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DRAFT

Public Service Reform Committee

Comataidh Ath-leasachadh nan Seirbheisean Poblach

Thursday 5 November 2026

Session 7

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PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM COMMITTEE
10th Meeting 2026, Session 7

CONVENER

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

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Michelle Campbell (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
*Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab)
*Lorna Slater (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
David Smith (West Scotland) (Reform)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

George Thorley (Mercat Group)
Keith Yates (Mercat Group)

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Public Service Reform Committee

Thursday 5 November 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:32]

Interests

The Convener (Bob Doris): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 10th meeting of the Public Service Reform Committee. I particularly welcome Carol Mochan, who is not new to committees but is new to this particular one. Carol, as this is your first committee meeting since being appointed to the committee, I invite you to declare any relevant interests, in accordance with section 3 of the code of conduct.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Thank you, convener. I am glad to be here. It is worth mentioning that I am a member of Unite the Union and Unison.

The Convener: Thank you. I am sure that that will be helpful as we steer through public service reform.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

09:33

The Convener: Under our next agenda item, we must decide whether to take item 4 in private. Do we agree to take that item in private?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Delivering Public Service Reform

09:33

The Convener: Our next agenda item is an evidence session on delivering public service reform. I welcome George Thorley and Keith Yates, who are both from the Mercat group. Thank you, gentlemen, for coming along.

We will move straight to questions. We are keen to draw on your wealth of experience not just in local authorities over the years but on the wider public sector. The most obvious question to ask is about the First Minister's statement that kicked all this off. He said:

"some of our councils are too small to be strategic and some are too big to be local."—[*Official Report*, 1 September 2026; c 32.]

Was that a pretty reasonable statement to make? If so, will you elaborate on why that is the case?

George Thorley (Mercat Group): I think that that statement is a bit simplistic. We have considered the five-year programme for government, which says certain things about structures and organisations, and the proposals for reforming the public sector—although the proposals say that they are about the public sector, they are really about local government.

Our experience goes back to the 1975 local government reforms and, more intensively, the 1996 reforms, which were based on detailed analysis of the issues affecting local government. The commission that was appointed at that time concluded that local government—which comprised nearly 200 local authorities, or perhaps more—was not too big but was not fit for purpose, because it could not do the things that it needed to do. The judgment was not about size. There was a large number of differently sized entities in local government at the time—there were counties, cities, large boroughs, small boroughs and districts.

I was therefore surprised that the First Minister chose to use size as his initial point in generating reform. Our view is that it would probably be better to think about the whole public sector in Scotland and consider the sort of landscape that we want. Do we want 32 councils and 135 quangos spending the billions of pounds for which you, as parliamentarians, are responsible? How should we organise things? We should ask those questions rather than prejudge things.

Our view is that the First Minister's statement was a bit like a curate's egg—it included some great ideas and some questionable ideas. We will get into that as we go on. To answer your question, I found the statement to be a strange starting point for talking about the way in which local government is organised in Scotland, with its 262,000 employees working 24/7, 365 days a year, to deliver more than 200 services to the public.

The Convener: I will reword my question slightly. Are some councils not strategic enough, irrespective of their size, and are some not local enough, irrespective of their size? Would that be a reasonable reflection? Is there a case for reform?

Keith Yates (Mercat Group): First, I thank the committee for the invitation to the meeting. George Thorley and I have worked together for many years. We will agree on most things, but we will disagree occasionally. I suspect that that is the dialogue that you are looking for today.

The one thing that I will add to what George Thorley said is that there is huge diversity in Scottish communities and in how they hang together. There are different spheres of influence. The sphere of influence in, say, Orkney or Shetland is clearly Orkney or Shetland, because they are small places with about 22,000 or 23,000 people, whereas Edinburgh and Glasgow are large city regions that have populations of up to 1 million people.

I do not totally accept the First Minister's statement that some councils are too small and some are too large, but one could argue that Orkney and Shetland, for example, must be strategic because of how things happen there. The First Minister's statement was about beginning to address the issue that has limited them in the past. The difficulty is that, in a relatively small area, the council—the island authority in those cases—and quite a number of what George Thorley described as quangos deliver services, but they cannot recruit, for example, the number of human resources or information technology staff needed for each organisation, so it would be better to bring things together.

The argument is about whether the most effective way to run small or large authorities is by having councils running the majority of services—although they run far fewer than they did in the past—and a range of non-governmental agencies coming in with their own priorities, which do not always match those of the council. What I am saying is that there is a lot of confusion about this. It is not a case of councils being either too small or too big. It is about considering what is right to deliver services in the most efficient and effective way and in a way that communities understand.

The Convener: That was helpful. I am sure that we will come back to that issue later, but I want to move things on a little bit.

In yesterday's debate in the chamber, I made the point that a lot of public service workers out

there are doing really important and valuable jobs. There might be a more strategic way of delivering the outcomes that we want to see, and that might mean change for them, but, nevertheless, they provide a valuable public service. What do you think local authorities are doing well under the current structures to facilitate that and what changes might you like to be made? After all, we are talking about structural reform, which I get is about delivering outcomes rather than changing the structures just for the sake of change. Mr Thorley, what are councils doing well, and what kinds of changes could improve outcomes for the communities that they serve?

George Thorley: The current structure of local government, with its 32 unitary councils, was not based on anything other than, I think, a political desire by the Government of the day to get rid of regional councils. There was a statement that "We want to introduce a single tier of local government", but in the process of creating that single tier, of 32 councils, a whole range of what had been local government services were quangoised. As a result, responsibility for water and sewerage, police, fire, transport, children's reporters and a range of other services were lost to local government.

As former chief executives of local authorities who served in regional councils, too, we could see the contrast in capability and capacity with the smaller authorities—by "smaller", I mean that the range of functions was narrower in the new authorities. The weaknesses of the current system have been partly addressed by the creation of city deals and regional growth deals, which have brought local authorities together with both Governments in an attempt to deal with a range of issues. For those key strategic services that still lie within local government—excluding water and sewerage and strategic roads, which used to be maintained by local government—the move towards city deals has been very positive.

If you look at the large number of inspection agencies that review the work of local government—of course you can do that, given your responsibilities—you will see that the education service is struggling. That is partly because of the funding allocated to local government, but it is also about there being value in the service being operated collectively at a higher level. We both worked for Strathclyde Regional Council—Keith Yates, in addition, worked for Central Regional Council—and we had a very powerful, strong and effective education department. To reinforce that point, when standard grades were introduced, the Scottish Office used Strathclyde to pilot them, because we had the scale and capacity to do so, and people often say it is recognised that their success as a way of measuring attainment was partly because the policy was able to be tested within a large organisation such as Strathclyde Regional Council.

