Government and the Improvement Service have provided a number of joint communications. A workshop session on the dog control notice database, which was attended by 27 or 28 local authority representatives, was delivered in January.

We then decided to do a scoping study to try to understand the landscape. On the convener's point, we wanted to know what processes are in place and what systems and technologies are used across the local authority estate. The Scottish Government funded that eight-week scoping study, which cost £15,000. Building on that, we decided to do a proof of concept, which involved creating a dummy system in order to prove that it would be possible for information sharing to take place. That work, which cost £30,000, was jointly funded by the Scottish Government and the Improvement Service. Six councils participated directly in that work.

We also held eight drop-in sessions, in which every local authority was invited to speak directly to my team, the Improvement Service and Police Scotland to consider any process issues. The sessions were really well attended. We managed to have 31 out of the 32 local authorities participating in the sessions, so there is still one with which we need to engage.

In addition, a knowledge hub has been set up for everybody who has a direct interest in the system. That has been done to ensure that there is regular communication on any matters that require clarification as we move towards the final development stages of the system. In the coming weeks, in order to support operational staff in local authorities and Police Scotland, we will produce a document of frequently asked questions that sets out any issues that have been raised on the knowledge hub. That will provide absolute certainty on how the system should be used and operated.

The Convener: It sounds as though you have covered a lot of ground to ensure that the system is workable.

The order will restrict access to the database to only those who require access to the information under the 2010 act. The policy note states that local authorities, Police Scotland and Improvement Service staff will manage the database, but some stakeholders—including the Dogs Trust and Mike Radford OBE, who is an animal welfare law expert—recommended that the database should also be accessible to the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the judiciary. Will the SSPCA and the Crown Office have access to the database? If not, why was that not considered to be appropriate?

Ash Regan: The provisions in the 2010 act control what we can do in establishing the database, and they are very specific. The act sets out what data we can hold and who can access it. At the moment, we are able to enact only what the act's provisions give us the power to enact. That is what we have done; we have gone as far as we can. We have followed the act's provisions in laying the draft order that is in front of the committee. That is why the order refers only to the organisations that you mentioned.

You are right to say that there is the potential for other organisations with an interest to be able to access the database and for additional data to be held on it. When the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee considered the matter, there were questions about whether the database should hold additional data. For example, should it hold all the complaints that have been made about the conduct of a certain dog? Should it contain information on whether a DCN has been breached? At the moment, such

data is not able to be held on the database because there are only specific provisions that we are allowed to enact.

However, I am going through a process of looking at what needs to be done to improve the enforcement of the provisions in the 2010 act. This session is part of that process. In the previous session, the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee produced a report on the issue—which I am sure this committee will have seen—and recommended that that work be done.

09:15

We have now moved on to review the wider regime of dog control. That includes consideration of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, which I am committed to reviewing. We will go through a number of steps in doing that. Once we have done that, we will introduce—I hope, in this parliamentary session—a bill on the control of dogs regime. If we want to change the database to allow additional information to be held and additional organisations to access it, that needs to be done through primary legislation, and the forthcoming bill will give us an opportunity to do that. We are actively considering including all those things in that bill.

The Convener: It is great that we have the opportunity to look at what you have called the wider regime of dog control. That is heartening news.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): Good morning. I refer everyone to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am a serving councillor on East Lothian Council.

My question is also on the database. How will it be ensured that the database complies with the requirements of the general data protection regulation?

Ash Regan: That is an important point. From the beginning of the process of developing the database, we have involved the Information Commissioner's Office. Obviously, the database will contain personal data, and we are required to ensure that the data is used and held appropriately.

The Government carried out a data protection impact assessment. I hope that the committee has that assessment as part of the documents that accompany the draft order, so members can have a look at that if they are interested in the detail. The ICO was also involved in the preparation of the draft order, and it is content with the policy as it stands.

There is a little complexity in relation to joint data sharing and so on, so a process needs to be worked through. The Improvement Service has

what it calls framework service agreements, which will cover data sharing between all the organisations that are data controllers. Those agreements will need to be in place with all 32 local authorities. Local authorities will be issued with those agreements, and they have a statement of work that they will need to sign up to before the database goes live.

Have I missed anything out, Jim?

Jim Wilson: I will add a couple of points. I stress that we have had on-going engagement with the Information Commissioner's Office. We invited representatives from the ICO to a show-and-tell session that was delivered jointly by the Improvement Service and the Scottish Government. That provided an opportunity for local authorities and the police to be kept up to date on the latest developments on the delivery of the system.

We have further engagements planned with the Information Commissioner's Office to iron out any GDPR-related issues. As things stand, I am not aware of any significant issues having been aired, but we want to ensure that the information on the system is held securely and appropriately. I stress that further engagement is planned with the ICO in the coming weeks.

Paul McLennan: The minister mentioned that local authorities will have to sign up to the agreements. Is there an estimated timescale or a target date for that?

Jim Wilson: There are three phases. We are now in the final delivery and development phase, which will last from now until December. Phase 2 will be from the end of December to the end of January. Any documentation will need to be finalised during that time, with a view to the system going live on 11 February. That is the target date. There is a three-stage process.

The Convener: I invite Willie Coffey, who joins us on BlueJeans, to ask his questions.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Good morning. I am delighted that a wider review is taking place of the 1991 act and the 2010 act, which was the subject of the work that the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee did in the previous parliamentary session, as the minister will recall. I am sure that members who served on that committee will be listening in to this meeting.

I ask the minister to clarify something. If a person who has been served with a dog control notice in one local authority moves to a different local authority with the dog, does the dog control notice cease to apply in the second authority, or does it still apply?

Ash Regan: That was our understanding of the way in which the regime is functioning at the moment. One of the reasons for implementing the database is to make enforcement easier in cases in which someone is issued with a dog control notice in, say, Fife, but they then move to Lanarkshire. We think that the enforcement process will be easier for local authorities and, we hope, for Police Scotland.

Willie Coffey: As you have said, access to the database will be on a national level—any authority will be able to access the database, even if a person with a dangerous dog that is subject to a notice moves around. Should an animal commit a second offence—if I can put it that way—in a neighbouring authority, would that become the first offence in that authority, or would it count as a second offence? You have said that the notice is a civil notice, but breaching it becomes a criminal offence, so it is probably important that a person knows whether, if their dog commits a second act of aggression, such as an attack, in the neighbouring authority, it will be a criminal offence.

Jim Wilson: I have a couple of points to add to the minister's answer, which relate to the digital transfer of dog control notices. The situation will very much depend on the circumstances. If I were to move from Fife to Edinburgh, I could seek a variation of a dog control notice that had been served, because my circumstances would have changed. A key concern that was raised by local authority staff was to do with enforcement difficulties. Although there is an obligation on the owner—the "proper person", as defined by the 2010 act—there will be occasions on which there could be challenges around information not being fed into the new local authority, which would have to consider whether the notice that had been served by another local authority still stood.

It is possible for specific conditions to be set in a dog control notice—for example, that the proper person, or the dog owner, must avoid particular places and must ensure that the dog is on a lead in particular parks in a local area or community. However, the 2010 act has national effect, so the serving of a dog control notice can be done nationally. We looked at clarifying the transfer process in the context of the updated statutory guidance that was produced by the Scottish Government in December 2020.

I mentioned the frequently asked questions document that we are developing. We would want to provide more clarity to operational wardens on the transfer of digital notices, because at the moment wardens are scrabbling about. They know that they have enforcement responsibilities under the 2010 act. When somebody suddenly goes off their radar, so to speak, they wonder whether the person is still in the community or whether they

have moved to another area. We reckon that one of the benefits of the database system will be to support wardens' enforcement duties and to support wider work that might be undertaken by Police Scotland.

There is also a welfare angle. The gathering of microchip information was made possible through the prescribed order form that was agreed to by Parliament in 2011. That means that if, for example, a stray dog is reported to the local authority or the police are asked to intervene and investigate, the microchip information will be key in helping to reacquaint the dog with the proper person or owner.

Willie Coffey: Thank you for that.

I have a final point of clarification. If a person whose dog is subject to a DCN moves to another authority, who is obliged to tell the authority? Is it that person who is obliged to report to the authority whose area he or she has moved into that they have a dog that is subject to a DCN, so that that can be recorded in the database? Is that how it works?

Jim Wilson: It is.

Ash Regan: Yes, it is their responsibility. They are the proper person to notify the new local authority that they have moved there and to give their new address.

Willie Coffey: If they did not notify the local authority, would that be an offence under the 2010 act?

Ash Regan: No, that would not be an offence under the 2010 act. We might look at that as part of our review in relation to potential future legislation.

Willie Coffey: That is great.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Good morning. I have a couple of questions that follow on from Willie Coffey's questions. People moving between local authorities is one issue, but will you also capture information on changes of dog ownership? Has that issue been explored?

Jim Wilson: Absolutely. We recognise that there could be situations in which a family believe, for whatever reason, that they are not in a position to care for and look after their dog, so they ask someone else to take on the dog. I go back to what I said to Mr Coffey. If there is a change in circumstances, a critical part of the process is the person who has been served with a dog control notice notifying the local authority. Someone who takes on responsibility for a dog might feel that the conditions that were set out in the dog control notice no longer apply—they might view themselves as a very responsible dog owner—so, under the provisions in the 2010 act, they could

seek to have the dog control notice discharged. From my direct experience of dealing with local authority dog wardens, I think that a challenge that they face is that, under the 2010 act, there is perhaps an overreliance on people notifying the local authority of a change in circumstances.

I will pick up on the minister's point about the opportunity to strengthen the 2010 act. There is the commitment to review the 1991 act, but we are also mindful of the responses to the consultation on the operational effectiveness of the 2010 act. We have looked at an obstruction offence that would be similar to provisions that are contained in the Dog Fouling (Scotland) Act 2003, so that there would be an opportunity to serve a penalty if somebody did not comply in giving information to the local authority in order to allow dog wardens to do their job. Local authority dog wardens felt quite strongly about that. We have had discussions about the opportunity, if the primary legislation vehicle comes along, not only to reform the 1991 act but to strengthen the regime under the 2010 act.

Miles Briggs: That is very helpful. The wider review probably presents far more opportunities. I think that I am right in saying that the minister said in her opening statement that the information that will be shared will include that relating to microchipping.

Ash Regan: Yes.

Miles Briggs: We have heard a lot about the other opportunities that the database will present, but we know that social services would also often be interested in looking at some of the information, particularly given the link between animal welfare issues, domestic abuse and violent crime. Is that issue being pursued during the review?

Ash Regan: It is. We have committed to that. I want to have the most effective dog control regime. We have been talking about two acts. It is envisaged that the 2010 act should act as a preventative regime. We want people to be responsible dog owners by keeping their dogs under control and behaving when they are out, so that they do not become dangerous dogs, which is an issue that is covered by the 1991 act.

There is quite a complex interplay, with dog wardens at one end and Police Scotland and the Crown at the other. There is an opportunity to look at everything in the round and to see whether the legislation needs to be strengthened, although I think that we all agree that it does need to be strengthened. There is an opportunity to consider all those factors. Miles Briggs has raised a good point.

09:30

Miles Briggs: The Parliament has also investigated dog breeding and puppy farming. Will such matters form part of the future review, or will they be able to be recorded in the system that we have been talking about, when it is up and running? Sadly, there is also often a link between people having dangerous dogs and the breeding of such dogs.

Ash Regan: That issue could be considered, but I think that that is more to do with animal welfare. I think that there is a reporting duty in the Animals and Wildlife (Penalties, Protections and Powers) (Scotland) Act 2020. I did not work on that legislation, but there might be opportunities for justice and animal welfare colleagues to work together on such issues. I know that Jim Wilson works with them, so he might be able to give the committee an update.

Jim Wilson: Mr Briggs has raised a really good point. We have a Scottish Government led working group, which includes a presence from the Government's animal welfare policy team, because we understand that it is important to consider dog control policy development through a cross-portfolio lens. In the previous parliamentary session, we were brought into discussions on Emma Harper's member's bill—the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill—and we even gave evidence alongside Mairi Gougeon at the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. We are keen to work with animal welfare colleagues, because there is a cross-portfolio interest.

A question was posed earlier about engagement with other stakeholders such as the SSPCA. I have had a number of recent discussions with Mike Flynn from the SSPCA. During our review of the 1991 act, we are keen to bring him in to enhance our expertise on the Scottish Government-led working group once we get into the nitty-gritty of potential policy changes in that space.

Miles Briggs: That is very helpful. There are many smaller such charities across Scotland—the minister and I know about the work that the Edinburgh Dog and Cat Home does; she does a lot of fundraising for it, which is very appreciated and welcome—but a lot of them do not have people working on policy, so it will be useful to ensure that they are supported in understanding how they can play an important part in the work.

Ash Regan: Absolutely. I have had conversations with the Edinburgh Dog and Cat Home about the issue. As you said, it and a number of smaller stakeholders with expertise in the area want to contribute to the development of the work. We will expand the working group,

because we want to ensure that we have the right expertise on it. We are moving from considering operational issues relating to the 2010 act to considering wider policy and legislative changes. We will keep Miles Briggs's point in mind.

Miles Briggs: Thank you.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for responding to the questions so thoroughly. The next agenda item is consideration of motion S6M-01888. I invite the minister to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee recommends the Scottish Dog Control Database Order 2021 be approved.—[*Ash Regan*]

Motion agreed to.

The Convener: I will suspend the meeting for a changeover of witnesses.

09:33

Meeting suspended.

