COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Wednesday 31 May 2006

Session 2

£5.00

Produced and published in Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body by Astron.

CONTENTS

Wednesday 31 May 2006

COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE
18th Meeting 2006, Session 2

CONVENER

*Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
*Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
*Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP)
*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)
*John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab)
*Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
*Dave Petrie (Highlands and Islands (Con)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green)
Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)
Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab)
Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Lynn Burnett (Poverty Alliance)
Lorraine Kane (Community Training and Development Unit (Forth Valley) Ltd)
Peter Kelly (Poverty Alliance)
Anne-Marie Smith (One Plus)
Maureen West (Get Heard)
Karen Wightman (Get Heard)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Katy Orr

ASSISTANT CLERK

Catherine Fergusson

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Communities Committee

Wednesday 31 May 2006

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:03*]

Social Inclusion

The Convener (Karen Whitefield): I open the 18th meeting in 2006 of the Communities Committee. I remind everyone to switch off their mobile phones.

We have only one item on our agenda, which concerns social inclusion. The committee will take evidence on the get heard project and on the forthcoming national report on strategies for social protection and social inclusion.

I welcome the witnesses: Peter Kelly is director of the Poverty Alliance; Lynn Burnett is policy officer at the Poverty Alliance; Lorraine Kane is from Community Training and Development Unit (Forth Valley) Ltd; Anne-Marie Smith is from One Plus; and Karen Wightman and Maureen West participated in the get heard project. Thank you for coming. We look forward to talking to you about the work that you have been doing during the past few months.

Will the witnesses provide some detail on the objectives of the get heard project and how Scotland's participation will be acknowledged and included in the national report?

Peter Kelly (Poverty Alliance): I thank the committee for inviting us to discuss the get heard project; this is one of the best outcomes that we could have hoped for.

The name "get heard" gives away the idea behind the project, which is United Kingdom-wide. The project was designed by the social policy task force, which is made up of a group of non-governmental organisations and has discussions with the Department for Work and Pensions on the national action plans on social inclusion—the UK Government produces a NAP every two or three years. The aim of the get heard project was to develop a process whereby people who have experience of poverty and exclusion could make their voices heard in the development of the NAP.

Get heard was designed around a toolkit that asked three basic questions: What is working in communities? What is not working? What needs to change? The emphasis was on enabling community organisations to use the toolkit to contribute to the development of the NAP. At UK level, we secured funding from the European Commission, which enabled us to employ a co-ordinator for the overall UK programme. All the evidence that was gathered in the UK has been fed in to the co-ordinator and to the steering group at UK level, which I chair. A report has been written and passed to the DWP, which is developing the NAP.

Good information was gathered in Scotland. We were fortunate to have Lynn Burnett co-ordinate the process; because she could co-ordinate the process and evangelise for it we were able to run 50 workshops. She can talk about the project in Scotland.

Lynn Burnett (Poverty Alliance): Participation in Scotland was immensely good and helpful. There were 50 workshops in which a range of groups and different people were involved. The workshops went well and a fantastic amount of knowledge emerged from them. Last November, when I was collecting quotes and information in preparation for our final conference, I was flabbergasted by the amount of knowledge that people have—it is overwhelming. The workshops were co-ordinated mainly by me, but groups were often co-ordinated by leaders of community groups or clubs; for example, Maureen West ran a couple of workshops in her community, which she might talk about.

We started by using the Poverty Alliance's networks and then we developed a reference group that comprised members of voluntary organisations, to enable us to branch out and develop more networks. Much communication was just by word of mouth, which was difficult at the outset because people were incredibly sceptical about becoming involved in a process that they were not sure would bring results. For a long time it was a huge challenge to get people interested. People want their voices to be heard, but they sometimes think that they were not listened to when they contributed in the past. Other people have never been asked to contribute and want to do so, but do not know whether they will hear about the results of their contribution.

The process was challenging, but it went well and gradually people became more involved. More energy was generated as the workshops got going, because people became enthusiastic about being part of the process when they heard about the other diverse groups of participants. The project gathered momentum and the conference was the culmination of all that work.

The Convener: The committee is interested in how people can be encouraged to participate in processes such as the get heard project. Was it easy for communities to become involved or were there barriers that prevented them from doing so? Do you have examples of good practice and participative approaches that worked well?

Peter Kelly: It would be good to hear from other witnesses about the barriers that they faced, but from my perspective as chair of the steering group at UK level, I can perhaps identify two main barriers. One is a lack of general awareness of processes. It is almost pointless my saying this, but if people do not know that something is going on, there is very little chance that they will take part in it. The national action plans on social inclusion have a very low profile both within and outwith Government, so it has taken quite an effort for the Poverty Alliance and a number of other organisations that have been involved across the UK to convince people that it is worth their while to become involved. There needs to be an awareness of the opportunities to participate.

The second issue is the resources that are available to support participation. The committee has probably heard these arguments before, but lack of awareness and lack of resources are real barriers that prevent people from taking part. The get heard project managed to secure additional resources to support participation. It was a very small amount of money—£7,000 across the UK. We administered the fund, which allowed groups that did not have resources to pay for child care and travelling expenses and to run workshops to feed in to the get heard project. The fund was very important, but we had to decide who should get that scarce resource. We tried to use the money for groups that would be very unlikely to participate otherwise.

Dedicated funding for participation is useful. The Poverty Alliance has learned that from experience over the past couple of years, so we now have a separate budget line for moneys to support people to participate. Lynn Burnett may have evidence on good practice and on what worked well at workshop level.

Lynn Burnett: It was challenging to secure funding, but it was really useful that I was able to meet different groups and to provide personal contact. It was important for groups to realise that that there was a central person to whom they could always come back. The approach worked really well in a few communities, which used it in local issues that stemmed from our work. The questions were quite broad: what is working, what is not working, and how should things be changed? Some communities find it challenging to answer those questions because there are so many possible points of departure.

In Drumchapel, numerous groups did workshops on various issues. Once the workshops had been completed, we had a final community get-together at which we reported in a wide context on the issues that people wanted to talk about and talked about them. The event was called Drumchapel speaks. The aim was to work through local issues and to feed them into community planning. That was difficult because—as members would expect—many people have not heard about community planning. People need to be more aware of it so that they can find out what is happening in their communities.

The introduction of community planning ran alongside what we were doing to influence matters at UK level, so people were sceptical about the difference between the two processes and were unsure about how to get involved. The use of local examples, as we did in Drumchapel, was helpful. The process took place at community level—it was not steered by me, but by communities. In order to enthuse people, it was important to show them that they were part of a big process, and for them to see that there would be something at the end of it and that information would be fed back to them.

The Convener: Would the participants like to comment on how easy or difficult it was for them to get involved in the process and on what made that easier for them?

Anne-Marie Smith (One Plus): I am a volunteer for One Plus. When the get heard project came to One Plus, we were able to get involved only because we were a captive audience and had child care. If that had not been the case, we would probably never have heard of the project. The volunteers for One Plus come from various areas; for example, the south side of Glasgow, which was not included in the project. I thought that it was important for me to become involved, because I feel that unemployed and employed single parents are excluded from society. Those who are unemployed do not have a voice; there is no place they can go where someone will listen to them. Even when people are in work, they feel guilty because they feel that they have to work. Their whole world is falling apart and they are screaming out for help, but there is no one to give it to them.

Because my friends and other people were facing those problems, I decided to get involved with the get heard project. The experience has been interesting, but how do we give a voice to everyone in the community, including disabled people? Although a lot of money has been put in to the regeneration of Pollok, communities seem to be falling apart. Buildings that have been pulled down, demolished or burned down are not being replaced. The committee might have heard about organisations such as Greater Pollok social inclusion partnership, but my community seems to have broken down and the resources do not seem to be there to deal with the problem. Instead of people trying to get together to make it clear that the issues affect everyone, they are just fighting for themselves.

There is a lot of poverty in Pollok. I am one of the lucky ones—I am so glad that I got involved

with the project—but what about the 23,000 other people in Pollok? Many of them are just not getting their voices heard.

10:15

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): On a point of clarification, are Ms Wightman and Ms West involved in organisations?

Karen Wightman (Get Heard): I am part of a sure start group.

Christine Grahame: I was just wondering how the two of you got involved in this.

Karen Wightman: Like Anne-Marie Smith, I was lucky. One of the girls in the project wanted to set up a focus group for a university course. Luckily, child care was available, or I would never have known about it because the information is not publicised. I would have been sitting in my little house thinking, "I need to talk about this or that issue, but we don't have any facilities."

Maureen West (Get Heard): I am a community activist and was asked to get involved with the project by a worker in the community forum that I belong to. We thought that the project was important because it linked into many issues we were involved in at the time, and had held a couple of workshops on community involvement.

Christine Grahame: So you were involved in organisations, groups or other projects.

Karen Wightman: Yes.

Christine Grahame: I was just wondering about people who are not involved in anything.

Peter Kelly: When we started the get heard project, we realised that we did not have enough resources to run our own workshops. As a result, we felt that we had to piggy-back on existing discussions that people were having on poverty and social exclusion. However, the way things worked out in Scotland was a bit different to what we initially envisaged because we were given resources that allowed us to send someone out and promote the project, and to organise workshops that fed in to the process.

We were also trying to feed in to national policy making, which is very challenging; after all, many community involvement and participation processes focus on local policy implementation, local projects and so on, and our task was to find out the direction that our society, the Scottish Executive and the UK Government should be going in, what our overall objectives should be and how we can get people's voices heard on such matters. The project is relatively unusual; I do not know of many others that have tried to influence national policy from the grass-roots level in such a way. In that respect, we are learning as we go.

Maureen West: I felt that it was vital for local people to ask the questions because that allowed a sense of trust to be built up. So-called outsiders who come in to the community and ask such questions do not get the right answers, but people react differently if they are comfortable with you and know that you are from, and want to work in, their community. Many people answered because they knew our faces—that made it easier.

The Convener: Peter Kelly said that the process was slightly different in Scotland in that he ended up having a dedicated worker for the project, although he did not anticipate that. Did that approach lead to higher levels of participation than in other parts of the United Kingdom?