I then went to South Ayrshire Council. Strathclyde Regional Council employed 103,000 people, while South Ayrshire itself had a population of 110,000 people, and I quickly realised that the strength of smaller local authorities was their ability to act quickly and be fleet of foot in changing and adapting policies and allocating funding quickly.

The Convener: Can you give us an example of that, Mr Thorley? It would be helpful to show how smaller structures can be more fleet of foot.

09:45

George Thorley: Examples would include the approach taken to the management of the organisation. We worked in organisations that had had 21 to 25 departments; with the exception of those that were transferred to quangos, we could have had a repetition of about 20 departments. Instead, we created a structure of seven departments simultaneously; they had slightly different names, but the idea was to focus not just on services but on themes in local government.

In one of the major changes that we introduced, and which I think highlights the ability to think quickly and radically, we changed the structure of how the 6,000 employees—as there were in my case—were managed. There was an equivalent radical move to reduce the number of committees to about five, each of which was based on broad themes. So, the organisation itself became very radical.

I was there for nine years. Some of the initiatives that we brought in over that time look kind of dated now, but, for example, we created a thing called a cyber centre and introduced the people of South Ayrshire to web access. That might seem ridiculous these days, when everyone in the room has a phone that you can go anywhere in the world with, but in those days, it was unique. That did not happen at regional council level—it was a policy that emerged through discussion between officials and elected members, and money was invested in it.

The Convener: Thank you. When you mentioned phones, I looked around the room, and I saw that no member was on their phone. Thank you all for being attentive—I just thought that I would check that. [*Laughter.*]

I have a final question, and then I will bring in the deputy convener, Michelle Campbell. I know that the Mercat group is concerned about the pace of reforms and getting the underlying principles. I do

not want to explore that in any detail now, as colleagues will do that later, but one of the alternative approaches that has been suggested is an evolutionary—or even incremental—reform of local democracy. I am not going to use the term "low-hanging fruit"—I hate that expression—but what are the obvious services, themes or topics that might be the early adopters of doing something different, instead of just changing everything at the same time?

Keith Yates: First of all, I would go back to the Wheatley commission, which took nine years from its establishment in 1966 until the 1975 reorganisation. It took three years for the commission to report; two years for the then Scottish Office to come up with what it thought of the commission; another two years for consultation; and then another two years for implementation. Moreover, the 1996 reorganisation took five years from when Ian Lang first announced a reform of local government.

Therefore, this sort of thing takes a long time, and we would argue that you should adopt a more evolutionary approach. There might be, as you have suggested, some low-hanging fruit here. First of all, as George Thorley has previously indicated, the 32 unitary councils do not exactly match up with geographical areas or spheres of influence, and there are four or five cases in which you could bring different councils together.

Indeed, the councils have already been negotiating on whether it makes sense to do that. The obvious example is my area of Stirling and Clackmannanshire. We almost did it in 2007, but there were elections and multimember wards got in the way. Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire have been talking about it for a long period of time, too; in fact, they already comprise a city region, so they are almost there. Ayrshire is in the same position, and the fourth area is one that I mentioned in our recent report. Members might have different feelings about this, but the rapid decline in the population of Inverclyde, in particular, has caused huge financial difficulties for that area and there might be merit in Inverclyde and Renfrewshire coming together. All of those would be evolutionary changes, but they could take place, ideally with the co-operation and the commitment of the local authorities themselves.

As for examples elsewhere, some of the city region areas perhaps do not match the geography of the areas. I do not know whether Murdo Fraser will agree, but it seems to me that Perth and Kinross is a city region in its own right and distinctly different from Dundee, and to have that whole area as one city region does not necessarily match the realities. There are debates like that to be had.

Finally, if you go back to the changes that took place in 1996, you will see that there were certain things that did not make a great deal of sense. I think that the previous Deputy First Minister made the point that the Highland Council is very large and that the whole area from Fort William outwards actually links to Argyll a lot more than it links to Inverness. Similarly, Rutherglen and Cambuslang have always been part of Glasgow, not necessarily South Lanarkshire. I know that I am getting into difficult areas now, but there are several other regions where the geographies perhaps do not match and adjustments could be made.

To answer your question, those are the sorts of evolutionary things that could be done with the co-operation of local authorities and without any great cost, and they could be done in months or a few years, rather than in eight, nine or 10 years, which is what the timescale might be if you go for something as radical as what is currently proposed for local government reform.

The Convener: I am pleased that I asked that question, because I now understand what you mean by "evolutionary". Further, as a former regional MSP for Glasgow, covering Rutherglen and Cambuslang, I can say that they are fiercely independent communities and I would not seek to second-guess what their thoughts on all of this are.

With that, I will move on swiftly and bring in our deputy convener, Michelle Campbell.

Michelle Campbell (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP): First, I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am a sitting member of Renfrewshire Council.

Keith Yates has already started to speak about this point, but I would like to hear further views from both of our witnesses on it.

I was really interested in the alternative approaches that you mentioned and, obviously, the opportunities that exist in relation to cities specifically. However, in terms of the opportunity that public service reform offers, I appreciate the concerns that have been raised, which I think are reasonable and valid, but I think that the historical and cultural links around places such as Renfrewshire, Inverclyde and East Renfrewshire offer a unique opportunity to bring things in those areas together. I loved what you said about the diversity of communities, how they hang together and the different spheres of influence.

George Thorley, I appreciate the concerns that you have expressed around the issue of geography, but where do you feel the opportunities are that will allow communities to thrive? I appreciate that you have touched on that issue slightly, and you may not want to comment on

specific communities, but I wanted to mention the one that is the most local to me. As well as representing part of Renfrewshire, I represent Cardonald, which is part of Glasgow. Having represented those areas for six months, I feel that, although there are connections between those areas and they complement each other in the city region—some good work has been done in that regard—there are also differences, and, when it comes to the regionalisation of councils, there are other opportunities that should be considered.

My question to both witnesses is, do you think that that is a reasonable view? What are your thoughts on the matter, given the experiences that you have had over your careers?

George Thorley: I will be controversial and say that that is the wrong starting point. Geography is the end point of this public sector reform process. I think that the right starting point involves thinking about the principles that underlie the substantial changes that are proposed. However, that is absent from the First Minister's statement. There has been no statement of principles.