09:39

On resuming—

Local Elected Office (Barriers)

The Convener: The fourth agenda item is to take evidence as part of the committee's inquiry into understanding barriers to elected office. We will take evidence from three panels. We want to find ways of supporting the promotion of more diverse local representation, identify the barriers to that and find ways of dismantling those barriers. Every sector of our communities should be represented at the decision-making table. As Councillor Alison Evison said previously,

"when that is the case, we can really see the difference that it can make."—[*Official Report, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee*, 7 September; c 21.]

I welcome Councillor Evison, who is the president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities; Alexis Camble, who is the policy and participation officer for equalities and is also from COSLA; Sarah Gadsden, who is the chief executive of the Improvement Service; and Laura Hutchison, who is the principal of the compliance team Scotland at the Equality and Human Rights Commission Scotland. Thank you for joining us. We will move straight to questions. For those of you who are joining us remotely on BlueJeans, please put an R in the chat box to indicate that you wish to respond to a question or contribute to the discussion.

Given that the McIntosh commission in 1999 and the Local Government Committee in 2000 highlighted a lack of diversity in local representation, why has progress been so slow? We will start with Councillor Evison.

Councillor Alison Evison (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): It is good to be here to talk to the committee because we need to work together on this important issue and joint working is crucial. Convener, you highlight very accurately the fact that progress in the past 20 years has been very slow and that we need to do all that we can to work together in partnership to address that.

The barriers come under three different headings, the first of which is working practices. At COSLA, we have done all that we can do internally to address our working practices and those of individual councils, in relation to the work that they are doing to address what needs to be done to encourage people to stand and to serve as councillors.

Secondly, there are barriers related to the financial remuneration of councillors; we cannot do anything about that on our own. Because of how things are organised, that takes co-operation, so

we need to work with the Scottish Parliament to improve remuneration. If we compare councillors' workload to the amount that they are earning, the bottom line is that they are earning far less than the real living wage. Obviously, a lot of people cannot consider doing that, so it is a real barrier.

We need to look at the remuneration of councillors not only when they have been elected but while they are standing for election. There are costs to standing for election in campaigning and the time that it takes. I had a couple of representations through social media this morning about that very issue. We need to look at whether we could use Freepost to support people who want to stand for elected office and we need to think about how we can put the whole campaigning process on an even basis for people.

The third issue that we need to look at together with wider society is the culture around being an elected member in whatever sphere of government—people's particular experiences of civil practices, abuse and feeling vulnerable in their work. Again, we need everybody to work at that. In the past 20 years, there has been a desire to improve diversity among people who stand for elected office, because we know the difference that it can make, and we know the importance of having their lived experience at our decision-making table, but unless we continue to work together on those three areas, we will not see changes. I am here this morning to say that we need to work together.

The Convener: Thank you for that. It is clear that we need to work together. As you mentioned, after 20 years there is still a lack of diversity. Can you point to why progress has been so slow?

Councillor Evison: Progress has been slow because we need to get those voices to come to the decision-making table to make the difference in the first place. Those of us who are in such positions need to take responsibility—to take a leadership role and encourage others to stand. In the past, that has not happened, particularly in local government. If you look at the people in the pictures staring down at you from the walls in town halls, they are white, middle-class and male. You do not get that sense of having a role model and that feeling of, "I could be there; I could do that too."

09:45

Those of us in elected office appreciate our responsibility to create those role models, to show those different images of people and to show the difference that can be made. In the past 20 years, a mammoth change has been required—and not just in local government. Until the most recent Scottish Parliament election, diversity was not so

obvious in the Scottish Parliament, either. I know that there have been improvements this year, but that is very recent.

We need to work together; it is our responsibility to be those role models—to be the change we seek, to borrow a phrase from elsewhere—and to encourage others to stand. That has not happened in the past 20 years because the change that has been required has been so big and the voices around the decision-making table have not been the voices of diversity. We need to work in partnership to persuade everybody around that table of the value of the change and to get that change to happen in a way that, unfortunately, it has not happened in the past 20 years.

The Convener: Thank you for that. The answer to my next question might seem to be obvious to us and to other colleagues here but it is important to draw the matter out a bit. What benefits have been accrued from having a more diverse range of candidates stand for local elections and be elected?

Councillor Evison: Local councils are the democratically accountable voices of our local communities. They make decisions with and for our local communities and it is important to have a range of people with a range of experiences around the table, because we work for those communities and if we do not have that breadth of experience there, the decisions will not touch every corner of the communities. There are too many underrepresented groups at the moment and it is crucial to get those voices at that table so that we can see a difference.

We have seen the difference that can be made when there are more female voices, for example. We have had recent national legislation and huge local engagement in communities on period poverty and establishing period dignity. Such examples have happened since more people from diverse areas of our communities have been able to raise their voices.

We have huge challenges in areas such as fighting poverty and tackling inequality. We can only meet our targets—and we must meet them—if those diverse voices are at the table. We can all give examples of what happens when we hear those voices. We have talked about lived experience, and the social renewal advisory board put a huge emphasis on the importance of lived experience. What better way than to have a democratically accountable lived experience voice at the decision-making table? Communities of place and communities of interest all need to be represented at the table to get the right decisions.

The Convener: Thank you for your thoughts on that. Does anybody else want to come in on reasons for a lack of progress or on other benefits

that we might see from having a diverse range of people standing for election?

Laura Hutchison (Equality and Human Rights Commission): I do not disagree with anything that Councillor Evison has said. I will just add something on the role of political parties in contributing to the slow and inconsistent progress that we have seen.

I remind everybody that political parties are covered by the Equality Act 2010 and have responsibilities around non-discrimination and advancing equality for their members. Political parties therefore have a real opportunity to build on some of the work that they have already done, particularly in relation to gender balance, to tackle some of the inequalities that are facing particular groups.

A number of things have not happened, but they could be done through political parties collecting and using data about their members, and taking positive action with underrepresented groups to improve the diversity of candidates and, ultimately, elected officials at local government level.

The Convener: Thank you. Elena Whitham has a question on a similar theme.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Thank you, convener. I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I am still a serving councillor in East Ayrshire Council.

There was the McIntosh commission and, after the 2017 elections, the Equality and Human Rights Commission commissioned its report, "Barriers to participation in standing for election to local government in Scotland", which contained a plethora of recommendations. My question, which is for Laura Hutchison first and then COSLA president Alison Evison, is this: how have all spheres of government and local parties responded to the recommendations? Have you seen any change yet, given that we are a few years beyond 2019?

Laura Hutchison: When we published our report on participation in politics, there was a lot of interest from political parties and we worked closely with COSLA and the Scottish Parliament on how they could start to collect and use data on the protected characteristics of elected officials. We received approaches from political parties who wanted to understand more about the positive action provisions in the Equality Act 2010, in the context of addressing underrepresentation.

At the time of its publication, the report stimulated a lot of interest in the topic. What remains to be seen is how the findings of our research are taken on board as we go into the next elections. It will be interesting to see what

action is taken and to see an analysis of what political parties have done. I encourage councils and COSLA to ensure that they collect protected characteristics information on the people who are elected in 2022. There was initial enthusiasm, but I am not sure how much has changed on the ground; I hope that we will see some improvements next year.

Elena Whitham: Thank you. Does Alison Evison want to add anything?

Councillor Evison: It is crucial that we collect data and understand the landscape. We have a set of data from 2018, and COSLA and the Improvement Service are considering how we will collect data from the 2022 elections.

Laura Hutchison made an important point about the differences that we see on the ground and what is done about the situation. For example, in 2017, only 29 per cent of the councillors who were elected were women. That is unacceptable, and we need to do all that we can to address the issue.

COSLA's work is focused on what we can do to make a difference. We have also worked with other organisations because partnership working to address the whole landscape is important. We have worked with Elect Her, Engender, Inclusion Scotland and others to try to understand the picture and develop a process that helps people to stand by encouraging them to feel that they are supported to do so. It is important that individuals are supported to stand, through mentoring and encouragement. If someone in an underrepresented group does not want to stand, they could support someone else in their group to do so instead.

COSLA has developed family leave and lone-working guidance, and we have looked at civility in public life. We have addressed all the issues that we can address internally, and we are encouraging councillors to step forward as mentors, to help other people to stand, so that we can take the steps that Laura Hutchison talked about and see change on the ground.

We are working on a cross-party basis at COSLA, but what parties do internally is another matter. We appreciate the problems that independent councillors face, as they do not have that party support. We must ensure that we do not place too much emphasis on parties and miss out independent councillors.

We are developing guidance to support people standing as independent councillors, to give them all the encouragement that we can. Councillors, such as Emma Macdonald in Shetland, who is a leading female independent councillor in a key role, are doing a lot of work to help with that. Indeed, just last night, Shetland Council ran a

session to encourage people to stand as candidates next year.

As I said, the emphasis on parties and what they are doing is important, but we need to widen our perspective. Some people who want to serve their local communities, be democratically elected and be that voice of lived experience in their communities will not want to stand for a party. In this conversation, we must not miss out the huge contribution that they can also make.

Elena Whitham: Thank you very much. I will hand back to the convener for the moment.

The Convener: We will move on to our next theme, which Miles Briggs will lead on.

Miles Briggs: We have already touched on some of the questions that I want to ask about, which are specifically with regard to the fact that 14 per cent of councillors in Scotland are independent, so no party support structure is in place for them. In more traditional areas, such as island councils and Highland Council, independent candidates are being elected en masse, so it is important to ask what support can be put in place for them. You have outlined some of that already, Councillor Evison, but do any of the other witnesses have any thoughts on that?

Laura Hutchison: I want to mention the Scottish Government's access to elected office fund. I think that the pilot for that was run around 2017. The fund provides financial support to disabled people who are interested in standing as candidates in local government elections. It provides support to individuals, regardless of their political party.

I am sure that the witnesses who are giving evidence later will be able to give more detailed information about how the fund operates. My understanding—this is my memory of what happened in 2019—is that the fund has been quite successful in providing financial support for any reasonable adjustments that might be required, for example.

I suppose that there is a line to be drawn to make sure that the use of the fund does not stray into paying for campaign activity. The fund is to provide additional support—sometimes, that is financial support—that candidates might need so that they can participate on equal terms with other candidates. The fund is a good example of an intervention that can be made to support people's participation.

Miles Briggs: As no one else wants to come in on that question, I will move on.

It is also important for us to look at how data on candidate diversity and equality characteristics are recorded. Can the witnesses outline how the information is collected? Are there better

examples from the United Kingdom or other parts of the world of how the data could be recorded? Should it be mandatory for the data to be recorded at the nomination stage, for example?

Sarah Gadsden (Improvement Service): We have tried to gather data through surveys that we have undertaken since 1999 to examine the demographic profile of councillors. We have looked at age, gender and ethnicity. We have also asked questions about the councillor role.

One challenge that we have had is the response rate. In 1999, we had a 56.6 per cent response rate; by 2017, it was 33.3 per cent. Therefore, up until now, the data that we have been able to gather is not representative of all councillors in Scotland. Furthermore, since 2007, we have not been gathering data from unsuccessful candidates.

However, we are aware—COSLA and others have been involved in discussions with Scottish Government colleagues about this—that there is a recognition that, without data being reliably collected at successive elections, it is impossible to fully assess the diversity of political representation or effectively monitor change over time to ensure that policies and initiatives are appropriately developed and targeted.

10:00

Currently, there is no commenced legal requirement to collect or publish information on the equality characteristics of candidates for Scottish Parliament or local government elections. However, the five largest parties in Scotland have signed up to Inclusion Scotland's access to politics charter, which includes a commitment to voluntarily publish such information, including for local government elections. As far as we are aware, none has published information yet, and Scottish Government colleagues do not yet know whether any or all of the parties will meet the commitment.

In order to address the issue, Scottish Government colleagues are working with partners and stakeholders, including the Improvement Service and COSLA, on scoping a project to look at how we can improve the completeness of data on the protected characteristics of election candidates and elected representatives. The aim of that work is to develop a process for collecting data on the diversity of candidates that is robust and could be replicated at all future elections. Such a process would provide consistent data for monitoring progress over time. Colleagues are in the process of scoping a proposal that will come back to us, COSLA and others for further discussion. The political parties panel is also having discussions on the topic. It is hoped that,

depending on how the work progresses, a process will be in place for gathering that information in advance of the 2022 local government elections.

Councillor Evison: Sarah Gadsden has given a very good answer on the work that COSLA and the Improvement Service are doing jointly on that issue. In addition, what we do with the data is important. For example, it is important that councils appreciate that it is okay to spend money on supporting councillors from diverse areas of the community if they have particular support needs. It is okay to spend money on safety issues, it is okay to spend money on improving accessibility and it is okay to change standing orders to amend the times of meetings and whatever, so that they are appropriate for people with caring responsibilities or other demands on their lives. The data is important in showing the need for that—in showing people who want to stand and people who get elected that it is okay to spend that money. Moving on from the data is crucial.

Miles Briggs: That is very helpful. I know that Laura Hutchison also wants to come in, but I will expand my question slightly. The committee has been trying to understand why some people have decided to stand down after just one term in office. Have you looked at any data on that? I will bring in Laura Hutchison. If anyone else wants to comment on that specific point, I ask them to let us know.

Laura Hutchison: I am sorry, but I cannot answer that specific question. I do not know whether you want to go immediately to someone else on that.

I was going to talk about response rates. When the work was done in, I think, 2018, response rates were very low. It is important that every part of the process looks at where data can be collected about the protected characteristics of the people who are participating, or attempting to participate, in the political process. We can look at some examples. For example, the Scottish Youth Parliament does a census of sitting members.

Although section 106 of the Equality Act 2010 is not in force, it would require political parties to collect and publish the data. Political parties could consider having specific rules on collecting equality monitoring data from their members. It is important to speak to party members and politicians so that they can understand why the information is being used and why it is important. That goes back to Councillor Evison's point. If people are clear and confident that the information will be used for good, they might be more likely to complete the forms or to participate in other research that is trying to understand the topic.