Peter Kelly: Absolutely. It was crucial that we had someone on board who spent their working days considering who could be involved and what activities were already taking place. Throughout the UK, 145 workshops took place, about 50 of which were in Scotland. There were also a lot in Merseyside; as we did, the Merseyside Network for Europe took the initiative, devoted resources to the work and went out and got it done. Other workshops elsewhere were fairly ad hoc. I emphasise again that the project was not a research process and that we do not claim that the outcome is a representative voice of the people who experience poverty and exclusion in Scotland. Instead, the project involved active citizens coming together to discuss the problems of poverty and exclusion.

The Convener: The project was a national one and the UK Government will submit a national paper to Europe. Were there any aspects in the Scottish experience that were distinctive or different from the experience in other parts of the UK?

Peter Kelly: I will pass the question to Lynn Burnett in a second. The committee has received a summary of the findings, but we are still analysing the findings for the main body of the report. Some of the issues that strike me as being more Scottish are to do with rurality, which came through as a big issue. However, that did not come through in Wales and Northern Ireland probably because less work was done there—if more work had been done, such issues would have been raised. Transport came through as an issue particularly strongly in Scotland but did not feature so much in the evidence from the rest of the UK. I mean transport in general, rather than one specific issue. Transport can be a barrier—or otherwise, as the case may be—to people getting to and from work, to accessing child care and to accessing good quality food.

Lynn Burnett has been close to the evidence, so she may have identified other differences.

Lynn Burnett: I would echo the comment about transport issues. Many people talked about transport as being a barrier to getting to work or to being part of their communities.

Loads of people also spoke about low-paid employment. I realise that many such issues cannot be handled in the Scottish Parliament because the minimum wage is not a devolved issue. However, people have very little incentive to go to work, which is an issue that must be highlighted because it came up in every workshop, except for the young people's workshop. People have no option—they want to give something to their communities, but the bottom line is that they are often better off on benefits than they would be if they went to work.

Access to information about services is another key issue. People often talked about not knowing where to get services and said that they often find out about services through word of mouth. The services exist, but people do not know how to get them.

Young people talked a lot about not having facilities and there being nothing for them to do. They also feel as though they do not have a voice in their communities. They want to be part of the decision-making process and to know about what is going on in their communities—in every get heard workshop, people said that they want to be asked for their opinions and to be part of the decision-making process because it is important to them. The get heard project was an opportunity for them to do that, but they did not know what would come out of it. I hope that that is enough to go on.

The Convener: My committee colleagues will probably explore all those issues as the morning progresses.

Christine Grahame: I want to get down to the nitty-gritty. I hope that you will accept that, for people who want to work, the cure for poverty is a decent, well-paid and fulfilling job, whatever one's abilities. Statistics in a Joseph Rowntree Foundation's report show that there are about 200,000 people who are not on the unemployment register but who are getting incapacity benefit, for good reasons; that one million people in Scotland are on low incomes; and that a third of employees earn below the minimum wage. Given our limited powers, how can we change things? I ask that in a positive fashion. We know, from our caseloads, about barriers and the benefits trap. The get heard project was UK-wide, but what can we do here? Despite that fact that there are regeneration projects, places are crumbling and communities are falling apart. People are in silos.

Peter Kelly: I think that you are asking what we in Scotland can do to help people back into work, given that we do not have control over benefits and the minimum wage—

Christine Grahame: The macroeconomy.

Peter Kelly: Those are two big issues. The witnesses have a range of experience and can draw on what has gone on in the get heard project.

Anne-Marie Smith: I can draw on my experience to answer the question. I volunteer for One Plus, where for the past three years we have been working on a mentoring qualification, which has brought some of the single parents out to get a wee bit of education and to talk to other single parents to hear what issues they face. The mentoring project reaches out to people who are in the situation that I was in before. Three years ago, I was really sad and was in the house with a newborn baby. Nobody was listening to me and I was on the minimum benefits. I went from having a job and a good-quality lifestyle to having a baby and being totally isolated from the rest of the world. I only went out on a Monday to purchase whatever I could with my Monday book—the money got paid into the bank.

I have noticed that single parents are struggling and suffering. I have been trying to get a job; I have been trying to educate myself and to keep my skills updated by working with single parents and going into work with One Plus—I volunteer in the office one day a week. I do that because I felt that I was losing all the skills that I had gained. I was suddenly a single parent in the house with a young baby—I was homeless last year as well. I thought, "I've got all these skills and nobody's listening. Do they think I'm stupid?" If I felt like that, how do other people feel? It took me a while to speak out and say how things were.

Single parents always seem to be slipping through the loophole of incapacity benefit. Single parents who are young or who get involved with drink or drugs will go on incapacity benefit, because the Government is offering an extra £20 a week. That is their way of getting more money to survive on. The Government is not listening. People like me have an education; we are not sick and we do not want to be classed as being sick. I have decided never to go down the route of going on sickness benefit, but some people feel that the only way they can survive is to pretend that they are sick. Even if they go to the doctor, the doctor just throws them tablets and sick lines, but does not consider the deeper problem.

We have to treat people as people and to provide what they need, which is an education and a bit of understanding to let them be part of society. Single parents with babies—or whatever age their kids are—become totally excluded because their focal point is providing for the kids. Parents lose out and start losing their skills so that, by the time their kids are older, they do not have any skills.

What do you do? Do you take a menial job in a shop or just sit back on incapacity benefit. That seems to be happening quite a lot. Other people will not admit it, but I will. It is about reaching out and meeting people. There is a lot of anger in my community about the haves and the have-nots, about who is getting help and who is not. It is a shame that that happens instead of the community getting together and seeing how everybody could help one another. That is where it has gone really wrong for us all—for all the communities.

10:30

Christine Grahame: What would your suggestion be for how people could get together and help one another?

Anne-Marie Smith: Even when people set up mothers and toddlers groups and get lottery funding of £500, they still have to pay for the rooms, so the parents still have to chip in. I am on benefits and I still have to pay into the toy fund, although I use a state nursery. My daughter gets an extra half session. We are entitled to only up to two and a half hours per session, although I am lucky that One Plus pays privately for one full day for me. That is only because people have seen my skills. It would better if the nurseries could offer child care so that people could get out and get re-educated—if they have education—or so that somebody could give them a wee taster session for such things.

Child care is the problem for single parents, even for the young people. I am the mother of a nearly 19-year-old daughter and the route that I have been forced to take is because of what I know. She left school when she was 16 and there were no jobs in the area. The choice was for her to go on income support or jobseekers allowance or for me to throw her out of the house. I had to really think about what I was going to do. I have an education and am quite proud of that, but I ended up committing benefit fraud. I sent my daughter to the Prince's Trust—everybody has heard of it—and decided to keep claiming the £10 a week family allowance. I held on to that so that I could send her on the bus to the Prince's Trust to work voluntarily for a year because she was excluded from benefits.

However, my youngest daughter will be in poverty because I have to pay back that tenner a week from her family allowance. I have been clear about it and put my hands up because I feel that it is an issue. If I have done that, what are other people doing? Are they doing worse? I am trying to make my daughter's life better. I am trying to prevent her from doing a menial job, and have tried to ensure that she gets an education to do something constructive, but I am being punished for that and people will look down on me. Was what I did really wrong? What was I to do?

Karen Wightman: Child care is not a problem only for single parents. I am not a single parent, but affordable child care is unobtainable where I live. I have two little boys and am fortunate in that I do not have to work because my husband earns enough money to support us. However, I considered part-time work so that we could have some nice things, such as holidays and nice clothes, but I could not afford to work part time. I would have to work full time to pay for full-time child care for two children, but would end up with nothing at the end of the week.

Christine Grahame: That is a common cry from many women.

Karen Wightman: Child care is a problem not only for single parents, but across the board. One little crèche operates at a high school in my area, but it is very expensive. It is the only one where it is possible to leave the kids and go away to do an hour or two's shopping. Other than that, we are looking at child minders. I have one child under two, which bumps up the price of a child minder.

Child care is just unobtainable. Many people are crying out for more crèches and more flexible child care. There is one crèche, which is open from 9 o'clock till 12 midday Monday to Friday. I cannot go to a fitness group or anything like that, because I have nobody to take the kids, and my husband works all hours.

Lorraine Kane (Community Training and Development Unit (Forth Valley) Ltd): I live in a semi-rural location where transport costs put many people off taking jobs, especially lower-paid jobs. People have to use transport, because there is little employment where I am, so they think twice about taking on a job.

Christine Grahame: In my experience, there is sometimes a lack of transport to fit in with jobs. High cost is not the only issue; sometimes there is just no bus to take people to work.

Lorraine Kane: That is right. Where I live, there is a bus once an hour, which is difficult.

Christine Grahame: I am looking for solutions. We all know about the cost of child care and that the Parliament could do something about that. What about transport? We can take out the concessionary fares issue now, God bless them—at least I have got my pass. That measure is relevant, because many pensioners now work—some of them have to work. What solution do you suggest for people who are not entitled to concessionary travel?

Lorraine Kane: We should try to make the fares lower, especially for people who come off benefits to start work, who find it difficult to pay transport costs initially. The fares could be reduced for a wee while until people get a bit of money behind them.

Christine Grahame: So you suggest a concessionary fare scheme, perhaps for the first six months after a person starts work, to ease people into work.

Lorraine Kane: That would help people to get back into work. It is difficult for people to come off benefits and make the transition into employment.

Maureen West: The problem in our scheme—Castlemilk—is that we have great ideas and projects are started up, but then the funding runs out. For example, I was one of the founders of an after-school care project for low-income families and people who were trying to go back into education. After we had fought and fought for such a scheme, we got initial funding and got the project up and running with free places, but then the funding got less and less, so the cost of places went up and up. Now we have a lot of children of the workers who work in the scheme, as they can afford to put their children in the place.

Facilities get up and running in schemes but, all of a sudden, the funding reduces and the people who benefited initially are left high and dry. We have sports centres and football pitches that people cannot afford to use. We have buses that run once an hour and, if they do not turn up, people get stranded in Rutherglen, which is not within walking distance for elderly or disabled people. Great projects that benefit the whole community get up and running, but then the funding gets less and less, which means that they no longer benefit the community and the community gets jaded. That happens in our area. The community planning partnership is changing. Every few years, people have to take one notice off the wall and put another one up. Even though the same people are involved, they have to start all over. Communities are in the fall-out area and they are losing faith in the Executive and their local representatives. Community involvement is essential.