We have advocated five principles, and none of them are new. They are all based on the Christie commission's principles, which were advocated 10 years ago. They are very straightforward principles about how you, as parliamentarians, should choose to organise the public sector in Scotland.

My obsession, if that is the right word, is prevention. If you, as the Public Service Reform Committee, were to decide that we should reform how we organise organisations in Scotland on the basis of prevention, because preventing things from happening rather than dealing with outcomes is the future, what would that look like? That would be a fascinating challenge, and that is the line that we have advocated.

We do not think that a radical reform of local government is needed. We need an evolution. If councils want to merge, that is great. The costs are minimal. Radical reform of local government, as proposed in the Government's current document, is not going to achieve the objectives. However, if you start off with principles, you can end up with decisions about place and how we organise things locally. That is the key.

Without that, what are we changing things for? Is it just to change the geography? That might help a little, but it is not the solution. The problem is that people love geography. They love talking about communities, boundaries and villages and towns. However, that is not the issue. The issue is about the principles that are behind the changes. I always remind myself of the four principles. One is people—that is, that government should be delegated to the lowest level that it can be to be as efficient and as accountable as possible. Another is partnership, which should be the driving force across all public sector organisations. Another is performance, which is the key thing. We must get better performance from the £68 billion that the Parliament will spend this year.

Of course, the process starts with prevention. Elsewhere in the United Kingdom, prevention will be the driving force of the budget. That is about tackling problems at the start. Why do we always end up tackling the end point of problems? Why not go back through the life cycle of the problem and deal with it at the start, so that we do not have to have endless rescue missions, with the public sector organised on that basis?

That is not an answer to your question, but it is a challenge, to say: forget geography, because you will go down an endless line of cul-de-sacs on that. Go back in time or back in the process and ask what principles we want to put in place to underlie this amazing opportunity that the Government seems to have given us.

Michelle Campbell: I assure you that I do not think that what you have said is controversial. Given the Christie principles, your reflections on your experience and where you feel that the priorities are, I think that you have made a reasonable statement, so please be assured that your comments are welcomed.

Keith, do you have anything to add, whether in relation to my points or some of the points that George Thorley has made?

Keith Yates: The only thing that I would add is on your points about Renfrewshire, Inverclyde and East Renfrewshire—this also relates to the convener's comment about Cambuslang and Rutherglen. If we were starting from first principles, we would argue that, in extending the Glasgow unitary authority to include all the extensions to Glasgow, that would include East Renfrewshire, much of West Dunbartonshire and much of East Dunbartonshire. Logically, that is the city, given the way that it has developed. However, we have the existing local authorities and, as George Thorley said, one of the strange things that happened after 1996 is that the more progressive councils were often the smaller ones, for the very reason that George gave, which is that they could be more fleet of foot than the larger councils, which were struggling with all sorts of other issues.

To give an example, as George Thorley said, we brought down the number of directorates from 15 or 16 to about seven, which was regarded as pretty radical at the time. We received letters from the directors of architects and the people dealing with sport and the legal profession asking how we could possibly not have a director of this, that and the other. However, we were trying to eliminate the silos that existed in local government, whereby

people in each of the professions held dearly to what they were doing and wanted the profession to work in that particular way. By bringing them together, we created the ability to be more responsive to what communities felt was needed.

What I am really trying to say goes back to geography to an extent. It is that the councils that are outwith Glasgow City Council at the moment have sometimes developed in very effective ways. They have broken down silos and done good things, and they would find it very hard if they were brought into a larger city, as has been suggested in the proposal for the six to 10 regions that would, in effect, run most of the services.

As George said, principles are very important, and we need to consider what can be done relatively easily with the agreement of the local authorities. There would need to be some incentives. First, some of the services that are currently run by the quangos, if I can use that term, could be gifted back; and, secondly, some additional finance could be made available to allow councils to come together in a positive way. In the longer term, that would create savings, too.

10:00

Michelle Campbell: I appreciate that my last question is a large one. On resilience, what is the one thing that would best be done as a first priority—apart from setting out the principles, the need for which you mentioned?

George Thorley: Can you help me understand the word “resilience”?

Michelle Campbell: For example, there have been local government reforms in the past, and you have been through those changes and dealt with the practicalities involved. From that learning and your experience, given the opportunity that the current reform process presents, where have there been missed opportunities? Given the length of time for which previous changes have been in place, what opportunities are there to create more resilience to allow for future proofing and for better, more effective decisions? I do not want to shape the question in too hard a way, because I want to hear your reflections on the first thing that you would prioritise. What is the one thing that always niggles and that needs to be done?

George Thorley: I need to correct something that I said earlier. The 1975 changes abolished 400 local authorities. I was working in Strathclyde at a relatively junior level at the time, and the challenge for that organisation was to aggregate large boroughs, small boroughs, counties and Glasgow city into the new entity. You will not see this in any written paper, but the feeling was that it took the council five years to get everything sorted. It needed to merge financial, HR and property systems—everything. All the hundreds—or rather thousands, I think—of contracts inherited by the regional council had to be sorted.

Let us move forward to 1996, when that large, highly functioning organisation was split into 12. I was in one of the 12—Keith Yates was in Central region by that time. The challenge that I, my team and the politicians in South Ayrshire faced was, “Where’s the financial system?” There was not one. There was a regional council system, but that was not based on 12 notional unitary councils; it was based on sub-regions. For some authorities—although, thankfully, not the one that I worked in—it ended in a bit of chaos. We did not have time to sort it out. Eventually, it was sorted out, but, in the meantime, there were casualties.

Therefore, part of the answer to your question is to ask: if, in aggregating, it took a long time to get things sorted out, and, in disaggregating, it took a long time to sort things out, why bother? Why not allow councils to merge voluntarily and just do things together? Am I going back into the geography again? Maybe not.

To answer your question about resilience, you reduce risks by merging, but they should be voluntary mergers, not top-down mergers. It should not be a case of saying, “You three councils will merge.” If the councils say that they do not want to merge, it should not be a case of saying, “Well, you will, because we say so.” That approach might not work. To my mind, the solution to the problems that we experienced over the previous two reorganisations is to encourage voluntary activity—voluntary mergers between authorities. If that can be sweetened, that is fine, but that should be the case rather than authorities being punished. I do not know whether that answers your question on resilience.

The Convener: I apologise for cutting across you, but I am conscious that we have had lots of time to explore these themes, but time is now slipping away quickly. I know that there is lots that you want to say, but more succinct answers will allow me to bring members in to raise with you all the matters that they want to.