Miles Briggs: That is helpful.

Councillor Evison: On the question about why people do not stand for a second term, COSLA

has just completed a survey on barriers to standing again and other issues around remuneration. That will be published in January, so we will be able to see the detail at that time. We will share that information with you when we can.

A big issue that came out of the survey is financial remuneration for councillors. People have given their five years of service and have struggled with what they have got for the number of hours that they have put in. I mentioned the real living wage. If you analyse the hours that councillors are working and compare it with how much they are earning, you find that it is way below the real living wage. We need to address that key point. People with caring responsibilities and families to bring up find the remuneration a real difficulty. We will not have diversity in politics until we address that and make it possible for people to earn more money.

On a related point, MSPs and MPs benefit—I presume that it is a benefit—from caseworkers and people supporting them in their work. They have a wider office surrounding them, but councillors work on their own. They have no one looking at their emails, supporting what they are doing and following up their casework. All the work of a councillor is done by the councillor. In order to serve your community in the way that councillors wish to do, there is a huge amount of work to do. It involves a huge amount of emotional stress and requires a huge amount of commitment to doing the job properly. That is tiring. Councillors have told us that there is a need to address the issue of support. It is about having somebody to support their work, as is the case in other spheres of government. That challenge is impacting on councillors.

The details of the survey will be published later, but I think that the levels of remuneration and the burden on individual councillors in their work are the two main reasons why some people happily give five years, but the prospect of giving 10 years is too much. We need to put measures in place so that we do not lose the wealth of experience and knowledge, and the community connections that develop during those five years.

Miles Briggs: I will come back to that theme, because it is important that we discuss the issue of support services.

The Convener: Councillor Evison has mentioned remuneration quite a few times. The vast majority of councillors who responded to our committee's questionnaire felt that councillor pay is not sufficient, with one councillor stating:

"It falls way below the national minimum wage for those of us who take the role with the seriousness it deserves."

Remuneration is also a significant barrier to tackling underrepresentation among councillors in

Scotland. In light of that, do the other witnesses agree with the questionnaire respondents that councillor pay is a major reason why the local election candidate pool is not more diverse? Your responses could include your thoughts on the right amount of pay, how the issue is specifically relevant to female representation and how it affects the quality of local government decision making.

Laura Hutchison: I am not sure that I can answer all your points, but the findings from your survey are not a surprise; they chime with the findings of the research that we undertook in 2015 on barriers to participating and standing for election relating to the resources that are available to people. Personal finances were seen as a barrier. Different groups of people have different experiences in terms of their level of income, their personal finances and how much they can participate in political activity when it does not provide a high standard of income.

We found that that was difficult for groups who might be more likely to be experiencing poverty, and that some protected characteristic groups experience additional costs that other groups do not. For example, disabled people might have additional costs if they are to participate in an equal way, and, as you touched on, women with caring and childcare responsibilities might have additional costs if they try to stand as a candidate, because of the timings of events and meetings. To be able to participate in those, they might have costs relating to childcare or caring that other people might not have.

It is quite a complex picture, but that was one of the common, recurrent themes in our research.

Elena Whitham: I have been subjected to online abuse as a councillor. The level of abuse that I have experienced as a councillor has proved to be significantly higher than the level that I have experienced so far as a parliamentarian. I think that that is because, sometimes, it can be very personal. Your friends, family and community can take great exception to decisions that you take at the local level, and things such as snow can create a flurry of complaints.

Respondents said that the level of online abuse is a major barrier to them or makes them not want to stand again. Is there anything that public bodies can do better to address the online abuse that councillors receive?

Councillor Evison: Councillors are the sphere of government that is closest to our communities, so the personal element is an important context.

We have already started work to show, for example, that councillors' addresses do not need to be made public. Until now, addresses were public in many council areas, so people know

where councillors live, which adds to the dangers of abuse.

We cannot tackle the issue on our own. We have done lots of work. With the other local government associations in the UK, we have developed work on civility in public life and have made commitments to that ourselves. We have developed a set of rules for social media engagement that people can use to show that it is okay not to engage with comments and to delete abusive comments. The rules also illustrate other aspects of how to maintain your social media.

However, it takes all of us to address the wider issue. As councillors, we cannot address it on our own because it is about how people perceive their politicians and their local leaders. It is about general respect and civility. If the message goes out that it is okay to abuse somebody, the abuse will continue. All of us together need to call out all abuse as soon as it occurs. We need to support one another to develop the right working practices and to generally keep going at it.

We need to keep supporting one another and calling out what is wrong, because no sphere of government on its own can address the matter. It takes us all working together.

Elena Whitham: You have already touched on my next question, which is about people who do not want to stand for elected office for a political party. Are there people who are really community minded and want to be community champions but are put off by party-political conflicts? Have you encountered people who feel that such conflicts distract from their aim?

Councillor Evison: Traditionally, people have stood for political parties when standing for the council. Some people feel that that process has to take place but they do not feel that it is appropriate for them. They want to be community champions and democratically elected voices for their local communities. We need to do more to support people to stand as independents.

I have already spoken about the great work that Emma Macdonald is doing. At COSLA, we are developing our own guidance because it is important that we shake up the system. It does not have to be political-party based; it must be community based. It must be the voice of lived experience from the community. It has to involve diverse members of our community. People who have not engaged in political parties do not have to feel that to do so is the only way forward.

We are doing a lot of work on that. We have strong voices in COSLA that are supporting us in that work. The more work we do on wider approaches such as the "Democracy Matters" work that was done as part of the local

governance review, the more we raise the profile of what being a councillor is about.

Democracy is essential. The democratic system is the bottom line of everything that we do but you do not have to stand for a party to be democratically elected. We need to stress that.

Elena Whitham: I think that Laura Hutchison wants to come in on that as well.

Laura Hutchison: I am sorry; my point is on the previous question. Is that okay?

Elena Whitham: That is fine.

10:15

Laura Hutchison: I agree with everything that has been said, but there are practical things that political parties and councils can do around codes of conduct, training and awareness raising. They can demonstrate inclusive leadership on those issues and ensure that there is a zero-tolerance approach.

In recent years, we have seen examples of political parties making a stand and supporting party members who have been subjected to abuse, but more needs to be done. Parties and councils need to look at what they can do to make a visible difference through actions and practice, rather than just putting words on paper.

Elena Whitham: Thank you for that important contribution. As you reflected, with regard to the practices that need to change, we require modelling of inclusive leadership.

My final question is whether the witnesses feel that the way in which council business is currently conducted is conducive to good work-life balance. Is it truly inclusive for people who have caring responsibilities? I will go to Alison Evison first.

Councillor Evison: It is important to remember that councils' working practices were established in a previous era, when there were different demographics around the table. Those practices were put in place to suit those demographics, but the standing orders that were set up in those times can be changed—they do not have to stay the same as they always have been. We need to get that message out to councils.

For example, things such as the times at which meetings are held, the length of meetings, the amount of papers that councillors get and when they receive those papers to read them before the committee meeting—I am talking about a sense of time, and whether someone has the time to read the papers on the day that they are given them—can all be changed and altered.

I come back to the point that, when there are more people around the decision-making table

who are aware of the value of diversity in elected office, we can work together, at individual council level, to change practices and make them appropriate for a particular council.

At present, a lot of practices are not conducive to the needs of people who have caring responsibilities. At COSLA, we have just in the past few years developed family leave guidance for the encouragement of people who have families, including children or adopted children, or other aspects of family life for which they need time. That guidance is being put into practice across Scotland, and various councillors have benefited from it.

We need to encourage more councils to adopt that guidance. The bottom line is that some current practices were set up under a previous demographic, for different purposes and to meet the needs of those people. Things change, and it is okay to change them. We need to develop that important message as we move forward. If we are to have—as we want—greater diversity among people who are elected, the operational practices of local democracy need to suit those people. Let us have the concept of change accepted, explored and developed.

Elena Whitham: Before I bring in Sarah Gadsden, who would like to contribute, it is worth once again putting on the record that, under Councillor Evison's leadership as president of COSLA, Councillor Perry and I were able to job share in the role of community wellbeing spokesperson. It is important to recognise that that was the first time that such a role had been divvied up, and it should by no means be the last.

I will bring in Sarah Gadsden to respond to the previous points.

Sarah Gadsden: To build on what Alison Evison said, I note that the Improvement Service is, anecdotally, picking up some benefits from the way in which councillors have worked and council business has been conducted during the pandemic, with the opportunity for hybrid meetings and remote meetings.

We are doing a piece of research with the University of St Andrews to look at the political governance arrangements that were in place during the pandemic. We are working with half a dozen local authorities and speaking to their council leaders, opposition leaders, back benchers and so forth to find out which processes that were in place during the pandemic have worked well and what we can learn from them. We have picked up anecdotally that the hybrid ways of working have been more conducive to getting involved for some people, because of their circumstances. Virtual surgeries have been conducted by councillors, and we have had positive feedback

from people about it being easier to participate when things are done virtually. We are very keen to learn the lessons that we can learn from the pandemic about how we can continue to support councils.

The Convener: Miles Briggs has a question on barriers.

Miles Briggs: It is more about the other challenges that Councillor Evison touched on earlier and is a two-part question. First, do you know what support services are provided by different councils? I believe that the City of Edinburgh Council, for example, provides pooled secretarial support to all council groups. Do you have any information on what that picture is like? The second part is around personal security. Sadly, in this country, a councillor's house has been firebombed, which is under investigation. That is seen by the public and I think it puts people off. They are worried about their security and about people knowing where they live. We have introduced changes such as not publicising home addresses, but people live in their communities and are known. Will you comment on that issue, too?

Councillor Evison: On support services, the position varies from council to council. It is an individual council's decision what support services it offers. Some councils offer support to council groups; others do not—for example, the council where I serve as a councillor. That needs to be looked at in the particular context. What I said before about it being okay for councils to spend money supporting councillors on aspects such as health and safety is a point that needs to be made as councils move forward.

On the second point, about personal security, we have heard horrific stories about incidents that have happened to some councillors in Scotland, which is totally unacceptable. We need to call out all those incidents—all of us need to do that. I must praise the work of Police Scotland over recent weeks. We are beginning to do far more safety work with Police Scotland. It has run webinars for councillors and we are currently discussing safety work that can be offered. I commend that partnership work with Police Scotland, which recognises the role of councillors nationally across Scotland, as well as encouraging councillors to work closely with the police in their local areas. We are at the beginning of a journey on that issue, but we need to acknowledge the fact that a partnership is being established and we are working with Police Scotland.

At COSLA, we are aware that councillors often work totally on their own, and we need to address the lone-working aspect of a councillor's life. COSLA developed lone-working guidance for councillors to adopt, which has different ideas

about systems that can be put in place for councillors to register where they are going and when they are safe again. We have technology to support councillors going about their work. The fact that councillors work on their own a lot of the time might put people off, so we need to acknowledge that we can use information technology and other technology and work in partnership with the police and others to give support where it is needed. You are right that the personal security of councillors should not be an optional extra. It is essential and we should deliver on that.

Miles Briggs: Thank you. I do not see anyone else who wants to come in on that.

The Convener: Willie Coffey has another question.

Willie Coffey: My question is about another barrier that perhaps has not been explored yet, and Alison Evison might be best placed to answer it. We are having great difficulty attracting people into local government, and I am thinking of those who are perhaps lucky enough already to be in a job and earning more than the salary that councillors get. How do we get more of those people into local government? Inevitably, it will touch on the issue of getting time off for public duty. When I was a local councillor, I found it incredibly difficult to continue with what I will call my day-to-day job as well as do my council work, given the hopelessly inadequate time off that I managed to get from my employer in order to carry out my public duties.

How can we begin to address that? Should we be thinking of, say, giving people fully paid sabbaticals so that they do not lose the money that they earn from their main jobs? If not, how do we attract such people into local government? How do we ensure that their employers do not lose their service—or, indeed, have to pay for the loss of their service—and that people do not feel as if they are being run off their feet trying to do two jobs at the same time?

Councillor Evison: Your last point is crucial: if you have work outside your work as a councillor, you will be doing two jobs at one time. I was first elected as a councillor in 2012, and the job has changed since then to become full time. The localism agenda and the work and engagement that is going on with the community, especially at the moment, are crucial. We are talking about and following through with policies on community wealth building, place planning and the 20-minute neighbourhoods; all of the policy direction is focused on the local, which means that our local councillors, as the democratically elected local representatives, have a key leadership role to play. At the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties, we were talking about

the importance of local government's leadership role and of local government being mentioned in the final agreement from COP26, as it indeed was.

That just underlines the variety of our work. The social renewal advisory board has highlighted the work that we have to do to support lifting people out of poverty, to develop our communities and jobs and to support economic development. That is the work that a councillor has to do on a daily basis, and it is not part-time work. It fills a person's life—quite rightly so. Councillors who have other jobs end up working hours that are not healthy or conducive in any way to good mental health and wellbeing, and they have to work a huge number of hours every week of their working lives. It all comes back to issues that we have raised before about the basic remuneration for councillors who do this important democratic function of serving their community, and it is absolutely crucial that finance be given to that.

I am not sure that sabbaticals from work would address the diversity issue that we have been talking about. Instead, we want a level of remuneration for local councillors that makes everybody from every walk of life feel that they can step forward and represent their communities. After all, the key qualification for being a councillor and the voice of a community is to be a member of that community, so it is important that we address the issue of remuneration.

I would also go back to the point that was made earlier about ensuring that councillors have administrative back-up support to enable them to do their job and their work properly, but I think that we need to address the basic remuneration issue if we are to address the huge diversity issue in elected office, too.