Christine Grahame: You say that the funding for the after-school care scheme fell away. Where did the funding come from? Did it come from one source or, as usual, from two or three sources?

Maureen West: As usual, it came from two or three sources—we had SIP funding and some European funding. The funding now has to be income generated.

Christine Grahame: That is a common complaint.

Maureen West: Business plans are now required, but many local groups do not have the appropriate acumen. The funding criteria have also changed. A pensioner centre in my area is now required to cover worklessness and addiction. How can it possibly fulfil those criteria?

Christine Grahame: One issue that is mentioned in the paper and which the Parliament has heard about for a long time is the need for a single source of funding and security of funding. Do you subscribe to that view?

Maureen West: Definitely.

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): Good morning. I want to turn to the section of the paper that deals with young people. It comments on trying to achieve the objectives outlined in "Closing the Opportunity Gap", and says:

"Young people should not expect to fail".

How can we break the cycle that Anne-Marie Smith touched on—that young people have a poverty of expectation and are destined to fail because of where they come from? The education system seems to fail those young people.

Because we represent areas that are in the former coalfields, a couple of us on the committee attend an informal coalfields communities group. At the most recent meeting, I was struck by the fact that young people who come from such areas—even when they go to the same schools as other people—seem to achieve less. How can we overcome the barriers that so many young people seem to face?

Anne-Marie Smith: A lot of young people in our area outgrow school. That is the excuse for excluding them—the school says, "Oh, you've outgrown us," and it just puts them out. People do not realise that it does not matter what sort of background the children come from—and believe it or not, Peter Kelly and I went to the same school. We decided to take different paths, and it just so happens that, years later, we met up again.

Things can work through education. Young people could be offered further education that was a wee bit more enjoyable and was about whatever they were interested in. Boys in my area love tampering with cars or breaking into them—the area has a lot of that. Why can there not be a wee garage for those boys, so that they could do things with cars? I have a boy of 15 myself. He is not allowed to go in a garage; because of insurance, he would have to be over 18. That is why young boys are going out and stealing cars. Is nobody listening? Is nobody looking at the crime statistics? The boys should be given an incentive.

Five or six years ago, within a 400yd radius of where I stayed in Pollok—around Brockburn Road—four teenagers were murdered within a two-year period. It was all to do with drugs, drug couriering and money. People might say that it was just a coincidence that four young boys were murdered in two years, but it really was not. What happened just was not publicised as much as it might have been. The young boys came from

good families. We are not talking about people who had had bad upbringings; they were a mixture.

We have to listen to what the kids are saying about what they want to do. There is no use telling them to go on Project Scotland and get 55 quid. That might be more than they would get on benefits, but they would still have to pay bus fares and find their lunch money. People think that they are going out to work, but they still cannot buy a new pair of trainers or a new jumper. There is no incentive for them—apart from turning to crime. People wonder why that happens, but it happens and the situation is getting worse.

The age of the boys who are dying in my area through drink or drugs is getting lower and lower and lower. The people who were dying used to be between 25 and 40, but now people under 25 are dying. I know, and everybody in my community knows, that that happens because people have nothing to do. Nobody is listening.

They are intelligent boys. If they can steal a car without an adult hearing them and without the rest of the community seeing who stole it, they must have some intelligence. How can you not tap into their intelligence, so that it can be used for their benefit and not against us?

10:45

Peter Kelly: I want to pick up on some points that have already been made about employment. One thing to come out of the get heard project is something that we already know—that all these problems are interconnected. However, before people move on to talk about other things, I want to mention some themes. Throughout the UK, a strong theme came through that support was being given to individualised approaches and local community-based responses to some of the problems. There are two factors: one is national policy and what it can do to affect levels of income; but throughout the get heard project, people have emphasised the crucial importance of local community support.

We have already heard various points about funding, which is a continuing and important problem. One of the few groups that I led was a group of people with mental health problems, and the group gave those people their main source of support. They raised issues about going back into employment and about the level of support that they needed. While not writing off employment as an option, they looked to the group for that support. The group was fragile, however. It was on a similar level of funding to that of so many local organisations. Anne-Marie Smith spoke about listening to young people, and the importance of doing so has come through strongly in much of the get heard information.

Scott Barrie: Was it suggested in the workshops that we should have a two-track approach? There is the national framework, but is it fair to say that we perhaps need specialised and localised projects to tackle the issues that grow up in our various communities, rather than assuming that one size will fit all?

Maureen West: Anne-Marie Smith has highlighted the problem that exists in many communities. Many of them have a community forum, which acts as a one-stop shop, as we see it. With the new, changing partnerships, the forums are now in jeopardy. The board members of our forum include unemployed people, disabled people and people with mental illness. All aspects of the community are represented on the forum, but community forums seem to be getting sidelined now. The new thing is to have a central hub, with satellites and so on.

The consultation processes are not working because the consultants are not listening to what the forums are saying. The people are there, and they should be used. We could be in danger of no longer having them available. Those people have a finger on the pulse of all parts of the community, and they have vital information. If those people are used, they will work with you, not against you. There seems to be a problem with recognising and using the experience that some local groups have.

Scott Barrie: Do you think that too many young people feel excluded from their local community?

Anne-Marie Smith: Yes, definitely. An incident happened a fortnight ago in my area of Pollok. The forum was trying to get people—teenagers—to mix with refugees. The situation ended up with the refugees and the workers having to get a police escort out of the area. There was a misunderstanding. This goes back to the relationships between the younger ones and the older generation. Nothing is put on for them but, all of a sudden, things are put on for the refugees. People ask, “What are they getting when we’re not getting anything?”

That issue will come up a lot. In fact, you will probably read something in the press about me at the end of this month, about a drama group that I am involved in with refugees. That will open up a big can of worms. I do not know if I am going to be ready for it. I will hide in here, where they will never find me.

A lot of the young ones are quite intelligent. We underestimate them. They are young people, but with adult heids on their shooders. Because they come from a poor background, they have to learn how to survive. They learn how their ma and da have done things, with the ducking and diving, the lying, the cheating and the stealing. They learn these things quick just to survive. They will take

that into their own adulthood, with a negative outlook.

It will become about the haves and the have-nots again. Young people will ask, "Why are we no gettin that? Why do they get it?" It can be about simple things. People are saying, "Look at them. They get bus passes, but we need to pay the bus fare to school." Even if the parents are unemployed, the children still have to pay bus fares to get to school. They will notice that refugees are getting free school meals, the best trainers and mobile phones.

We can feel things building up in those young people. There is no one there to say, "There, there, it'll be all right, youse can get those things," because there are no resources for that. There is not even a chance of "youse might get"—there are no opportunities there, and people are not just going to shut up and wait for things to change. Young people just know that nothing will change, because there is nothing building up for them to look forward to, and they are getting angry.

We are breeding angry children who are going to become angry adults, and that is something that we need to watch. I have two children, so I can see it in them. No matter what opinions I voice and no matter how I try to mould them, saying "Don't say thae things," or, "Don't dae thae things," they come back with other stories. How can I say, "This is how it is," when they are saying, "No, this is how it is"? That is what the young people are doing. Do not treat them as idiots. They are intelligent people, and the more you speak to them the more they will be heard and the more you will listen. Then things will change—before it escalates into something horrible.

We were in Brussels a fortnight ago for the fifth convention of people experiencing poverty, where 150 people from Europe met in one of the Parliament buildings. We do not hear so much about Nazis in Scotland, but we all know about them. One day, a boy of 17 went out into one of the streets off the Grand Place in the middle of Brussels and shot a black woman and four weans. He killed the black woman and one of the weans was critical—every time I tell the story it gives me goose pimples. When I came back from Brussels, I had all these pent-up emotions—was I sad, was I happy, was I angry, was I frustrated, or was I jealous of what other communities get? When I told the refugees that story one of them burst into tears. That made me think that the same could happen here, and that is something that we need to be aware of. It was a 17-year-old boy, not an adult, who went out and killed that black woman.

That could happen here, and the more I think about it, the more it terrifies me, because we have a lot of refugees in our community. We need to watch out, because if young people grow up angry, they will be angry adults and they will be dangerous, and that is all down to poverty. If only we could reach them before they end up thinking that they have nothing. They grow up thinking that they have nothing. Years ago, I was frustrated about that and thought, "What is this Government daein? I have to grow up and teach my children to learn how to be poor." That is the way it is, and we need to stop it. We need to listen.

Scott Barrie: That is emotive, Anne-Marie, and you are absolutely right. You touched on a lot of different points.

I would like to finish by asking whether any of the witnesses can think of any other ways in which we can engender the sense of belonging that is missing for a lot of young people in our communities.

Maureen West: We have tried intergenerational approaches in our community. One of the girls did a workshop with pensioners and the housebound elderly. Those people were community activists but they have got older and all of a sudden other people think that they no longer have any sense. However, they are a fount of information, and we found that exactly the same issues that they had been concerned about came up in a focus group for young people. They were all concerned about the same things, so we tried to organise some intergenerational activities to involve the older people and the younger people. Again, it is a question of resources. We have a lovely big youth complex in Castlemilk, but it might be closing down because of lack of funding.

The youth complex organised anger management classes—Anne-Marie Smith mentioned this—where young people worked with other young people. Young people said to each other, "Maybe you need to go and get that resentment thrashed out." The reply was, "Maybe you're right." However, those facilities could then no longer be offered, because funding was withdrawn. It can lead to frustration if a centre is going to be closed. People will ask, "How come we've got this facility but we can't do art classes or anger management, when other people can do things and get facilities?" That builds resentment within a community that does not need it. Those people are our future, and unless we can sort things out now we do not have a hope in hell. I agree strongly with Anne-Marie about that.

It is the young people who volunteer and put in a lot of time, but they just do not have the resources to back them up. That is something that all of us should work to resolve. We are Scotland's community, from the Executive to Joe and Mary Bloggs in the street, and we should work together to get things done.