No pressure, Keith—I apologise, but I will hand over to you after saying that.

Keith Yates: If I may quickly add to what was said, perhaps it is about not just resilience but a word that is going round at the moment that you will all have heard: “persevilience”, which is about asking what opportunities arise from good resilience. In this context, what you get from that is an increased pace of change. Since the 1996 reorganisation, things have slowed down very significantly as a result of the fact that there are now so many organisations. For example, if you want a project, you have to deal with the way that

public services now have to take decisions. I have described that process as a bit of a Rubik's cube. Bringing public services together more effectively at local level will create the opportunity to make decisions at speed. Not being able to do that has held Scotland back for the past, dare I say it, 20 years.

The Convener: Alex Kerr has a supplementary question.

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): I thank our witnesses for their incredibly helpful and insightful evidence. I will come back to some of these issues later, but, first, I must declare an interest as a councillor in Glasgow City Council. I am also the MSP for Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse in South Lanarkshire, which is part of the Glasgow economic area and the South of Scotland parliamentary region—so go figure.

My question is about the geography aspect. Later, I will ask about the why rather than the where, but I am keen to push a bit on this aspect. You have mentioned that the 1996 reorganisation that created 32 local authorities was largely a political change and one that was potentially about gerrymandering particular areas.

We have talked about the voluntary approach, which I understand, but you are also talking about merging, and there is an understanding that, over time, we must come to a position of having fewer bodies. In the case of some of the councils that you mentioned, it is probably not in their interests to merge, because they would then not have to contribute council tax for services in neighbouring regional local authorities. I am concerned that what you are saying, although perfectly reasonable, would be misrepresented by people who do not wish to see any changes to the current structure. You are suggesting a carrot, which is obviously the best way to do it, but, if some local authorities are refusing to move with the times, does there come a point when we need a stick?

George Thorley: Here is a short answer to that question: look at what has happened in Manchester. There, there are 10 local authorities, which exist as local authorities with their own political structures, mayors and all the other things. Because they are metropolitan councils, they have the full range of council functions. A good number of years ago, they agreed to just work together and create a combined authority.

I recently spoke to the chief executive of the City of Edinburgh Council, who you could no doubt call to give evidence. He said that he had worked for one of those boroughs and that, when he joined, he was told, "You work for this borough, but you also work for Greater Manchester. Think Greater Manchester: work locally, think Manchester." I thought, "Wow." Subsequently, it had an elected mayor. We all know about Andy Burnham, who was a very successful mayor of that area. I do not want to take anything away from his achievements, but, in my opinion, the real success was the agreement of the 10 authorities to work together. They said, "Let's have a common education policy. Let's have a common transport policy." They are still independent entities, but they agreed to combine, and that has been the basis of all the subsequent changes in England.

With regard to the Government's proposal, the creation of very large authorities of 500,000-plus people is controversial, but on the basis of what has happened in Manchester, it is a cracking model to look at. Why does it work? It seems to work. Manchester is now the fastest growing city in Britain outside London. Wow.

Alex Kerr: I want to probe you on that a bit, because that is a situation in which people have agreed to come together voluntarily. I am asking what we do if that does not happen.

George Thorley: If it does not happen, we have to find out why. Is it just a party-political thing? Is there a fundamental difference of agreement? We already have 10 city and regional growth deals in Scotland, which are working. The one that you mentioned in Glasgow involves 11 authorities, I think, which have voluntarily combined. They do not belong to a big organisation, but they have voluntarily agreed to work together.

Alex Kerr: I am aware of how much time I am taking for a supplementary question, but do you want to add anything briefly, Keith?

The Convener: I am conscious that your question was a supplementary, and I am not sure what it was hanging on. I have been far too soft. I think that your supplementary question, which took quite a while to deliver, was basically: should there be compulsion to merge at any point, or should the whole process be voluntary? Keith, I think that that is ultimately what Alex was asking.

Keith Yates: Compulsion should be a last resort, but there are certain circumstances in which it could be considered. For example, I mentioned Inverclyde and Renfrewshire. If the financial position becomes so unpalatable in those areas, perhaps there will be an opportunity to compel them to merge, but it would be a last resort, because it is far better to have organisations working together and committed to the changes that need to take place.

The Convener: Keith, that was very clear, but I apologise, because we have to move on.

Lorna Slater (Edinburgh Central) (Green): You likened all the different public bodies trying to get things done to a Rubik's cube, which is

certainly a message that I hear from some of our councillors. In 1996, many of the powers of councils were given to public bodies, and those quangos have only grown since then. Should we reverse that? Are there key powers that should definitely come back under democratic oversight?

Keith Yates: If we are thinking about the economy, there are two key areas. First—George Thorley is probably more of an expert than I am on this—there are colleges and careers, and some of the economic development functions that have been concentrated initially through Scottish Enterprise and the enterprise companies. Those functions will be more effective if they are delivered locally, provided that there is the capacity in the council to do that, although some councils might be too small, despite what I said earlier, to be able to do that effectively. Those are things that could happen.

The second area is more controversial. At the time of the Wheatley commission, public health was a responsibility of local government. As part of public sector reform, the Government is talking about splitting health in Scotland into two health boards, as opposed to—I think—eight at the moment. Is there an opportunity for some of the health and social care partnerships to go back to local authority areas and to be managed through local democracy, as opposed to the current partnership agreements, which sometimes slow down the pace of progress?

George Thorley: No justification was given for colleges of further education, which were built, owned and operated by local government, to be taken away from it. There was no white paper, no green paper and no discussion. Colleges were told, "You're now there; now you're out." It was a very strange decision.

This is about the curate's egg that was mentioned earlier. One of the great ideas that is mentioned in the proposals paper is the creation of a strong regional entity to deal with economic development, which is what the country needs. Far greater levels of growth are needed. Keith Yates was right, because it was difficult enough working in Strathclyde region to generate economic development when we had the levers of so many services, but it is almost impossible under the current system, when we have such an array of quangos. Each quango has its own board, its own chief executive, its own line to administer and its own set of policies.

Returning colleges, which deal with skills and development, to an environment that could include the business community makes sense. Other functions to consider include those of the two enterprise companies: Highlands and Islands Enterprise and South of Scotland Enterprise. I do not include Scottish Enterprise, because that has a national role. That is one of the issues that we expect the committee to look at. In John Swinney's statement, he said that there are some public services that work well "at a national level", while

"others are best delivered at a regional or more local level."—[*Official Report*, 1 September 2026; c 32.]