Willie Coffey: As for getting time off for public duties, it is pretty much down to the employer and the councillor—the employee—to agree that sort of thing. My experience is that an employer wants to give you as little as possible when, in fact, you need much more if, as you have said, you are to do your job correctly. Do we need to look at what is proper in that respect and recognise that a councillor needs time off for public duties to be able to do the job properly?

10:30

Councillor Evison: I think that I would turn the question round, because I do not think that it can be done. Because of the way that the councillor role has developed in the 10 years for which I have been a councillor, it cannot be done in time off for public duties. Being a councillor is a full-time job. We should perhaps look at it the other way and say that people should get time off from being a councillor to do another job.

In serving our communities, we work, engage and consult with them. We are developing wellbeing agendas, prevention agendas and work on the net zero target. We are working together to address poverty and to support economic development across our areas. We have all the regulatory services for which we are responsible now that we have left the European Union—a lot of work is coming to councils as a result of that.

Given all the responsibilities that councillors have, it is full-time work. We need to properly remunerate councillors for the work that they do, rather than talk about time off for public service. It is not public service in that sense; it is a far greater role and I have seen it evolve in the past 10 years, for good reasons. The work of councillors very much fits with the national direction in the recovery programme and with Scottish Government policy on localism, but we need to ensure that councillors are remunerated for that work.

The Convener: We will move on. We are running out of time, but the next few questions are important. I will pass over to Paul McLennan. We will direct our questions to specific witnesses.

Paul McLennan: My questions are on awareness and support for new candidates. You will be aware that the online questionnaire brought out a few key points. One was that potential new candidates do not understand the role of councillor and what councillors do. My question is probably for Alison Evison. How can we make people more aware of that? How can we ensure that younger people in our communities know about local politics and the role that they would have if they became members?

For brevity, I will ask my other question, which is about community councils. Are they a good source of people moving into local politics and, if so, how can we support that?

Councillor Evison: There were lots of points there, despite it being a brief question. On the first point, an awful lot of work is being done on mentoring and giving advice and help to new councillors. I will pass over to Sarah Gadsden to answer that, because it is done through the Improvement Service.

On encouraging young people, yesterday, we had the announcement of the new Scottish Youth Parliament representatives across our areas. It is crucial that we work closely with our MSYPs. It is also crucial that, as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, councils give children their voice, and not just on specific issues but on whatever is important to them. We have worked with care-experienced young people to ensure that their voice is heard. A lot of work is being done in those areas, but we should do more of it.

Many local authority councillors have served as community councillors. From that, they developed a sense that they wanted to serve and have that wider decision-making role in the area in which they work. Engagement with community councils is essential as part of our work, and it is important that we serve together with community councils in our areas. Not everybody who has served as a community councillor will want to be a local authority councillor. To go back to the point that Willie Coffey made about public service, perhaps the public service element should lie there, whereas being a councillor is a full-time commitment. Links with community councils are important so that their voice is heard.

I will pass to Sarah for the specific answers.

Sarah Gadsden: On raising awareness of the role of councillor, we are working closely with COSLA and we have a local councillor site up and running, which is supported by a local councillor Twitter handle. We have worked with all 32 local authorities to ask them to raise awareness of the website and the work to attract potential candidates.

The website helps people to understand the many aspects of a councillor's role. It provides information to help people to decide whether being a councillor is for them and to ensure that they are well prepared if they are elected. We have videos on the website involving current elected members, and we have a mix of male and female councillors talking about a week in the life of a councillor. We also have a range of resources available for candidates, new councillors and inexperienced councillors. Interestingly, 50 per cent of people who visit the site actually want to find out what councillors do, and 10 per cent are interested in becoming a councillor.

We have also developed a political mentoring development programme. We are working with current elected members to support them to develop the knowledge and skills to become effective mentors. That is about mentoring not only new elected members next year but individuals who are looking to stand for election, so that they have somebody who has been an elected member to support them as they think through what being an elected member might mean for them and what is involved. We have also been running bespoke mentoring workshops for political groups. We are trying to do quite a lot this year to raise awareness of the role of local councillor.

We also run a community council website to provide information and support to community councillors. I stress that some of the challenges that councils face in attracting underrepresented groups apply equally to community councils. They face similar barriers in relation to the age profile of community councillors.

The Convener: Thank you. Sadly, we have run out of time. It has been helpful to have you all with us to share your perspectives with the committee. Thank you for taking part.

I suspend the meeting briefly for a changeover of witnesses.

10:36

Meeting suspended.

10:39

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome our second panel. We have with us Jessie Duncan, who is a development officer at Engender; Alys Mumford, who is chair and a steering group member of Women 50:50; Councillor Soryia Siddique from Elect Her; Councillor Ethan Young, who is a civic participation manager at Inclusion Scotland; and Councillor Junaid Ashraf, who is a community engagement officer at the Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organisations Scotland.

We will move straight to questions. If witnesses wish to respond or contribute to the discussion, please type R in the chat box. The committee has a practice of directing our questions to a witness, but if you want to come in on something, please indicate that. There might be times when I have to cut you off, because we have a lot to cover and we want to hear from everybody.

I will start. From your perspectives, what are the structural and cultural reasons for women being underrepresented in councils? I ask Alys Mumford first then Soryia Siddique.

Alys Mumford (Women 50:50): I agree with everything that was said in the previous evidence session about the barriers. Alison Evison laid out nicely that it is important to look at working practices, remuneration and culture. From Women 50:50's point of view, a key barrier to equal representation for women is the lack of quotas. We really need quotas. We call on the Government to push for the devolution of powers to allow quotas in councils to be legislated for. That was a recommendation of the national advisory council on women and girls. We were told that it would be considered further, but we have not heard anything yet.

Are you able to hear me?

The Convener: Thank you for that.

Councillor Soryia Siddique (Elect Her): The work that Elect Her has done in various workshops and peer support sessions has found that there are various structural and cultural barriers. We got feedback about gatekeepers to elected office.

Most of Scotland follows a political party system in local elections and most parties ask people to be a member for around 12 months before they are considered as a candidate. Candidate selection processes happen on varying timelines and people are required to make quite a bit of investment in the process.

Other feedback that we received was that women are sometimes subjected to political manoeuvring, misogyny and racism. Some women told us that the party-political culture is unappealing to large swathes of women who would make excellent candidates and councillors. That needs to be considered.

We also found that there is a lack of access to information about being selected to stand in an election, and we came across the issue of low levels of literacy. We carry out education programmes in which we upskill women, and there are programmes and information online to support women to stand for election and help them to understand the selection process and the various levels of government.

Finance, which has been discussed, also came up as an issue in the feedback. There is a level of cost associated with standing for election, including giving up time to volunteer as an activist or campaigner, sacrificing income, paying for printing and buying drinks and sometimes coffees and pizzas for campaigners. Although people might want and like to do those things, there is a cost.

There is occasionally support from political parties, but the feedback that we received is that it is not always enough. Additional costs for women with childcare also came through in the feedback. When a political party gives specific funding to support someone's campaign, the additional cost for childcare is not always taken into consideration.

10:45

Financial remuneration—that is a difficult word to say—is also an issue. Given what is expected of councillors and the demands of the job, it is clear that the associated finance is not enough. That issue comes up in various spheres—it comes up over and over again when councillors say that they are not standing again.

It is clear that many councillors have to have second jobs, and it is a fundamental challenge to balance those jobs. An attendee at one of the programmes asked how on earth they were supposed to take on all that responsibility—and the abuse that, sadly, comes with the role these days—for so little financial reward.

There are concerns about the abuse and the negative and divisive atmosphere. Women in public office are at much greater risk than men of getting online abuse, and the abuse increases dramatically for women of colour. Globally, women are 27 times more likely than men to experience harassment online, and black women are 84 per cent more likely than white women to be mentioned in problematic or abusive tweets. In the 2017 general election, Diane Abbott received 45 per cent of all the abusive tweets that were directed at women. That environment is very off-putting.

The lack of flexible options is an issue. As far as we are aware, job sharing is not an option, although it could be key to opening up the environment. The lack of parental leave for people in key roles is another barrier that women shared with us through our various programmes.

The Convener: Thank you.

I apologise to Alys Mumford for cutting her off. I was conferring with the clerk when you asked whether we could hear you and I did not realise what you had asked. Yes, we could hear you, and please come back in if you want to add anything.

Alys Mumford: Thank you. I will not take up too much time, as I know that we have lots to get through.

I echo what Soryia Siddique said. There are huge issues in councils, whether we call them structural or cultural. The committee asked the previous panel whether the role is incompatible with caring duties; we say yes, it really is. There are 10-hour meetings, there is lots of evening work and unexpected additional work, which makes it very difficult for women, particularly women of colour. Women of colour's representation on local councils is staggeringly low.

The point is not that we should have equality for equality's sake, although that is a good thing; it is that we get better decisions when we have diverse representation. We get worse decisions when we do not have diverse representation, which does people in Scotland a disservice.

The Convener: Thank you. Jessie Duncan wants to come in.

Jessie Duncan (Engender): The witnesses who have responded have made great points—thank you for those.

When women enter or try to enter politics, they are competing against the huge backdrop of their historical exclusion from public life. That issue cannot be solved quickly or easily; it requires sustained efforts to examine where inequalities stem from and what the cultural barriers are, and then to address those issues.

The gendered socialisation of roles in political parties, which, as has been said, are the gatekeepers to representation are such that, when women become councillors, they are often held to a higher standard. There are greater expectations on their time; they are often expected to become spokespeople for issues that are regarded as women's issues, which adds extra pressure to a councillor's already sizeable workload.

The press and media scrutiny that councillors face is disproportionate for women councillors, who often face scrutiny of their physical appearance, personal life and family. As has been pointed out, the risk of abuse is much greater for women than it is for their male counterparts.

The issue of family leave has been mentioned. The fact is that there is no legal guarantee for elected representatives with regard to such leave. The voluntary guidance that has been created is a great step, but it has not been universally adopted. Moreover, although the guidance is a welcome development, it falls short of many women's experience in the workplace. For example, it recommends a six-month leave period, but a lot of people who are considering becoming councillors and for whom family leave would be a priority are likely to get a better offer in the employment in which they are already engaged. That is quite off-putting, and it has all led to a lack of role models for women in local councils and politics in general, which only compounds the situation.

It is also important to note that, as has been pointed out, women are not a monolithic group, and the barriers are faced to a greater degree by minoritised women, including black and minority ethnic women, lesbian, bisexual and trans women and disabled women. We need to remain aware of the different extent to which the barriers manifest and present themselves in contributing to reduced diversity and representation.

The Convener: Thank you. It would be great to hear from Ethan Young and Junaid Ashraf on the structural and cultural reasons for the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities and people with disability.

Councillor Junaid Ashraf (Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Organisations Scotland): Thank you so much for having me here. I should say that I am wearing two hats this morning. I am representing the Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Organisations Scotland, but I am also here as a sitting councillor who was elected in 2017 at the age of 20. I can therefore probably give you a youth as well as a race perspective.

Rather than go through the issues that are impacting on us, I wonder whether it might be better first of all to give the committee an understanding of the context with regard to the

representation of ethnic minority councillors across Scotland. According to the Improvement Service, less than 1 per cent of the 1,227 councillors in this country are from an ethnic minority background; indeed, I believe that I read in a COSLA report that the estimate was about nine councillors out of 1,227. The numbers are staggeringly low, and the same situation is reflected not only in the numbers who are being elected but in the number being promoted as candidates. In 2017, 2,614 candidates ran for elected office in the local council elections, but only 42 of that 2,600 or so were from an ethnic minority background.

To put into context how staggeringly low the figures are, I would point out that for there to be racial parity for ethnic minorities in local government—which would equate to, say, 5 to 7 per cent with regard to visible and non-visible ethnic minority communities—there should be about 100 elected councillors from those communities. In other words, if all 42 candidates from an ethnic minority background who stood in 2017 had been elected as councillors, we would still be only less than halfway to having racial parity for ethnic minorities in Scotland.

In looking at how the situation impacts on us, I think that we need to reflect on the experience of Bashir Maan, who was the first ethnic minority councillor to be elected in this country back in 1970 and who, sadly, passed away a couple of years ago. When he was running for election, it was suggested by his opponent that he would be elected only by members of his own community, specifically the Scottish Pakistani community. There is an onus on political parties to do everything they can to support and promote ethnic minority candidates in communities. As the COSLA spokesperson said earlier, councillors come from and live in their communities and they should be seen as true representatives of the people who live there.

Given that there have been 18 local council elections since 1970 and that only eight additional councillors from ethnic minority communities have been elected, it is clear that we still have significant issues to overcome. A number of those issues come from the culture within political parties and from how party structures support the inclusion of ethnic minority members of society in politics.

We need to understand the historical context. When my grandparents came to Scotland in the 1950s, public bodies, and society as a whole, were not inclusive. There was a heightened level of racism in society. To give a generic example, the grandparents of my white counterparts might have got involved in political structures through trade unionism or because of Margaret Thatcher or other ideas that came from working-class

backgrounds. However, a lot of people from ethnic minority communities were pushed out when they faced racism. They had nowhere to go within the council, local government, political structures, the police or wider society. That has continued from my grandparents to my parents. They feel that they cannot get involved in political structures because groups such as trade unions have traditionally not been inclusive of ethnic minority issues.

Modern campaigns such as Black Lives Matter have been inclusive and supportive and have allowed ethnic minority communities to come out into society and have our voices heard. We are starting to see a positive movement as ethnic minority members of society get involved in politics. However, that is still not being nurtured by political parties. The onus is not put on them to support candidates to come forward. Local government should have a role in having a positive impact on communities.