This is a great opportunity for get heard and the Poverty Alliance to meet the committee. It also

gives the committee the chance to put a face to a name. You can now say, "I will ask Anne-Marie about that"; you know that you have people on whom you can count. The committee can also use us as an avenue to meet other people: we can get together a group of young people or refugees—whatever the committee needs. At the community level, people are willing to work towards that. It is vitally important that the Executive and the people of the UK get behind the national report, which is desperately needed.

Scott Barrie: Thank you.

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): From what Maureen West said, funding is not secure—my experience also tells me that. People get funding for a project and build the project up, only for it to be threatened by a lack of funding. Local and national Government seems to be on a quest to get people to reinvent projects. It seems as if Government simply wants to be seen to be doing something. Good projects can be sidelined simply because another priority is identified or another group of voices needs to be heard. I see that all the witnesses are nodding. Many committee members feel that that is the case. What is your comment?

Maureen West: We feel exactly the same about that. I mentioned a pensioner centre—a brilliant, active pensioner centre—which involved many pensioners from the housebound to those who go hill climbing. However, its funding criteria talk about addiction and worklessness. Government needs to get real: how is the centre supposed to fulfil those criteria? I assume that, with addiction, we are not talking about prescription drugs. On worklessness, people work later in life these days and the Government is setting a higher retirement age. The situation is diabolical.

So many good projects have gone down the Swannee—all because people were asked to reinvent the wheel. Some have neither the facilities nor the business acumen to keep on doing that. Nowadays, people who are involved in projects have to have a level of business acumen that enables them to draw up business plans and so on. We are trying to involve local people and community groups, yet a Philadelphia lawyer is needed to draw up the business plan. The situation is awful.

Peter Kelly: The committee will know about the new programmes that the Big Lottery Fund has introduced. It may have done so partly as a response to the criticisms that have been around for some years; any member who was involved in the voluntary and community sector will know that. Obviously, as the approach that the Big Lottery is taking is very new, we will need to see how it pans out. The longer-term approach that it is taking will see organisations funded for up to five years. That is useful; it marks a change in the Big Lottery's thinking about funding, from money to keep a project going to an investment in communities. That change in the Big Lottery's mindset means that it now sees funding as a long-term process and as part and parcel of the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

Some of the problems that Tricia Marwick mentioned are all about the changes to community planning and so on. Different priorities are being set, and some of these things are changing too often. There is a lot of good experience on the ground, however.

We are in the very fortunate position of having good, stable funding from the Scottish Executive—I have to mention that. However, the serious point is that even with that funding, we can still find it difficult to pick up the little bits and pieces of funding that allow us to get essential projects off the ground. We recently launched a project on peer education for young people. We received part funding from a trust, but it took us a further year and a half to find the match funding that allowed us to start the project. The situation is difficult, even for an organisation such as ours that has the ability to produce business plans and to do all the work that was mentioned earlier.

11:00

Tricia Marwick: You said that there has been a new approach by the Big Lottery Fund in relation to what is likely to be longer-term funding. However, is there any evidence that local government and the Executive is following the Big Lottery's line on regeneration and supporting community groups, or is that funding still vulnerable? My point is that priorities are constantly being chopped and changed. One year, the priority is young people; the next, it is older people—in fact, there are priorities across the board. As a result, good projects are losing out, and people cannot understand why they lose their funding while other projects keep theirs. Indeed, people sometimes have to invent new projects simply to keep money in the community.

Maureen West: The issue is certainly dividing communities. Because groups are being set against other groups, some are saying, "Well, we know more about this issue than you do," and are becoming insular.

The problem has also affected the community forum. One of my pet issues at the moment is the community planning partnership that we have been slogging away at for the past year. No one is sure what exactly will happen with that. During the consultation process, all the community groups in Glasgow worked together and chose the third of the five options that were offered. However, when

we went back to the table, we were told, "We don't want you to have that one; we think you should choose option four." What happened to the consultation process? Because the funding and the options change all the time, the power gets taken out of the community's hands.

As I have said, that approach is divisive and is putting community against community. Because of boundary changes, affluent areas have been lumped in with less affluent areas. That mix has not worked either, because how can you involve people in meetings during the day when they have to work? They still have to have their say, so meetings have to be held at night, which raises child care and transport issues—how can you get people from a wide area to a central point? Things just seem to be getting harder and harder for the community.

Lorraine Kane: I got involved with the CTDU through an intensive active citizen programme. I would never have been able to give evidence today if I had not joined that programme. My confidence built slowly. Although I left school with no qualifications, I was able, with the CTDU's help, to take a higher national certificate course in working with communities, which is something that I thought I would never be able to do.

However, the CTDU has had to change; because our funding has been cut, we have had to lose a worker who was in charge of that part of the project. Instead of concentrating on intensive programmes that help to build people's confidence not only to take HNC courses but to go in a different direction, we have had to branch out to help smaller communities and so on. I feel sorry that we have lost that.

Dave Petrie (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As a relative newcomer to the Parliament, I am finding this dialogue very valuable.

According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's findings on income poverty, debt is a major problem, particularly the targeting of people by advertising and loan sharks. How can we tackle that problem?

Lynn Burnett: It is hard to know where to start. In many communities in the most deprived areas, the same people are targeted by loan sharks and advertising every week. People have no escape route. If that is their only way to go, that is what they will do. They might be better going to a credit union in the long term, but to deal with the immediate problem they will turn to the loan sharks. I can talk about only other people's experiences.

Maureen West: The Scottish Executive gives licences to groups such as Provident, which charges a 7.9 per cent annual percentage rate or whatever. That means that if someone borrows £100 they pay back nearly £200. Groups like that have been given a licence. They operate legally, but they are coshing people over the head. Debt often accumulates because a lot of people are with not one of those companies but two or three. Unofficial loan sharks also operate, because people cannot afford the payments for the official ones. Money gets stretched further and further, and people are either threatened with court actions by official loan sharks—shall we say—or beaten up by unofficial ones. Legislation to ensure that official loan sharks would not be given a licence and to ensure that something would be done about the problem would help all communities deal with poverty. The current situation is a disgrace.

Dave Petrie: What about education on handling debt? Is there a case for people going into communities and saying, "Look, we realise that you are in this position. We would like to help if you are prepared to listen."

Anne-Marie Smith: That would be really good.

I can speak from my own experience. At Christmas I had to get £100 from Shopacheck so that I could cover the cost of Christmas for my three kids. I had to pay back £125. The company said to me that I could get £300, but there was no way that I could keep up the £15-a-week payments from my £88-a-week benefit. It is a vicious circle. The lenders give you the money, but they want more and more. They feed off you, like vermin. I have had to shut the door to them, but being on benefits means the situation is impossible.

I have been in my house a year, but I still do not have carpet in the hall. Carpet is a big issue, because there are the stairs, the hall and cut-offs. Even if I got a big enough carpet and cut it into three it would cost about £350. When I am on benefits of £88 a week, how can I get £350 for a carpet? The only way to do it is to go to a loan shark or a pawnbroker. The pawnbroker charges 8 per cent a month, so if somebody is given £100 for an item and they take the item out the next month the cost is £108, but over a year they would have to pay back nearly 100 per cent interest on the £100 they were given. People become tied. Although you can get interest-free loans from income support, you are only given so much and the payments are taken off your benefit.

Maureen West: Double the number and add the figure you first thought of.

Anne-Marie Smith: If I ask for £300, they say that I am asking for £600. I say, "No, I am asking for £300. It is only £300 for a carpet," but they say, "No, we have to make out that you have asked us for £600." That is the way it is, which is stupid. In that situation, I am willing to do without my carpet.

I have had to separate my wants and my needs. What do I need? Do I need a carpet now? No. I want one, but I do not need one. I will have to wait until I have paid off the loan that I got on the income support before I can take out another loan. It is a vicious circle. When the carpet is worn out, I might take out another loan. That circle will continue unless I get out of the poverty trap that I am in.

Peter Kelly: There has been a lot of useful discussion about financial education and financial literacy. Anne-Marie gave a good example. There is no question about people's financial skills or literacy. All the feedback shows that when someone is living on a low income they need fine financial management skills. People get into debt and overindebtedness because, with the best will in the world and the best skills in the world, they cannot manage on the very low incomes that many people get by on. Financial education is part of the solution. I read a suggestion that came up in England—I am not sure whether it came up as strongly in Scotland—that financial education should start at a younger age for pupils in schools. It was suggested that education should be provided in how to handle money, bank accounts and so on.

There was some discussion of basic bank accounts. Although there have been improvements in the accessibility of basic bank accounts and in setting them up, there are still big issues around charging for the use of cashpoints, especially in disadvantaged areas. The issue of the location of banks has come up at the UK level as well. It is difficult for someone to set up a bank account if there is no branch in their area. Some progress has been made, and some banks are starting to take that into account, but that issue is still coming up through the get heard project.

Maureen West: Identification is also an issue. The banks want to see a passport or a driver's licence, but how many people who are on benefits have a driver's licence? They have never been abroad, so they do not have a passport. It is a nightmare for them to try to open an account.

Some of the banks say that people cannot come into the bank. They can use the cashpoint outside the bank, but they cannot go to a teller unless they are withdrawing £300. They do not get £300. Again, those on the poverty line are being victimised—coshed over the head. Why can they not go into a bank and get their £10 or £5 out? They can withdraw only £10 notes from the cashpoint. For someone on benefits, £5 is a bag of shopping, but they cannot go into a bank and get their £5. They cannot go to the hole in the wall to get their £5 out because the only notes in it are tenners. They are clobbered from all angles.

Dave Petrie: I want to follow up on the subject of credit unions. To what extent would credit unions and independent sources of advice help to alleviate some of the problems relating to debt?

Anne-Marie Smith: I can speak on that because I am a member of a credit union. The credit union is a brilliant idea—I absolutely love it—but a lot of people will not go to it because of their council tax. They are frightened that the Government will know about it and take the money out for council tax payments, so that stops people. Only the people who are not doing anything wrong and who have not got anything to hide are using the credit union. The people who are in poverty who need help—the people who want to save for a wee bit holiday or a Christmas present for their kid—are not using the credit union because they are frightened that the Government will say, "There's our council tax money," and just take it all away. They are still excluded. The people who the credit union was set up for are excluded again.