However, there is no discussion in any documents that I have seen about what works well at a national level. Do the 134 quangos work well at a national level? Creating two health superquangos and one superenvironmental quango is going in the wrong direction. The number needs to go down the way, not up the way.

To answer your question and to reinforce Keith Yates's comment, colleges would fit in well with a stronger regional entity, in order to encourage economic development, and the same is true for the two local enterprise companies.

Lorna Slater: Super. We have talked a little bit about pace. The Scottish Government has committed to pursuing reform at a very fast pace. Is that approach doomed to fail? Is it possible to do it in that way? I get that you do not think that it is a good idea, but how can the process be made to work—or is it simply unworkable?

10:15

Keith Yates: I think that it is doomed to fail if it is as comprehensive as is suggested in the paper. We would argue that, if you work with the grain of organisations, you can move a lot faster and make the necessary progress.

As an aside, on pace, we should not forget about the importance of energising communities. One of the recommendations of the original Wheatley commission in 1969 was that community councils should have the ability to manage, as agents of local government, some services. I think that George Thorley mentioned that there were 420 councils prior to 1975. Many of them performed functions such as grass cutting and looking after monuments and cemeteries. Some of those functions could perhaps return to a local level, but that could not happen under the existing system.

I am not suggesting that there should be another tier of local government. I am suggesting that, with the agreement of the local authorities, some functions could be carried out at the local level. At the moment, we have about 1,347 community councils, 17 per cent of which do not meet because they do not consider it worth while simply dealing with consultations. A large number of development trusts have been established and have done some amazing things, very often in small islands or small communities. Giving them, along with the community councils, the powers to

become agents of service delivery could be a real breakthrough.

Such a change would not cost very much. One aspect of life is that many people are working from home, and there is such rich diversity of people with different skills in each community. Good ideas stem from people from different backgrounds coming together, engaging in debate and coming up with solutions. Often, solutions are best innovated at the local level.

Over the past 40 to 50 years, Scotland has missed out by not utilising communities to drive forward change. However, we have seen some really good examples of where that has happened in different parts of Scotland. Giving communities power to drive forward and become agents of progress and growth is important, but that is not really mentioned in the paper.

Lorna Slater: I am really glad that you said that, because you answered what was to be my next question, on community councils.

For my final question, I will ask about the point that you made about size. There is a democratic principle about how many people should be represented by any particular elected representative, and my understanding is that European local councils are much smaller. There is a much greater chance that people there will know who their councillor is. I am ashamed to say that I do not know who all my councillors are—one is a Green Party member, but I do not know the others.

We often do not know who our councillors are. It is much harder for councillors to close a nursery school or do something unpopular if, for example, people are running into that councillor in the supermarket every week or know where their kids go to school. If your councillor is someone whom you have never met, never heard of and will never see, they are simply not able to be as connected. Do you have views on size with respect to the electorate per electoral representative?

George Thorley: It depends on the role that you see local government having in our society. If, as we clearly need in Scotland, there is to be a better structure to drive economic development, and if the proposals tackle that by saying that we need a regional level of local government, that is fine.

I worked at Strathclyde Regional Council, where there were 103 councillors. Strathclyde was always attacked for being far too big, but the numbers were based on a city region. At the time, the city of Glasgow had 1 million people and Strathclyde had 2.5 million. No one seemed to complain when a range of services were transferred to the Scottish Government. At that point, the bodies taking on services became super big, representing 5.4 million people with no local democratic accountability.

You are correct that local government units in Europe tend to be smaller in population size, but you need to look at where local government sits in the context of those countries. Do those countries expect local government to deliver? What do they expect it to deliver? Do those countries want local councils to be innovative, forward-driving and clever organisations that lead the country's economic growth, or are they parish pumps?

Functions need to be allocated according to accountability and then size. I do not think that it is useful to say that, because the average population size for a council in France is 40,000, that should apply in Scotland. We have to be cleverer than that and not have standard templates. We can have different solutions in different parts of Scotland. We already have that in the suggestion that Shetland, Orkney and the Western Isles should have public sector entities, which is a great initiative. Why not spread that model to other councils? Everyone in Shetland knows their councillor, because only 20,000 people live there.

Keith Yates: There are 22,000 people and 22 councillors in Shetland.

George Thorley: It would be impossible to apply that to all local government in Scotland. I had the figure, but I think that we already have more than 2,000 councillors in Scotland; should we now have 20,000 councillors, because we want to ape what is happening abroad? No. We need to understand the function of local government and then decide on the appropriate system of democratic accountability.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning, gentlemen, and thank you for an interesting conversation so far. I will ask you about three things and I will try to be brief.

Lorna Slater raised the role of councillors, so I will start by asking about that relevant topic. Just last week, I was talking to a former regional councillor; I am pleased to say that a few of them are still surviving. His reflection was that it was a nightmare when he was a regional councillor, because no one understood the difference between the responsibilities of a regional councillor and those of a district councillor and, therefore, he had to say to half the people who came to his surgeries, "It is nothing to do with me. You need to see someone else." The advantage of having a unitary authority is that the councillors are responsible for everything.

The Scottish Government has proposed that we have a regional tier and a community tier. Unless you can shed any more light on that, I do not think that we are clear as to what the role of councillors

would be. There is a suggestion that councillors would sit on both bodies, but I do not think that we have been told what that would mean for their hours of work, their responsibilities or their remuneration. Do you have any reflections on what councillors would be doing?

Keith Yates: Having tried to read and understand the Government's report, I think that your guess is as good as mine. My assumption is that councillors would carry out the functions at community level in the way that the smaller councils operate at the moment. They would be in the situation that Lorna Slater talked about—councillors would meet people in the supermarket and have a close relationship with them. At the wider regional level, councillors would be dealing with the bigger issues. Not all the councillors from each of the smaller councils would sit on the regional body; I assume that it would have a smaller number of councillors. The selected councillors would act as leaders for their local council and would go to the larger council and negotiate, in the way that that happens in Greater London. The Greater London Authority has separate elected members who take decisions for Greater London, but there is a relationship with each of the 33 boroughs. That is expected to be the format that brings it all together.

As I understand the proposals at the moment, the same group of people would do both things, which is asking a lot of them. Anyone who has worked in local government as a council leader knows that that is a full-time job. If someone has to do that at local and regional level, it will not be an easy solution. I do not think that the proposal has been carefully thought through. I assume that committees such as this one will need to explore the proposal in more detail.