Councillor Ethan Young (Inclusion Scotland): I, too, am an elected councillor, although I will be speaking with my Inclusion Scotland hat on. I have lived experience of being a disabled person and of the situation that we are discussing today.

The biggest barriers for disabled people are attitudinal. Those negative attitudes are not only towards disabled people but towards changing environments for disabled people or making reasonable adjustments so that disabled people can participate. We are trying to fit disabled people into a system that needs to change: it is not disabled people who need to make those changes.

At the fundamental level, we must also look at human rights. The lack of access to independent living is a big barrier for disabled people. When 50 per cent of those living in poverty are either disabled or have a disabled family member, we cannot expect a proportionate number of disabled people to think, “You know what? I’m gonnae run for elected office. I’ve got something to say. I could really represent my community here because I understand the barriers.”

People do not have social care. They do not have access to basic things such as housing. They cannot get to the shops independently to buy a loaf of bread. There are also the other barriers that we have heard about to do with things such as remuneration, stresses, workload and the public scrutiny that elected members are under. If that is the level of setback at the very beginning, we will never get to a point where we can organically get a representative number of disabled people into elected office.

There is a range of barriers, from grass-roots level all the way up to the detail of elected office such as functioning within political parties or as an independent candidate. I hope that we will go into that later and I would be happy to expand on it. Disabled people face many barriers. There are intersectional barriers for people who have multiple protected characteristics. It is difficult to pick that apart, but people's fundamental human rights must be met. That is the key. The UK Government has signed up to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which is there to support the removal of barriers to people who participate in politics at all levels.

11:00

The Convener: Thank you for that. I hope that more of the complexity comes out through our questioning, as we go on.

Miles Briggs will lead on questions on the next theme.

Miles Briggs: My questions follow on from what we have already heard with regard to data and diversity. Do the witnesses have views on how we collect that data? We have already heard that the data is patchy. What are your views on making the recording of data mandatory at the nomination stage? Ethan touched on that earlier, so I will bring him back in.

Councillor Young: Inclusion Scotland has worked with the five main parliamentary political parties to encourage them to take advantage of equality laws that direct that it is voluntary to publish data on protected characteristics. We work with political parties to support them to collect data at all levels. We need that data because, as has been said before, we do not understand the problems until we define the data. Therefore, we need the numbers as well as the stories.

To my knowledge, none of the political parties has published that data, but all the party leaders have signed up to doing so. Therefore, we are still expecting the parties to come out with that information on a voluntary basis and to present it to everyone, so that we can better analyse where the problems lie. It is really important to understand which candidates were successful, but the earlier stage in the process also helps us to understand more about where the barriers are and where work needs to be focused.

Councillor Ashraf: Thank you for the question, Miles.

All political parties need to record information from the outset. We need to understand the numbers of women, disabled and ethnic minority candidates who fail to make it through vetting, and

whether disproportionately low levels of people with those protected characteristics make it through the vetting process. For example, anecdotally, I have heard a number of women say that their supposed lack of leadership skills has been referred to in that process, but some of those candidates have been lecturers or teachers for 10 or 15 years, so I am not sure what the evidence is for a lack of leadership skills. Within the data, we also need to ensure that the number of ethnic minority candidates who come forward for internal selection processes or stand for election is recorded.

Beyond that, for future years we should set targets for the numbers who run for election within each local authority. As I referenced earlier, if all the ethnic minority candidates who stood at the last local elections had been elected, the number would still be less than half of what we need in order to reach racial parity, which should be the bare minimum, and not just the general aspiration. That would also mean that more than half of all local authorities would still have no representation from ethnic minority communities.

Of course I agree that there needs to be thorough data collection, but the data that we have in front of us already reflects the severe lack of representation of ethnic minority communities across Scotland. In answer to other questions we can talk about what can be done to progress that.

Jessie Duncan: As has been noted, data collection is inadequate at the moment. Much of our information on protected characteristics is anecdotal. We are not working with the most robust information. Without really knowing where we stand—without the specifics about how many people with protected characteristics are involved in parties and political institutions—we have no baseline from which to measure progress.

I know that work is being done ahead of next year's local elections and that people in the Scottish Government are planning data gathering and equalities monitoring at the nomination stage, which is great progress. We encourage the people who will gather the data to ensure that it can be disaggregated for gender and other protected characteristics, to allow for intersectional analysis. That is the only way to get a full picture of where things stand. People and representatives have intersecting identities; we need to understand those complexities in order to understand where the gaps are and where progress is being made. Right now, in equalities monitoring processes people's identities are often recorded in static and separate categories, but we need to see the whole picture so that we can understand where the issues lie.

As has been pointed out by Ethan Young and Junaid Ashraf, the parties should be gathering

such data at organisation level. The project that I work on—the equal representation in politics project, which works with a coalition of organisations from across the equalities sector—created, in 2016, a pledge to which the five largest parties all signed up; they all committed to the ethos and to the specific items within it. One item was on auditing

“the diversity of party members, activists, staff, candidates and elected representatives at all levels”

in order to create

“a benchmark against which to monitor change.”

We know that the will exists to do that, but action still needs to be taken, so we are keen to see how that can be pushed forward and perhaps enforced by parties or through other methods.

Councillor Siddique: Our understanding is that section 106 of the Equality Act 2010 requires all political parties to publish diversity data on candidates who are standing for election to the House of Commons, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly.

We could introduce effective systems across Scotland to monitor the demographic make-up of electoral candidates. That would be a small but important step towards improving the diversity of political institutions.

Elect Her was looking for information on the number of women of colour who have been elected in Scotland out of the 1,227 councillors who were elected. It was unable to access that information and had to go to each local council and go through pictures and names in order to gauge the number. That is not acceptable and it is clearly not the ideal way to go about things. Such data and information should be available. It is important that we make evidence-based decisions; that requires factual data, so it is really important to take that step.

Alys Mumford: Section 106 of the 2010 act needs to be enacted; it needs to be enacted at UK level and the power to enact it in Scotland needs to be devolved.

The reason that is often given for not enacting section 106 is to do with not wanting to burden political parties. In the evidence, we have heard that parties are willing. They have signed pledges and are seeking support through projects such as the equal representation project, but voluntarily. That means that parties will be using different methodologies, the data will not be comprehensive, and it will not take in all the stages that have been mentioned. Enacting section 106 is absolutely necessary.

It is worth pointing out two things. Because the level of representation of people of colour, in

particular, is so low in Scotland, people might be easily identifiable in data that is collected—for example, if they are the only person of a certain ethnic group who is in a party in a region. That must be considered, and having a consistent approach across the board would help with that.

Parties need to take action in relation not just to candidates but to party committees and everything that they do. We know that there is a pipeline to becoming elected—it cannot just be decided that someone will become a councillor or an MSP. Parties should look at the gender balance of their committees and at whether they funnel women into roles that are to do with welfare and organising events, while they keep men involved in the political roles and standing orders.

I echo Junaid Ashraf’s point that, with data, we can do things. The point of having the data is to allow people to set targets and make changes, but we need the data in the first place.

Miles Briggs: Our questions have concentrated on political parties, but 14 per cent of councillors across Scotland are independents. There has been a tradition of independent candidates, especially in the Highlands and Islands. Who is responsible for encouraging more diversity in councils that have independent members? The committee has heard specifically that the Western Isles Council is all male.

Alys Mumford: The question is interesting. We need to look at individual councillors, especially because party politicking can put people—particularly women—off, as the previous panel mentioned. There is a support system in a party—even though it is not much—that many independent councillors do not have. The issue is structural. As we have heard, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has issued guidance—on issues including parental leave—that has not been taken up universally.

We have heard that councillors’ pay is unsustainable for people. Councillors fall in a difficult position because they are not employed by a council or a political party, but councils and political parties—if a party is involved—have a duty of care. A council is a workplace, so if people receive abuse, have unsustainable working practices foisted on them or are put in unsafe situations online or offline, the council should step in and take on the pastoral care role. It is important that the guidance becomes more than just guidance and that all councils take it up.

We hear a lot that informal networks in councils are really helpful. Across parties and as individuals, women councillors in a minority, for example, often get together to talk to one another. Facilitating that and making it clear that it is acceptable and resourced—for example, by

providing rooms—is a small thing that can help in making some of the required change. However, we need mass change in structures and in people’s attitudes to being a councillor. I echo what Alison Evison said—being a councillor is a job and an employment role; it is not just a civic duty.

Councillor Ashraf: I will go back to points that were made about political participation. There has been a lot of focus on the issues with political parties; the onus should be largely on them to push diversity in elections. Beyond that, we should be talking about wider education through high schools, colleges and universities. The onus is on high schools to encourage participation in local democracy, because we need to start the journey early.

My understanding—it is not merely my understanding, because I left high school only seven years ago—is that we are taught what political parties are and what the difference is between right wing and left wing, but there is a huge gap in participation that relates to how we get involved in local government, what local government is and what community councils are.

If I were to ask a friend who is not generally interested in politics what a community council is or what a councillor’s role is, they should be able to tell me. However, people have that level of understanding only when they are vastly involved in civic society or in a political party. That plays into the issue of interaction with local government.

11:15

That is tied to the question why there is such low voter turnout in Scotland. People often do not understand what they are voting for. That could have an impact on support for independent councillors in the Highlands and Islands. The local authority that I represent—North Lanarkshire Council—has a number of independent councillors. We should look at high school education and we should ensure that all of civic society understands what a community council is and what councillors are.

The Convener: We will move on to barriers, remuneration and other challenges. I am keen to hear witnesses’ views on councillor remuneration. I have difficulty saying that word, which has been used frequently today. What is your experience of how councillor remuneration affects people from underrepresented groups standing for local government?

Councillor Siddique: When I stood for election to the council in 2012, I had a full-time permanent job in further education. That job did not come easily: I worked for years in temporary jobs to achieve that. I quickly realised after the election

that I could not keep my full-time job, so I went part-time. That was a very difficult decision to make because I had worked so hard to get a full-time permanent job. My employers made it clear that they wanted me to fulfil my role and wanted to know whether that was a long-term decision. I could not answer the question then, but I decided that I could not serve my community while keeping a full-time job, so I made that sacrifice.

I still find it difficult to juggle part-time employment and being a councillor. The role is more and more demanding. There is greater expectation that councillors be seen on social media or in the local community. I love and enjoy that, but I could not say with any honesty that anyone could keep a full-time job and serve as a councillor.

In the work that we have done with Elect Her, we have heard women asking how on earth they are meant to take on such responsibility for very little financial reward. That should be looked at. Some councillors are not earning even the minimum wage. That is not acceptable.

Women might have caring duties or families. Expectations around those things create a barrier and discourage women from standing. I have heard excellent women who are community champions say that they cannot be councillors at their stage of life. I know of women who served for five years but could not continue because it was too big a sacrifice. They could not afford it; it was too financially demanding. That is a real challenge. It must be considered and we must find a solution.

The Convener: Thank you for sharing your personal experience.

Jessie Duncan: I agree with a lot of what has been said. Remuneration is based on the assumption that being a councillor is a part-time role, but we have heard so much today about how it is not a part-time role. Pay is one of the main reasons why being a councillor is the preserve of people who have the time and financial security to pursue the role and who do not have caring responsibilities. That has an excluding effect on vast swathes of society, including many women.

Councillors’ duties are many and varied. They do casework and surgeries, and they go to council meetings and meetings to keep their finger on the pulse of the community. Councillors report that those tasks vastly exceed the expected time commitment.

That time pressure has a completely disproportionate impact on women, who are generally time-poor compared to men and have to carry out a disproportionate amount of domestic and childcare duties at home. They are also more likely to be in low-paid or precarious work, which increases the risk that is inherent in taking on a

councillor role—which is itself low paid—with all the challenges of flexibility and financial security that are introduced.

All that means that such roles remain the preserve of predominantly older and financially secure men who can afford to stay in them, and it leads to the perception of the councillor job as a hobby, which perpetuates and justifies the low-pay situation. That does not serve our communities or, indeed, women.

I also point out that many decisions that are taken at council level disproportionately impact on the lives of women. For example, women are more likely to use public transport or to be employed in the care sector or in education. Their voices are missing from the table, and that issue is intimately tied up with the issue of remuneration.

Work is being done on the issue. As has been mentioned, COSLA has carried out a remuneration survey of councillors, the results of which I am really looking forward to seeing. I hope that, as a result of the survey, the work of the committee and discussions such as this, we can begin to address an issue that really needs to be addressed in order to make the councillor role a more feasible, practical and achievable option for more people and, indeed, for more women.

The Convener: I know that a couple of others want to respond but, in the interests of time, I ask for only comments or points that have not been made by previous witnesses. We have a number of other questions that we need to cover.

Alys Mumford: We have talked about the work that Ethan Young has been involved in on access to elected office for disabled candidates, but I think that we could also look at, for example, remuneration for care costs. After all, it is not just remuneration itself that is the problem for those who are elected but the fact that they have to sacrifice a lot both financially and professionally in order to stand. Of course, having made those sacrifices, they might then not get re-elected—or might not even be elected the first time.

As a member of Women 50:50, I constantly feel a bit conflicted. We want women to have 50 per cent representation on councils and we encourage them to stand, but we also know that the environment is quite toxic and unrewarding. I just want to make it clear that that is very well known, and that those huge barriers put off many women from standing.

Councillor Ashraf: Above and beyond what has already been said, I believe that the issue is having a negative impact on how local government is perceived by the local community. There has been a lack of money to support councillors' pay. We need to say what that pay is: councillors get £17,000 and, as surveys by COSLA and the

Improvement Service have shown, some of them typically work 30 hours a week. I feel for most of my female colleagues, because if they have one or two children, they are essentially on the poverty line if they do not have any additional income support. One of the difficulties of having an additional job is that the engagement that a councillor would like to have with the local community cannot really take place, as they need to spend time on that secondary role.