Dave Petrie: Are there any other views on that?

Peter Kelly: It comes back to what we touched on earlier about information and folk's awareness of the existence of credit unions.

Dave Petrie: That is what I was going to touch on. Is there enough advertising and promotion of the benefits of credit unions?

Peter Kelly: Compared with the advertising that other forms of credit receive, no. One thing that comes through strongly across the board is the need for independent advice, whether from citizens advice bureaux or local projects. There is a lot of support—there always has been—for those independent sources of advice. I hope that this is not all coming down to the fact that you need to support the voluntary sector better, but that is a big part of it. Often, it is the voluntary sector that provides local, tailored services for people.

Dave Petrie: I take Anne-Marie Smith's point about council tax seriously. It almost needs to be addressed separately. It is sad that, despite the fact that credit unions were set up to help people, because of that issue and other issues people are not taking advantage of them. I hope that advice can be sought with a view to resolving that. It seems a shame that people are going through hardship and that they have the worry about not paying council tax at the same time.

Anne-Marie Smith: Where I stay, people do not call it a credit union; they call it their Swiss bank account. That is what it is like—people feel as if they are lying, cheating and conning just because they put money in the credit union. They should not be made to feel like that. It is unfair.

11:15

Christine Grahame: I have three short supplementary questions. I hear what you are saying about credit unions. I am a member of a credit union. Perhaps the situation has changed—you can correct me if I am wrong—but I understand that someone cannot borrow until they have put money into a credit union.

Anne-Marie Smith: It has to have been in for 10 weeks.

Christine Grahame: Should we not be trying to persuade credit unions to change that rule? It seems to be a catch-22 situation.

Anne-Marie Smith: Because credit unions are self-supporting, low-paid people would be tempted to grab the money and run. I think that the 10-week rule is fair.

Christine Grahame: Okay. That is a fair view. I just wanted to put that to you.

My second question is on direct debits, the business of which you have not touched on. I know that there are various levels of poverty, but charges can be punitive for people who do not pay by direct debit. Is there some way in which we could address that?

Maureen West: We are talking about trying to get a lot of the young ones back into education. Anne-Marie Smith talked earlier about whether someone should put their child out at 16. I was told by a Department for Work and Pensions official that my child was no longer my responsibility at 18 and that it was not up to me to keep my child, even though she was going to university. I politely told him that that might be the way that he works with his family, but it is certainly not the way I work. If I am 90 and my daughter still wants to be there, so be it. People are being penalised. They want to be families, but the Government is encouraging lying and cheating. We are trying to encourage families because that is the way to bring people up. In a family unit, everyone works together and helps each other, but we have Government officials telling us that, at 18, children are no longer our responsibility.

Christine Grahame: That was not really my question, although I am glad to hear that response. My question was about how you are punished in paying power bills and so on. People get discounts if they pay by direct debit. It is a catch-22 situation.

Maureen West: But that is what I am saying about the young ones going to university. They get an overdraft facility and there is a £35 charge if their money is not in.

Christine Grahame: That is bank charges, which is another issue.

Maureen West: Yes, it is bank charges.

Anne-Marie Smith: I have got direct debits on my account, so I can comment. I feel as if society is punishing me or giving me all these things as a learning curve. I have arranged for Scottish Power to take £54 a month from my account for my fuel charges—it is a fuel direct payment. Because the charge is so high, I cannot get it taken off my benefits. It is either that or the slot meter, but it would be impossible for me to budget for a meter. If I was out with three kids and they were all shouting, sometimes I would forget that I needed to top up my card. I cannot take that risk; it is better that the money comes straight out of the bank.

I agreed for the £54 to be taken out of my account and to have my family allowance and benefit money put in, but Scottish Power decided to take £122.50 out of my account, which completely emptied my bank account. I had to contact the company, but I have not got a phone, so I had to use a mobile. I had to get a loan of money to get a top-up to phone the company, and although it was an 0845 number I was left holding on and holding on. It ate up my £10 credit. Eventually, when I got through to Scottish Power, I was told that the money would be put back into my account but that, because it was the weekend, it would take three days.

As it worked out, I did not get my money for seven days, just because some computer said that Scottish Power could take it. I was left without money. When I phoned up the income support people to ask for an emergency payment—a crisis loan—they said that Scottish Power had said that the money was going to be paid back into my account. I told them that they were not listening. Fair enough, the money was going to be put back into my account, but not in time. I needed money for the weekend. It was pure madness and mayhem.

I wrote a nice letter to Scottish Power and showed it my bank statement. It said that, as a goodwill gesture, it would give me £10 off my next bill. I said, “Excuse me. It was nice of you to give me the £10 as a goodwill gesture, but I spent more than that on phone calls.” I was constantly on the phone trying to make sure that that was all that Scottish Power was going to take out of my account. I knew that I had to budget. The week that I get my family allowance and income support in my bank account is the only week that Scottish Power can take the £54 out. It cannot take £54 off me when I have got only £88, so it has to do it in the week I get all my money, but instead of doing that it just decided to take the money out. If it has done that to me, it has done it to others. It is sick, the way we are being penalised. If someone can pay their bill in four instalments, they get a

discount. If someone has money to pay their bill, they get a discount. Why can I not get a discount?

Christine Grahame: That is the point that I am making. It is grossly unfair.

Peter Kelly: Anne-Marie Smith illustrated the point better than I could. The general point is that people are aware of the impact that a direct debit going wrong can have. I remember the number of mistakes that were made with council tax direct debits years ago. All companies and organisations make mistakes with direct debits, but people on a low income cannot afford to have such mistakes happen to them. I do not have a solution, but more needs to be done to equalise the benefits.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): That was interesting evidence. The previous Communities Committee considered the issue in detail. I hope that we will run with it.

I turn to regeneration. The summary of the findings of the get heard report states:

"people want communities to be at the centre of decision-making … because … they are the ones … most likely to know the solutions … poverty is about lacking hope and having low self-esteem".

That is undoubtedly true. Are people who are in communities where there is regeneration having problems finding affordable homes?

Anne-Marie Smith: I speak to a lot of people in my community and I find that a lot of them will not go to community groups because they do not feel that they are educated enough or have the knowledge. A lot of people in the community sit in different forums. The same people attend; they just wear different hats. People say, "I'm not interested in going. She's there again." People do not have the confidence to get involved.

It would be good if we could educate people in communities about communities. A lot of people are interested only in one wee issue. If we introduced one such person to all the issues, we would have a good person who was willing to get involved in the community. Everybody is excluded rather than included, because they lack education and an understanding of what is happening in the community.

Every time I go to a forum or meeting, I end up being the only person there who is not getting paid, even though I am the one running about trying to get a babysitter and paying my bus fares, so why should anybody get involved? That is why we are not getting the people who really need to be heard into the community groups.

Maureen West: In my area we have some lovely housing, but the local people cannot afford to buy it. My fear is that the Government will pay only so much rent for people on benefits, so there might be a capping system. More and more people who are being excluded or evicted from council or community housing—perhaps because they are bad neighbours—are going into private lets, and their rents are getting higher and higher. The houses in surrounding areas are full of people who work and people who have been excluded from community housing. The system is being changed. A new poverty trap could be created. There is less council and community stock because of the right to buy, and local people cannot afford to buy the big fancy houses that are being built. There will have to be a cap on the rent that the Government will pay for private lets. Where does that leave people who are trying to find affordable, decent housing? We have colleagues in Northern Ireland who tell us that even in this day and age, places there still have outside toilets. We have that on one hand and big fancy houses on the other hand. I do not know how the situation will be rectified.

Cathie Craigie: You represent community groups in the Castlemilk area, where I know that loads of regeneration and building appears to be going on involving the private sector and housing associations. If someone is allocated a housing association flat, do they still pay more rent than they would for local authority housing? Do housing association rents sometimes place people in the poverty trap? You explained the situation in the private sector. What about the public sector and housing associations?

Maureen West: The problem in Castlemilk is that housing associations charge different rents, so the rent depends on the housing association. As I said, there is less council stock because much has been transferred to Glasgow Housing Association, which is another lot that should never have been given a licence. [*Interruption.*] I am sorry, but that is my view. That creates problems.

We have the problem that young people who were born and bred in Castlemilk cannot obtain a house because they fall into the gap between housing for the 16-to-20 group and housing for older people from 50 upwards. Many pensioner flats have come into circulation because many pensioners are in care homes in the area—Castlemilk has three or four homes. Their flats are being let to single people or childless couples, who must be older. A big gap lies in providing affordable decent housing for 25 to 40-year-olds.

Many people who were born and bred in Castlemilk cannot obtain a house, which is causing problems. As Anne-Marie Smith said, people think that refugees all of a sudden have housing, whereas other people say, "Wait a minute. I've been on the housing list for 10 years. Why haven't I got a house?" More problems are being created for the vulnerable people who are angry and upset and who feel disfranchised,

because they are not being given decent housing. They are not aware of the local problems, because they are not part of local groups. One problem feeds off the other. Everyone should have affordable housing. With the benefits and the rents that the council pays, people could buy a house.

Cathie Craigie: Our aim is to have affordable housing for everyone.

We hear that it is important to involve community groups in regeneration—the Executive supports that—because it happens in the communities in which they live. Are local people becoming involved and saying how they want their communities to be regenerated? Are Executive policies feeding down to a local level? Is there room for improvement?

Maureen West: There is great room for improvement. People from Castlemilk have always been kind of loud, as members can tell. We are politically aware and active. However, we have problems—the groups that try to give out information are being restructured because of the new generation of community planning partnerships, which I mentioned. We have to jump through smaller and smaller hoops, which is difficult.

Normally, such groups try to involve many other people in what is going on, but we are spending a lot of time focusing on ourselves to try to fit the criteria that we have been given. People who are involved in planning are now doing roadshows, which I hope will involve many people. We are trying to hold a local event at which all groups in the scheme can come together and each have a wee stand, so that everybody gives out information about everything that is going on. Again, that is local people trying to get funding to implement the Executive's policies, which is difficult at ground level.