Murdo Fraser: I will bring in George Thorley next. Another aspect is that we will have council elections in May, and all parties are recruiting candidates to stand. If the programme progresses, we will not be entirely sure what we are asking people to stand for or what they will be doing.

George Thorley: To support what Keith Yates said, the proposal does not make any sense.

The proposal to have up to 120—

Murdo Fraser: One hundred and sixty.

George Thorley: The proposal to have up to 160-something—I am not quite sure what it is—sets of councillors does not make any sense.

When the Wheatley commission looked at the local government landscape of Scotland, which had been designed in 1929, it said that there were far too many small councils and that they were not fit for purpose. They were not strong enough, not big enough and not heavily resourced.

I think that somebody in government has now said that we need to recreate the equivalent of regional councils. What functions will they have? It makes sense to allocate those functions, but what about the other stuff?

Local government delivers 200 services every day—the figures vary a wee bit and are all higher than I am suggesting. Some councils do a range of things—they may own harbours or golf courses. Not all councils do all the same things, but they have a vast bulk of services. It looks to me as if someone advising the First Minister has taken out the key services that work well at a regional level, including housing, environmental services, economic development and planning, and all the rest will drift down.

How would a chief executive of one of the regional areas allocate the staff to the 40 little entities below them to do the food hygiene, gun licensing and all the detail that local government is correctly asked to deliver? One set of councillors is probably better than two sets of councillors, because two sets of councillors are a recipe for chaos, and 160 sets of councillors plus regional councillors—no.

I urge the committee to undertake research to try to figure out how that would work. To answer your question, I do not think that it would work.

Murdo Fraser: That answer is helpful, because it leads me neatly on to the second thing that I will ask about, which is where all this has come from. You have talked about previous reorganisations and the conversations that took place around them.

Back in March, the Scottish Government published "Democracy Matters: A Route Map to Reform", but then in the programme for government we had the announcement, which took many people by surprise, of an ambitious plan with a three-month consultation, which we are probably more than halfway through now.

According to a report in *The Herald* this morning, the First Minister spent just 75 minutes discussing local government before agreeing to put it in the programme for government—if we assume that that is a well-sourced statistic. Has the proposal come out of the blue, or has the thinking that underpins this been going on for some time?

George Thorley: The thinking is good at the regional level, but the bit that is missing is what I described earlier. There has been no assessment on the Scottish Government's part of what public services should be delivered at the national level. It has now said that some need to be delivered at the regional level, which is great, but with the absence of some of the quangos that should be gravitating to that level.

People have not understood how complicated local government is. We should bear it in mind that councils deliver 200 services—I am happy to supply the clerk with the list that we have identified—and there are the joint services with the health service on top of that, which are not being mentioned. Are they going to disappear? Is all that joint working between health and social work in primary care going to evaporate? What is proposed is not good enough to form the basis of a reform of a part of the public sector that employs more than half a million people.

Keith Yates: Back in 2005-06, a previous Administration talked about local government reorganisation. Tom McCabe, who was the then Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform, talked about supercouncils in the way that George Thorley just mentioned. That fell by the wayside, as these things tend to do.

There are a lot of wicked issues here, and I suspect that, collectively, it is very hard for the Scottish Parliament, with its political divisions, to tackle those difficult issues. To make a personal comment, the tribalism that sometimes exists in debates, particularly in the chamber, prevents the Scottish Government from taking on some of these very hard issues. However, they are exactly the issues that the Scottish Parliament was designed to deal with.

10:30

Having worked with two or three committees in the past, and having also worked in local government, I suspect that most members from the political parties round the table would be in general agreement on 80 or 85 per cent of issues. The other 15 or 20 per cent of issues are the area for dialogue, which should be constructive and collaborative. From what I have seen, that is what tends to be the approach in your committees. However, the public at large do not see that; they see First Minister's question time and all the clips that come out on the 6 o'clock news and so on, and they believe that you are all at one another's throats all the time. The collaborative work that probably takes place behind the scenes is what is needed to address some of these wicked issues. Maybe I am speaking out of turn in saying all this.

The Convener: The reason why you have been invited and given a microphone is that we want to hear what you have to say.

Before I bring Murdo Fraser back in, I will make a wider point that I think is really important. The lead committee for education reforms would be the Education and Gaelic Committee. The lead for local government reforms would be the Social Justice, Housing and Local Government Committee. For health reforms, it would be the Health, Care and Sport Committee. However, this committee might want to look at a set of underlying principles that binds everything together, and at common themes. Rather than get into the important weeds and detail of each individual set of public service reforms, we are considering the overarching process and the principles that underpin it.

If you have any comments on that, we would find that helpful. I hate asking an important question and then asking you to answer it briefly, so I am really sorry about this, but do you agree that there has to be that underpinning so that we are clear on the principles before we build the sets of reforms?

George Thorley: We outlined our principles in one of our recent articles, which I think the committee has been given.

The Convener: Those are your principles, but should the Government be clear on what its principles are, and are you advocating that they should be the ones that you have set out?

George Thorley: Yes, and particularly prevention, because that will save money. As I understand it, the Parliament and the country have to face huge budgetary stresses. One of the solutions is to advocate for prevention. It is amazing that this committee exists. It is the equivalent of the policy and resources committee from our experience—the committee that takes the overarching view of life. The service committees look at various services, but this is the only committee that is taking an overarching view. Well, more power to your elbow, frankly.

The Convener: I apologise to Mr Fraser, as I cut him off in his prime.

Murdo Fraser: That is fine, convener.

I have one more question. Keith Yates mentioned that Perth and Kinross is distinct from Dundee. As you might know, there was an emergency meeting in Perth and Kinross Council last month at which it was unanimously agreed that the council does not want to be linked to Dundee as part of a Tayside region. I also represent Fife, which very much takes the view that Fife is a region in its own right—indeed, a kingdom in its own right—and that, if there is going to be a regional model, Fife should be one region. You hear the same arguments in the Borders and in Dumfries and Galloway and elsewhere. If we are moving to a regional model, is six the right number of regions?

Keith Yates: No. If there is a regional model, the number should be more like 13 or 14. As a starting point, I would have the three island authorities. Tayside could be split, and Ayrshire should be split from what was formerly Strathclyde. There is an argument for keeping the Lanarkshires together,

because Lanarkshire is in many ways the centre of the logistics industry in Scotland, if you can call it that. Lothian could probably be held together, as that makes sense. The area that I represent—the Central region—is interesting because, as with Perth and Dundee, Falkirk and Stirling are totally different. Falkirk is dominated by the petrochemical industry and manufacturing, and Stirling is about tourism, finance, universities and things like that.