That also plays into another issue. It is half and half whether this happens or not, given that some councillors are the most ambitious individuals I know—they care about and fight very hard for their communities—but we could still be losing a level of quality when certain people choose not to stand as candidates. I was elected while I was at university studying mechanical engineering, and some of my friends are now making between £30,000 and £35,000, while others are on £40,000 to £50,000 or even £80,000-plus. My wage is about a quarter of what my friends are on, even though we were at university at the exact same time. Are we losing a certain quality of candidate because of the pay? It is 100 per cent the case that we are.

Councillor Young: I will touch on two things: time and energy. A lot of disabled people need more time. They take more time to do things and to get places, to get ready and to get organised. That creates an additional barrier to juggling two jobs. Also, many disabled people have an energy impairment, so their energy is limited. Using the energy that it takes to do two jobs is not sustainable—I know that for a fact—and that also contributes to people saying, “You know what? This isn't something that I can do.”

I do not want to repeat what others have said, but I must repeat what Alys Mumford said about the emerging moral responsibility in our role of trying to engage more people in politics and get them into elected office. The reality is that elected office is not a great place to be. We are trying to get more people into office, but there is a burden on us to manage people's expectations and be very clear about the environment that we are promoting and encouraging them to go into. That environment is another big barrier that disabled people face.

The Convener: Thank you, Ethan, for underscoring the challenges of the local government context, both in standing and in being elected.

I invite Elena Whitham to come in with questions on the same theme.

Elena Whitham: I will limit myself to two questions. First, I would like to explore with Jessie Duncan the point that was made by Engender,

which was that when women gain access to these spaces, they are routinely held to higher standards than men who are in the same position. Can you speak briefly on that?

Jessie Duncan: Absolutely. We have heard anecdotally from women who are involved in politics at all levels. As I think someone mentioned, the role of councillor is not what it once was, and the prevalence of abuse of women councillors, both online and offline, and the level of harassment that they are at risk of have greatly increased, especially for minoritised women. That is scrutiny from the external world, never mind the scrutiny that they face from their colleagues and within the institutions where they work. That sends a huge signal to women that politics is not a safe place for them. There have been a number of high-profile examples of that recently from within institutions.

Women also report that there is an expectation that when they speak, because of the low numbers of women in office, they speak for all women. That greatly increases the amount of pressure that they experience. They are often sidelined into being spokespeople for softer issues, such as welfare or education, and hard politics is left for their male counterparts. Those are just a couple of the issues that women face.

Elena Whitham: Thanks, Jessie. My second question—

The Convener: I think that Junaid Ashraf wants to come in on the question.

Councillor Ashraf: I am sorry to interject. I want to add some perspective from what I have seen in my role as equalities officer for my political party in North Lanarkshire Council, and further to that what I have seen occur in other political groups and parties.

During the #MeToo movement, I remember being in the room when a discussion was being held by male colleagues about what should be done to protect men, given that situation, so that female colleagues should not be able to falsely accuse them of sexual assault.

It is typical in meetings for us to refer to each other as Councillor Ashraf or Councillor Whitham or Councillor Et Cetera. However, female colleagues are regularly referred to by their first names, rather than by their formal titles, during committee meetings. They are also interrupted, which is something that I have only ever seen happen to female colleagues.

11:30

Usually, when we hold the floor, we hold the floor until we are finished. If the standing orders have a specific time limit of three or five minutes,

we are allowed to speak until the time is over. I have seen female colleagues being interrupted halfway through what they are saying to be told that their point has been raised already and to have the microphone taken away. Female colleagues have to repeat the same things over and over again in meetings but will be silenced in those meetings and told that the issue has already been covered in a previous meeting. They are asked why they are repeating issues, but they are elected members who represent their communities and, like everyone in the room, they have a right to speak. Those are some specific examples that fit the context given by Jessie Duncan.

Elena Whitham: It is helpful to have those observations on record for the committee. I certainly recognise them.

I would like to hear witnesses' views on whether quotas and equality mechanisms should be used, or should be used to a greater extent. I would like to hear from Ethan Young and then from Alys Mumford, who mentioned quotas earlier.

Councillor Young: We need quotas. Disabled people face so many barriers at grass-roots level; to get a representative number of disabled people through organically, we would have to eradicate poverty and all the other barriers that they face.

Although we need quotas, they should not be used in isolation. We also need a grass-roots approach and we need to eradicate all the barriers. When a top-down and a bottom-up approach meet in the middle, that is when we get sustainable change. By "top-down", I mean using quotas. When I say "bottom up", I am talking about how we remove the structural, institutional and societal barriers that disabled people face. If those meet in the middle, we get sustainable change.

Elena Whitham: That is a powerful point. When mechanisms are in place without real sustainable change, we can have a situation in which a person is not able to stay in the role that they have got into because of the structural barriers.

Alys Mumford: I agree that quotas are not a magic bullet to solve the problem of representation. They can get us to a certain point, but we need support structures, institutional changes, culture change and pay increases to happen alongside that. As Ethan Young said, we cannot wait for that to happen organically. There was an increase of only 3 per cent of women elected at the most recent council elections compared to the previous set of elections. Change will not happen quickly enough for any of us. Women 50:50 is in favour of quotas and of other diversity mechanisms such as all-BME shortlists.

There is a challenge and there is more thinking to be done. Gender is the most theorised area of the subject. Having a gender quota is an obvious

choice. It goes with the population: if women are 50 per cent of the population, there should be equal representation for women. Junaid Ashraf made a point about what the numbers underneath the demographics would look like.

We need to do more thinking about race, disability, carers and people with other protected characteristics to ensure that we have an intersectional analysis of those things and intersectional mechanisms. There should not be a choice between increasing the representation of men of colour or of white women. That is not the choice. We need intersectionality throughout.

The Convener: Willie Coffey is joining us remotely.

Willie Coffey: Good morning to the panel. First, I thank Councillor Ashraf for mentioning Bashir. I was privileged to serve in the Parliament at the same time as Bashir, and I assure people that he is very much missed around the Parliament.

I will put to our councillor colleagues the question that I put previously to Councillor Evison, which was about how to get more people who may be working attracted to local government. Soryia Siddique said that she gave up her full-time job in order to become a local councillor. Junaid Ashraf mentioned that a lot of his friends and colleagues already earn well beyond what a councillor's pay is. How do we resolve that? Do we put the pay up from the £17,000 or £18,000 that it is and, if so, to what level? How do we attract people who are earning at the moment, and who have to support their family and pay a mortgage, into local government? Do we need to somehow match what a person's salary is so that they do not lose out financially, to enable them to do the councillor job full time, as Councillor Evison suggested we should? What is the solution? Perhaps Soryia and Junaid could offer a few thoughts.

Councillor Siddique: I agree that the remuneration needs to change; there is absolutely no doubt about that. I have a science background and I know that my remuneration at the council nowhere near matches that of my colleagues and fellow scientists working in the pharmaceutical industry and in education. I cannot make it up with a part-time job either.

In 2012, I was teaching, but I had to chair certain committees—let us say one committee every six weeks or one committee every four weeks. There was a requirement for continuity from my employer, who said, "Look, we do not really want to slot you out of this classroom or module that you are teaching. We want continuity." I was told that I could therefore either do all of them or none. Without a doubt, having more flexibility from my employer would have helped me.

I will not put any particular employer on the spot, but I have had feedback from my colleagues about the processes that they had to go through with their employers, whereby they had to say, "I am an elected member and I have certain rights in relation to serving the public." They said that they felt like they were being singled out from their colleagues and, sometimes, that they almost had to fight their corner. It is therefore about having greater understanding and more flexibility from the employer.

The idea of matching salaries was mentioned. If that was possible, we would get doctors, lawyers, scientists and engineers. There is a lack of people from the medical profession and a lack of scientists in decision making. Having broad and diverse representation in decision making is so important—that has certainly been the case during the pandemic. As Councillor Evison suggested, remuneration needs to be looked at. It would make local government much more inclusive and broaden representation, and it is so important that we have a representative voice for the communities that we represent in local government and at all levels of government.

Councillor Ashraf: First and foremost, we need to define the role of a councillor. We do not have a definition of what a councillor is supposed to do, and the structure of local government differs from local authority to local authority. For example, Glasgow City Council has more of a government or board role with higher positions, whereas North Lanarkshire Council has more of a defined committee structure with conveners attached to it. There needs to be a defined role for councillors.

I cannot look up a definition of my roles and responsibilities. As the COSLA spokesperson said earlier, over the past 10 years, it has therefore slowly become the case that everything is our job. People get in touch with me about issues with their general practitioner and about issues to do with their Twitter account. I have to deal with things ranging from the obvious issue of dog mess on the ground all the way up to high-level issues such as banking issues.

Their issues become my issues, because they bring them to me. If I do not deal with them, the constituent will not be happy; and if the constituent is not happy, I will not get re-elected or, at least, that constituent will not vote for me again. We need to define what our responsibilities are as far as the basic pay is concerned.

First and foremost, though, councillors' basic pay needs to be raised. The pay cannot be left at £17,000. I believe that we in Scotland require a process such as that at Westminster, where an independent regulatory body defines members' pay. We need someone to look at councillors' roles and responsibilities and define what their pay

should be. I could throw out a random number—say, £22,000, £23,000 or £24,000, or even the Scottish median wage, which is about £26,000—but, as I said first, the responsibilities of the councillor have still not been defined.

Beyond the basic pay, there need to be additional monetary incentives. In my first two years as an elected councillor, when I was still at university, I sat on three committees; when I finished university, I decided against going straight into a mechanical engineering job or a job with a finance company and instead spent a year looking at my political role and taking on additional responsibilities. Instead of sitting on three committees, I sat on six; instead of being involved with no public external bodies—most councillors might sit on one—I was involved with three; and instead of having no role in my political grouping, I took on the role of equalities officer. All of that impacts on the time that I have for myself, but a colleague who sits on two or three committees, has no involvement with external bodies and has no additional responsibilities, such as a role in our political grouping, gets paid exactly the same as me.

I am not saying that I am the hardest-working councillor. Maybe there are councillors who do significantly more—

The Convener: I am sorry to interrupt you, Junaid, but I must point out that we are running well over time, and other witnesses want to offer their own perspectives. Thank you so much for your contribution.

I want to make some time for comments from Ethan Young and Jessie Duncan, and then Paul McLennan will ask a final question.

Councillor Young: The role absolutely needs to be defined. I would take an organisational approach to this by asking: how do we recruit in Inclusion Scotland? We make the wages competitive, given the level of work that the person is expected to do, and we provide a clearly defined role description. Actually, the environment in the third sector is really competitive at the moment. There are lots of jobs going. You cannot advertise a chief executive officer role for £27,000, because you will not get anyone. They can get a job at a lower level with less stress or more money, or they can get a CEO job somewhere else for a lot more money.

We need to think about how other organisations do this, because there is good practice out there. We could, for example, get in recruitment consultants or, indeed, any other sort of consultant. The point is that we do not treat being a councillor as doing a job; we still see it as some public service thing. As a result, people think that councillors have no right to the sort of human

resources department that you might get in an organisation and which might give them support when they have had to deal with someone who might be, say, suicidal. Given the whole load of such issues, we need to shift focus and realise that being a councillor is a professional job that requires an organisational structure behind it and the sort of support that you would get in any other role.

Jessie Duncan: I want to make a very quick point that follows on from what Ethan Young said. There is the issue of pay, of course, but I would also highlight some other HR-style measures that you would expect to see in a workplace. In that respect, I go back to my earlier point about the guidance on family and parental leave. Having no really robust and competitive family leave policy is a massive barrier for women, and if they have to choose between their current job, which might provide generous and good-quality family leave provision, and a councillor role, women will not very often decide to leave their current job. Addressing that needs to be a priority.

The Convener: Thank you for that. We will move to a question from Paul McLennan.

11:45

Paul McLennan: One of the key things is the equal representation in politics toolkit that has just been launched. Three or four organisations that are represented here today took part in that. What engagement has there been with political parties and local authorities in that respect?

Also, you have all mentioned ways to encourage women and underrepresented groups to enter politics. Is there anything else that you would like to add at this closing stage?

I will start with Jessie Duncan—I know that Engender was involved in developing the toolkit.

Jessie Duncan: Yes, I am the development officer on the equal representation in politics project and all the organisations on this panel are members of the equal representation in politics coalition.

The toolkit was developed a couple of years ago. Part of my role has involved working with coalition members to further enhance and develop it and to do outreach with political parties to promote and support the use of it. There has been an overwhelmingly positive response to the toolkit from political parties and individuals that I have contacted. There is enthusiasm around doing something about the issue.

The toolkit is a set of completely free online resources for parties to use, which provides comprehensive self-assessment quizzes across seven topics that can support parties to identify

areas for improvement and measures that can be taken to support diverse representation and the involvement of underrepresented groups in politics.

Parties have been very enthusiastic about using the toolkit, but we really need to recognise the challenges in terms of time; many people in pivotal roles in political parties are volunteers who are time stretched. There are a million and one things to get on with in the volunteer role and in their life outside the party as well, so using the toolkit consistently and integrating its methodical way of reviewing internal practices and processes is a challenge for volunteer time.

Developing internally appropriate ways of using the toolkit is a great investment for parties to make because the work has been done by the organisations that created it. They want to provide support for parties because they recognise the pivotal gatekeeper role that parties have in creating more diverse representation.