11:30

Lynn Burnett: I echo some of the points that Maureen West, Anne-Marie Smith and Peter Kelly made. Peter Kelly talked about fragile support groups. I have a comment about the people who may be reached by community planning. The community groups that have been formed do not necessarily involve the people who are really struggling. That is not to say that the people in those groups are not struggling—we found out in the workshops that they certainly are struggling—but many people are not being reached. When we go out to small support groups, we find out about their issues. People on those groups are never heard, and such small groups are all that they have. When we asked a group of young people in a community what they liked about their area, they said that there is absolutely nothing to do, that the flats are falling down and stinking and that it is dreadful living there. There is a young people's group, but that is the only thing they have to do. Another set of young people said that they have a group that is cool but, for the rest of the week, there is nothing to do. Other people think that they are not cool because they want to go to the community centre—that is just not considered to be cool. So many people have to struggle.

Anne-Marie Smith talked about educating people about what it means to be part of a community. If we focus on exactly what a community is, we can go a long way. People want to belong and to feel part of something. If we focus on that, figure out the potential of individuals and focus on them, we will work things out so much better. People told us over and over that they want to feel part of something—they are aching for that.

Karen Wightman: There are many barriers to people joining community groups. Sometimes, as Anne-Marie Smith said, the issue is education. People feel that they are not educated enough to go along. Child care is another issue, as is knowing about the groups that exist. I go to the library three or four times a week with my little boy, so I see the notices that are posted there, but many people do not go to the library because that is not their thing. That is the only source of information in our local community. I am lucky, because I take my boys to a playgroup, so I hear about groups through word of mouth.

The cost of groups is a big barrier, too. There is a lack of affordable groups. I keep saying that I am lucky, but I am—my husband works, so we have some money, but we still have many barriers if we want to do anything. The issue is not just about money; it is about education, too.

Peter Kelly: One issue that comes through from the get heard project is that people can identify a lot of changes in their community and processes, groups and programmes that have been put in place, but they do not see an overall improvement in their situation. We probably all agree that a lot of money is being spent, particularly on regeneration programmes, but people do not see that being translated into positive change. One reason is that, as we have all said, people do not feel that they have much involvement in directing the change.

A way of tackling that would be through providing information and support for groups. There may also be fear, or perhaps reluctance, on the part of the new structures and local authorities to engage more meaningfully. We often hear that the "usual suspects" are involved. To be frank, the "usual suspects" are the active citizens that we all want our society to be full of. There is fear, possibly on both sides, about participation in community planning and about engaging in some

of the processes and giving up what has to be given up. Some of that stuff still needs to be worked out. There are things going on involving the community voices network. I do not know how well that is going, but there are attempts to address the issues of community engagement in regeneration policy.

To pick up on some of the other things that seem to be coming through the get heard project, a big issue is community safety in the widest sense. That is intimately related to regeneration policy. Some young people do not feel safe in their own communities and do not feel able to leave them. That takes us back to some of the issues that we touched on earlier. Another issue is the quality of the local environment. Although housing might be getting built, people did not necessarily feel that their local environment was improving in the way that they wanted. Both in Scotland and much further afield, there were concerns about whether the use of antisocial behaviour orders is a good step forward and whether that is improving things in local communities.

Community wardens got a positive response, but people think that they are underfunded and that there are not enough of them. They are perhaps not integrated enough into their communities. I do not know what the other witnesses think about that. Another issue that came up is housing in rural communities. When we think about regeneration, we typically think of urban areas, but there are big issues in rural areas, one of which is access to housing in rural communities. I am putting that on the agenda, but I do not necessarily have any solutions for it. However, it was something that came up.

John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): This is some of the most important and well-presented evidence that I have ever heard either in this Parliament or in another Parliament where I served for some time. Our difficulty is to try to find answers to some of the questions that you ask, but it is important to help us to focus on them, so thank you.

I move on to health. The Executive's fifth closing the opportunity gap objective is:

"To increase the rate of improvement of the health status of people living in the most deprived communities - in order to improve their quality of life, including their employability prospects".

I might add, "and improve their prospect of living long enough to get a pension". That has become topical recently.

Will you say a little about how people feel the environment in their communities impacts on their health—at home, in the community, at work or wherever? It is clear from the key findings paper that campaigns to improve health through exercise and diet have been successful in getting certain messages across but that the lack of facilities or whatever means that people cannot act on those messages by taking more exercise and eating healthier food. What more can be done to make sure that people have—and take—those opportunities to improve their health?

Anne-Marie Smith: I went to the doctor and I did not want any antidepressants or anything, so I was offered a Glasgow club card, but it is only for going swimming. It is half-price—it is what unemployed people would get anyway. There was no incentive for me to go. I couldnae really go. I was still having to pay an adult rate for my daughter, although she was a volunteer with Project Scotland, getting £55 a week. This is another thing that is getting done to young people. We would still have to pay full price for her and half-price for me, then the price for my boy. The teenagers get in for a swim free if they have the Glasgow card, but it is still cost, cost, cost even if the doctor might be saying, "Here you go, here's an incentive." People get a wee induction when they go to the gym, and they think, "Yeah, yeah, it'll be brilliant. Shall I go oot and buy the trainers the now?" [*Laughter.*] They are saying these things, but they are just not thinking. For me to take my daughter to the gym, I would also need to put her in the crèche and pay for that.

It was lovely for the doctor to say, "Here's a club card. There you go; you're getting half-price swimming," but that is what you would get anyway. It would only benefit someone who is working. It is free health care and if it had been offered to groups, it would have made the community go together again, whether it was women, men, teenage girls or boys, mothers and toddlers or people who want to learn to swim. If those sorts of classes were free, people would go in groups because they would go with their friends. It would be like socialising. People would get stimulation from people that they did not know were out there. People would come out of their houses and that would help their health, well-being and self-confidence. It is not feasible, but it was a brilliant idea for the doctor to give us a card. However, people would need to equip themselves for using the facilities as well.

John Home Robertson: You have talked about facilities for exercise and the rest of it, but what about diet? Healthy food can be cheaper than unhealthy food—

Maureen West: If you know how to cook it.

John Home Robertson: But people get into habits and I know that it is difficult to get them to change.

Anne-Marie Smith: It is about convenience. The healthy living initiative was shut down in our

area because of the lack of funding. That was really nice of the Government.

Maureen West: It is true; a lot of people do not know how to cook food. I got involved with some of the refugees in our area—I must have a friendly face—and they were asking, "What's this?" They had come from villages and been dumped in the middle of Castlemilk. They did not know where the post office was and what the food was in the supermarket. They had never seen that stuff in their lives before because the food in their country is different.

We tried to organise classes to show them how to do mince and potatoes. We had a cross-cultural event where they brought all their African food and we brought mince and potatoes, haggis and turnip, potato scones and tea cakes, and it all went like snow off a dyke; it was brilliant. Then there was the look of horror when they saw the traditional Christmas mince pie and custard, but they were too polite to say anything because they thought that a mince pie would have mince and they did not realise about mincemeat.

When we were helping the African people to cook, we found that some of our own kids did not know how to cook a meal. I taught my daughter how to cook from a young age so that when she went to university, she would be able to cook a wholesome meal cheaply because she would know how to make soup and stews or whatever. Young ones are not being taught how to cook, just how to ping the microwave, and pinging the microwave is twice as dear.

John Home Robertson: That is what I am driving at. It is a fair bet that the people in the refugee communities will know a lot about cooking—if they can get the right ingredients—because of the areas they come from.

Maureen West: That is what we found.

John Home Robertson: It is the people who are being brought up in our communities who tend to eat very expensive and unhealthy food. That raises questions about education at home and in the school.

Karen Wightman: Kids are getting taught far too much about food technology in schools and not a single thing about how to bake a cake or cook a meal.

John Home Robertson: Or how to grow a tattie.

Karen Wightman: My younger sister has just left school and she does not have a clue how to cook a proper meal, but she could tell you about food technology.

Peter Kelly: A lot of the issues that we have covered this morning relate to the so-called choice agenda and what that means. You are right that healthy, fresh food can often be cheaper for a lot of people, but do you have the choice to buy it in your local community? Very often it is simply not there.

All the issues about local voluntary organisations and community groups are connected and food co-ops can play a really important role in linking all those issues together. As soon as I said that, I forgot the name of the project that I was going to mention—it is north Glasgow community food initiative. It has brought asylum seekers and refugees together with the local community around issues to do with food and building people's skills and confidence to use the raw materials. That achieves a lot of our aims—it addresses health issues and, as Anne-Marie Smith eloquently put it, it brings people together and builds their confidence.

We have to look at these issues in the round. When someone applies for funding from the community planning partnership, there should be enough flexibility and openness to allow us to say, "This project is doing many things, even if some of them do not feature in our business plan."

11:45

Lorraine Kane: As you know, I live in a semi-rural setting.

John Home Robertson: So do I.

Lorraine Kane: We have a wee corner shop and if you are on benefits you cannot afford to buy from it. There is a Scotmid down in Bonnybridge where I come from, but I now live away from there. You have to go to Falkirk to get competitive prices, and sometimes the bus fare can put you off. If you want to take your children, you think twice about the bus fare to get you there to buy cheaper food. It is a catch-22. All the time you have to think, "Oh, I'm spending this, just so I can buy that. Is it worth it?" When you live in a semi-rural area, you do not have choices when it comes to buying cheaper food.

Dave Petrie: I, too, live in a rural area, and I share your concerns. Funding rural sparsity is a major issue for the Executive.

What specific problems were identified in rural communities, and what solutions were suggested?

Lynn Burnett: Because of issues with resources and funding, some rural communities were involved in the get heard project but we did not access many communities in the Highlands and Islands. That was difficult because we were based in Glasgow in the central belt. Among the rural communities that we managed to work with, transport came up all the time. Lorraine Kane has just spoken about access to good food, and that

issue came up all the time too—as did access to services such as a citizens advice bureau or a bank. As Peter Kelly said earlier, cash machines charge more in certain rural areas.

Lorraine Kane: Access to leisure facilities is also a problem.

Peter Kelly: Some issues have come up strongly. We met a few groups of disabled people in Dumfries and Galloway and big issues for them were the availability of public transport and the physical accessibility of that transport. The vast majority of public transport vehicles still did not comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and there were questions over whether they ever would.