This is maybe an important point. The fighting or—if that is not the right word—the disputes that existed between district and regional councillors were very severe in many parts of Strathclyde and Central. The Falkirk and Stirling members did not get on particularly well, because they had different aspirations, which is totally understandable.

The task is to correctly define the city regions and spheres of influence. Six is not the answer. Maybe 13 or 14 is the answer, if you go for the regional approach.

Alex Kerr: I will keep this brief. My question ties in to what the witnesses have said about the potential benefits of regionalisation and where powers should lie. I asked earlier about the geography, but I put it on the record that I think that that is less important, as you have spoken about.

I have spoken to stakeholders in various bits of industry who have talked about the potential benefit of building regulations being more standardised across the country and said how planning could be done differently. In *The Herald* fairly recently, along with OnPath Energy and Muirhall Energy, I spoke about the potential benefit of ring fencing some of the non-domestic rates that are collected at local authority level to provide an incentive to promote and attract economic growth rather than have the situation where local authorities are seeing no benefit from it.

From an economic growth perspective, which I think has been missing from the conversation, what are the key powers that would sit at regional level that could help to drive that?

George Thorley: I will answer based on my experience of working in Strathclyde, where, for a while, I helped to lead, with elected members, the economic development drive. The key to the ability to drive that was the responsibilities that the organisation had. I have mentioned water supply, sewage disposal, roads, public transport, business and economic development, and colleges and schools. You can build all those things together, and you can see some sense in the Government's proposal to combine those activities. Currently, the Government proposes to add in housing and environmental services. In 1969, Wheatley recommended that that should be a regional council function, but the UK Parliament decided against that.

You need a critical mass of an organisation. We have the 10 city growth deals. I was just looking at the plan and saw that the one for the Glasgow area does not involve 11 authorities, as I think I said—it is eight authorities that have voluntarily combined, as has happened in other areas in Scotland. That is a great model. The challenge for them is to bring along Scottish Water and Transport Scotland, because often some of the bottleneck issues relate to infrastructure. I know that the intention is to take Transport Scotland into Government, so we will have one less quango. However, we will have the same centralised nature of Government in Scotland, so that will not change anything; it will just reinforce the central nature of how the country is governed.

The more services you can allocate to the regional level, the better. We have suggested that colleges should join them, and that the northern and southern enterprise agencies should join them. We are talking about local government. In Manchester, 10 authorities have agreed to get together and, in Glasgow, those eight authorities have agreed to get together. It is the authorities that will carry the functions.

The question is: should we encourage local authorities to merge? What I cannot really understand from the current proposal is where the local authorities are. We have what I would call regional entities—they are not regional councils—that are responsible for a fair whack of functions and up to 160 something-or-others that are responsible for the balance of the 200 services. However, the upper authority will be responsible for the quality of delivery. The message is very confused.

I know that I am straying a wee bit from your question, but to answer it, I would say that I think the effectiveness of Strathclyde Regional Council as an economic development organisation came down to its size, its range of functions and its political ability to advocate on behalf of the population. People forget that a huge amount of advocacy took place between the regional council and a whole range of organisations from the British Airports Authority to central Government in England and the Scottish Office.

I am not sure whether that answers your question.

Alex Kerr: What you have said is very helpful, and I will come back to it in an moment, but for the moment, I want to bring in Keith to see whether he has anything to add.

Keith Yates: All I would say is that, in the Glasgow and Edinburgh city regions, you have the

growth deals, and you should let those partnerships mature. They are already there, and they are beginning to do their work. There is a lot more that could be done, but if you allow those things to mature, you will not have to get into the difficulties of local government reorganisation and reform, and you will still be building the strong partnership that George Thorley has just described as a positive virtue. My main worry about all of this is that, if you go for six to 10 regional authorities and 120 to 160 community authorities, you will miss the opportunity to deliver through what you already have evolved. It goes back to the point that we started with.

Alex Kerr: That is interesting. I am picking up that the principle of regionalisation is key to unlocking a lot of that economic growth.

Keith Yates: In the two big city regions, yes. I should make it clear that you have the big city regions of Glasgow and Edinburgh, and then there are other city regions such as Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, Perth and Kinross and Dundee, Stirling and Clacks, and Ayrshire. There are city regions elsewhere, but with the two big ones, you have to bring in a large number of local authorities to work together, and this kind of approach makes sense there. Elsewhere, you could move towards having mergers, if agreed between the respective councils.

Alex Kerr: Do I have time for another question, convener?

The Convener: Yes.

Alex Kerr: As a follow-up, I would just highlight the interesting issue of colleges and the pipeline in that respect. In my constituency, the University of the West of Scotland recently opened an undergraduate college with New College Lanarkshire, and that was pipelined through the sort of partnership work that you have just been talking about. I think that that is really interesting.

One big barrier that I have certainly experienced, having worked on budgets at a local authority level in the cross-party budget working groups, is the financial lever. Are there any financial powers that would come with a focus on promoting growth at regional level?

Keith Yates: The one thing that I think should be looked at is a land tax, and whether any form of that could be utilised in Scotland to fund the capital development and other developments that are needed. We already have through the planning legislation section 75 agreements under which new major planning applications require investment in roads, sewage works, various play areas, cycleways and all the rest of it.

Given the amount of development that is taking place, is there an opportunity to have a land tax, too? In that respect, I am thinking not just about residential developments, but about the very significant investments that have been made in green energy, if you like—that is, wind farms, solar farms and various other developments. These are major investments that are—if I can put it this way—generating income for landowners. Might there be a way of taxing some of that to give the extra needed for business development?

Alex Kerr: That is very helpful. I will bring in George Thorley, because I could see him nodding about the financial aspects.

10:45

George Thorley: It is not about a tax. I do not know why local authorities in England have a power of general competence but those in Scotland do not. That power obviously does not mean that local authorities can do anything that they want, but they do not need to search for a piece of legislation to justify doing something. If we are enhancing the status of growth deals—let us call them that in order to include the city deals and the rural deals—all authorities that are involved in those deals should have a power of general competence.

For example, in the days of Strathclyde's economic development, when we were in the European Union, we had a lot of relationships with Brussels, with a team in Brussels and a team in Scotland. The result was that more than £1 billion of European money—at a time when £1 billion seemed like a lot of money—was brought in.