There is information in the toolkit relating to a range of elements of party life, including candidate selection procedures, tackling abuse, and looking at how accessible activities, events and campaigning are. It is about looking at all manner of things that a political party does and setting out how the party can be as inclusive and open as possible to support as many people as possible to not only get involved but, crucially, to stay involved.

It is really positive that there has been huge enthusiasm within parties around using and accessing these resources, but we need to look at how to sustain that enthusiasm and build the toolkit into processes. When the toolkit is accessed, if people use one part and then they use another part, it can become a self-fulfilling thing so processes develop and become more accessible, with the ultimate impact of creating more diverse and representative institutions.

That covers the first part of the question. What was the other point?

Paul McLennan: I think that you covered the other point—it was about how we encourage other groups, but I think that you covered that really well in your answer.

Would other panel members like to add anything?

The Convener: I think that we have run out of time. Thanks, Paul, for your enthusiasm in wanting to get more feedback. I will just say that this is not the only session that we will hold on this issue. As a committee, we believe that it is a very important issue to address and to see progress on.

Thank you very much for coming this morning and I am sorry that you were not all able to get into

every little bit of detail, but it has been very helpful for us to meet you and to hear your perspectives.

I suspend the meeting to allow for a changeover of witnesses.

11:50

Meeting suspended.

11:55

On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome back. We will continue taking evidence on barriers to elected office. I welcome our third and final panel: James Kelly is the general secretary of the Scottish Labour Party; Louise McAllister is councillor for the Ellon and District ward in Aberdeenshire; Roslyn MacPherson is a former council candidate from the Western Isles; Councillor Kelly Parry is the local government convener of the Scottish National Party; Sheila Ritchie is the convener of the Scottish Liberal Democrats; and Councillor Cameron Rose is from the Southside/Newington ward in Edinburgh. I thank them all for joining us.

If witnesses wish to respond to a question or contribute to a discussion, they should put an R in the chat box. Please try to be succinct in your responses. Time is against us. We want to hear from everyone and we have quite a few questions. We might direct specific questions to someone in particular if that will be more relevant.

I will start with a question that could take us all day. Despite that risk, I would like the witnesses to tell us how and why they became involved in local politics. The person who answers first may have a harder time. Please think about the key moment that brought you in and made you realise that was something that you wanted to engage in.

I am looking at the order in which I called the names. James Kelly, could you make a start?

James Kelly (Scottish Labour Party): I have been involved in politics as a member of the Labour Party for 40 years. I have been a party activist, an election agent and an MSP, and I am now a party official.

You asked what drove me to be involved in elected office. Whatever their politics, everyone who joins a political party thinks and believes that what they are committed to will make the country, society and community that they come from a better place. What drove me forward was that Cambuslang, the community where I grew up and still stay, was decimated by factory closures. That got me involved in politics and I enjoyed that involvement. Over time, people approached me and asked me to stand for Parliament and I regarded that as an honour. I wanted to help make

my community a better place. That was what brought me into politics.

Councillor Louise McAllister (Aberdeenshire Council): That is an interesting question, and one that I can answer briefly. After sitting on the community council for some time, I was asked whether I would stand to be a councillor. Before that, I had been the chair of various groups in our local community. I was approached by a sitting councillor to see whether I would consider standing.

We had an event recently for a women-centric group. We discussed how we had all come to stand to be local councillors. Almost all the female councillors had been approached by someone else who asked them to consider standing. We were all invited to stand rather than stepping forward of our own volition, and we all thought that that was an interesting take on our perspective.

I was asked, as many people are, and that sparked my interest. After I looked into it more, I followed that up and stepped forward. The short and sweet answer is that I was asked.

Roslyn MacPherson: I will try to keep it brief. Like James Kelly, I believed that I could do some good in my community. I had strong opinions on lots of things and felt that I could be useful to the community. That pretty much sums it up.

12:00

Councillor Kelly Parry (Scottish National Party): I am grateful to be here, and I will keep my answer brief. I became a member of a political party—the Scottish National Party—in 2005. It was not really until I got involved in a local school closure that affected my son that I got involved in local politics; like many women in politics, I began by getting involved in my community. The independence referendum was a key catalyst for me taking the step to the next level, from being involved in politics to standing for elected office. I was elected in 2015 in a by-election, and again in 2017. When I stood, there was a push to encourage and empower women and to get more women elected. I look to stand again in 2022.

My decision was about my community and what I wanted to change locally, but it was about national politics as well.

Sheila Ritchie (Scottish Liberal Democrats): My approach was from a slightly different perspective. I joined the Liberal Party in Scotland in 1981. I approached it from a political-philosophical perspective—I think that the world is better if it is liberal—and I stood for office. Although it is not the reason why I am in this meeting today, I was a councillor from 1988 until

1996. I wanted to make my area more liberal in the way that it did things.

Councillor Cameron Rose (City of Edinburgh Council): Thank you for inviting me. I wanted to change the world. I looked at what was happening and thought that it was not going in the right direction, so I wanted to make a contribution, at least in my small corner, to changing that, although I am not sure that I have been very successful.

It was significant that I had the time. I had got to a stage in my life where my children were grown, my wife supported me and I was able to get involved. That is why I did it.

The Convener: Thank you for the responses. We will move on.

The next question is addressed to the three councillors who are with us. Again, answers should be kept brief, but that might be difficult to do for the first person taking the question. We would like to have the councillors talk us through what a normal week looks like. How much time do you spend on councillor duties, and how do you fit in other things in your lives, such as other work, running a business or caring responsibilities, which we heard about earlier?

In the interests of time, I will tack on to that another question. Can you tell us how much you are paid and whether you think councillors should be paid more for the work that they are doing? If so, how much should that be? I will start with Kelly Parry.

Councillor Parry: It is a great question, and what varied answers you are likely to have from the councillors. There is no average week when it comes to being a councillor. Every day can be different. In addition, council meetings tend to be structured in six-week cycles. That means that it can be difficult to predict what will happen in terms of your week-to-week business.

In terms of what that means for me, it is a challenge. I have two children and another paid role. That means that I have pretty much become an expert at juggling those roles, which can be difficult, and that absolutely is a barrier to entering local government for people with caring or family responsibilities. That said, it is essential that we have more women and other representative groups in local government, because the decisions that we make really affect all of our communities. We need that lived experience in our council chambers.

The work is complex and time consuming. As an opposition councillor, I earn the very basic minimum councillor salary, and I do not think that I would be able to survive financially if I did not have another paid role. I am lucky that my paid role,

which is in local government, is very flexible, but from personal experience and that of other colleagues, I know that it is incredibly difficult to find other part-time work that fits in with being a councillor. Not only that, some recruiters and employers can be put off when they see that you are a councillor.

I hope that that has been helpful.

The Convener: I do not want to put you on the spot, but are you willing to tell us how much you get paid as a councillor? Moreover—and I know that it is difficult to speak for yourself on this issue—what do you think we should be looking at as the right level of remuneration for the work that you do?

Councillor Parry: I am paid the same as every other opposition councillor with no special responsibility—in other words, £18,000 a year.

The question of what councillors should get paid is very interesting and often debated. I think that it is accepted that they should be paid more, but whether that should be achieved by increasing the councillor budget—and thus paying everyone more—or by distributing the budget differently is a political question. The budget should be bigger—we should not be trying to fix this conundrum by reducing the number of councillors—and we need more parity with MP and MSP pay. As has been pointed out, the demands on councillors have increased and, indeed, the public's expectations of councillors continue to increase, too. However, councillors are mostly working full-time hours with absolutely no staff support. If we are talking about parity, I would say that the work that councillors do with no support is at the same level as that of a back-bench MSP. I am not advocating that councillors' pay should be the same, but it should be much better than it is and somewhere in between where it is now and a member's pay.

Councillor Rose: Convener, I am not sure that I have an answer to your question about what we should be paid. I am a little hesitant about going too far down the route of professionalising councillors, though I agree with the comments about the £18,000 that opposition councillors get paid—and which, in fact, everyone but those who receive special responsibility payments gets paid. However, as I have said, I am just not sure that the answer is necessarily to give an amount that is commensurate with the hours worked. I just do not know what the answer is.

As for the shape of my life as a councillor, the key aspect is flexibility. Certain aspects such as the times of meetings are fixed, but I can fit all sorts of things around that. We work in the evenings, too; in some weeks, I might do 30 hours while in others I might do 60 or 70. The work does not stop on a Friday and it certainly does not stop

at 5 o'clock, but I can see my grandchildren or my children at some point on a weekday. There is a lot of flexibility.

There is also a huge opportunity to expand what you do. You can spend as much time as you want on things, and there is always a demand in that respect. However, as we have seen from the profile of different councillors and because of the circumstances that we have talked about, the time commitment that some can make can be a lot less.

Councillor McAllister: How long is a piece of string? That is how our working week looks. This is my only timed meeting today, although I have been in my little office at the bottom of the garden since 8.30, and I am likely to be here for the rest of the day, answering emails and chasing things up.

I have about 11 evening meetings a month involving schools and community councils. Although I might not be obliged to go to them, it is absolutely expected, and the people sitting on those community councils and school parent councils certainly expect me to turn up. There is that level of expectation, which falls far outwith our scheduled council meetings.

The level of work differs from week to week. For example, I sit on the education and children's services committee. As well as meetings, there are pre-meetings, and there are also the papers to read through beforehand. As anyone will know, they can run to hundreds of pages of detailed information, and that takes up a considerable amount of time if we are to do the job properly.

That is key. I know of councillors and, anecdotally, I have heard about councillors who seem to skate by doing the bare minimum that is required of them. Of course, that is not what we want; we want councillors who are dedicated to their course of work and to the commitments and pledges that they have made to the people who voted for them.

I have a second job—I am self-employed—and I absolutely could not survive on the councillor's income as it stands, which is £18,000 a year. How much do we need to increase that by? I would put my hat in the ring and say by at least a third. If we round up to £20,000, we are looking at closer to £30,000 to make it anything like an attractive proposition for anyone. As to whether we could ever match salaries, I do not know that that is the way to go. I think that it is essential that all councillors across the country are paid the same. Going down the road of matching salaries takes us into completely different territory.

I was having a conversation with a fellow councillor earlier today, and she mentioned that she has been in receipt of universal credit as a single parent of two children. She could not

survive on the councillor's income alone. That is a barrier, especially to women. Most single-parent families—but not all, by any means—are headed up by the mother of the children, and that presents an additional barrier, if you want to look at it from that perspective. She has now taken on an additional two-day-a-week role, so she is stepping back from universal credit, but she said to me that she is struggling, even working those additional two days on top of her councillor duties.

Have I answered everything? I think so.

The Convener: Yes, I think that you have. Thank you very much—thanks to all three of you.

Miles Briggs: Good morning to the panel, and thank you for joining us today. Given the limited time, I will ask you what are almost two double questions. First, what support did you receive from the political party that you stood for at the election? Secondly, what support have you received from the council to do the job as a councillor, or from any other external bodies?

Councillor Parry: That is a good question. I completely acknowledge the role that political parties themselves have to play in increasing diversity. In 2017 I felt very supported, and I know that others did. The Scottish National Party increased our women's representation in local government by around 15 per cent in 2017. That extra support was effective. Since then, we have run a number of programmes involving mentoring, inspiring and supporting not just women but other underrepresented groups. However, political parties can do only so much. In the party role that I play, I know that there has been a huge focus over the past year on ensuring that we maintain that representation, and increase it where possible.

12:15

There are two things that we have an issue with. The first is retention of councillors who come from underrepresented groups. You touched on that earlier, Miles. I know that a lot of the evidence is anecdotal, but I think that, for some of the reasons that we have pointed out, which are to do with pay and conditions and trying to gain other employment, we have lost along the way councillors who are women or who are from other underrepresented groups. Although we will not know until after the election, I also fear that more people from underrepresented groups will not stand again in 2022. That is an issue.

Secondly, the question on what councils have done is really interesting. I will offer a local perspective. Midlothian Council was the most gender-balanced council in Scotland after the local elections, but every senior position on the council is held by a man. Absolutely, therefore, there are things that councils can and should do.

A third thing, which I point out because it was raised earlier by a number of organisations, relates to some of the gaps in the Equality Act 2010, and what those mean that political parties can or cannot do. All-women shortlists are a good example; where we have already had equal representation for women, there has been an issue with their compatibility with the Equality Act 2010. It would certainly be good if the committee could look at having that devolved or at how we can change that.

The Convener: Thank you for that, Councillor Parry. I will call a stack of the other councillors and bring in Roslyn MacPherson as well.

Councillor Rose: I am tempted to respond by dissenting with some of the things that Kelly Parry just said. However, the answer to both parts of the question that Miles Briggs asked is, "Not enough"—neither from the party nor from the council.

I am a councillor in the City of Edinburgh Council. I have a personal assistant, who I share with five other councillors. There is always more to do, and I could do with more assistance. Similarly, at party level, more assistance would be welcome—but hey, that is life; that is where we are at. We cannot do everything.

Councillor McAllister: I stood in a by-election just in October of last year. I felt that I was hugely supported by my party, which is the Scottish National Party. In fact, I was urged forward by a couple of male colleagues, who particularly noted that, whereas men like to talk, women like to do. They felt that having more women in the mix was a positive step forward. I received nothing but encouragement and enthusiasm during my campaign. That was wonderful.

When it comes to support from the council, I have done everything from my little office since being elected. I have never sat in a meeting room with anyone, and I have had, I suppose, minimal contact with the council, perhaps because of that. When I speak to officers in the council, the general consensus is that I have managed brilliantly well and that I seem to be getting to grips with everything. However, I can assure you that, within about five weeks of being elected, I felt cut adrift. I did not share their confidence in my abilities, to a point at which I reconsidered my decision to stand and wondered what on earth I had done. I am glad to say that I have stuck with it, but I certainly think that the council could do more to support councillors.