Another big issue in rural communities was the sense of isolation. Among people on low incomes, that feeling was enhanced. People in urban areas may have opportunities to get out a bit more—although those opportunities are not always taken—but in rural areas people have a sense of being cut off.

Dave Petrie: I think that Lynn Burnett answered the question when she suggested that she did not have the resources to access rural areas as easily as she could access urban areas. I know from my own experience that there are major issues in rural areas.

For access to information, could more use be made of the internet through libraries and community centres, just so that people are aware of the resources that are available to them? I am thinking in particular about financial help. Is there a case for pushing the issue of access to information technology?

Lynn Burnett: I can only really speak about one community where IT was pushed by a community forum. However, people did not have the skills to use the computers and they did not feel that they were the type of people who would use them. For example, there was a group of elderly people who did not feel that the computer room was their place, and there was a group of unemployed men who did not feel comfortable—they did not have the skills and they did not know how to go about getting them. In any case, a lot of people had difficulty in getting to the place every day. There was a huge challenge. What you suggest is positive and we should think about it, but other things would have to happen first.

Dave Petrie: When we talk about rural areas, we tend to focus on the mainland. There is a wealth of islands out there, and there are major issues around affordable ferry services and so on.

The Convener: I call Christine Grahame, but I ask her to be brief.

Christine Grahame: I will endeavour to be. I must, however, echo what John Home Robertson said: the evidence has been intensely interesting and compelling.

I know that there is a difficulty with going to rural areas. You mentioned Dumfries and Galloway. Where else were you able to hold a workshop?

Lynn Burnett: Dumfries and Galloway was our main area for rural workshops. Some participants came down from the Highlands. That was excellent, although we did not have a workshop there. We tried to organise workshops with Inclusion Scotland, a disability organisation up in the Highlands and Islands, but they did not work out, partly because of communication problems. Also, getting people down from the Highlands and Islands is very expensive. However, we also did some workshops in Fife and Midlothian.

Christine Grahame: With respect, those areas are not quite as rural as Dumfries and Galloway and some other areas.

There is an issue with transport and accessibility for disabled people. It has been put to me that, sometimes, disabled people will be able to go somewhere on a bus with a low-rise step but unable to get one back. Might we be able to pursue the bus companies with respect to their identifying on their timetables which buses have disabled access or low-rise steps, so that people could plan their journeys? I am thinking about pensioners who get concessionary fares, who—

Anne-Marie Smith: Or people with double-buggies.

Christine Grahame: Yes, or double-buggies. Is there a solution to be reached with the bus companies in that respect?

Karen Wightman: Sometimes, I will not take the risk of travelling, because I have a two-year-old and an eight-month-old, which is not funny with a double-buggy. There is no guarantee that the same bus will take us back, or that the next bus to arrive will be the low-floor one.

Christine Grahame: Is that an issue for the Poverty Alliance?

Peter Kelly: Christine Grahame's idea is an excellent one. It is a practical solution and, in some ways, it involves the private sector in discussions about solutions to problems of social exclusion. It could give us a practical way in.

Christine Grahame: I have tried it out with First, but it has not pursued the matter. I hope that you can put more pressure on it than I could. The matter has been raised with me several times.

Maureen West: The problem is that First is taking a lot of services off. I was talking about our local number 46 bus. There is one an hour, and

we campaigned to prevent the service getting taken off completely. That would have meant that people going into Rutherglen, for either leisure or work, would not have been able to get back out again. If the bus did not turn up, that was them snookered. The oldest buses in the fleet would be used for such services, unfortunately, and they are inclined to break down more. The new, fancy buses with the screens will be used on the more profitable routes, and the older stock is left. It is difficult.

Christine Grahame: What solutions are there? Such transport issues impact on employment, leisure and health—the whole lot.

Peter Kelly: You made a suggestion about giving people information so that they know which buses are accessible at certain times. Obviously, we would want all buses to be accessible all the time. There are particular issues to do with the timetabling of bus services, especially in rural communities. Someone might be able to get a suitable bus into Dumfries, for example, but the only one that could take them back home might be leaving in the next half-hour.

Christine Grahame: Or even before that.

Peter Kelly: There can sometimes be no effective co-ordination of timetables. It would seem to me that there must be a fairly simple planning solution to that. I do not know why that is not the case, but positive steps could be taken as far as physical accessibility is concerned and through the provision of information about the services that are there and about when the buses are going to turn up.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): We have heard a lot about people's everyday experience, but I will ask about the progress that is being made over time. The Government regularly comes out with statistics that say how many people have been lifted out of poverty and how much progress has been made, but your research indicates a perception that the gap between rich and poor is getting wider. If when we say "poverty", we mean relative poverty, then poverty is increasing. Will you say something, not only about what is happening to the gap between rich and poor but about the gap between what the statistics say and people's lived experience?

Peter Kelly: That is a big question. It not only relates to the get heard project's findings but is a challenge for us all. The figures are what they are. As far as I am concerned, the figures on child poverty are correct and the trend for relative child poverty is downward. However the perception, which is accurately reflected in the get heard project's findings, is that the small changes and improvements in people's incomes do not translate into changes in their overall well-being or that of their communities. That is a significant challenge for the Parliament, the Executive and the United Kingdom Government.

My understanding is that, if income inequality has not widened, it has not reduced—if it has reduced, it has done so by an extremely small fraction. Something that came up not only in Scotland but throughout the UK was the perception that the gap—inequality itself—is a problem. That is why it is possible for the levels of child poverty or pensioner poverty to be falling but for people still to regard the gap as the big issue. I do not want to get too philosophical, but that is about the kind of society in which we live and the emphasis that is placed on material consumption. In that context, people feel even more excluded than they might do otherwise.

I do not feel like I have answered your question, but it is a big issue.

Patrick Harvie: It is difficult to answer the question, but it is an area to explore. Various people have touched on this theme. Anne-Marie Smith talked about people seeing regeneration money being spent but perceiving that communities are falling apart. Scott Barrie asked about young people's expectations and levels of hope. Somebody else mentioned what community is about and feeling part of something. If we are talking about more than the material aspects of who has a job and who has what income, how do we start to figure out what real progress on addressing the wider issues would look like, rather than what the statistics say about income and joblessness? How do we know whether we are making any real progress? Are we making any?

Anne-Marie Smith: The answer is to look at the health records. In my area, it can take a week or a week and a half to get an appointment for a doctor even when the wean has a cold. There is a knock-on effect, like having a sickness that you pass on to your kids. If the adults are sad, the kids are sad. If you feel that you are deprived and cannae afford, you get angry and end up being angry at your kids because you've no got to gie them. The depression and pent-up anger have to go somewhere, so you end up putting them on the kids, who are growing up to be angry and learning to be poor.

The only way to see progress would be if the health figures looked better, but they just look worse. You only need to go into any health centre and see the people. The whole community, not just the young people, is sick with depression or illnesses, not just a wee taster that they will get rid of in six months, but long-term illnesses from an early age, right through. It is wrong.

I got to see the way that they do some things in Europe, where as soon as you have kids you get

enough money financially to keep them until they reach the age of five. That would be brilliant. We need something like that here not just for single parents but for all parents. We should give an incentive for mothers to stay in the house and look after the child up until the age of four. You should get extra money when the wean is four so that you can go out and educate yourself. In that way, by the time that the wean is five and goes to school, you are in a job and you are not on benefits and living off the Government any more.

When people have kids in our communities, they stay on benefits right up until the kids reach 18. That vicious circle just keeps going, with three or four generations having the same thing happening. People are on benefits and have no way out. We have to stop that here. I am trying my hardest with my family, but I can only do so much. I cannot keep on breaking the law, if you know what I mean. We need to look at the bigger picture. If other communities in Europe can do that, how can we not?

12:00

Peter Kelly: Having had a wee minute to think about the question, I think that part of the issue is how we measure where we are making progress and getting better. Time and again, the numbers that we use are not up to the job of explaining change. They tell us something, but they do not give the whole picture. We need to integrate some of the current measures that are used with people's experiences.

Perhaps the new way of measuring child poverty that the Department for Work and Pensions will bring fully online next year could be used as a model. That new measure will take into account not just whether the number of families living on low incomes has improved but whether people's material deprivation has improved. Therefore, absolute poverty, relative child poverty and the new measure of material deprivation will now all need to move in the right direction. The new measure will be based on survey information, in that people who say that they cannot afford three or four items from a long list will be classed as being materially deprived. The new measure should give a better indication of where we are moving generally. That is one solution.

A big part of the issue is inequality. Our current statistical measures of inequality are difficult to understand and do not speak to people. In a sense, we have a problem of wealth in our society almost as much as we have a problem of poverty. What comes through in many of the statements that people in the get heard project have made is that the extremes of wealth that we have in our society are now problematic.

Patrick Harvie: Yes, the key findings highlight the fact that people who live with deprivation feel deprived of dignity as much as anything else.

My final question follows on from our discussions about the various barriers, such as transport and health, that prevent people from getting into work and out of poverty and the wider aspects of the employment issue that we have talked about, which involve experiences beyond just getting into work. Bearing in mind what the Scottish Executive can and cannot do—it cannot deal with credit although it can deal with debt and it cannot necessarily do everything that we would like it to do—will the panel say what the top priorities should be for the Scottish Executive? How should the Executive use its powers?

I think that Maureen West wanted to say something a moment ago.

Maureen West: As someone who works with people in poverty and who would be classed by some as disabled and on the poverty line, I would say that I might be deprived but I am not depraved. That is an important point. Just because someone is on a certain income, that does not mean that they cannot cope with everyday life. The problem is coping not with everyday life but with the cumulative effect of being on the poverty line.

Unfortunately, that is now an issue for our children's education. Computers and internet access are being used widely in school. If people are not on the phone, they are not digitally included. It is upsetting for parents who cannot provide for their child. For some, the problem is providing food—the basics. For others, it is material things, but it is not that people just want material things. Computers, for example, are needed in education. If someone does not have computer access, their child's homework might not be as good as Jeannie's, who has a computer at home. Wider barriers are being created. The concept of being digitally included is all very well, but the vast majority are excluded. We cannot assume that people have telephones.