One of the things that that money was spent on was employment grants. We had a serious problem with people being unemployed for more than six months, so we needed to get them back into work or they would be permanently unemployed. The team that I was working in came up with the idea of subsidising wages. Why do we not provide a fixed subsidy for any job for any person who has been out of work for more than six months? At that time, we worked with the equivalent of the Department for Work and Pensions, which knew who those people were. That week, we got half the funding from the European social fund and half from the regional council. The scheme ran for many years, until the regional council came to an end, and I think that it facilitated more than 56,000 people getting a job.

If we are thinking about the powers that councils need and what they could do, we should give them a power of general competence and allow them to be imaginative in providing solutions.

The point that has been driven into Keith Yates and me is that—as you, as elected members, will know—there are different needs and opportunities in different parts of Scotland. Those needs will not

be satisfied by 160 little entities, which will probably mostly oppose everything. People do not like change, so why would we give those entities planning powers? If we did, we would not get any economic development at all. I am not sure whether that is what is intended, but there has been talk about household extensions and such things. At the moment, most of those powers are delegated to officials. A huge number of planning applications—the percentage is well into the late 90s—are approved, so the problem is not in the planning system.

At the time, Strathclyde did not need that power of general competence, but here we are, a generation later. We should give councils the power to think radically.

Alex Kerr: The only other question that I was going to ask was about preventative spending and auditing, but I know that we are running behind time.

The Convener: I want to give our witnesses the opportunity to make any final comments. The committee will want to consider certain themes. We are aware of examples of the Government, local authorities and health boards already having to consider voluntary severance schemes, redeployment and retraining, and there is a variety of ways in which the third sector can be actively involved in co-production. Mr Thorley gave the good example of the power of general competence, but, more generally, how can we free up those at the local and strategic levels to innovate in order to get the best outcomes?

In relation to all that, I am interested in the strategic themes that you think the committee should consider. They do not necessarily need to be about local government. I am thinking more generally about the heft and scale of public service reform that the committee will need to grapple with. What strategic matters would it be helpful for all committees to keep an eye on and scrutinise over a longer period?

Keith Yates: You could certainly look at demography. George Thorley and I are baby boomers—we come from the late 1940s. It was assumed that baby boomers were born at the highest peak in birth rates in Britain, but that was not the case in Scotland. The highest peak in birth rates in Scotland was during the 1960s. The swinging 60s produced a generation of people who are now between the ages of 55 and 64—some of them are around this table—and they will be retiring over the next five to 10 years.

Believe it or not, a third of the local government workforce is in that band, and that probably applies pretty well across the rest of the public services, including quangos and certainly the health service. That means that there is going to be not only an immense loss of institutional knowledge, but a gap. How do we bring in younger people?

Back at the time when George Thorley and I finished university and were looking for jobs, there were milk rounds and people wanted to work in local government because it was perceived as a good career. Nowadays, very few people go into local government because, relatively speaking, the pay rates are not the same and people's perception is that it is not an advancing public service that they want to work in.

There is a real issue here about the demography of Scotland. How are we going to generate entrants to public service in the wider sense to replace those people who are going to disappear over the next five to 10 years? Are the training facilities available to enable us to bring them on board? We occasionally hear about shortages of teachers or staff in different aspects of the health service, but there are many other examples. In local government, building control inspectors, planners and environmental health people are just three examples of areas of work where there are shortages at the moment. That is really an HR issue, but it is going to be fundamental for public services in general.

George Thorley: I am going to repeat some of the things that I said earlier because, in my opinion, they are important.

First, it would be good if this committee took a view on which services must be delivered at a national level. Everything else could then be up for grabs. What are the national things that must be done at a national level? You are parliamentarians and you are steering the country, so you should have an understanding of the things that are most important. Interestingly, in the context of what happens in Europe, this Government does an awful lot of delivery itself, and maybe that should not be the case. We have the Scottish Government and we have local government, and the Scottish Government wants to deliver everything. We have situations where ministers are called up to Parliament to answer questions on Mrs McGlinchey's bad back. Come on—that is not a Parliament. That is like a big council. You should stop being a big council and be a big Parliament. The first thing is to consider what should be organised and delivered at a national level.

Secondly, in the current exercise, let us not destroy 32 councils. Let us keep them—even though, personally, I do not think that they represent the correct configuration—and encourage them to merge. In that way, we can avoid all the stuff that we had to deal with in 1995. At that time, there was a property commission and a staffing commission. There were huge

processes because organisations were being broken up and some were being merged.

Thirdly, if the Government is correct, we need to encourage communities to understand more about what it is doing. You should legislate to create a statutory requirement on local authorities, whether they are to be merged or not, to bring in genuine schemes—not fake schemes, but genuine ones. There are now lovely examples for you to look at in Dumfries and Galloway and in Edinburgh of power actually being passed right down to the local community, involving primary teachers, general practitioners and the local police. Those things are really working, and councillors are driving them, rather than being the forgotten bit. If we are to have local committees, they must be chaired by local councillors.

Those are the three things that I wanted to mention—the national level issue; the principle of councils merging and not being destroyed and torn apart, which would take years, during which time we would not have performance; and the need for a statutory duty on local government to delegate so that we engage the community. That relates to one of the principles that we mentioned earlier: the people principle, which is about getting responsibility down as far as we can, to the community.

The Convener: Thank you. I hope that you both feel that you have had the opportunity to put on the record everything you wanted to say. I know that I was rushing us on at certain points. We have literally two or three minutes left, and if there is anything that you feel that you have not got on the record, you have the opportunity to mention it now. You finished on a crescendo there, Mr Thorley, so you may wish to leave it at that, but the opportunity is there.

Keith Yates: I hope that we have not sounded too defensive about the way that local government is at the moment. There is recognition that change is needed, and a little disruption is quite helpful. The main message is that, if you do that disruption with the people who work in local government, you will be able to get solutions far more quickly.

I stress again the importance of not underestimating the energy, commitment and contribution of people in the localities. In some ways, they are the missing link in driving Scotland forward. They have just not been given the agency that they need in the recent past. However, that is not just something for you to do as the Scottish Parliament; it is also something for local government to do. Local government has not done it very well because, over the past 15 to 20 years, it has found its resources diminishing and it has had to focus on managing limited resources rather than on doing the creative part of the work, which is bringing people on board.

The Convener: Thank you for putting that on the record. That is a really good way to finish this evidence session.

I thank both our witnesses for coming along today. At our next meeting, which will be on 12 November, we will continue to hear stakeholders' views on public service reform. We will now move into private session.

10:56

Meeting continued in private until 12:01.

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