That said, I appreciate that everything is being done at a distance. Perhaps were I in a building with people and able to pop down the corridor and speak with someone, that might make life a lot easier. We will see what next year brings.

Certainly, I am standing again in next year's election, so it has not put me off to any great extent.

I have taken part in a group that has looked at councillor induction. Whether someone has stood in a by-election or in the wider election of 2017, there are lots of gaps in there—of course there are, and that is always going to be the case. I do not think that an induction session or sessions can ever cover every aspect of life as a councillor. Some things have to be discovered along the way, as is the case for most people in whatever their line of work might be.

I would say that offers of help have always been there. I could probably have done with more practical help and, as I have said, perhaps that will change in 2022.

The Convener: Roslyn MacPherson, will you share your perspective from having stood as a candidate in the Western Isles?

Roslyn MacPherson: I have to disagree slightly with the party experience that has been expressed by other people, partly because my local branch was dormant, so I was not offered a lot of help when I stood. The majority of the help that I got came from elected members and the neighbouring branch, which was absolutely fantastic at bringing people down to campaign with me.

I actually felt quite abandoned by the wider party. When I did not get elected, I felt completely ignored. I stood twice, once in a by-election and once in the most recent full council elections, and, both times, messages went out from the party congratulating all those who had been elected while those of us who had stood and did not get elected were completely ignored. It was not an edifying experience and I fed back on it but, again, I got no feedback. I was quite disappointed in the party at that time.

Miles Briggs: My second question is about looking to the future. Given your experience on the council, what needs to change if councils are to put in place better support services? We know that some councillors do not have any secretarial support whatsoever while others do receive it. Could our witnesses comment on that?

The second part of my question is about personal security, which has, sadly, become an issue that we are acutely aware of. I know that most councillors will be working on their own. As parliamentarians, we are considering our security here, in the Scottish Parliament building, and the same is happening at Westminster. Do you have any reflections on that?

I ask Cameron Rose to start, and we will move around the panel.

Councillor Rose: I do not personally feel any angst or concerns about personal security. I regard my contact with members of the public, in all sorts of circumstances, as part of my job. Sometimes there are risks when you are dealing one to one with somebody who might be volatile, but, for me, that is part of the job.

What was the other part of your question?

Miles Briggs: It was about support services. You mentioned that you share someone with five other councillors.

Councillor Rose: Miles, it is just never enough. However, I recognise that resources are limited, as they are for many people. I would welcome more resources to deal with my pretty heavy workload, with 24,000 electors and 33,000 souls in my ward. I can never do all that I want and need to do to serve them adequately. More support would help, but I realise that there are other calls on resources.

Councillor Parry: Those are really good questions. When we have these conversations about personal security, I am often struck by how many male councillors say that it is not an issue. It absolutely is, certainly for women councillors, who, as we know, often face a higher level of abuse and criticism than their male counterparts.

I welcomed Police Scotland's response on personal security for councillors on the back of the tragic recent events at Westminster. However, you will probably be aware that a lot of the personal protections that councillors were asked to put in place meant having staff members present at surgeries, and, as we have already heard from various witnesses today, the staff support that is given to councillors varies from local authority to local authority. It is a political budgetary decision and perhaps that should not be the case. On the question about what needs to change, Miles Briggs is right that support should also be a fundamental part of that.

Interlinked with that, and another barrier to people standing, is the scrutiny of women on social media. We need to start moving away from the rhetoric around how it is our responsibility to keep ourselves safe. Of course, we want to make ourselves accessible to the public. However, we have to start looking at this from the point of view of challenging social media platforms. Specifically, Twitter is an issue. Perpetrators of toxic abuse on social media should absolutely be addressed as well.

Thank you for those very good questions.

Miles Briggs: Thank you for that.

Councillor McAllister, you outlined that you have been working from the bottom of your garden for most of the pandemic and since you were elected.

Specifically on different working means and methods, a lot of us have moved to working from home. Has doing so improved the way that you are able to undertake your role as a councillor?

In addition, on personal security, do you have any reflections on your concerns or on any information that has been given by Aberdeenshire Council?

Councillor McAllister: Again, those are good questions. I recently attended a session on lone working, at which we looked at personal safety. That was quite interesting. It was a discussion as much as anything else—we had a presentation, but the session was very much led by discussion among us councillors.

Interestingly, one thing that came forward was the seeming reliance on other people to look out for our safety when those people have nothing to do with us in our role as councillor. For example, a couple of councillors mentioned working from schools in the evening and feeling that having the janitor in the building provided them with a level of safety. However, as I pointed out, the janitor is in no way obliged to stand between a councillor and an angry constituent who might be presenting a threat.

We have to be very careful. We like to be able to rely on people to come to our aid if need be, but we cannot oblige anyone to do so, and we certainly could not hold anyone to account if they were not willing to put themselves at risk.

Working from the bottom of the garden has great advantages. Covid's silver lining has been in demonstrating to many people that we are able to work remotely—as I am doing for this meeting—using FaceTime, Zoom or whatever platform we are on and that we can still connect with people who have issues. Obviously, that protects everyone and keeps them safe. It is not ideal for 100 per cent of the time, but nothing is.

In addition, it allows us to manage our time much better. Going back to the example of evening meetings, when I do not have to attend in person, I can spend half an hour or thereabouts at three different meetings during the course of one evening. However, if I have to attend in person and travel time is involved, that half hour of travel time each way bites into the evening so that I can attend only one meeting.

There are therefore advantages, and it also ties in with our safety. The nights are now drawing in, as they say, and I can be out driving quite some distance around the countryside in rural Aberdeenshire in order to attend different meetings. It is dark when I go in and it is dark when I come out. Other people might be around but, if I want to hold back and speak with one person, I am leaving the building and the area via

that shady car park on my own at night. I have done that in a previous role and it has never caused me undue concern but, of course, we are all increasingly aware of the need to be really careful and look out for our own safety.

Speaking as a woman, I am quite accustomed to going into strangers' houses in my other role and sitting and having conversations with them. Whether subconsciously or otherwise, I always look after my personal safety. People know where I am going and when, and how long I expect to be there. I position myself closest to the door. I have taken all those matters into account for years, outwith my councillor role, and I have taken them forward with me.

Certainly, the presentation on lone working was useful. However, as I have said, we have all, anecdotally, had experiences in which we have suddenly realised that we are in a bit of a precarious situation.

When it comes to the support that is available, I did not realise that people could have PAs. Cameron Rose is awfully lucky, even if he has to share someone with five others. That would probably be superb. That said, we work with what we have—absolutely—as Cameron has rightly pointed out.

The Convener: Thank you for those responses. We move on to a question from Elena Whitham.

12:30

Elena Whitham: This is one of our final questions, and it is for those who are here representing their party as opposed to being here as councillors. I will direct it to Kelly Parry as the local government convener of the SNP, James Kelly as the general secretary of the Scottish Labour Party, and Sheila Ritchie as convener of the Scottish Liberal Democrats.

What are your parties doing to encourage a wider range of candidates for next year's local government elections? If you could be as succinct as you can be, that would be fantastic.

Councillor Parry: That is a good question. We have been working hard to increase the diversity of our candidates. We have worked with a number of organisations, many of which have given evidence here today.

We have had a mentoring programme or buddy system. We have held various events for recruiting and supporting underrepresented groups to make sure that we have the biggest pool that we can get. We have also tried to instil a culture change within our party, and we have made sure that that is a really important part of our recruitment process. In fact, I would say that that has been absolutely central to our recruitment process. We

completely appreciate that it is important to have a diverse cohort of councillors after the next elections. As I said earlier, we managed to increase our representation of women in 2017, and we hope to increase our representation of other underrepresented groups.

I guess that there is just one challenge to flag up. We can do our best to make sure that our candidate pool is the best that it can be, but we also need to focus on making sure that those candidates are selected and then elected, and that they can continue in their role.

Political parties can do a lot, and I genuinely feel that the Scottish National Party has done every single thing it could do to increase our diversity. However, the Scottish Parliament and, I guess, the committee can also do things to help all parties to realise their ambitions in that work, and they are around pay and conditions. My message is therefore, "Over to you, committee." I am quite sure that we are doing our bit, and I am sure that other parties are also doing their bit, so that is the message that I want to leave the committee with today.

James Kelly: Thank you for the question. Scottish Labour has said that 50 per cent of targeted, winnable seats have to be selected for women, so we are using all-women shortlists. We have also run a series of engagement events to try to get new people to come forward—not just women, but people from ethnic minorities and other groups that are underrepresented on councils. We have backed that up with specific training sessions so that we can not only support and encourage those who come forward but make sure that they have the back-up that they need to give them the confidence to take part in selections and the election campaign.

We have spoken to organisations such as Engender, and we are using its toolkit to provide support. We are also proactively ensuring that our local government committees follow up candidate applications, particularly when there is a shortfall in people from underrepresented groups coming forward.

I agree with what has been said about political parties having a role in bringing forward new people who are underrepresented currently, but the key issue that has come across in today's meeting is the £18,604 that councillors are paid. It does not represent a full-time salary, and that is the biggest constraint we are under when trying to bring a wide range of people forward. It also means that there are people in the system who are reluctant to retire or move on, so we do not get a refresh or new people.

Political parties need to take a strong leadership role here, but the fundamental issue that needs to

be addressed is the remuneration that is available to councillors. Only once that has been addressed will we get a wider range of candidates and councillors.

Sheila Ritchie: I totally agree with what James Kelly said about barriers to candidacy. Having done a fair bit of research within the party, I can say that the single biggest issue, particularly for young people and women, is the pay. It is somewhat the problem of being careful what you wish for, because we have completely changed the nature of councillorship. I sat through the earlier panel sessions, so I am fully conscious that you have engaged with those issues.

We have done a lot, short of moving to all-women shortlists. We were hammered in the 2016 Scottish Parliament elections and Willie Rennie led from the front in engaging with change, to the extent that we have achieved, from our very high numbers, 50:50 representation of men and women in the Westminster Parliament. That helps in a different way, because it gives us two really good role models. Role models are core to having women, in particular, see in political roles people that they recognise as being the same as themselves.

Part of the work that was done on gender diversity by Willie, which has subsequently been extended to groups of people with other protected characteristics, is our diversity fund, which was set up with a base level and is required to be increased by the rate of inflation every year. That money is spent on supporting candidates—preferably in winnable seats—who come from groups of people with protected characteristics. About 85 per cent of it is spent on women, but it is also available to candidates who are disabled or who come from minority ethnic backgrounds, and more of those people are coming forward.

We have two UK programmes that help. Our last federal president, Baroness Brinton, set up a future women leaders cohort that, every year, trains and brings on women not just at a parliamentary level but across the country. We also set up a campaign for gender balance in the party, which does mentorship training for approval and selection and generally provides additional support for women candidates—again, at every level.

Our women's group in the party has run a campaign of women supporting women over the past three or four years. When a woman is a candidate in a by-election, it is normal for hordes of Scottish Liberal Democrat women to turn up, help over weekends and provide additional support that might not otherwise be available.

That tags on to the 50:50 "Ask her to stand" campaign—I think that we are realising that

women need more than one ask to be a candidate. Received data says that, if a man is asked to stand, he is far more likely to say yes the first time, whereas a woman may need to be asked five or six times before she is persuaded that she wants to take that course of action.

One other thing to say that relates to earlier sessions is on data collection. We have had problems with the general data protection regulation in collection of the data that Inclusion Scotland asked of us. We have got past those problems, but that has involved us changing our data policies and, obviously, publicising those to the membership. We cannot require people to give us the information that we need in order to be 100 per cent there on collecting statistics about protected characteristics, but we are absolutely going for it this time, to the maximum extent possible. I like to think that, come the end of May next year, we will be able to provide better data.

That issue is as important at the selection stage as at the nomination stage—albeit that selection is becoming significantly less of an issue because of the barriers of pay, working conditions and culture.

The Convener: Thank you for your responses and for rounding off the panel session.

I thank our witnesses very much for making time to be with us. I am sorry that the schedule got a little shifted. Your responses have been very helpful in giving us perspectives from the lived experience of political parties and beyond.

As I said earlier, this session is one of several that we hope to carry out. I hope that, in the next sessions, we can start to move towards the kinds of concrete actions we can take.

I will suspend the meeting to allow the witnesses to leave.

12:40

Meeting suspended.

12:42

On resuming—

UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Continuity) (Scotland) Act 2021

The Convener: Item 5 is consideration of the Scottish Government's draft policy statement and draft annual report on the use of the keeping-pace power that is conferred on the Scottish Government by the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Continuity) (Scotland) Act 2021. The Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee has shared the documents with subject committees for comment, and it has invited us to submit comments to the Scottish Government. Do members have comments on the draft policy statement and the draft annual report?

Willie Coffey: In relation to paragraph 11 of the clerk's paper, it might also be worth asking the Scottish Government to outline to us the benefits of aligning Scots law with European law and to give us a regular update on progress with that—perhaps annually, if that is appropriate. That is all that I would suggest that we do in addition to the bullet points that are in the paper.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I have no comments to add, convener.

Elena Whitham: If we are to write to the Scottish Government as Willie Coffey has outlined, I would like to include a request that it ensure that local government be included in the common frameworks. We should make sure that that is outlined, from the committee's perspective.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that addition.

Do we agree to write to the Scottish Government, highlighting those comments and points of clarification?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Thank you. As agreed earlier in the meeting, we will consider item 6 in private.

12:45

Meeting continued in private until 13:00.

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The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Thursday 23 December 2021

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

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