The wording of some of the Executive's policies could be different. I know that it is trying not to use jargon but that can be seen in some policies, but not in others. There should be more education to help the people we are trying to include to understand the policies. Today's meeting is wonderful; it allows us direct access. It should have been publicised widely that the Scottish Executive is talking to the community—there are only three people here.

Christine Grahame: It is the Scottish Parliament, not the Executive.

Cathie Craigie: It is the Communities Committee.

Maureen West: It does not matter. You are still representing your constituents. The fact that you are listening to communities' voices should have been publicised. The Scottish Executive could do more of that.

The Convener: Unfortunately, we cannot force newspapers to write about the good things that the Parliament does from time to time. That is something that every MSP grapples with every day.

Peter Kelly: When the final report is published, we will have several opportunities to publicise it. Maureen West is right that getting the issue on the public agenda and having it debated is a huge challenge, but we must meet it. I do not know whether anyone else wants to give their top three priorities. I always feel under pressure to say what the priorities are. Once a big report such as the get heard report has been produced, people suggest hundreds of priorities.

As Maureen West said, we should encourage involvement and genuine, effective participation. That is perhaps a broad priority, but it is a real one.

People seemed to be demanding flexible, tailored support to meet their needs in a way that reflects the changes in their life that we all go through. If we are focusing on work as a route out of poverty, the support that we provide to help people back into work has to be flexible and tailored to their needs.

Another big issue for the Scottish Executive, which comes through crystal clear in get heard, is income. There is limited scope for the Executive to act on that, because it cannot address benefit levels or the minimum wage. Perhaps it needs to take time out to think a bit more creatively about how it addresses issues of income adequacy in the context of the services that people access. It should also consider what additional measures it could introduce to supplement people's incomes.

We have talked a lot about transport. We still need to see how the free travel for older and disabled people scheme goes, but it is a welcome step forward and I am surprised that it has not received the coverage that it should have received over the past three months.

The Convener: We have almost reached the end of our questions—honestly. The last couple of questions are directed at Peter Kelly, so the rest of the panel can breathe a sigh of relief and relax.

Is it possible for Scotland's needs and expectations to be reflected in a UK-wide report? Is the European Union-wide process relevant to Scotland?

Peter Kelly: On the first question, it will probably be more difficult to see Scotland's input into this UK-wide report than it was to see its input into the most recent national action plan on social inclusion. Over the past two years, the European process that drives the issue has been streamlined and our report on social inclusion now forms part of a wider report on social inclusion and social protection that, in turn, has been streamlined from a report on the national action plans on pensions and health care. As a result, the amount of information that the DWP can set out is much less.

I question whether we should focus on trying to reflect Scotland's position in a couple of lines in a document. The kind of dialogue that we are having now is one major aspect that should be pursued; however, that does not happen very often. Although our regular discussions with the DWP on the drafting of the national report are useful, there is scope for much wider involvement.

I cannot say for certain how Scotland will be reflected in the main body of the report. It will contain a fairly significant annex on get heard, but that will be published only on the web. However, I know from the many days that I have spent editing the report that Scottish views are well reflected.

I am sorry—I have forgotten your second question.

The Convener: Is the European process relevant to people in Scotland?

Peter Kelly: Yes. Various NGOs in the UK and Europe have fought hard to maintain what is technically called the open method of co-ordination. To be honest, that different way of developing policy has given us the hook for a wide-ranging discussion on the role of NGOs, people in poverty and a wide range of stakeholders in contributing to social inclusion policy in Scotland. Without that approach, we might not be here today.

That approach sets down markers for how to institutionalise the dialogue. We have made a lot of progress with the UK Government and the DWP in bringing together the different departments that have an impact on poverty and social exclusion. The process of getting the various strands of Government thinking and working together has been very slow, but the open method of co-ordination has provided a lever in that respect.

The Convener: Christine Grahame has a final question.

Christine Grahame: I have no supplementaries, convener. I knew that that would make you smile.

The Convener: I thought that you were about to ask about the Finance Committee's report on cross-cutting expenditure. In that case, I will ask the question.

The Finance Committee has recommended that there should be a single funding stream. Would such a move assist your work on this matter?

12:15

Peter Kelly: I have looked at the Finance Committee's report and it makes a good argument for a single source of funding for regeneration. I had some questions, which are not really answered in the report, about the committee's suggestion that the Executive would set the high-level approaches, which would give local authorities more flexibility in how they meet them. I am not sure what the Executive's role would be in relation to the single budget. It is not the role of the Executive almost to turn into a funding body. It needs to be able to give policy direction and to set national priorities. The Finance Committee suggested that the Executive needs to consider in more detail how it can bring together the pots of money that target regeneration. That would be useful.

The Finance Committee referred to bringing together area-based regeneration money and other moneys. It would be interesting to see how that would work in practice. As we have discussed this morning, the problem of poverty is much more than simply located in certain geographical areas. The Finance Committee report made the point well that poverty is not just about the

"most deprived 15% of data zones".

The Scottish index of multiple deprivation is a step forward in how we track deprivation in Scotland, but the way in which it is being used to allocate funding is perhaps less than helpful, particularly as it misses out a lot in rural areas.

The Convener: Christine Grahame wanted to get back in. By mentioning rural areas, you have perhaps pre-empted her.

Christine Grahame: It is a very short question. The Finance Committee report was interesting. Have you responded to it? If not, will you respond?

Peter Kelly: We have not responded. Our time has been filled with the get heard project and with welfare reform. I take your point; now that we have spent a bit of time on it, it would be useful to respond to the report.

The Convener: Perhaps the committee can reflect on what you have said and pass those comments on to the convener of the Finance Committee, since he wrote to us and took an interest in today's evidence. He might be interested to know your thoughts on that subject.

That concludes the committee's questioning. Thank you for your time and your participation in this morning's meeting. I think that all committee members have found it useful to hear of your involvement in your communities, your experiences, the work of the get heard project and what influence you will have on the national report. We would normally suspend the committee at this point to allow witnesses to leave, but the committee will have a short discussion about what we will do in light of your evidence and I thought that you might want to be here to listen to that. It should not take us long. We need to decide what we will do.

I ask members to indicate what action they wish to take, following the evidence that we have heard on the national report on strategies for social protection and social inclusion. The committee may wish to seek more information on the Scottish Executive's contribution to the UK national report and on the manner in which the conclusions from the get heard project in Scotland will be taken into account. We may also wish to ask the Executive to consider how the committee might be afforded greater involvement in the process in future. I suggest, in light of points made by Christine Grahame about transport and disability, that we write formally to the Equal Opportunities Committee, since it is conducting an inquiry into that area. It would welcome those suggestions and would be able to take them forward.

Scott Barrie: I agree with your point about the committee, convener. The temptation is to say that we should have the minister before us and question him on the evidence but, before we do so, perhaps we should ask him to comment on the evidence. In the light of those comments, we could decide whether to pursue the matter further by way of a formal evidence-taking session.

Christine Grahame: I want the minister to come before the committee not so much to question him as to discuss the issues, if it is appropriate for us to do that. I do not envisage conflict. Instead of having the usual, formal evidence-taking session, which can be confrontational, it would be interesting for us to discuss in public session with the minister the many issues that were raised in our evidence taking. I am not sure whether that has been done before, but it might be a better way forward. A bit of interaction would be good.

Patrick Harvie: Given that so many of the issues touch on devolved and reserved matters, perhaps there is scope for having a dialogue with a relevant Westminster committee, after the summer recess. We could set up a teleconference, for example; perhaps that would be of use.

The Convener: All of the suggestions are helpful. Scott Barrie's suggestion of writing to the minister is an important one; we need to keep the item on the agenda. The point that Christine Grahame made is also a good one. However, our

difficulty is that there is no time in our work programme up to the summer recess for a session with the minister. I suggest that we write to the minister, asking him to reflect on the evidence and give us his comments. In the letter, we could also say that we look forward to having an opportunity to discuss the issues with him in public session after the summer recess. In that way, we could take forward with the Executive some of the issues that were raised in the evidence taking.

Patrick Harvie made the good and helpful suggestion of liaising with our colleagues at Westminster. I would be happy for the clerks to do a little bit of work on that. I ask them to come back to the committee on it in the not-too-distant future. We have had some—albeit limited—liaison with our Westminster colleagues in the past—on charity reform, for example. I think that a Westminster select committee may have visited the Parliament and that there may also have been a teleconference, but that was before I became the committee convener. Certainly, we should explore that suggestion.

I thank members for their attendance at committee today.

Meeting closed at 12:23.

Members who would like a printed copy of the *Official Report* to be forwarded to them should give notice at the Document Supply Centre.

No proofs of the *Official Report* can be supplied. Members who want to suggest corrections for the archive edition should mark them clearly in the daily edition, and send it to the Official Report, Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh EH99 1SP. Suggested corrections in any other form cannot be accepted.

The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Wednesday 14 June 2006

PRICES AND SUBSCRIPTION RATES

OFFICIAL REPORT daily editions

Single copies: £5.00
Meetings of the Parliament annual subscriptions: £350.00

The archive edition of the *Official Report* of meetings of the Parliament, written answers and public meetings of committees will be published on CD-ROM.

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS weekly compilation

Single copies: £3.75
Annual subscriptions: £150.00

Standing orders will be accepted at Document Supply.

Published in Edinburgh by Astron and available from:

Blackwell's Bookshop
53 South Bridge
Edinburgh EH1 1YS
0131 622 8222

Blackwell's Bookshops:
243-244 High Holborn
London WC1 7DZ
Tel 020 7831 9501

All trade orders for Scottish Parliament documents should be placed through Blackwell's Edinburgh

Blackwell's Scottish Parliament Documentation Helpline may be able to assist with additional information on publications of or about the Scottish Parliament, their availability and cost:

Telephone orders and inquiries
0131 622 8283 or
0131 622 8258

Fax orders
0131 557 8149

E-mail orders
business.edinburgh@blackwell.co.uk

Subscriptions & Standing Orders
business.edinburgh@blackwell.co.uk

RNID Typetalk calls welcome on
18001 0131 348 5412
Textphone 0845 270 0152

sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk

All documents are available on the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.scottish.parliament.uk

Accredited Agents
(see Yellow Pages)

and through good booksellers

Printed in Scotland by Astron